

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF FORMATION AND CHANGE IN  
ATTACHMENT TO GOD

by

Ginny Cashion

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This study consisted of a phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of individuals who identify as Christians, examined within the context of attachment to God. Eleven Ph.D. students enrolled in an online program at an evangelical institution in the southeastern United States were interviewed. The interviews were conducted online, recorded (audio and video), and transcribed within the MS Teams app. Data was analyzed, codes were established, and themes were identified. Analysis revealed that while one's relationship with God was meaningful and secure, all indicated the presence of seeking (greater connection to God) language. Second, attachment terms were often used to describe one's relationship with God. Third, spiritual mentors and life crises were identified as significant in helping individuals move closer to God. Finally, changes in attachment were associated with the practice of spiritual disciplines. These findings emphasize spirituality's essential and complex nature and the need for further exploration using qualitative measures. Implications for the church include the need for creating awareness of the attachment relationship available to all who desire a connection to God, the importance of educating individuals on the ways in which their human attachment relationships may influence attachment to God and the possibility that emerging adulthood may be a sensitive period for spiritual development. A finding that should be considered for future research is the importance of life crises in forming one's attachment to God.

*Keywords:* Attachment to God, spirituality, emerging adulthood, crisis, crises

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## Dedication

Dedicated to the Father who seeks us, the Spirit who helps us, and Jesus Christ who made it all possible.

*For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,*

*So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

*(Ephesians 3:13-20, ESV)*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

Attachment to God is a construct with significant similarities to the Attachment Theory proposed by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and others. Within this theory, an attachment relationship is defined as "... any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world" (Bowlby, 1982, p. 668). It has social and biological foundations (Bowlby, 1969/1982). It is described as a behavioral system activated by fear or discomfort to seek proximity to and protection from one who is stronger and wiser. Secure attachment relationships are believed to contribute to positive health and well-being beginning in infancy and continuing throughout adulthood (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Similar to attachment relationships between humans, attachment to God has implications related to human flourishing across many domains and throughout one's lifespan (Bowlby, 1951, 1969/1982, 1973, 1977, 1982, 1988; Ainsworth, 1964, 1985; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). The positive benefits derived from a secure attachment to God are supported within the Biblical narrative and within a robust and growing collection of scholarly observations and research (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990; Krause & Pargament, 2018; Augustyn et al., 2017; Leman et al., 2018; Njus & Scharmer, 2020; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018; Matthew 11:28; Isaiah 26:3; Psalm 84:11). Within psychological literature, two pathways have been proposed as the likely path one might follow in forming an attachment to God (Granqvist, 1998). One is called correspondence and the other compensation (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist et al., 2012). The correspondence pathway is

demonstrated by those individuals who experienced a secure attachment to his or her human caregivers and connect with God as one whose behaviors correspond to (are similar to) that of his or her responsive and consistent caregiver. The compensation pathway is associated with individuals who did not experience a secure attachment relationship with early caregivers and so seek a relationship with God to compensate for this deficit. While much has been written about these two approaches and outcomes associated with either a secure or insecure attachment to God, little exploration has focused on specific behaviors or thought processes an individual might execute to develop or deepen their attachment to God. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of attachment to God in individuals who self-identify as Christians to understand how attachment to God is described and developed. Further, the experience of change within one's attachment to God was explored.

### **Background**

The foundation for this study begins with a brief review of the seminal work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth on human attachment style (Bowlby, 1951, 1969/1982, 1973, 1977, 1982, 1988; Ainsworth, 1984, 1985; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). This brief overview touches on the history of this theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bowlby, 1988; Harlow, 1958; Hess, 1958), salient concepts (Bowlby, 1982, 1988; Ainsworth, 1964, 1985; Gillath et al., 2016; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016), and classification parameters (Ainsworth, 1985). Research related to outcomes (Bowlby, 1951, 1988; Scott et al., 2009; Smith & South, 2020; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Cherniak et al., 2021) and ways in which individuals might

change their attachment style (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby, 1988) are also examined. Relationships between attachment theory and other constructs such as Baumeister and Leary's research on the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as well as research on loneliness (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010) and its relationship to attachment deficits (Borawski et al., 2021; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014) are also examined.

Finally, attachment to God is examined in light of its similarities to Attachment Theory (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990; Beck & McDonald, 2004), with a specific investigation of the parallels found between human attachment figures and God as an attachment figure. The research will demonstrate that there are substantial similarities between human-to-human attachment relationships and human-to-God attachment relationships, with each type of relationship exhibiting proximity seeking, distress at separation, and the caregiver as one who serves as a safe haven in time of trouble and a secure base from which an individual can explore with confidence. These parallels are supported within scholarly literature (Ainsworth, 1985; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) and Biblical texts (Genesis 16:8-12; Exodus 3; Judges 6:11-24; 1 Kings 3:5-14; Psalm 23; Luke 19:10b; John 10).

Secure attachment style is associated with benefits across many domains (e.g., mental, physical, social, and spiritual) in both human-to-human attachment relationships and human-to-God relationships (Krause & Pargament, 2018; Augustyn et al., 2017; Leman et al., 2018; Njus & Scharmer, 2020; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018; Matthew 11:28; Isaiah 26:3; Psalm 84:11). Similarly, both human-to-human and human to God relationships demonstrate deficits and difficulty when an individual exhibits an anxious or avoidant attachment style. While the attachment style established in early childhood

tends to persist throughout the lifespan, it is not permanently fixed (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby, 1988). Research indicates that attachment style can change if one undertakes intentional efforts to adjust the internal working models established early in life (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Internal working models are the thought processes established early in life based on one's relationship with his or her caregivers (Bowlby, 1988; Gillath et al., 2016). Bowlby (1988) indicated that when caregivers are responsive, kind, and nurturing, a child comes to view him or herself as one who is worthy of love and affirmation. He or she sees the world as a safe place to survive and thrive. When a child is neglected or abused, the outcome is the opposite. The child sees the world as a place in which they must continually seek external acceptance and affirmation (anxious attachment style) or a place in which they must learn to rely only on themselves for whatever is needed (avoidant attachment style). A key mechanism for changing one's attachment style is to recognize these internal working models, identify the impact they have had and are having on one's present relationships, and then intentionally change these deep-seated thought processes. A therapeutic relationship is often recommended as a catalyst for this type of change (Bowlby, 1977).

An individual's attachment to God is sometimes found to run parallel to a person's human attachment style, with individuals who formed secure attachment relationships in early childhood finding it easier to form a secure attachment to God (Granqvist, 2010). This is referred to as correspondence. Conversely, research indicates that individuals who did not form secure attachments in childhood are sometimes drawn to form a secure attachment to God in a process called compensation. In other words, individuals could

seek a close and personal relationship with God to take the place of (or compensate for) the secure connection they did not experience with their human caregivers (Granqvist, 2010).

Scripture indicates that God demonstrates relational qualities that facilitate a secure attachment relationship with humans. He has promised to accept all who seek Him (John 6:37; Romans 10:13). He has promised love that is unconditional and eternal (Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16; John 10:28). He repeatedly promises protection, provision, and continual presence (Psalm 23; John 10). He is described as the epitome of the stronger and wiser caregiver defined by Bowlby (Psalm 37, 113, 145). And is identified as the ultimate attachment figure (Cicirelli, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2016).

While much research has examined outcomes related to one's attachment to God, with evidence demonstrating the benefits of secure attachment and deficits related to insecure attachment (anxious or avoidant), no studies have been found that explore the mechanisms by which an individual establishes, maintains, or develops an increasingly more secure attachment relationship to God.

### **Problem Statement**

The Bible and psychological research demonstrate that a secure attachment to God results in positive outcomes related to spiritual and psychological well-being. Examples of this include increased “awareness of God, spiritual meaning, and forgiveness ...” as well as “satisfaction with life and positive coping” (Augustyn et al., 2017, p. 204). Further, Leman et al. (2018) noted a positive correlation between secure attachment and positive self-reported measures such as less depression, anxiety, unhappiness, and greater energy. In other research, Njus and Scharmer (2020) found that

individuals securely attached to God demonstrated higher scores for self-esteem and lower scores for depression than either believers or non-believers who showed anxious or avoidant attachment to God. Bradshaw and Kent (2018) found that, among older adults, secure attachment to God was associated with greater optimism. Scripture also supports positive outcomes related to God attachment, including rest for those who seek proximity to God (Matthew 11:28). Isaiah 26:3 promises peace to those who keep their mind focused on God. The word translated “peace” implies safety, wellness, and prosperity (H7965, *Strong's Hebrew Lexicon*). Although many other examples could be cited, one final verse to note is Psalm 84:11, where the Psalmist indicates that one who dwells in the presence of God (seeks proximity to Him) is rewarded with protection (the safe haven) and all good things. While a focus on these outcomes is valuable, the question unanswered within the research literature is which process or processes are involved in moving individuals who profess faith in God from an inadequate attachment relationship with God to a secure attachment relationship with God? The two existing constructs, correspondence or compensation, seek to explain why a person's attachment to God may be secure, anxious, or avoidant (Beck & McDonald, 2004). However, the issue of how the process by which one establishes a secure attachment relationship with God or how one might move from inadequacy to earned security is not addressed.

This issue may be related to the assessments used to measure attachment to God. There appears to be a tendency to use very simple questions with limited options for response. For example, one widely used measure is the Duke University Religion Index (DUREL). It is considered a “reliable and valid measure of religiosity” (Koenig & Büssing, 2010, p. 82) but includes only five questions with limited response options



(example: definitely not true, tends not to be true, unsure, tends to be true, definitely true of me). More complex assessments such as the Attachment to God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004), the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood, 2011), the Communion with God Scale (Knabb & Wang, 2021), and questions related to one's image of God (Krause & Ironson, 2019) are more comprehensive, but typically only ask the respondent for feelings or opinions rather than specific behaviors. Two studies moved to a more scientific methodology in measuring implicit indications of attachment to God. Still, these were also focused on measuring what was present rather than pointing to how one might have changed his or her attachment to God (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist et al., 2012).

Another issue may be that one's relationship with God is difficult to examine using quantitative measures. While quantitative data is important and useful to a certain extent, it fails to identify how or what is involved in understanding a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach may be more productive to understand what behaviors are involved in attaining or maintaining a secure attachment relationship with God and how these are exhibited in the everyday experiences of those who demonstrate this secure attachment relationship.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of attachment to God in individuals who self-identify as Christians to understand how attachment to God is described and developed. Further, the experience of change within one's attachment to God was explored.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do individuals who identify as Christians describe their lived experience of attachment to God?

RQ2: Is the experience of attachment to God described by participants with language similar to human attachment theory language (i.e., proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, distress at separation, and seeing God as wiser and stronger)?

RQ3: How do individuals describe the experiences involved in arriving at their current attachment to God?

RQ4: How do individuals describe their experience related to changes within their attachment to God?

### **Assumptions and Limitations of the Study**

The main limitation foreseen is one commonly mentioned in previous literature: reliance on self-report data. Response bias, or the tendency to provide answers in alignment with what one believes the researcher is looking for, may have played a role in this study because the interview focused on talking about the participant's relationship with God. Another challenge may lie in developing the degree of trust needed so that participants will move beyond providing "Sunday School Answers" and truly discuss this topic in a meaningful and honest manner. This potential limitation proved to be only somewhat true as participants seemed to provide responses that were genuine and transparent after an initial warming-up period, during which many participants tended to provide responses that were more theological rather than personal. All interviews yielded some degree of insight into the genuine experiences of individuals in their relationship with God.

A second potential limitation was the expected lack of diversity in the most accessible pool of potential participants (non-diverse in terms of race, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and religion). This proved to be somewhat accurate in terms of race and educational attainment (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics). Participants were non-diverse in terms of religion, as one of the inclusion criteria specified that individuals must identify as Christian. Educational attainment was also non-diverse as all individuals were students enrolled in a doctoral program. Socioeconomic status was not identified in this study.

A practical challenge concerning scheduling face-to-face interviews with current pandemic protocols still in place was overcome by conducting the interviews via Microsoft Teams. This characteristic of the study may have been a factor in participant recruitment as some individuals who indicated an interest in participating failed to connect during their scheduled time. However, in terms of connecting on a meaningful level with the participants interviewed, the technology did not seem to present any barriers. This is likely due to the ubiquitous use of video conferencing apps during the pandemic and the fact that all participants were enrolled in an online doctoral program (which assumes a level of comfort with online technology).

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Study**

The main theory that guided this project from a psychological perspective is Bowlby's Attachment Theory. This theory posits that an individual's early relationships with their caregiver(s) help form a foundation that influences and often directs the pattern of relationships throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1951, 1969/1982, 1973, 1977, 1982, 1988; Ainsworth, 1985; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Bowlby developed the initial

constructs of this theory based on his observation of children separated from their mothers (most often in an institutional setting) for extended periods. Ainsworth extended his research by creating an experimental condition known as the Strange Situation (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). The research Ainsworth and colleagues conducted introduced an experimental approach to the study of attachment. From this research, specific categories or styles of attachment were identified. The main styles or types include secure attachment, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment styles. If an infant experiences attentive, responsive, consistent care from one primary caregiver, he or she is likely to develop a secure attachment style. If, however, the care received is inconsistent, neglectful, or abusive, the child is likely to develop an attachment style identified as anxious, avoidant, or in extreme circumstances, disorganized (Bowlby, 1951, 1969/1982, 1973, 1977, 1982, 1988; Ainsworth, 1985; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Research indicates that the attachment style developed in childhood is persistent but not permanent. Because attachment involves an attachment behavior system (including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components), an individual can learn to recognize their present way of thinking about and reacting to others with whom they share a relational bond, and they can work to change these patterns. These patterns of thought, feeling, and action are referred to as internal working models.

One significant difference in human-to-human attachment vs. God-to-human attachment relationships is that within the human-to-human context, the deliberate withholding of connection and care between a caregiver and a child is identified as cruel or even criminal in that it would likely be considered neglect or abuse. But scripture indicates that God, at times, does not immediately respond, intervene, or act on behalf of

individuals who cry out to Him for help. For example, Jonah likely prayed for deliverance, yet God allowed him to be thrown into a turbulent sea and be swallowed by a whale (Jonah 1). Joseph almost certainly prayed for deliverance but instead was sold by his brothers and suffered through slavery and false imprisonment (Genesis 37 - 40). Daniel was an old man who had sought to honor God throughout his entire life yet was dragged off and thrown into a den of lions *because* he prayed to God (Daniel 6). From the immediate perspective of Jonah, Joseph, Daniel, and others, it may have seemed that God was unable or unwilling to help in their time of need, but the perspective of history demonstrates that God chose not to act in the moment so that a greater purpose could ultimately be achieved. This is a topic of much study and discussion in theological circles and could be an area of future research regarding the related psychological implications.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list defines the terms used in this study.

**Attachment** – Refers to the close relationship established between a caregiver and infant that is a formative influence on personality and future relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Flaherty & Sadler, 2011). It has a persistent but not necessarily permanent influence on cognition, affect, and social relationships throughout the lifespan.

**Attachment Behavior System** – Is an innate system with a primary goal of attaining or maintaining security. It involves biological, emotional, and cognitive components triggered by a perceived sense of lost security (Gillath et al., 2016).

**Attachment Status or Style: Anxious Attachment** - Occurs when a child receives inadequate care from his or her caregiver and comes to see the world as a place in which they must continually seek acceptance and affirmation.

**Attachment Status or Style: Avoidant** - Occurs when a child receives inadequate care from his or her caregiver and comes to see the world as a place in which he or she must learn to rely only on him or herself for whatever is needed.

**Attachment Status or Style: Secure** - This occurs when a child receives reliable and responsive care from his or her caregiver and comes to see the world as a place in which he or she is worthy and capable of experiencing loving relationships.

**Earned Security** - The process by which an individual moves from insecure attachment in childhood to secure attachment at some later point in life (Saunders et al., 2011; Dansby-Olufowote, 2020).

**Internal Working Model** - Internal working models are the thought processes established early in life due to one's relationship with his or her caregivers (Bowlby, 1988; Gillath et al., 2016).

**Considering the caregiver as a safe haven** - When the caregiver functions as a safe haven, the child seeks proximity and protection when experiencing a perceived threat or separation from the caregiver.

**Considering the caregiver as a secure base** – When the caregiver functions as a secure base, the child exhibits confidence in exploring his or her environment.

**Proximity Seeking** -- A "repertoire of behaviors" an infant is "equipped" with at birth (Ainsworth, 1985, p. 772). Crying, smiling, and babbling are examples of early proximity-seeking behaviors. Later, infants will reach for his or her caregiver. Once a child becomes mobile, they will follow and/or cling to the caregiver.

**Distress at separation** – Negative behaviors and vocalizations expressed by the care receiver when separated from the primary caregiver. This reaction can be physical as the

child tries to follow the caregiver or can be vocal as the child might whine, whimper, cry, or scream to express his or her dissatisfaction at being separated.

**Seeing the caregiver as stronger and wiser** -- The care receiver considers the caregiver to be one upon whom they can rely for protection, guidance, and comfort.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as many individuals in the Christian community accept Christ as Savior and are eternally secure, but very few appear to exhibit the abundant life Jesus promised (Cicirelli, 2004; Willard, 1997). This statement is supported by recent surveys that found (even pre-pandemic) that 39% of practicing Christians experience loneliness described as intense to unbearable (Mettes, 2021). Also, 34% of practicing Christians indicated that anxiety and depression had an impact on important relationships (Barna Group, 2020). In light of these statistics, there seems to be a gap between what is known about one's relationship with God and what is experienced in this relationship. An important question is whether the experience of an abundant life is tied to our experience of a secure attachment to God. In the process of interviewing individuals who identify as Christians, one goal was to determine if responses might shed light on whether individuals are experiencing abundance in life and if this is connected to a relationship with God characterized by a secure attachment bond.

This study also contributes to psychological science as there is an increasing interest in topics related to spirituality, yet few researchers have explored this particular construct using qualitative methods. The information obtained may help more clearly define what constructs are best used to define spirituality.

### **Summary**

Attachment to God is a construct assumed to develop either in correspondence with secure human attachment or in compensation for deficient human attachment. From a Biblical perspective, we see God functioning in a caregiving relationship with people as He exhibits classic characteristics described in attachment theory, functioning as a safe haven and a secure base for exploration. The psychological literature indicates that secure attachment to God is connected to positive outcomes related to spirituality and general well-being. However, an examination of how one's attachment to God develops, is maintained, or grows; and what this relationship looks like in practical terms is absent within the literature.

Therefore, this study consisted of a phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of individuals who identify as Christians examined within the context of attachment to God. It was believed that this exploration would reveal antecedents of a secure attachment to God and also help develop an understanding of the ways in which this relationship is developed, maintained, and enhanced. The knowledge obtained may help develop more effective means of measuring attachment to God and/or discovering how individuals with an avoidant or insecure attachment to God might attain a secure attachment relationship with Him.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The process by which individuals form close, personal attachment relationships with other humans is well-researched and supported in the literature. Attachment is initially established as secure or inadequate based on an infant's interactions with his or her caregivers. These experiences form the foundation of internal working models (IWM) that guide a person's beliefs and expectations about his or her relationships with others. Attachment to God is also a theoretical construct well-studied with Biblical and scientific support to illustrate how and why individuals need and/or benefit from a secure attachment relationship with God.

Secure attachment to other humans and secure attachment to God produces positive results, while insecure attachment in either area leads to negative results. Although research into human attachment has helped scientists discover ways in which parents and other caregivers can facilitate the development of secure attachment in children, research related to God attachment focuses mainly on the results of secure attachment to God. It does not explore how this relationship is formed and/or is changed. In this study, the lived experience of individuals who identify as Christians was examined to identify the factors (thoughts, behaviors, and emotions) instrumental in developing, maintaining, or changing one's attachment to God.

This literature review begins with a brief description of foundational concepts related to attachment theory and attachment to God. Next, outcomes related to the two paradigms are compared. Finally, gaps or omissions in understanding how attachment to God is developed, maintained, and/or changed are identified.

### **Description of Research Strategy**

The literature search for this proposal began with a review of an article in which Bowlby describes the processes involved in developing his Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982). Several routes were pursued to obtain information about how one might move from anxious or avoidant attachment to God to secure attachment. First, Google Scholar was searched using the phrase “Changing Attachment to God” while limiting results to the past five years. This search yielded one record (a dissertation) supporting the assumption that an individual’s attachment to God can be changed (Kim, 2017). Next, the phrase “earned secure attachment to God” was entered with similar results (just two dissertations). In addition to searching Google Scholar, “Attachment to God” was used to search the PsycINFO database. With few limitations (previous five years only and peer-reviewed journals only), 85 articles were found. To narrow the topic, the following terms were used to search for articles that addressed causes of secure attachment to God or determinants or factors: Attachment to God and Meditation, Attachment to God and Prayer, Attachment to God and qualitative research or qualitative study, Attachment to God and congruence, Attachment to God and relationships. Results were refined as follows: expanded to include equivalent subjects, limited to full text only, year of publication 2016-2021, and peer-reviewed journals only. Additional resources were identified by examining sources cited within articles located in the initial searches and also by using the “related articles” function within Google Scholar.

The search strategy for Biblical concepts is based largely on previous study and training in Biblical studies and was supplemented with general searches of topical lists

found on the Internet. More in-depth examination of terms found in specific passages relied on tools found on the Blue Letter Bible website (<https://www.blueletterbible.org/>).

### **Review of Literature**

Bowlby (1982), in writing about the development of attachment theory, pointed out that individuals seek an attachment figure that is responsive to their needs and provides a “strong and pervasive feeling of security” (p. 669). Further, he pointed out that research identifies this need for security as a fundamental part of who we are as human beings (Bowlby, 1988). Early investigations of maternal deprivation hypothesized that the attachment bond observed between a mother and child was simply a function of survival as a child became attached to the one who provided the food necessary for survival. Later, Harlow and Lorenz demonstrated that this relationship bond went beyond survival needs and identified a fundamental need for comfort and security (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bowlby, 1988; Harlow, 1958; Hess, 1958). Because these experiments were conducted with animals, it is difficult to say whether the need expressed was physical or emotional. Still, it appears that it could have been both since (in the Harlow experiment) the young monkey returned to the softer, more comforting model rather than staying near the wire-frame model that provided food. Bowlby believed that the attachment behavioral system was multi-faceted, involving physical, cognitive, and emotional elements.

As attachment theory developed, the following constructs have come to be recognized as key components: internal working models, the attachment behavior system, and attachment behaviors (proximity seeking, distress at separation, and the caregiver as a secure base and safe haven). These will be briefly described in the next section.

### **Key Constructs in Attachment Theory**

### **Internal Working Models**

As a child grows, he or she develops mental images and beliefs about him or herself based on how individuals in close relationships act and react to him or her (Bowlby, 1988). These mental images or beliefs are described as internal working models (IWM) (Gillath et al., 2016). These internal working models guide the formation of one's attachment style and typically endure throughout one's lifespan (Bowlby, 1988). Those whose early life experiences involve warm, responsive caregiving will typically develop a secure attachment style. In contrast, those who experience a caregiving relationship that is less than adequate are likely to develop a negative attachment style characterized by avoidance or anxiety (Bowlby, 1988).

IWMs form the foundation of an individual's self-concept in terms of whether others consider one worthy of value and love and whether others can be trusted to provide the love one desires and needs (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Gillath et al., 2016). These beliefs about oneself and others are key to the development of IWMs.

### **The Attachment Behavior System**

The second important construct in Attachment theory is the Attachment Behavior System. This was proposed to explain behaviors that appeared to be innate and universally present. Behavior systems (according to Bowlby) had a goal of "guiding behavior in a way that would increase survival and reproduction" (Gillath et al., 2016, p. 170). Each system has a specific function, a specific set of triggers, a variety of responses, a specific goal, is guided by a spectrum of cognitive functions, and each system also shares associations with other systems (Gillath et al., 2016). The attachment

behavior system meets these criteria for the following reasons. First, it serves a specific function (development of an attachment relationship). Next, it is triggered by safety or security threats. Third, it may elicit various responses (crying or smiling to get a desired response). Fourth, it includes specific goals such as comfort or protection. Fifth, it is guided by cognitive functions such as monitoring the position of one's attachment figure and/or evaluating the degree of threat in a situation. Finally, the Attachment Behavioral System is impacted or associated with other systems such as caregiving, exploration, and affiliation (Gillath et al., 2016, p. 178).

### **Attachment Behaviors**

Bowlby (1982) defined attachment behavior as “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world” (p. 668). He indicates that an immediate and enduring connection characterizes the attachment relationship. There are four behaviors identified as primary attachment behaviors. Two are enacted by the caregiver, who functions as a safe haven and a secure base. The care receiver enacts the other two in reaction to or in relationship with the caregiver. These are proximity seeking and distress at separation.

#### ***Proximity Seeking by the Infant***

Ainsworth (1985) described proximity seeking as a “repertoire of behaviors” an infant is “equipped” with at birth (p. 772). At first, these behaviors, such as crying, smiling, and babbling, are not directed at any one individual (Bowlby, 1969/1982). As the infant grows, the following behaviors are evident: clinging, expressions of happiness such as clapping, smiling, happy vocalizations, and lifting of the arms or reaching for the

caregiver (Ainsworth, 1964). With increasing skill and strength, the infant's efforts to gain proximity to others are increasingly directed to the primary caregiver (usually the mother). When the child gains the ability to move about on their own, proximity seeking moves into a more active phase where the child can physically pursue his or her caregiver. A key milestone is achieved when the child attains the capacity to understand that his or her caregiver/attachment figure continues to exist even when he or she is not visible. This is the point at which Ainsworth indicates that the attachment bond is formed (1985).

### ***The Caregiver as a Secure Base***

Ainsworth (1985) noted that when a child's quest for proximity is met with success – in other words, when a caregiver responds in a warm and consistent manner -- the child develops confidence in his or her relationship with the caregiver and others. The caregiver thus becomes a secure base or foundation from which the child can venture forth to explore new situations. Ainsworth described this as a sense of confidence or competence that the child develops as he or she is met with success in a relationship with the caregiver. In other words, when the caregiver creates an environment around the child and a relationship with the child that is safe and predictable, the child can assume that new experiences will also be safe and predictable. This allows him or her to explore the environment with courage and confidence.

### ***The Caregiver as a Safe Haven***

Bowlby (1982) indicated that attachment behavior is most obvious when a person is afraid, tired, sick, if he or she becomes separated from the caregiver, or if he or she is threatened with separation. When these situations occur, the child seeks safety and

comfort from his or her caregiver. In other words, the typical response to these adverse conditions is the activation of the attachment behavioral system, with the child employing whatever means are at his or her disposal to receive help or comfort from the caregiver.

### ***Distress at Separation***

The final attachment behavior typically recognized within the attachment relationship is distress at separation. Infants and children make no secret of their distress with crying, screaming, tears, and desperate attempts to follow their caregiver when it is clear that separation is imminent. It is interesting to note that while the overt expression of this distress may diminish as a person matures, the pain of separation is still evident throughout the lifespan when one loses close contact with his or her attachment figure. This is perhaps most poignantly evident when death marks the point of separation.

These concepts were observed and written about by Bowlby beginning in 1956. Bowlby was invited to join a study of young children who had experienced a temporary separation from their mothers (Bowlby, 1969/1982). He later continued his study of this phenomenon by observing children and through interviews with caregivers of children who had faced separation or deprivation early in life. Bowlby and others identified three stages of distress. The first stage is “protest” and typically involves crying, screaming, and attempts to follow the caregiver. Later, children appeared to be resigned to the fact of separation. This second stage was labeled “despair.” In the third stage of separation from the caregiver, children demonstrated “detachment.” In this final stage, children refused to receive comfort or care from the substitute caregivers and sometimes even turned away from their own caregiver when she returned.

While these observations were helpful, they were incomplete since an experimental research design was not implemented. This deficit was remedied with the development of an experimental condition pioneered by Mary Ainsworth.

### **Ainsworth and the Strange Situation**

Ainsworth and Bell (1970) expanded on and confirmed Bowlby's theory by conducting an experiment that came to be known as the "Strange Situation." In it, she identified the attachment behaviors described earlier: proximity seeking, the presence of a safe haven and secure base, and distress at separation (Cherniak et al., 2021). In her seminal study, Ainsworth brought 56 children just under one year of age (49-51 weeks) into a laboratory to examine how they would behave based on the following seven conditions or episodes: 1) mother and stranger enter with baby then the stranger leaves, 2) mother and baby are alone in the room and only engage if the baby seeks attention, 3) stranger enters, speaks to mom, then attempts to engage baby with a toy, and mom exits quietly, 4) depending on the baby's reaction, the stranger either: does not engage if the child is playing with a toy, attempts to distract the child with a toy if the child is inactive, or tries to comfort or distract the child if he or she is distressed, 5) mom returns, stopping in the doorway to allow the child to react while the stranger leaves, mom stays until child is settled down then again departs after signaling by saying bye-bye, 6) the child is then left alone for 3 minutes (unless the child is excessively upset), 7) stranger re-enters and attempts to distract or comfort the child, and 8) mom returns, stranger leaves. In observing the behavior of parent and child within these 8 situations, the experimenters were specifically interested in quantifying these attachment behaviors: exploratory behavior, crying, proximity-seeking, contact-maintaining behavior, and proximity-



avoidant and interaction-avoiding behavior (see Ainsworth & Bell, 1970 for a detailed description of the procedures and findings).

Ainsworth and colleagues found that exposure to new situations and people did not activate the attachment behavior system. Instead, they noted that it was only after periods of separation from the child's mother that this system was activated (as evidenced by the increase of proximity-seeking behaviors). Interestingly, the presence of the attachment figure (mom) tended to support exploratory behavior even within novel or strange situations. However, once the attachment figure was gone, the children demonstrated a significant increase in attachment behaviors and a significant decrease in exploratory behavior. The specific attachment behaviors the researchers expected and observed were proximity seeking, distress at separation, and a desire to reunite with the caregiver. One unexpected behavior observed in some of the children was a resistance to contact and even avoidance upon the caregiver's return.

### **Classification System for Attachment Styles**

Based on observations in a naturalistic setting, a laboratory setting (the strange situation), and additional observational study within children's home environments, Ainsworth (1985) developed a classification system that identified three patterns of behavior (or interaction). While these patterns were initially identified with a letter (A, B, or C), the following descriptions are more commonly applied. According to Ainsworth (1985), the first category (B) is a secure attachment style which is characterized by a child who demonstrates less crying at separation, a more positive reaction during the reunion phase, and in general, a more positive affect when held or put down, and a more cooperative attitude overall. The mothers of secure babies demonstrated similar

characteristics, as they were observed to be more responsive and attentive and less rejecting of their child's request for attention or proximity. The second and third patterns (A and C) included babies identified as insecure or anxious in their attachment style. According to Ainsworth, these babies demonstrated distress much more than secure babies. They cried more frequently and were more difficult to soothe. Their confidence in exploring the environment and/or interacting with other people (other than their mother) was much less than babies classified as secure. These babies displayed more anger, more negative affect and behavior, and they cried more frequently. The descriptive label assigned to "Pattern C" babies was anxious/resistant or anxious/ambivalent and the label assigned to "A" babies was anxious/avoidant. The mothers of A or C babies were less responsive to cries of distress and were generally less affectionate than mothers of securely attached infants. The main difference between anxious/avoidant and anxious/resistant/ambivalent is that the behavior of mothers whose babies demonstrated the avoidant pattern was labeled "rejecting." They were less responsive to the child's cries, they were less likely to hug or cuddle their baby, and they tended to appear irritated or angry when interacting with their child. The anxious/resistant/ambivalent mothers were not seen as rejecting but appeared to offer comfort and affection only when it was convenient rather than when the infant expressed a need or desire for comfort or close contact.

### **Attachment Styles and Internal Working Models**

Ainsworth (1985) theorized that children with a secure attachment pattern developed an internal working model identifying his or her mother as one who is responsive and available when needed. The child with an anxious/resistant pattern of

attachment developed an internal working model identifying his or her mother as one who is not consistent in terms of responsiveness and availability. The child with an anxious/ambivalent/avoidant pattern has developed an internal working model based on feelings of rejection. Ainsworth identified this as a defensive mechanism the child developed to avoid the emotional pain associated with being rebuffed/rejected by his or her mother. Each of these behavior patterns helped create the internal working models that set the stage for ways in which the infant approached relationships later in life. While these attachment behaviors appear to be established as a result of a child's early experiences, the question of whether early deficits in attachment relationships could be overcome later in life needed to be examined.

### **Stability vs. Change in Attachment Styles**

Deficits in early relationships are associated with multiple devastating results in physical, social, and intellectual development (Bowlby, 1951, p. 367), the development of one's personality (Bowlby, 1988; Scott et al., 2009; Smith & South, 2020), and even in one's ability to form healthy relationships over the lifespan (Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Cherniak et al., 2021). However, research on attachment relationship interventions demonstrates that, while persistent, attachment style is not necessarily permanent (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby, 1988). Through therapeutic intervention, Bowlby indicated that a person could be helped to reappraise his or her early experiences and work toward developing a secure attachment style. He identified five steps in this change process. First, a therapist provides an environment characterized as safe and secure; next the client explores how he or she currently relates to others. Third, the client and therapist examine their relationship with each other. Fourth, the therapist helps the client

understand how internal working models (IWMs) are formed based on early childhood experiences with a primary caregiver. Finally, the therapist and client work together to replace dysfunctional IWMs with IWMs that are more functional and healthy.

### **Assumptions of Attachment Theory**

Bowlby posited that attachment was a biological and social system developed through an evolutionary drive for survival (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). This arose from his early studies of and admiration for Freud (psychoanalytic theory) and Darwin (evolutionary theory). Conrad Lorenz (who studied how imprinting influenced early relationships in geese) and Harry Harlow (who studied the relationship needs of young rhesus monkeys) also influenced Bowlby's ideas. However, while Freud and Darwin based their theories on the observation of adults and drew from the adult's recollection of childhood experiences, and Harlow and Lorenz worked mainly with animals, Bowlby believed observation of young children and their caregivers was the key to understanding how and why these early interactions proved so influential in the growth and development of human beings (Bowlby, 1969; 1982).

### **Related Theories and Constructs**

Just as Bowlby drew on the knowledge he obtained through the study of psychoanalytic theory, evolution, and ethology, researchers today continue to consider other theories as a means of improving and expanding on the knowledge of attachment behavior. Three areas of study support and expand the basic tenets of Attachment Theory already discussed. These include Baumeister and Leary's (1995) research on the need to belong, research related to loneliness, and studies of attachment to God. Each of these

contributes to a more complete understanding of physiological, social, emotional, and spiritual needs met through affiliation with and attachment to others.

### ***The Need to Belong***

The need to belong is described by Baumeister and Leary (1995) as a “pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). They later added that two requirements must be met to satisfy this fundamental need. They are “frequent interaction plus persistent caring” (p. 497). Also of note is the idea that the interaction and caring is best experienced through repeated interactions with one person or with a small group of individuals rather than with an ever-changing series of different relationships. Baumeister (2012) later writes that this need for affiliation exceeds even the basic physiological needs described in Maslow’s hierarchy. He states that the “motivation to form and sustain at least a minimum amount of social connections is one of the most powerful, universal, and influential human drives” (p. 121). The need to belong is further explored and clarified by Leary & Acosta (2018), who suggest that while “belongingness” is often equated with acceptance, the construct might be better defined if referred to in terms of “relational value.” Relational value is defined as “the degree to which others value having a relationship with” another person (p. 378). The authors suggest that relational value is optimal when both parties in a relationship value each other and when both parties are responsive to the needs of each other. Further, they state that when relational value is reciprocal and considered adequate by both parties, both individuals will experience fulfillment of their need for acceptance or belonging. When relational value is not reciprocal, a number of adverse conditions might ensue, including awkward interactions,

hurt feelings, feelings of rejection, anger, and sometimes even a desire to cause harm to the person who does not fulfill one's relational value expectations. Later, Leary (2021) identified low perceived relational value as the "key element in the psychological experience of rejection" (p. 128).

The need to belong is evident in the work of other theorists, including Freud, Maslow, Bowlby, and others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is also supported by empirical studies that describe mental, social, and physical benefits associated with adequate social connections and ill-effects associated with inadequate social relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Leschak & Eisenberger, 2018; Teo et al., 2013; Valtorta et al., 2016; Manvelian & Sbarra, 2020; Lim et al., 2020).

Gebauer & Maio (2012) describe empirical support connecting a person's need to belong with motivating his or her belief in God and his or her desire to engage in affiliative behavior with God (through worship, prayer, and spending time with Him). These findings were connected to the fulfillment of belonging needs because individuals who saw God as one who is accepting were more likely to believe in Him and desire to affiliate with Him than those who saw him as rejecting. Although Gebauer & Maio use the term "affiliative behavior" to describe these findings, the similarity to attachment behaviors is striking.

Williams (2021) discusses the need to belong in relation to religion, suggesting that the "affective need to belong" (p.280) that exists within each human can be met through affiliation with others in a religious community. While he does not propose that the need to affiliate with others is the sole reason individuals engage in religious behaviors, he identifies religious groups as more effective than others (such as

community or work groups) at meeting this need due to shared beliefs, goals, and purposes.

Finally, Chan et al. (2018) found that individuals who were socially isolated but highly religious were more likely to demonstrate greater purpose in life than those who were disconnected socially but not religious. The authors identify having purpose in life as a prominent factor in psychological well-being. In this study, religiousness was first defined in terms of one's commitment to religious beliefs. In the second study, religiosity was measured in terms of "religious coping or how likely people are to turn to their religious beliefs and God to deal with problems" (p. 462). In both cases, the effect of social isolation was moderated by the presence of religious beliefs.

### ***Loneliness and Attachment***

A common outcome when individuals struggle with attachment relationships is loneliness (Akdogan, 2017; Borawski et al., 2021; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Loneliness is described as the state that occurs when there is a difference between what one hopes for or desires in terms of social connection and that which he or she experiences (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010). Beutel et al. (2017) found that 10.5% of the general population reported some degree of loneliness, with 1.7% indicating that they were severely impacted by loneliness. This is a serious issue as loneliness predicts higher rates of mortality, morbidity, accelerated aging, increased cardiovascular disease, and increased blood pressure (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness is also associated with personality disorders, suicide, cognitive impairment and decline, and increased risk of Alzheimer's disease. In addition, Hawley & Cacioppo indicate that loneliness predicts increased rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and anger. Ernst and Cacioppo

(1999) suggest that chronic loneliness may begin in childhood with problems related to attachment relationships.

### *Attachment to God as an Alternative Perspective*

Implied in scholarly literature and observed in daily experience is the idea that people are imperfect resources in our quest for fulfillment of the need for attachment to others. Because humans are inherently imperfect and inconsistent, even a person with the best intentions is incapable of giving and receiving optimal social support. No one can be perfectly present and consistently willing to act in response to another person's needs. However, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008/2016) identify God as an "exalted attachment figure" (p. 908) or one who perfectly and without fail fulfills all the attachment needs a person might have. The Bible also tells of the God who stands ready to engage with humans in a perfect and personal way. Of course, it is important to note that this does not always happen in ways that are predictable from a human perspective. As mentioned earlier, there are times when God may appear distant or uninvolved, as His greater purpose might allow an individual to endure adversity for a time in order to achieve a greater good.

This worldview perspective provides an alternative to the psychoanalytic or evolutionary explanation for the human need for attachment and proposes that man's innate drive to connect (first with our caregivers and then with other human beings) is a characteristic of individuals made in the image of a relational God (Foster, 2008; Genesis 1:26-27) who created people to desire connection to others. The concept of a relational God will be explored in the next section, and the connection to Attachment Theory will be explained.



### **Biblical Foundations of the Study**

The Biblical narrative begins with the presence of God as the first words of Genesis state, “In the beginning, God...” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, Genesis 1:1). The next three chapters detail the story of Creation, providing insight into the personal, relational nature of God. It states that God the Father worked in relationship and cooperation with others as Scripture describes a joint effort in His creative work with involvement from the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2) and Jesus Christ (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16). In Genesis 3, another specific reference to the relational and cooperative work of God is noted when the passage states that God formed man from the dust of the ground. He did not work in isolation but in cooperation with other members of the Godhead. Scripture states, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image after our likeness’” (Genesis 1:26a). The relational nature of God is further illustrated as we see God acting as a nurturing teacher and a close companion for the man he had created (Genesis 1:28, 2:16-17). The Genesis account implies that Adam and Eve regularly interacted with God (Genesis 3:8) but attempted to hide from Him when they knew they had done wrong. In what is likely the most powerful demonstration of relational connection in all of history, God immediately moved to restore the relationship with man that had been broken by sin, even though it came at great cost (Genesis 3:15).

Further evidence of the importance of human connection is seen in that soon after creating the world and all that is in it; God observed that “It is not good that the man should be alone” (*English Standard Bible*, Genesis 2:18). This recognition of man’s need predates our modern investigations in psychology by thousands of years, but has been affirmed both by those who believe in the veracity of Scripture and also by those who

merely observe this truth in human behavior. Perhaps the deep-seated need for attachment to others is a substitute for the need we each possess (but most are unaware of) to connect with God Himself. St. Augustine famously wrote, “for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee” (Augustinus, 401). This principle (that our primary attachment need is attachment to God) is supported in Biblical and historical writings as well as contemporary observations. In the next section, examples from Scripture that demonstrate activation of the attachment behavior system and the response from God as the wiser and more powerful caregiver will be examined.

### **Attachment Behaviors Illustrated in Scripture**

The idea that mankind was created to form an attachment to God is supported throughout Scripture. Within these examples are found the attachment behaviors identified by Bowlby, Ainsworth, and others (proximity seeking, the caregiver as a safe haven and secure base, and distress at separation). The foundational concept of the caregiver as one who is stronger and wiser will also be explored. The section to follow provides a representative sample of these passages.

#### **Proximity Seeking in Scripture**

One of the first instances of proximity seeking in Scripture illustrates activation of the caregiving behavior system rather than the attachment behavior system as we see God (the caregiver) seeking proximity to Adam and Eve. He enters their space and calls out to them (Genesis 3:8-9). We also see God seeking proximity to other individuals, offering help in their time of need. Some Old Testament examples include Hagar (Genesis 16:8-12), Abram/Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), Isaac (Genesis 26), Jacob (Genesis 28, 31, 35), Moses (Exodus 3), Joshua (Joshua 1:5, 9), Gideon (Judges 6:11-24), and Solomon (1

Kings 3:5-14; 2 Chronicles 1:7-12) (*The Blue Letter Bible*, 1996). The most obvious New Testament example of proximity seeking on the part of the caregiver would be Jesus Christ, who Scripture states came to earth from heaven to "... seek and save the lost" (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, Luke 19:10b). Many times this act of proximity seeking shows Jesus reaching out to individuals in distress even before they asked for help. Examples of this include Zacchaeus (Luke 19), the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9:9-13), Peter the Apostle (John 21:15-17), and Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19).

Closely related to proximity seeking is the attachment theory paradigm known as the safe haven. This is illustrated as we see individuals seeking protection in the presence of God.

### **The Safe Haven in Scripture**

Scripture identifies God as the omnipotent (all-powerful) one who protects and defends those He loves (2 Thessalonians 3:3, Isaiah 41:10, Psalm 23). Also, scripture is replete with images of God as one who is omnibenevolent: a loving, nurturing, and protective Father (Luke 11:2-4, Matthew 6:9-13). Further evidence of the safe haven concept is illustrated by instances of individuals crying out to God when in trouble. One notable example was King David, whose cries for help are recorded throughout the book of Psalms (13:1, 18:6, 31:22, 69:1-4, 80:7). Specifically, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, and 102<sup>nd</sup> Psalm include vivid imagery of God as a safe haven. Also notable are instances in which the Israelites cried out to God when faced with troubling or dangerous situations (Exodus 2:23, Judges 6:7, 2 Chronicles 13:14). In addition to finding in God a safe haven,

scripture demonstrates how God also serves as a secure base from which individuals can act with confidence when facing challenges. Some of these examples are included next.

### **The Secure Base in Scripture**

The secure base construct is demonstrated in Scripture as individuals with great faith demonstrated courage and resilience while facing extremely difficult circumstances. One such example is Joseph, a young man of privilege who was sold into slavery, falsely accused, thrown into prison, then forgotten and forsaken by those he had helped (Genesis 37–48). While other factors related to resilience or another psychological construct very well could have come into play, the Biblical narrative does not indicate whether this was the case. A few insights related to this can be found in the story of Joseph’s life as he (at a young age) demonstrated discipline (was recognized for his work ethic and intelligence by being promoted to positions of authority), morality (as he refused sexual temptation), altruism (in offering to help the baker and the cupbearer), and forgiveness (as he did not seek to punish his brothers). The most salient clue related to whether Joseph’s behavior might be linked to the attachment construct of “God as a secure base” may be seen in the words he stated after he was reunited with his brothers. Joseph said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, Genesis 50:20). His confidence in the sovereignty of God seems to support the idea that despite all the adversity in life he faced, God provided a secure base upon which to stand and explore life. In the same way, Daniel and his friends (as described in the book of Daniel) were taken from a place of privilege and sent to a foreign country, where they were ordered to forsake their faith and set aside their moral convictions. Their faith in God (again, the

secure base) gave them confidence and courage to do what was right even when it appeared it would result in painful punishment and might ultimately cost them their lives. This same courage is also seen in the Biblical accounts that describe the exploits of Joshua, David, Elijah, Nehemiah, Esther, and many others.

### **Distress at Separation in Scripture**

Distress at separation from or the loss of one's attachment figures is another one of the defining features of an attachment relationship (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004). Distress at the threat of separation from God is a theme frequently found in Scripture as writers implore God to remain with them, using the words, "be not far from me" (Psalm 22:11; Psalm 22:19; Psalm 71:12; Psalm 38:21). Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016) point out that within Christian doctrine, the most salient feature of hell (or eternal damnation) is described as separation from God. Perhaps the most notable passage in Scripture illustrating the ultimate distress of separation from God is found in the words Christ uttered just before His death on the cross when He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, Matthew 27:46). Despite ample evidence found in Scripture, some individuals question whether individuals can truly form a personal relationship with one they have never seen or heard. This question is addressed in the literature describing attachment to God.

### **Attachment to a Non-Corporeal Being?**

While adherents of faith traditions accept as reality that humans can engage in an attachment relationship with God, some outside the faith doubt whether it is possible to form a relationship with one that is not visible or who (according to non-believers) may not even exist. However, Cicirelli (2004) discusses an idea (presented earlier by

Bretherton, 1987) that while human attachment first occurs in a close personal relationship between two physically present persons (caregiver and infant), this relationship is later maintained in increasing measure with the growing child's mental representation of his or her attachment figure (usually the mother). In other words, as the child grows, he or she spends increasing amounts of time outside the physical presence of his or her mother, but this does not decrease the bond that was established. Evidence for the idea that individuals can also form a relationship with God (even though He is not physically present) is confirmed in a study in which researchers found that 75.1% of individuals surveyed in the World Social Survey (n=90,350) indicated that they believed in God's existence. Further, 46.4% indicated that they considered God very important in their life (Leite et al., 2020). Just as one's attachment relationship to his or her mother endures through separation and even death, one's attachment relationship to God can also continue even though He is not physically seen as present. Further, Granqvist (2020) suggests that one's relationship to a deity may be a more significant construct in the study of adult attachment than the well-established idea of attachment connections to romantic partners, as a relationship with God more closely resembles the parent-child relationship. As an example, Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016) point out complicating factors that occur within adult romantic relationships that impede the attachment relationship (such as inconsistent reciprocity as well as issues that arise related to sexuality). Thus, while there are some detractors, a large body of evidence (both psychological and biblical) supports the idea that God can serve as an attachment figure.

Thus far, the information provided has relied on Biblical sources as evidence for the idea that God can serve as an attachment figure. Next is a brief review of evidence from psychological science related to God as an attachment figure.

### **Attachment to God in Psychological Science**

Attachment to God was first explored by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990), who proposed that the experience of one's attachment to God aligned with the human attachment behavior observed and identified by Ainsworth and Bell (1970): seeking proximity to a caregiver, using the attachment figure/caregiver as a secure base from which to explore, using the caregiver as a safe haven, and expressing separation anxiety when removed from the caregiver (Beck & McDonald, 2004).

To measure Attachment to God in empirical terms, Beck and McDonald (2004) developed the Attachment to God Inventory. The development of this scale drew heavily on an existing attachment scale, the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale, with questions focused on "Avoidance of Intimacy and Anxiety about Abandonment as they apply to relationship with God" (p. 94).

Since the development of the Attachment to God Inventory, empirical support for the value of one's attachment to God is noted with secure attachment to God being associated with positive spiritual and psychological outcomes (Augustyn et al., 2017; Leman et al., 2018), and improved well-being (Njus & Scharmer, 2020). Bradshaw & Kent (2018) indicated that attachment to God played a significant role in the connection between personal well-being and prayer, and Wilt et al. (2020) found that attachment to God was a predictor of transformative sacred moments within the context of religious/spiritual struggles. Counted et al. (2018) discussed the association between

secure attachment to God and relational spirituality (which is frequently associated with improved quality of life).

Specific research also includes examining how attachment style and relationship status impact religiosity in early adulthood (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000) and how attachment impacts religious change in adolescence (Granqvist, 2002). Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) conducted three experiments to examine attachment using subliminal stimulation in attachment relationships. The results of these experiments demonstrated that adolescents with a secure attachment history exhibited strengthened religious attachment.

General support is also found in the psychological literature for the importance of a secure or strong relationship with God (not necessarily identified as attachment). Research indicates that one's relationship with God helps improve functioning when human relationships are deficient (Chan et al., 2018; Bradshaw et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2020), it improves the overall quality of life (George et al., 2020), it decreases one's sense of loneliness (Kirkpatrick et al., 2016; 1999), it is associated with reduced chronic pain (Hatefi et al., 2019), it is associated with the use of effective coping strategies (Parenteau et al., 2019), it is associated with one's ability to cope with suffering (Bock et al., 2018; Bock et al., 2021), it reduces depressive symptoms (Krumrei, et al, 2013), it acts as a buffer to reduce stress and improve sleep (Ellison et al., 2019), it improves psychological/mental health (Kent et al., 2018; Pirutinsky et al., 2019; Stulp et al., 2019; Tung et al., 2018), it facilitates reduced cardiac reactivity to stress (Masters et al., 2020), and it improves one's general ability to manage stressors (Wilt et al., 2019; Raj & Sim, 2020).



Interesting to note is the fact that the literature discovered and examined thus far has focused almost exclusively on outcomes. Researchers describe what is observed in relation to secure attachment to God but do not examine how a person might develop a secure attachment to God. Because ample evidence exists related to how beneficial it is to attain a secure relationship with God, it is worthwhile to examine how this relationship begins, develops, and is maintained throughout the lifespan. To begin exploring this topic, foundations for one's attachment to God will first be examined from a Judeo-Christian perspective as described in the Bible.

### **The Pathway to Secure Attachment to God**

Based on psychological science and Biblical examples, it is clear that individuals can form an attachment relationship with God and that those who do form an attachment relationship with God experience benefits across multiple domains. This close, personal relationship is promised to all believers and is described by Jesus as a life of spiritual abundance. This is something most would desire, but it appears that not all religious people experience it (Cicirelli, 2004). Thus, it begs the question of what an individual must do to obtain a relationship with God characterized by a secure attachment.

### **Beginning a Relationship with God**

According to Christian teaching, mankind lost the ability to have a relationship with God when the first man (Adam) sinned (Romans 5:12). However, immediately after man sinned, God promised that the relationship would not be broken forever but that He would make a way for the relationship to be restored through salvation in Christ (Genesis 3; John 3:16).

### **Foundational Elements of a Secure Attachment to God**

Unfortunately, many who enter this relationship with God accept His gift of salvation and stop there. They do little to experience the life of abundance promised within this relationship. Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, John 10:10b). This promise is important, as Christ stated that providing for this abundant life was a primary reason He came. The word “life” in this verse is the Greek word *zoë*, which is associated with one’s spiritual, eternal soul rather than physical existence (Foster & Helmers, 2008). The phrase “more abundantly” is identified as the Greek word *perissos* which means superior in both quantity and quality; “very highly, beyond measure ... superfluous” (G4053, n. d.). In other words, Jesus promised His followers a spiritual life here on earth that far exceeded anything they could ask for or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). This verse in which the phrase “more abundantly” appears is within the context of Jesus’ description of Himself as the Good Shepherd. He contrasts the place of safety He provides for His flock with the danger those outside His care face. From this Biblical narrative, one can infer that the abundant life promised is one characterized by proximity to the shepherd/caregiver, an exceeding and abundant sense of security with freedom from fear and anxiety, along with a sense of affiliation and affection that is unshakably secure (John 10:27-30). If this pairing of Christ’s use of the Shepherd/Sheep paradigm with His promise of abundant spiritual life was intentional, the abundant life could be characterized as one in which individuals exhibit a strong attachment to God as one who is with them, who protects them, provides security, and frees them from fear and anxiety. As noted earlier, these constructs align with the attachment paradigm of the safe haven. The security enjoyed by the sheep is associated with the attachment concept of a secure

base. Distress at separation is another of the key constructs identified by Bowlby as elements of an attachment relationship, and they are also identified as key elements in the Religion-as-Attachment model first described by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990). Next is an examination of how researchers explain the processes that may be involved in forming one's attachment to God.

### **How Attachment to God Occurs**

#### **Psychological Bases for Attachment to God**

##### ***Correspondence or Compensation?***

Many researchers, including Kirkpatrick (1992) and later Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016), studied ways in which God serves as an attachment figure either through correspondence (in which one's relationship with God mirrors the secure attachment relationship established with caregivers early in life) or compensation (to make up for deficits in secure attachment). In the correspondence model, an individual who enjoys a secure attachment relationship with his or her parents assigns the internal working models related to human attachment figures (his or her parents) to God. In other words, God is an attachment figure whose character aligns with that of human attachment figures. Support for the correspondence theory is supported by the idea that attachment behaviors appear consistent across generations, with securely attached parents/caregivers tending to parent in ways that promote secure attachment in their children (Verhage et al., 2016). If the correspondence model is correct, scientists might expect that children of parents securely attached to God would be more likely also to demonstrate a secure attachment to God. Based on this idea, the question arises of whether attachment to God is encouraged intergenerationally. Cassibba et al. (2013) found that this may indeed be the case. Young

children (M age = 7.5) were given a felt board with an image of a child, and an image that represented God, then presented with situations describing attachment activating or attachment neutral events, children whose mothers demonstrated a secure attachment to God placed God closer to the image of the child than did children of mothers with an insecure attachment to God regardless of the situation described (attachment activating or neutral).

Another question explored is whether attachment to mother or father is most significant in the development of a child's attachment to God. August and Esperandio (2019) indicated that (based on an integrative analysis of 62 articles published from 1980 to 2017), there was "unanimous" (p. 1049) support for the idea that one's relationship with his or her parents is a key factor in how one's relationship with God will form but mixed results related to whether maternal or paternal attachment was most important.

A second pathway is called compensation. In this model, an individual who did not develop a secure attachment relationship with his or her caregivers comes to see God as a wholly adequate, substitute, or surrogate attachment figure. The person who comes to God via the compensation model finds a way to change his or her internal working models from anxiety and/or avoidance of relationships to form a confident and trusting, secure attachment relationship with God (also referred to as earned security).

Scripture supports both the correspondence and compensation model. Throughout the Bible, parents are enjoined to teach their children about God (Proverbs 22:6; Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Ephesians 6:4). This implies support for the correspondence model, as parents are not likely to teach their children about God if they do not have a personal relationship of their own with Him. The compensation model is also supported as God

frequently refers to Himself as a father to and defender of the fatherless (Psalm 27:10; Psalm 146:9; Psalm 68:5; John 14:18).

In summary, Biblical (see above), theoretical (Granqvist, 1998; Granqvist, 2010; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; 2016), and empirical support (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist et al., 2012) exists for either a correspondence or compensation pathway to God attachment. A third way in which research indicates individuals might engage in a closer attachment relationship with God is through the experience of difficult life circumstances. These situations find individuals reaching out to God as a safe haven in times of trouble.

### ***Life Circumstances and Attachment to God***

**Difficult or Dangerous Situations.** Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016), in discussing various circumstances that might motivate individuals to increase their attachment to God, identify intensely stressful situations or situations involving imminent threats such as war as contexts that might motivate individuals to form or strengthen an attachment to God. Also mentioned are situations involving distress related to personal relationships. They cite multiple studies from 1924 to 2016 in which individuals indicate that the stressful situation precipitated their turning to God for help. Often this involved a conversion experience in which the distressed person cedes personal control to God as a wiser, more powerful partner.

More recently, Davis et al. (2019) explored individuals' reactions to a natural disaster in light of the survivor's attachment to God. They conducted a qualitative study collecting data on two separate occasions (the first four weeks after a catastrophic flood and the second six months after the disaster). In both interviews, 85% of the participants

indicated that their religious attachment was the same or better than it had been pre-disaster. In describing their religious status, survivors indicated that they saw God as “a source of love, comfort, strength, and hope” (p. 578). Further, they described an active decision to put their trust in God, and finally, they indicated that their experience with God involved their family and community. The researchers concluded that a dangerous situation such as a flood or other natural disaster activates the attachment system, and survivors readily look to God as their trusted attachment figure (a safe haven and secure base). An interesting finding is that individuals who experienced greater trauma (direct rather than indirect effects of the flood) expressed a greater tendency to recognize God as their safe haven than those who were not as directly affected. One final note of interest was that 67% of survivors felt closer to God after the disaster.

**Illness or Other Health Crises.** Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016) identify “illness, injury, fatigue” (p. 910) as life circumstances that may motivate individuals to reach out to God for help (seek proximity to Him or look to Him as a safe haven). Granqvist & Kirkpatrick write that this commonly occurs as individuals seek proximity to God through prayer, asking God to relieve pain, heal illness, or provide comfort and strength. Specific research supporting this point includes a study by Gall & Bilodeau (2019) in which they found that anxious attachment to God was associated with a reduced ability to cope with a breast cancer diagnosis (more avoidant responses and more emotional distress), while women with a secure attachment to God demonstrated a better ability to cope with stressors related to the possibility of a breast cancer diagnosis. This is perhaps an indication of God as a safe haven during a time of uncertainty.

Hatefi et al. (2019) conducted a cross-sectional study that examined religious coping (RC) and attachment to God (ATG) in elderly participants experiencing chronic lower back pain. They found a correlation between RC and ATG and one's ability to deal with pain. Specifically, the researchers indicate that the greater the degree of ATG indicated by a participant, the greater their experience of pain relief and their acceptance of chronic pain.

**Failed Relationships.** Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016), in reviewing their previous investigations, note that “many of the crises reported retrospectively by religious converts involved relationship-focused difficulties ... particularly breakups and divorce” (p. 910). They note that the desire to draw close to God during the time of relationship loss may be attributed to their experience of loss. These circumstances that tend to encourage attachment to God are significant in studying why individuals might seek to establish or maintain an attachment relationship with God.

### ***Therapeutic Intervention and Attachment to Others***

The idea that one's attachment status can change over time is well-supported in the psychological literature (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The process by which an individual moves from insecure attachment in childhood to secure attachment at some later point in life is referred to as earned security (Saunders et al., 2011; Dansby-Olufowote, 2020). This approach to changing attachment style was described by Bowlby within the framework of a therapeutic relationship.

**Bowlby's Guidelines for Attachment Style Change.** Bowlby (1988) outlined the following steps as a means by which a therapist could facilitate change in a client's attachment style. Within a clinical setting: 1) first, the therapist provides a safe haven and

secure base, 2) the client then explores his or her current style of relating to others, 3) the client and therapist explore how the client relates to the therapist, 4) the therapist provides guidance so the client may reflect on how his or her internal working models are linked to childhood experiences with a primary attachment figure, and 5) the therapist and client work together to recognize dysfunction of present IWM and replace them with functional IWMs.

**Another Perspective for Attachment Style Change.** Another perspective grounded in a therapeutic relationship prescribed a slightly different approach to changing one's attachment status (Dansby-Olufowote et al., 2020). The researchers sought to develop a grounded theory of earning secure attachment. The theory that resulted from this study included three categories: 1) identifying and implementing metaconditions of positive attachment style change, 2) making intrapsychic changes, and 3) making interpersonal changes. Advice related to the first category involved encouraging the client to be intentional and to develop a relationship with a surrogate attachment figure. Second, making intrapsychic changes involves redefining one's worth/identity, reframing self-doubts and perceived negative qualities, identifying and replacing false beliefs, and refusing to see oneself as a victim. Within the third category, making interpersonal changes involved making peace with the past, taking small risks with trust, focusing less on oneself, reaching out to others and accepting vulnerability, and eventually becoming an attachment mentor to others. The main difference between this approach and that advocated by Bowlby was that Bowlby identified the therapist as the catalyst for change, while Dansby-Olufowote et al. identified the role of a surrogate attachment figure, also called an alternative attachment figure.



**Surrogate Attachment Figures and Attachment Change.** Theoretical support for the idea that individuals other than parents might function as alternative attachment figures is found in the seminal writings of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1985). Scientific support for this idea is also found in more recent literature. Saunders et al. (2011), in a longitudinal study of 113 first-time mothers recruited during the final trimester of pregnancy, found evidence that attachment security can be achieved even if inadequate caregiving occurred early in life. Using the Adult Attachment Interview (Main et al., 2002, as cited in Saunders et al., 2011), interviews were used to determine how these women recalled early relationship influences. The interview results were transcribed, coded, and individuals were classified according to the participants' "current state of mind ... not on memories of childhood experiences" (p. 409). Typical attachment designations (secure, dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved) were assigned to each participant, with the dismissing and preoccupied participants combined in an insecure category and the unresolved participants re-evaluated and placed in the best fit category. Participants were further divided into two categories within the secure category: continuously secure and earned security. Earned security was defined according to strict criteria established in previous research (Hesse, 2008 and Main et al., 2002, as cited in Saunders et al., 2011), which required that the participant describe "negative relationship experiences with their primary caregivers during childhood, yet are able to talk about these experiences openly and coherently"(p. 404).

Other information elicited by the investigators was whether participants received appropriate care from one or both parents, whether an alternative caregiver (AC) provided emotional or instrumental support, what relationship the AC had to the

participant and/or his or her family, at what age the AC was involved, and whether the participant received therapy and (if so) for how long. Participants were also screened for depression to rule this out as a confounding factor.

Sessions with participants and their infants were recorded, analyzed, and coded at 12 and 15 months (of the child's age) to explore whether the mom's attachment status influenced interaction with her child. Results indicated that mothers with an earned secure status were as likely to have securely attached infants as those who were continuously secure.

Four factors emerged as significant in participants' experiences classified as earned security individuals. First was the involvement of an AC present in the child's life during childhood. The second was that the quality or type of support received from the AC (emotional support rather than instrumental). Third, researchers noted that the identity of the AC was not significant as both family and non-family members filled this role appropriately. Fourth, time spent with a therapist proved significant, with the time spent in therapy also a factor (earned secure individuals had spent more time in therapy).

In a replication of Saunder's (2011) study, Zaccagnino et al. (2014) obtained similar results in Italy, with individuals who experienced deprivation in childhood moving to a status of "earned security" in adulthood. The following were indicated as factors present in the experience of individuals who achieved earned security. First, they demonstrated higher levels of reflective functioning (RF), with RF described as a recognition of the difficulties they experienced in childhood and an understanding of how it might impact their abilities as caregivers. Second, those with earned security status identified the presence of at least one alternative support figure who provided emotional

support (when primary caregivers did not). Specifically, those identified in the earned secure category had the highest score related to the amount of emotional support provided by alternative support figures. The researchers cite the emotional support provided by the alternative attachment figure as a key factor in helping individuals move from insecure to earned secure status. An interesting difference reported by Zaccagnino and colleagues was that an overwhelming majority of the surrogate attachment figures in the Italian study were grandparents, while participants in the American study listed a variety of individuals (some non-family members) who functioned as their alternative attachment figures. In light of these findings, the question arises of whether attachment to God might fulfill the role of an alternative attachment figure, providing the emotional support needed for individuals working through attachment issues. This concept will be examined next.

### **God as an Alternative Caregiver/Attachment Figure**

A case is made that God may serve as an ideal surrogate attachment figure due to the belief that He is one who is always present, always available, and always concerned for the well-being of His children (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Kirkpatrick, 1992). One example offered is the almost universal practice of prayer during times of trouble, with individuals seeking proximity to God and using Him as a safe haven in their time of distress. The secure base phenomenon is also mentioned as they cite research identifying faith as a resource for reducing anxiety and a source of psychological confidence. Granqvist et al. (2010) indicate that individuals who suffer attachment relationship deprivation and thus sometimes see themselves as unlovable may turn to God as a surrogate attachment figure because Biblical teaching posits that God's love is

universally accepting and unconditional. The terms “earned” and “reparative” attachment security are used in this context. While theoretical discussions are helpful and support the idea of God attachment helping facilitate change in human attachment relationships, the research examined here indicates mixed results, with some finding that secure attachment to God is helpful, while in other cases, attachment to God was not useful in helping individuals move toward earned security. A brief overview of representative research is examined in the next section.

The question of whether God might function as an alternative attachment figure and thus help individuals with inadequate attachment styles move to a place of earned security is supported by Cicirelli (2004), who studied older adults (age range 70-97) and found in some of the cases that God did indeed serve as a substitute attachment figure for individuals who had suffered the loss of their primary attachment figure. An interesting finding was that while a majority of participants were “highly religious” (p. 384), only some demonstrated a measurable attachment to God that was considered strong. Cicirelli wrote that while some form of belief was foundational to God attachment, “being religious is no guarantee that such an attachment will form” (p. 384). This point leads to further exploration of how or why some individuals develop a secure attachment relationship with God while others (who appear to be equally religious) do not.

Nygaard et al. (2020) examined whether transformative encounters with God resulted in a secure attachment relationship with Him. The research team conducted qualitative interviews with individuals (N=9) who attributed religious healing experiences to an encounter with God or Jesus. The researchers found that these experiences demonstrated a connection to God reflective of both a safe haven and a

secure base, providing the participants with motivation for “new explorations of their lives, selves, others, and God” (p. 487). These transformative experiences are attributed to a change in the internal working models such that the individuals found in God (or Jesus) the attachment relationship missing from their early childhood experiences. So, in this case, it was evident that God acted as a surrogate attachment figure with a transformative healing experience serving as the catalyst for change.

Counted (2016) conducted qualitative interviews with young adults specifically chosen based on their identification as individuals with an anxious attachment status (N = 15). The researcher sought to explore the attachment language present in descriptions of the participants’ view of God (God concept). Findings indicated that one’s concept of God is related to what he or she has learned about God (cognitive connections), while “God attachment language is through what we experience and use to express an affectionate bond with an AF” (pg. 323). In general, the participants expressed what could be termed “head knowledge” of God (God concept based on a cognitive understanding of what had been taught to them) that was generally positive and aligned with theological descriptions of God. However, when participants were asked to elaborate on these descriptions using personal examples, a more conflicted relationship emerged, with high levels of anxiety evident. In other words, while some attachment behavior was evident (such as proximity seeking and seeing God as stronger and wiser), the personal relationship with God was characterized by “emotional conflict and tension” (p. 343). In this case, it appears then that the relationship with God did not assist these young people in moving from anxious attachment to earned security. In other words, He did not fulfill the role of one who brings healing as a surrogate attachment figure.

In another study, Kimball et al. (2013) explored emerging adults' relationship with God in light of their attachment relationships with parents and peers. Because there was little to no difference in attachment status between parents and peers, the "peers" attachment variable was not used in the analysis. In this study, the role of a surrogate attachment figure was referred to as a corrective or reparative attachment experience. Three research questions were proposed, with the third question demonstrating relevance for this discussion. The researchers sought to determine the process by which emerging adults with insecure parental attachments became secure in their relationship with God. Participants were recruited from two graduating classes of a Christian liberal arts college, so the researchers expected (and found) a high degree of religiosity. Two major themes were identified from the data gathered in the qualitative interviews. The first was the presence of a personal connection to God, and the second was a communal connection (usually obtained through interaction with members of a faith community). While not present for all participants, the researchers found that 62% of the interviews reflected these themes. Results indicated that emerging adults with inadequate attachment relationships early in life developed an intimate relationship with God, with most indicating that this relationship was developed via a personal connection to God (69%) rather than a communal connection (31%). The attachment language most used by these individuals was related to the secure base and proximity seeking aspects of attachment. The authors note that this relationship did not appear to be an attempt to see God as a surrogate or replacement attachment figure. Instead, the relationship seemed to be a "very personalized, intimate experience with God" (p. 185).

To summarize, based on this limited review of literature, it is possible for individuals to engage with God as a surrogate attachment figure, but they might also just connect with Him in a personal way that does not emulate attachment behaviors, or they may only connect with Him on a cognitive level.

### **How Attachment to God Status Can Change**

Just as researchers have studied the ways in which individuals might change their insecure or avoidant attachment status to a status of earned security, researchers have also proposed ways that individuals might also change their current status in attachment to God by changing their internal working models in terms of how they view God and their relationship with Him. Granqvist et al. (2010) indicate that individuals whose attachment status is not secure may sometimes see themselves as unlovable and may turn to God as a surrogate attachment figure because Biblical teaching posits that God's love is universally accepting and unconditional. The terms "earned" and "reparative" attachment security are used in this context. While theoretical discussions are helpful and support the idea of God attachment helping facilitate change in human attachment relationships, the research examined here indicates mixed results, with some finding that secure attachment to God is helpful, while in other cases, attachment to God was not useful in helping individuals move toward earned security. A brief overview of representative research is examined in the next section.

### **Summary**

The vital necessity of healthy attachment relationships is a well-established psychological construct with implications for health and well-being across multiple domains. These benefits, as written about by Bowlby (1969/1982), Ainsworth (1985),

and others, identified the life-long benefits and outcomes associated with a secure attachment style and the detrimental impact of inadequate attachment relationships among humans. This review of literature has provided support for the premise that attachment to God has multiple parallels in characteristics and in beneficial outcomes to the attachment relationship formed between a child and his or her caregiver. Individuals such as Kirkpatrick, Shaver, Mikulincer, Granqvist, Beck, McDonald, and others identified the life-long benefits associated with a secure attachment to God and also described the detrimental impact of inadequate attachment relationships between humans and God. Also found within the literature of Attachment Theory and Attachment to God Theory is evidence that one's current attachment style is persistent but not permanent. Evidence suggests that individuals can and do change from an inadequate attachment to earned security in human relationships and in one's relationship with God.

While robust evidence from psychological and religious literature identifies positive outcomes related to secure attachment to God, the process by which one arrives at their attachment to God status is unclear. Two potential paths have been proposed, with some evidence indicating that correspondence with one's human attachment style guides the development of his or her attachment to God. A second path is compensation. According to this model, individuals begin and strengthen their attachment to God in an attempt to compensate for deficits in their human attachment relationships. While these concepts provide a helpful framework for understanding this relationship, they do not identify practical methods for helping individuals change from an inadequate attachment relationship to God to earned security. This study will attempt to add to the current knowledge about earned security by interviewing individuals who identify as having a



relationship with God to identify thoughts, emotions, and/or behaviors that contribute to their present attachment to God and to explore how their attachment style may have changed over time.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the lived experience of attachment to God in individuals who self-identify as Christians to understand how attachment to God is described and attained. Further, the experience of change within one's attachment to God will be explored. In this chapter, the methodology of the proposed study will be presented, including the selection of participants, methods and tools of measurement, an explanation of the data analysis, and finally, the delimitations, assumptions, and limitations related to this study.

### Research Questions

RQ1: How do individuals who identify as Christians describe their lived experience of attachment to God?

RQ2: Is the experience of attachment to God described by participants with language similar to human attachment theory language (i.e., proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, distress at separation, and seeing God as wiser and stronger)?

RQ3: How do individuals describe the experiences involved in arriving at their current attachment to God?

RQ4: How do individuals describe their experience related to changes within their attachment to God?

### Research Design

To design an effective research study, an individual must base his or her decisions on the purpose or goals of the investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1997).

One of the key decisions related to this is whether to conduct a qualitative or quantitative study and, secondarily, what specific type within that category. Creswell & Poth (2018) identify the overarching consideration in this decision-making process to be whether sufficient information is available to make accurate assumptions (in order to form the basis for a hypothesis) or if the topic requires an exploratory approach. While outcomes related to one's attachment to God have been examined in numerous quantitative studies, exploring what one experiences in forming, maintaining, or changing his or her attachment to God is less evident. In light of this, an exploratory approach is deemed appropriate.

Further, Creswell and Poth (2018) identify 7 additional criteria for choosing to conduct qualitative research. The 7 criteria are: 1) complexity, 2) need to empower or provide a voice for a particular population, 3) understanding contexts, 4) lack of fit between what needs to be examined or measured and quantitative measures, 5) lack of a robust theory, 6) follow up to quantitative studies to fully explain the results, and 7) a need for flexibility in writing style when reporting results. Of these 7 items, the first 4 apply to this study. First, the complexity involved in learning about the ways in which human beings connect to the Divine is not likely to be captured through a quantifiable, self-report scale. Second, although there has been increasing interest in studies related to religion and spirituality within psychological circles, much work remains to be done in terms of deeply understanding constructs such as religiosity, spirituality, faith, belief, etc., from the perspective of those who identify as Christians. Rather than investigating what a secular researcher might consider religious or spiritual constructs, it is important to allow individuals from this minority population to define these terms according to their

beliefs and traditions (Knabb & Wang, 2021). This is closely related to the third criterion: understanding contexts. A qualitative study allows for opportunities to understand context in ways that might not even be considered or imagined prior to the investigation. In other words, researchers using a standard scale or inventory cannot consider all the many contexts that might create confounding variables. For example, one question on the Attachment to God Inventory states, “My prayers to God are very emotional” (Beck & McDonald, 2004, p. 95). Suppose a person happens to be grieving the loss of a loved one when the inventory is completed. In that case, he or she is almost certain to respond differently than if taking the inventory when they are not experiencing significant grief or loss. However, information related to this experience of grief would almost certainly be communicated during a face-to-face interview as the researcher might note physical reactions (tears, difficulty responding, etc.) as well as changed affect as the interviewee considers how he or she experiences a relationship to God in that moment. Fourth, qualitative research should be chosen when the data to be examined does not fit within the realm of quantitative research. For example, it would be a simple matter to count how many individuals in a group respond in a manner consistent with a secure attachment relationship to God (based on their scores on a scale such as the Attachment to God Inventory). But this test and others like it (Knabb & Wang, 2021; Underwood, 2011) focus on a person’s present experience with God but does not reveal anything about the participant’s experience of attachment to God or whether they have experienced change within the relationship.

In light of these factors, a qualitative design was chosen. Within qualitative research, several approaches could be used. After reviewing a number of these

approaches, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was selected. The rationale for selecting this approach will be examined next.

To understand why hermeneutic phenomenology is selected for this study, it is important to briefly examine the historic and philosophical foundations of phenomenology. First, it is important to understand that phenomenology is at its foundation, not a research technique or method but a philosophy (Vagle, 2018; Peoples, 2020). Edmund Husserl considered the father of phenomenology, was a philosopher whose ideas were formed in opposition to the prevailing philosophy articulated by Descartes, who stated that “the mind and everything outside of the mind are separated from one another” (Vagle, 2018, p. 6). Husserl proposed that rather than one’s reality residing in logic or cognition, it was based on a person’s immediate experience. Vagle further states that to Husserl, life was neither subjective nor objective; instead, life is experienced somewhere between the two. While Husserl advocated a transcendental phenomenology (one that is free from any presuppositions), his student, Martin Heidegger, noted that individuals could not escape the contexts within which their being exists. The next section is a very brief overview of two key concepts related to Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology: *Dasein* and the Hermeneutic Circle.

Heidegger introduced the concept of *Dasein*, a word whose literal meaning is “being there” (also referred to as “being-in-the-world”) to say that we can only begin to capture the essence of human existence when we consider the unified experience of the person within the context of their immediate place in the world (Zahavi, 2018). He advocated a hermeneutic phenomenology that requires practitioners to implement a process called the Hermeneutic Circle. Within this process, as individuals examine a

phenomenon, they recognize their presuppositions at the outset and then consider how these assumptions might be revised as a continual spiral of examining aspects of the phenomenon (the parts and the whole) either strengthen or weaken the pre-existing assumptions. Peoples (2020) indicates that this should not be considered a technique but was instead (according to Heidegger) the way we make sense of the world.

The focus of a phenomenological study (according to Creswell and Poth, 2018) is to describe the “common meaning” (p. 75) of a phenomenon experienced by a group of individuals in order to describe the essence or most basic nature of the phenomenon. Thus, a phenomenological approach was selected for this study in order to explore the phenomenon of attachment to God through the lived experiences of individuals who identify as Christians. The approach to this phenomenological study is further defined as a hermeneutic phenomenological study in recognition of the fact that the topic being studied is rich in presuppositions. To divorce oneself from all assumptions and presuppositions could introduce an awkwardness or artificiality that might inhibit the effort to gain a deeper understanding of the complex experience of a human being’s relationship to Deity.

### **Participants**

Because the presence of a common or shared experience is an essential element for a phenomenological study, the participant selection was purposeful rather than random, criterion-based, and will implement snowball sampling if needed to reach saturation. The target sample size for qualitative studies generally varies from at least 3 participants to as many as 15 (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2020), with the final number dependent on saturation. In other words, a qualitative researcher will know when

he or she has reached an acceptable sample size when no new data is obtained from participant interviews. So rather than identifying a specific number of participants, the research will continue until saturation is achieved.

Inclusion criteria include age (over 18 years of age), self-identification as a Christian, and enrollment as a student at a specific evangelical institution of higher learning. Exclusion criteria included individuals under 18 who did not identify as Christians and were not enrolled at a specific evangelical institution of higher learning. Participants were recruited through an announcement targeting residential students of an evangelical university in the southeastern United States via a posting on the research study web page. Additional recruitment of participants included an electronic announcement for online students in the same university. The text of the announcements is included in Appendix A.

Permission to recruit students was obtained from the Dean of the online and residential programs mentioned above.

### **Study Procedures**

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. Phenomenology aims to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence-in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive reliving and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience (van Manen, 1997, p. 36).

To accomplish the above-stated goal of phenomenological research, the following procedures were implemented:

1. Individuals who responded to the link provided within the posted announcements were sent a brief questionnaire to evaluate whether inclusion criteria were met (See Appendix B).
2. Volunteers who met the inclusion criteria were provided with a document (see Appendix C) detailing particulars related to participation, including informed consent and confidentiality information. Volunteers were asked to sign and date the consent document. This document was then stored within the data collection system (Qualtrics).
3. Volunteers were sent a meeting request with a proposed appointment date and time.
4. Based on the individual's response (accept the proposed time and date or suggest a new one), the initial interview was scheduled.
5. On the day of the scheduled appointment, an email reminder was sent, and the participant was sent a copy of his or her informed consent document. See Appendix E for sample reminders.
6. The semi-structured interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams. Inclusion criteria were confirmed and consent for recording was obtained. See Appendix F for a list of initial questions.
7. The recordings were transcribed and examined.
8. Data analysis commenced as interviews were completed.

### **Instrumentation and Measurement**

Creswell and Poth (2018) cite Moustakas (1994), who recommends that the interview begin with two broad questions, "What have you experienced in terms of the



phenomenon? What contexts of situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (p. 79). For the purposes of this study, to avoid leading the participants to respond in a particular direction, the phenomenon will be stated as “your relationship with God” rather than “your attachment relationship with God.” Additional questions will be developed depending on the responses provided by the participant. If salient questions are discovered, they may be used in succeeding interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process described by Creswell and Poth (2018) as that which is generally similar for studies focused on psychological phenomenology is as follows:

1. Transcribe interviews and read each interview in its entirety.
2. Examine the transcripts to identify and highlight significant statements that describe the lived experience of the participants. This process is called “horizontalization” (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
3. Examine the significant statements to identify general themes.
4. Develop “clusters of meaning” (p. 79) based on the themes.
5. Develop textural and structural descriptions of the lived experience.
6. Combine the textural and structural descriptions to form a composite description or essence of the lived experience.

### **Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations**

This study was limited to include only individuals who self-identify as Christians. While attachment to God may be studied within other traditions, this study will focus only on individuals who share the common experience of having trusted Christ as their

Savior. Assumptions underlying this study are as follows: 1) a person who self-identifies as a Christian has established a personal relationship with God through saving faith in Jesus Christ, 2) this relationship is enduring in that once a relationship has been established, it cannot be undone, 3) the parameters related to this relationship are revealed within the text of the Bible, 4) a person can have a relationship with God but not enjoy all the fullness that is available as a part of this relationship, and finally, 5) the researcher assumes that all participants will be truthful and genuine in their responses.

The chief limitation of this study (as noted in Chapter 1) is the inherent problem of self-report data. Because of the nature of the topic, if the researcher was unable to establish rapport/trust with the participants, the answers might not be entirely truthful. A second limitation is a lack of diversity in age, race, socio-economic status, and educational attainment.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlines the methods planned for this study. In it is included a rationale for the selection of hermeneutic phenomenology that is based on philosophical and practical factors. The philosophical foundation for this qualitative study is found in the writings of Heidegger, who wrote that the essence of a phenomenon could only be understood through an examination of the lived experiences of individuals. From a practical perspective, a qualitative study is needed due to the complexity of the topic, the need to explore the phenomenon from the perspective of individuals who are experiencing the phenomenon, the need to understand the context within which the phenomenon occurs within the lived experience of the participants, and the fact that

analysis of this information will be more effective in a qualitative process rather than quantitative (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to addressing the foundational items noted above, the chapter also outlines the procedures planned for the recruitment of participants, study procedures, data analysis, and completion of the project.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of attachment to God in individuals who identify as Christians in order to understand how attachment to God is described and developed. Further, the experience of change within one's attachment to God was explored. I specifically sought to learn whether these experiences with God were similar to attachment behaviors or attitudes experienced by individuals in relationship with their human caregivers.

### Research Questions

The specific research questions posed in this study are as follows:

RQ1: How do individuals who identify as Christians describe their lived experience of attachment to God?

RQ2: Is the experience of attachment to God described by participants with language similar to human attachment theory language (i.e. proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, distress at separation, and seeing God as wiser and stronger)?

RQ3: How do individuals describe the experiences involved in arriving at their current attachment to God?

RQ4: How do individuals describe their experience related to changes within their attachment to God?

### Descriptive Results

#### Participant Demographics

The participants included 6 females and 5 males. Ages ranged from 24 to 75 (estimated). All participants were students enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Liberty University studying Psychology. One participant was African-American, and all others were Caucasian (with the classification based on investigator observation). One of the eleven participants identified as a member of the Catholic church; others did not specify a religious affiliation. All participants met the inclusion criteria in that each was over 18 years of age, enrolled as a student at Liberty University, and identified as a Christian.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Ethnicity	Chronological Age	Spiritual Age	Religious Affiliation
<b>P1</b>	F	White	24	5 years	Not Specified
<b>P2</b>	F	African-American	51	25 years	Not Specified
<b>P3</b>	F	White	44*	22* years	Not Specified
<b>P4</b>	F	White	36*	6-7* years	Not Specified
<b>P5</b>	M	White	26*	14.5 years	Not Specified
<b>P6</b>	F	White	39	20-21* years	Not Specified
<b>P7</b>	F	White	45*	37* years	Not Specified
<b>P8</b>	M	White	37*	7-8 years	Catholic
<b>P9</b>	M	White	75*	50	Not Specified
<b>P10</b>	M	White	33*	22* years	Not Specified
<b>P11</b>	M	White	29	9 years	Not Specified

\*Estimated

**Sample Parameters**

The sample size of 11 participants was determined to be sufficient based on saturation. Saturation was reached as no new insight was noted after the first nine interviews. Two additional interviews were conducted to obtain a more balanced ratio of male to female participants.

**Study Procedures**

All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams (which provided the opportunity for audio and video connection). All interviews except one used both audio and video to connect during the interview. The participant not on camera connected while driving and so used the audio-only option. Because the distraction of driving seemed to impact the interview and because some degree of interaction was diminished due to not seeing each other, this was the only interview conducted in which the participant was not focused solely on the interview and on camera. The average time spent on each interview was 35 minutes and 16 seconds, with the shortest interview lasting 25 minutes and 39 seconds and the longest interview lasting 55 minutes and 12 seconds. The interview length did not seem to impact the quality of responses. The shorter interviews appeared to be due to a faster speech cadence but did not appear to include less information. As noted above, the only factor that impacted the quality of responses appeared to be whether the participant was focused solely on the interview or if they were multitasking.

**Table 2**

*Interview Characteristics*

Participants	On Camera?	Gender	Interview Length
<b>P1</b>	Yes	F	25:39
<b>P2</b>	Yes	F	35:30
<b>P3</b>	No	F	37:00
<b>P4</b>	Yes	F	43:52
<b>P5</b>	Yes	M	27:28
<b>P6</b>	Yes	F	40:12
<b>P7</b>	Yes	F	34:05
<b>P8</b>	Yes	M	28:20
<b>P9</b>	Yes	M	55:12
<b>P10</b>	Yes	M	33:02
<b>P11</b>	Yes	M	27:47
<b>Average</b>			35:16

The computer-generated transcript was generally helpful but not perfect. It was necessary to review the recordings to edit each transcript for accuracy. Interesting to note was that transcripts from the interviews of individuals with any type of accent were less accurate, while transcripts from individuals without an accent (individuals from the Mid-Atlantic or Midwest regions) required fewer corrections. The video recording was helpful to see body language and expressions as this information helped enrich understanding of participant responses (for example, their gestures and their level of emotion).

I listened to each recording several times, comparing the written transcript to the audio and video record. As noted above, while each transcript was mostly accurate, variance in enunciation made some transcripts more accurate than others. Listening to the recording while reading the transcript provided greater exposure to the data as well as an opportunity to correct any errors that occurred during computer-generated transcription.

After working to ensure the accuracy of the transcript, I removed information that could be used to identify a participant (removing names and assigning an identification code; for example, the first participant was relabeled as P1). I also removed conversational text not directly relevant to this study. Finally, I combined all interview transcripts into one document and formatted the pages to facilitate note-making (double-spaced and extra wide margins). After prepping the data, I set the transcripts aside for a few days to create some mental distance before beginning a formal analysis.

Data analysis began with reading and re-reading printed transcripts to mark (underlining, jotting notes, etc.) any information that seemed significant to this study. Twenty codes were identified as important to this study. They were organized into four

overarching themes. The codes and themes that emerged from this process are summarized in Table 3 and described in detail in the text that follows.

**Table 3**

*Summary of Codes and Themes*

<p><b>Theme 1: How Lived Experience in Attachment to God is Described</b></p> <p>Code 1: Relationship with God as Meaningful  Code 2: Relationship with God Characterized by Seeking  Code 3: Relationship with God as Secure/Unconditional</p>
<p><b>Theme 2: Evidence of Attachment Language or Behavior</b></p> <p>Code 4: The Experience of Seeking Proximity to God  Code 5: Experiencing God as a Safe Haven  Code 6: Experiencing God as a Secure Base  Code 7: Experiencing God as Stronger and Wiser  Code 7a: Experiencing God as a Provider  Code 8: Experiencing Distress at Separation from God</p>
<p><b>Theme 3: How Was Current Attachment to God Achieved?</b></p> <p>Code 9: The Experience of a Specific Turning Point  Code 10: The Influence of Crises  Code 11: The Influence of Trauma  Code 12: The Influence of Mentors</p>
<p><b>Theme 4: Experiences Related to Changes in Attachment to God</b></p> <p>Code 13: The Experience of Cognitive Dissonance  Code 14: The Experience of Christian Disciplines  Code 15: The Experience of Gratitude  Code 16: The Influence of Relationships  Code 17: The Experience of Suffering  Code 18: The Experience of Increasing Knowledge  Code 19: The Experience of Proximity Through Doctoral Studies  Code 20: The Experience of Abundance</p>

### Study Findings

#### **Code 1: Relationship with God as Meaningful**

The code *Relationship with God as Meaningful* was used to describe participants' lived experience in attachment to God. It is defined as either an explicit or implied



indication that a meaningful connection to God or a relationship with God was significant within each person's experience. Individuals who currently experience a close connection to God used the following positive words to describe it: joy, gratitude, support, calm, comfort, guidance, confidence, hope, and contentment. Conversely, when individuals experienced a feeling of separation from God, words used to describe their lived experience were negative: angry, bitter, shameful, detached, lonely, lost, and fearful.

### **Code 2: Relationship with God Characterized by Seeking**

This code is defined as the experience of individuals seeking to have or develop a closer relationship with God. It was interesting to note that this seeking was demonstrated in a number of different ways. Some sought closeness to God through exposure to Scripture. This was illustrated by the participant who said,

I really, really wanted to learn more ... but (before) there wasn't really any kind of deep dive into learning about the Bible and what Scripture says and what it means. And so when I started attending Bible study, I just, I loved it...

Some indicated that they were seeking closeness to God as they looked to Him for guidance or wisdom for life direction:

I called to the Lord that if He would have me do anything He, He is only to show me the way ... of course He already has as He has all of us, but more like me begging Him for specific guidance in whatever moment it is.

Others simply sought a more intimate personal connection to God through increased communication with Him. This was illustrated in many different ways. When asked about his communication with God, one participant smiled and said, "It's never enough." Another indicated that his prayer life consisted mainly of "...thanking God ...

for the same thing sometimes over and over, but a lot of thanksgiving and then a lot of asking mostly for like wisdom and guidance. Just expressing my need for Him and to trust in Him.”

Whether a participant had been in relationship with God a relatively short time (5 years) or a significantly long time (50+ years), the common thread was that each one described a deep desire to be closer to God. Additional statements that illustrate this seeking behavior are included below:

“I don’t think it’s necessarily where I want it to be yet, but I barely know what is ... the relationship that I would like to have with Him.”

“I think as far as my relationship with God ... there’s always ... there’s always things that I can do differently ... but I feel like I’m aware of that, and I try ....”

“... I think it’s good to aspire to keep on walking close to the Lord and letting Him increase whatever He wants to increase... obedience is a big part of it, I think. And I’ve tried to be obedient.”

“Yes, there’s definitely joy ‘cause I believe that ... it’s possible to choose joy in all circumstances and I think it’s much easier to do with ... a strong relationship with God.”

### **Code 3: Relationship with God as Secure or Unconditional**

The code Relationship with God further defines the lived experience of individuals in relationship with God as Secure or Unconditional. It is defined as the expression of confidence in that no matter what happens within one’s experience, God is always loving, always forgiving, always welcoming, and always present. One participant described her relationship with God in these terms:

Calm ... comforting ... like I know I can always go there. I know I'm always invited. And I know that He knows more than I do. I know that ... you know ... He sees and hears ... and I don't have to be afraid.

Another participant described a time when she had turned away from God and engaged in behaviors she knew were not acceptable. She stated that when she returned to God,

I didn't have any doubt that He would (be there for me) because I knew His word and I knew that He would never leave or forsake us. I knew that there was nothing that He would not forgive us for.

#### **Code 4: The Experience of Seeking Proximity to God**

The code, *The Experience of Seeking Proximity to God*, is specifically connected to exploring whether specific language from the Attachment Theory developed by Bowlby (1969/1982) was evident in the experience of individuals as they described their relationship with or attachment to God. This code was defined as any statement in which a participant described the experience of seeking a closer relationship with God in order to receive emotional support, knowledge, or guidance. While most participants described feeling closer to God as a result of their seeking, one participant described the experience of seeking but not finding that which she hoped for in her relationship with God.

One participant mentioned an intentional effort to seek proximity to God through worship, meditation, time spent in nature, and prayer.

Another participant indicated that all of her life experiences could be interpreted as a means of drawing closer to God. She said, "I feel like everything in my life, you know, has drawn me closer to God. You know, every challenge ... every struggle."

One participant experienced trauma as a child and has had continued difficulties as an adult. She indicated that during times of intense emotional need, she seeks closeness to God. She said, “I get scared, so I will either sing something simple or just say Jesus’ name over and over and it, it kind of neutralizes that situation...” Later in the interview, she also said, “... during times of trouble is usually when I feel closest to God.”

Another participant said, “I can feel like my, my spirit wanting to spend time with Him.”

One participant described a process he called reciprocal seeking as the process by which God seeks a relationship with individuals even as they seek a relationship with Him. This concept (reciprocal seeking) was identified in the experience of one participant who reported having had a relationship with God for approximately 50 years. He said,

Yeah. I, I think when we get off track, He seeks us and tries to bring us back. And I've always let Him ... it was kind of reciprocal though, as He was seeking me and put that desire in me to seek Him ... I think it it's a reciprocal thing.

One final example of an individual seeking proximity to God was expressed by an individual who answered, “It’s never as much as I want,” when asked about his experience related to communication with God.

### **Code 5: Experiencing God as a Safe Haven**

*Experiencing God as a Safe Haven* is the second code aligned specifically with Bowlby’s Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982). It is similar to proximity seeking but different in that it speaks specifically to seeking closeness to God because He is seen as

one able to provide protection. Participants sought safety (in God's presence) during times of fear or when finding themselves in dangerous situations.

One participant described experiencing God as a safe haven during the COVID pandemic. He said, "There was, you know, there was a lot of things outside of my control. And so I found a lot of comfort in, in relying on God's sovereignty."

Another reflected on her experiences in a combat situation in this way: "That is, as long as I am walking with him, he'll protect me ... He got me home safely, and for all the attacks that we went through, I walked out of there unharmed."

Another combat veteran described God's role as a safe haven by quoting the familiar phrase, "there are no atheists in foxholes." He further described the experience of finding God a safe haven during times of trouble by saying,

I can't really explain ... what it's like when you see somebody survive when, when they shouldn't have or when somebody perishes when they shouldn't have. You know, you enter a room that you should not have walked out of, but you do. It's ... excuse me. It's obvious that that you know the Lord's hand is at play.

### **Code 6: Experiencing God as a Secure Base**

A third concept, *Experiencing God as a Secure Base*, also emerged as evidence that Bowlby's attachment theory appears to align with attachment to God. This code was defined as any statement in which a participant experienced God as one who provided confidence to face uncertainty with greater confidence than any they could produce within themselves. This was illustrated by one participant who said, "I feel calm going through this (trouble) right now. It's, it's not the best situation, but it (God's involvement) was almost like that (sense of) relief."

Another stated that when facing the challenge of balancing work, family, church, and her pursuit of a doctoral degree, that God gave her the strength and confidence to continue. She said, “ ... that motivation comes from God saying, ‘you’ve made it this far already ... how could you not continue with this ... and you’re doing so well.’”

Another participant spoke of the confidence and strength his relationship with God provided even as he experienced a life-altering medical diagnosis. He said,

Even if, I kind of relating it back to Job, like even if my possessions and my family or my physical health, even if those are gone, like God (is) still there and he's still, he's still listening, and then I gotta listen for him to whisper in the storm. So I guess it kind of led, led me to a greater -- I guess like a greater, greater trust and that I can rely on him even if I can't hear him.

Perhaps the most appropriate comment provided that illustrates the way in which God’s work in an individual’s life provided confidence to function well in spite of uncertainty was from an individual who said, “But it (confidence) really stems that, you know, regardless of what anybody else thinks, regardless of what happens, I know I have incredible worth and value in that someone would, would die for me.

### **Code 7: Experiencing God as Stronger and Wiser**

The code, *Experiencing God as Stronger and Wiser* and the sub-code, *Experiencing God as a Provider*, are also codes specifically connected to concepts from Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982). This code was defined as any statement in which a participant experienced God as one who has greater knowledge and an ability to act on one’s behalf in ways greater than they themselves were capable of. It is interesting to note that all eleven participants expressed this concept. Here are a few

examples of the way in which participants expressed experiencing God as one who is stronger and wiser.

“He knows more than I do... He sees and hears and I don't have to be afraid.”

“God is... He's telling me where to go.”

... (we) were kind of really discouraged but we both we both decided well God's plan is higher than ours and we're just gonna choose to be joyful because we know that God's plan is going to prevail, and then we're going to trust that He's got something even better for us.

### **Sub Code 7a: Experiencing God as a Provider**

Related to the idea that God is one who is stronger and wiser is the sub-code labeled *Experiencing God as a Provider*. This code was defined as any statement in which a participant identified God as one who gives good things that he or she could not provide for him or herself. For some participants, this was described in terms of the provision of physical resources such as money or an opportunity to buy a house. Other participants spoke of God as a provider in terms of employment or promotions within their job. Interestingly, one participant indicated that her experience was characterized more by asking but not receiving (related to finances and spiritual needs within her family).

### **Code 8: Experiencing Distress at Separation from God**

The code, *Experiencing Distress at Separation from God*, is the fifth and final code connected to Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969/1982). This code was defined as any statement in which a participant experienced negative feelings when they perceived that God was not listening or that He was distant from them. Some examples of the

distress experienced include feelings of anger, shame, loneliness, and lostness. One participant explained it in this way, “I felt like he (God) was more distant and not hearing ... why is this something that I have to go through? He’s not here for this ... why is this happening?”

One participant described the distress that resulted during a time in which she engaged in behavior that was not in alignment with her beliefs as a Christian. When these behaviors resulted in several significant personal crises, she described her condition in this way, “I was just tired of, of just the way that I was living without God, so I was really reaching for Him to make a change in my life.

Distress at perceived separation from God was also expressed in this way:

At that time, I pushed away from God because I was so ashamed ... because I knew better. I knew better, and I felt like I let Him down, you know? So I didn’t want to read my word. I didn’t want to pray. I was so ashamed ...

Additional quotes related to the evidence of attachment concepts or themes is provided in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Summary of Attachment Theme Quotes*

<b>Stronger and Wiser (11/11)</b>
"But I would appreciate the guidance; It's not for nothing."
"You know better than I do." (Spoken to God)
"He knows more than I do ... He sees and hears and I don't have to be afraid."
"I see God's hand in things ... being a guide."
"You (we) were kind of really discouraged but we both we both decided well God's plan is higher than ours ..."
"We, we prayed and we like ask(ed) God to lead us and then help us to get through and show us the way."
"It's a more pleading with Him to intervene, intervene in a big way because I don't know anymore what to do."
"Guide me on what I need to choose." (Spoken to God). "My relationship with God led me into teaching."
"We're never gonna have His knowledge ... I've come to understand that He really does know better than me."
"The Lord God is our guidance in life ... If He would have me do anything He, He is only to show me the way."



"You know there is a lot of the caringness... the comfort that He brings, the guidance that He gives."
<b>Safe Haven (9/11)</b>
"He doesn't give you more than what you can handle."
"I didn't have any doubt that He would (be there for me) because I knew His word."
"I don't have to be afraid ... I don't have to be afraid. I don't have to worry... like I'm taken care of."
"He takes care of us ... I'm here for you despite what you decide, just despite how many times you fall."
"Just listening to us, so I'm listening to me when He needs it, when I need it. Offering me that -- OK, I understand. I've been there. Wherever you've been, I've been there."
"As long as you walk with the Lord, you know, you're good." (Spoken in connection to time spent in a combat zone).
"I felt safe and secure and protected."
"You know, you enter a room that you should not have walked out of, but you do. It's (emotional) Excuse me. It's obvious that that you know the Lord's hand is at play." "Faith has saved me ... faith has saved my friends."
"... the caringness and comfort that He brings ... there was, you know, there was a lot of things outside of my control. And so I found a lot of comfort in, in relying on God's sovereignty."
<b>Secure Base (7/11)</b>
"There (was) no doubt in my mind that we're going to be that norm. We're we're going to get through."
"Feeling of like, 'I can't quit' and I get that from God."
"He's there and He helps us to always overcome and to ... to uh just just rely on Him ..."
(We are his) "treasured possession and a holy people, uhm, set apart and who He loves dearly and would give up anything for." (Speaking of how our special place in God's heart creates confidence).
"Felt like it was speaking directly to our lives at that moment. And how could it be anything but God saying, 'I hear you and I know what's going on and I'm here.'"
"God's will is, you know, omnipresent and His will is fulfilled. And that's what gives me the confidence to know that all I have to do is follow the word."
But it (confidence) really stems that, you know ... regardless of what happens, I know I have incredible worth and value in that someone would would die for me.
<b>Proximity Seeking (11/11)</b>
"I realized that it was something that I needed more back into my life."
"I can feel like my my spirit wanting to spend time with Him. I need to feel this closeness from from the Lord."
"Communication for me usually comes up the strongest when I'm struggling" (draws closer to God during struggles).
"I wanted to learn more. I really, really wanted to learn more."
"Just kind of having an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day."
"I have to keep Him close you know, so it's it's where He's leading."
"In my times of need, I think that's the times I most feel close to God." "I get scared and so I will either sing something simple or just say Jesus' name over and over."
Was seeking something from the Catholic church that he had not found in his So. Baptist church.
Obedience as a path to proximity? Proximity to God through faith -- rather than hope. Reciprocal seeking -- we seek God and He seeks us.
(In response to what is your experience of communicating with God like?) "It's never as much as I want."
"So when I had that realization, I, I thought to myself, you know, I, I, I need to get back into the word. I I need to start praying more frequently. And so I tried to."
<b>Distress at Separation (7/11)</b>
Lack of God's intervention (He was not there for her) created anger.
"I can feel like my, my spirit, wanting to to spend time with Him."
(Mentioned times in life when she acted in ways that "did not reflect Jesus in any way"). Used the word shameful. "For me it is hard to sit in church when I'm feeling shameful."

"... I gotta listen for Him to, to whisper in the storm."
(How do you feel when separated?). "That loneliness that you know ... Just kind of lost. I think lost is the best word."
"I think in the moment I get frustrated with my situation and I'm not realizing that I'm not feeling close to God."
It's (his relationship with God) a very "always there, ready, willing" just whenever, whenever I decide to come on over.

### **Code 9: The Experience of a Specific Turning Point**

This code identified experiences in life that had served as a watershed moment in that participants marked this specific point in life as the beginning of their relationship with God. Participants described these experiences in great detail, even though some had occurred decades in the past. One such turning point moment was the experience of accepting Christ as Savior. The age at which individuals accepted Christ and began their relationship with God varied, with some identifying a point in time during childhood, others indicated that this turning point occurred in adolescence, and the remaining participants indicated that this event took place in early adulthood. None of the individuals indicated a beginning point later in life (adulthood or late adulthood).

One participant described beginning her relationship with God as an 8-year-old child at a Bible camp. She described it in this way:

I remember hearing the message about sin, about ... salvation and knowing that ... I was a bad kid, you know like I lied, and I probably picked on my sister. I think those are the types of sin I, I think as an 8-year-old. And so once I had accepted Christ with the counselor outside under the big, starry sky, you know, had a lot of impact on me. I felt safe and secure and protected.

The experiences of individuals who began a relationship with God as young adults were more knowledge-based. One participant described his experience in this way:

Ironically, (it) wasn't until I went to Bible College in New York that (I realized) I have an intellectual understanding and appreciation for God, but there was no ... there was no relationship. ...it was kind of like, OK, I'm studying a textbook like that's ... that's it. That's when I really started to take faith very personally and not just see it as you know, this, this dogma of information, but an active, ever-changing dynamic relationship that is always dynamic and changing on my part because Christ never changes.

### **Code 10: Crisis as a Catalyst for Change**

This code identifies crisis experiences in life that were deeply troubling. Some of these crises were related to physical health/wellness, personal safety, finances, abandonment, mental health (anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts), divorce, issues that threatened the person's basic family structure, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other relationship problems. These experiences initially led to negative emotions and distress but, in retrospect were recognized as turning point experiences leading to a significant change in an individual's relationship with God.

### **Table 5**

*Summary of Crisis Types (across all interviews)*

<b>Crisis Type</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Health	5
Personal Safety	3
Financial	3
Abandonment	2
Suicide (attempt or ideation)	2
Divorce	1
Family (unspecified)	1
Pandemic	1
Relationship	1
No Crises	2

One participant described a family crisis that served as a turning point in her relationship with God. She said,

I can't express in in terms of how I view God and what my relationship is and how pivotal that particular experience was. I don't want to say it was life-changing I don't want to say it was... you know you hear about the stories of the little girl who fell out of the tree and was cured of cancer. I don't want to compare it to that but it was definitely a pivotal moment for me because it wasn't like I was not religious before ... what I found is what, what I thought was important for me in order to have a life that isn't filled with anger that wasn't filled with stress, that wasn't filled with like resentment and things along those lines. It kind of made me a better person.

### **Code 11: The Experience of Trauma**

At least two participants described emotional or physical trauma, which included abuse or abandonment. An observation related to this was that both individuals who had experienced significant trauma used words like “begging” and “pleading” when describing their communication with God. One participant described the way she talked to God about a significant, ongoing need in her life, saying, “It's urgent. It's a more pleading with Him to intervene, intervene in a big way because I don't know anymore what to do.”

Another participant indicated that he had encountered significant trauma in his life experience. These experiences led him to a deep recognition of the value/worth found in relationship with God. He said,

I found a light. And I've been following the path that it illuminates. And you know, I, I mean at times I might stumble or at times I might sway but ... the beautiful thing about a lighted path in the darkness as you go right back to it. And ... I'm not ... I've never been the kind of person to stop and turn around. I just keep going forward, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, sometimes more accurate than others.

### **Code 12: The Value of Mentors**

This code was defined as any statement in which a participant identified experiences with spiritual mentors as a key factor in their relationship with God. Two participants specifically identified adult male role models as individuals instrumental in their salvation experience. One participant indicated that military chaplains had made a significant spiritual impact. The participant stated, "I love chaplains ... they're my favorite. And that may or may not be a be the right outlook, but it's my outlook. So they ... have a real ... effective way of connecting with their flock."

Several female participants indicated that women in their church have served as an inspiration to help them grow closer to God. Statements related to this include the following:

There are some amazing people -- especially amazing women at our church who are just, Oh my gosh, I ... I am in awe of how reverential they are and how just how God has moved in their lives and how they continue to influence ... and guide other people. They're just, they're ... they're ... they're so at peace with, with life and ... and just so encouraging.

Another individual (female) identified the experience of fellowship with women in the church as a resource that helped her feel a greater attachment to God. She said,

Anytime I take part in like a women's event at church ... and feel as if I could fully express myself, you know. I do believe that, you know, God is present when there's multiple believers together. So that could be something with that too. But I do feel that I do feel something special.

### **Code 13: The Experience of Cognitive Dissonance**

The experience of cognitive dissonance was noted when participants identified experiences during which their behavior did not align with their spiritual beliefs. Nail & Boniecki (2011) indicate that dissonance is reduced through a change in attitude or behavior so that alignment is achieved. Participants in this study identified periods in which cognitive dissonance was evident as their behaviors were not aligned with standards found in Scripture. These behaviors resulted in feelings of separation or distance from God. Within this study, one participant indicated that while in college, she engaged in behavior she felt “shameful” about even though she was also attending church. She stated, “You know, I guess in college years just, you know, keeping up with peers and you know doing some things I’m not proud of ... that do not reflect, did not reflect Jesus in any way.”

Another participant described behaviors in early adulthood and later adulthood that caused feelings of cognitive dissonance. She said,

I felt horrible. And at that time, I pushed away from God because I was so ashamed, because I knew better. I knew better and I felt like I let him down, you

know? So I, I didn't want to read my word. I didn't want to pray. I was so ashamed.

#### **Code 14: The Experience of Christian Disciplines and Other Behaviors**

This code emerged as participants described behaviors that tended to help them draw closer to God. Although none of the participants seemed familiar with the term *Christian disciplines*, many appear to have moved instinctively into these behaviors. The disciplines specifically mentioned included Bible reading, Bible study plus prayer, prayer alone, praise and worship (alone and within the church community), fellowship, service, silence, and obedience. In addition, participants indicated that the following behaviors and experiences helped them feel closer to God: becoming a parent, formal/organized religion (praying the rosary, observance of Holy days), academic studies that included Biblical worldview components, and experiencing protection in times of danger. A few mentioned contemplative practices identifying specific techniques used in meditation (breathing exercises, meta-moments, and therapeutic/counseling techniques). One participant said,

My communication with God, is ... is characterized by a lot of prayer. It used to be just prayer at night before I go to bed, but since then it's kind of progressed to just ... saying little prayers throughout the day. Just kind of having an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day. And then on the other side of that, I do also ... try to meditate a bit ... just sit in silence just to allow God to speak and then me to, to listen.

#### **Code 15: The Experience of Gratitude**

This code surfaced as participants talked about their communication with God. Many indicated that they thanked God for providing in specific ways, such as financial needs, emotional needs, relationship needs, and even physical safety. One example of this was the participant who described his communication with God in this way: "... I found myself thanking God ... for the same thing sometimes over and over ... a lot of thanksgiving ..."

Another mentioned a habit of spontaneous thanksgiving in response to things God revealed to her when reading Scripture. She described her experience in this way: "He'll give me a scripture to go and read and I'll go and read that Scripture and it's exactly what I was thinking about. (And I say) 'Like, oh, wow ... thank you, Lord, that that's really awesome.'"

Also mentioned was the experience of learning to be thankful even when circumstances were not necessarily good. One participant whose family had survived a significant crisis said, "... our family is better off for it and, and grateful for that experience because it kind of made us better."

### **Code 16: The Influence of Relationships**

The influence of relationships was generally positive, as individuals such as one's spouse, fellow believers, and spiritual leaders (pastors, priests, and military chaplains) were mentioned when participants were asked about how their relationship with God had changed over time. Statements related to one's spouse indicated that the experience of love for and from another human being helped the participants understand more about God's love for them. One participant also noted that his spouse had helped him develop a more well-rounded understanding of God. He said,



My understanding of God has changed, and I would say primarily as a result of my wife. She was New Testament – God (as) loving, forgiving. And I was Old Testament – God (was) all about justice, wrath, and all those things. So throughout our marriage, we’ve kind of evened each other out to where I have a much more integrated, better understanding of who God is.

Another recurring theme found within most of the interviews was the way other believers helped and encouraged spiritual growth within the participants. Several female participants specifically mentioned how women in the church had served to encourage and help them grow closer to God. One participant stated, “I am in awe of how reverential they are and how just how God has moved in their lives ... they’re just so at peace with life and just so encouraging.”

Other participants spoke of the significant impact of spiritual mentors such as pastors, priests, youth leaders, and military chaplains. In each case, the unifying thread was that (in addition to providing knowledge about God and the Scripture) these spiritual mentors came alongside the individuals to provide practical help or spiritual encouragement.

#### **Code 17: The Experience of Suffering**

This code was defined as any statement in which a participant identified suffering as a catalyst for increasing his or her attachment to God. One participant said,

We have this faith in Christ that He's going to take care of us and that He does for us and that we are going to suffer... I mean, that's just that's part of life. That's part of being a Christian is we are going to suffer.... And that's ok because we endure that and because we maintain our faith, we are going to be rewarded.

Another participant who has had a great deal of exposure to human suffering discussed the problem humans have in understanding how a good God can allow “needless” suffering. She indicated that she is confident that suffering results from a corruption of God's perfect plan – it is not what God had intended for mankind to experience.

### **Code 18: The Experience of Increasing Knowledge**

This code was defined as any statement in which a participant identified knowledge of Scripture as a positive factor in his or her relationship with God. The participant who appeared most secure in his relationship with God was also the individual who demonstrated the greatest depth of knowledge (making many references to Scripture by alluding to passages or directly quoting them). When asked by what means he had obtained such a comprehensive grasp of Scripture, he indicated that it was his habit to use daily reading guides to read through the entire Bible each year. He had done this each year for approximately 4 to 6 years. Several participants also indicated that the most influential factor in their spiritual growth was Bible study and/or listening to Biblical preaching and teaching. In some cases, the knowledge led to confidence in the relationship, while in one situation, the knowledge was expressed with a degree of hopelessness (the knowledge did not engender confidence in the relationship).

Another participant who indicated greater confidence commensurate with greater knowledge of scripture stated:

In 2020 through the pandemic there was a lot of things going on at work and was a very stressful time and I felt very close to God. And I, I think the reason why is

I was spending a lot of time reading the word every day and a lot of time praying and thinking and reflecting about who God is and what He says.

Another individual said,

And so when I started attending Bible study, I just, I loved it... and it was wonderful because it gave me that opportunity to really ... understand more... and to really just shape my life a little bit more around what scripture guides us to do.

Finally, one participant indicated experiencing confidence and comfort when listening to her pastor explain scripture. She said, "... the sermon that the Pastor gives felt like it was speaking directly to our lives at that moment. How could it be anything but God saying, 'I hear you and I know what's going on and I'm here.'"

#### **Code 19: The Experience of Proximity to God Through Doctoral Studies**

This code was associated with comments made by individuals who indicated that the Biblical worldview emphasis and the mentorship provided by Christian instructors within their doctoral program had facilitated a closer relationship with God. One participant related how the Biblical emphasis helped him attain greater knowledge and interest in Scripture. He stated,

When I had to research in the Bible to find topics that match what our discussion is it's helped me understand more and go more in depth in the Bible and understand that 'cause honestly I can read it, but I didn't really never really thought about it much until I started at Liberty.

In terms of her professors' role helping her draw closer to God, one participant said, "I can feel God in those people. Just the grace, I guess the, the grace that I've been shown throughout this difficult time with schooling and, and working ..."

## Code 20: The Experience of Abundance

This code was defined as the statements provided by participants in describing what they believed Jesus meant when He talked about the abundant life. Here are some of the responses:

The abundant life to me is just living in peace and knowing that God is not gonna allow me to be overtaken with any evil or anything that's not of him. And just knowing that ... that when I die, I'm gonna go and be with Him.

“I think that the, the abundant life is that life that we are able to live with Christ, but the, the life that we’re looking forward to when our time is done here on Earth.”

Another participant said,

If you follow God like you're gonna be blessed like your blessings are gonna overflow. Just trying to think positively and doing right ... doing good ... helping others. If we do that, and trusting God like we're gonna be taken care of. We're gonna overflow with blessings. We will be able to live abundantly.

I kind of think of it as ... essentially more joy and just being able to fully experience all that life has to offer. And even when the bad things of life come ... it doesn't bring you all the way down, because of your hope in him. Then yes, there's definitely joy 'cause I believe that ... it's possible to choose joy in all circumstances, and I think it's much easier to do ... with a strong relationship with God.

Another participant’s understanding of the abundant life was described in this way:

In one context, I think I've interpreted that to mean that my life here on Earth would feel full, full, fulfilled because I have Christ. On the other hand, I often think of that is, you know, it's the future life. That we have in heaven. And it's eternal, so. I don't know. I toggle back and forth between the two. And, and when I'm thinking of earthly life being abundant, it's certainly not with the idea of possessions or things like that, I think. Even the desire to have a simple life. Feels abundant to me so. Having time, having ... having room to breathe, having margin in my life seems abundant.

Another participant shared this perspective on abundance:

I think I, I think it is transcendent ... and I, I, I don't think ... I don't think that He ... means more, more physical beings or more physical things or more physical experiences. I think He means an enriching of this spiritual domain of the human person. So that... I mean, at one point we had to learn how to walk. You know, we also need to learn how to live in our spirit.

One final statement that was particularly insightful was this:

Rousseau's idea that to truly be free, we need to have government. We need to have restrictions. We need to have constraints because that's how we can truly be free. And I, I oftentimes think and reflect of this idea of absolute freedom -- absolutely terrible because we are wretched, sinful beings. And so when Christ comes and you know, he says you like, come to give you life and give it to you more abundantly. I see my understanding of what he's saying is, "if you follow what I tell you, if you do what I say, if you believe in me, I am going to give you a life that is so much more rewarding and beneficial. It is going to be so much

more abundant. It's not going to be easy. You're not necessarily gonna find it pleasurable all the time. But this time here on life. So, so small. And I'm I'm talking about forever.” So that's how I understand that passage of Scripture and what Christ means there.

**Research Question 1: How do Individuals Describe the Experiences Involved in Arriving at Their Current Attachment to God?**

In terms of describing how each individual arrived at their current status in attachment to God, the theme that emerged included the first three codes identified above: (1) Relationship with God as Meaningful, (2) Relationship with God Characterized by Seeking, and (3) Relationship with God as Secure/Unconditional.

Along with this foundation for their current attachment to God, individuals emphasized the vital importance of frequent communication with God. Most indicated that the main vehicle for communication was speaking to God through prayer. Some indicated that they communicated with God through inner promptings. At least three participants indicated that they spent time listening to God. Many mentioned praise music (alone or in conjunction with other believers). Two indicated that they used techniques often associated with counseling therapy (positive self-talk and meta moments), while a third participant indicated that he used meditation techniques (deep breathing and solitude in nature) to listen for God’s voice.

Reciprocal seeking, or the idea that God pursues a relationship with individuals even as they seek a relationship with Him, emerged as an important factor related to the ways in which individuals described how they arrived at their attachment relationship with God. The idea that both God and man express a desire for relationship runs parallel

to the ways in which human-to-human secure attachment relationships develop, with both caregivers and care receivers seeking proximity to one another. This process was described as reciprocal seeking by one participant. Other participants (while not explicitly calling it reciprocal seeking) described experiences during which they believed God had pursued them in order to begin or deepen a relationship with them.

Most individuals indicated that the journey to their current attachment to God had not been without some degree of difficulty. Feelings of shame, loneliness, and lostness were described as being present during times when participants reported being distant from God due to distractions, apathy, or choosing to pursue behavior antithetical to Christian living. However, all indicated that they did not believe God moved away or turned away from them. If a sense of separation was experienced, individuals expressed certainty that they had moved away from God rather than God moving away from them. There was a common belief that God never changes; He is always there for His children.

To summarize the essence of the lived experience of individuals in relationship with God is a difficult and complex task. However, throughout the interviews, it was clear that among these participants, there was a longing to know and be known by God (seeking). They indicate a degree of security in having a relationship with One who is stronger, wiser, and most importantly, One who never changes in His love and care for us. This sense of security in relationship with God breeds confidence in knowing that He will always and forever be there for us.

Within this summary, a connection to human attachment theory began to emerge. However, the analysis used to answer the next research question is more direct in

examining the data to determine if attachment to God runs parallel to our experience of attachment relationships with other humans.

**Research Question 2: Is the experience of attachment to God described by participants with language similar to human attachment theory language (i.e. proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, distress at separation, and seeing God as wiser and stronger)?**

The next phase of analysis involved looking for specific themes related to human attachment theory as initially described by Bowlby (1969/1982). These ideas were briefly identified in the initial list of codes but will be examined in more detail here. In particular, the data was examined to discover whether individuals used attachment language or behaviors to describe their experiences with God.

### **Attachment Language or Behaviors**

One of the benefits of using technology such as Microsoft Teams is that audio and video interactions are easily recorded. This was particularly beneficial in this project as, at least one time, a participant demonstrated behavior similar to that demonstrated by infants or young children when seeking proximity to his or her caregiver. Specifically, one participant (when describing a time of distress) stretched her arms upward to God in the same way an infant or child might reach upward to their caregiver when they want to be held.

Phrases were included by several individuals that allude to behaviors consistent with the relationship between human caregivers and care receivers. The following phrases are provided as examples:

“I reached out to God.”



“I was really reaching for Him to make a change in my life.”

A participant spoke of “crying out to Him.”

“Eventually I find myself back in His arms.”

“I could just cry thinking about it” (referring to worship).

Interesting to note was that one of the participants who demonstrated a greater depth of understanding and maturity in her faith (as demonstrated by a discussion of how suffering makes sense within a Christian’s life) expressed her relationship with God in terms of “walking with God” (something a more mature child or adolescent might do with his or her caregiver) rather than being carried by God.

Specific attachment themes included the ideas of God as a safe haven and/or secure base, God as one to whom they seek proximity, whether there was distress at separation from God, and whether individuals saw God as one who is stronger and wiser. In addition to the summary of quotes provided in Table 4, the next sections describe the identification of these themes in more detail.

### **Attachment Theme 1: God as One Who is Stronger and Wiser**

The theme of God as one who is stronger and wiser emerged in every interview as participants identified experiences in which God provided guidance or protection. Participant 1 spoke of God's guidance during a difficult time in life and the assurance that the difficulty had an ultimate purpose. Participant 2 indicated that God’s direction kept her from making serious mistakes. She stated that God has said to her, “I'm not gonna give you anything that's gonna take you away from me. You're not ready for that yet.” Her response in those situations is, “I don't really like that, but OK. You know you're God. (You) know better than I know. Participant 3 stated a similar sentiment stating of

God, "He knows more than I do." Participant 4 also spoke specifically of God providing direction and wisdom at specific points in life. Participant 5 spoke of an instance in which he and his spouse experienced deep disappointment but responded to it in this way: "we both decided, well, God's plan is higher than ours, and we're just gonna choose to be joyful because we know that God's plan is going to prevail, and then we're going to trust that He's got something even better for us."

God as one who is stronger and wiser was also found in the interview with Participant 6, who said that when she and her husband faced a significant crisis in life, they "ask(ed) God to lead us and then help us to get through and show us the way." Participant 6 also talked about "those times when you trust God that you don't know why." Participant 7 spoke of "pleading with Him to intervene, intervene in a big way because I don't know anymore what to do." Participant 8 mentioned God's hand in guiding him to do specific things. Participant 9 spoke of an ongoing conversation with God in which specific guidance was given. He also observed that even as we seek to grow spiritually, the wisdom we gain will never match that which God demonstrates. Participants 10 and 11 indicated that God had provided guidance, direction, and meaning in life.

### **Attachment Theme 2: God as a Safe Haven**

In addition to God being viewed as stronger and wiser, God as a safe haven also emerged as a theme consistent with attachment theory. This theme of one's caregiver as a safe haven is foundational when studying human-to-human relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). As noted earlier, it is also emphasized in Biblical stories that recount individuals' stories and quotes regarding seeing God as a place of safety and comfort.

The interviews in this study also support this concept, as viewing God as a safe haven in times of trouble was evident in the experiences described by nine of the eleven participants. One participant in describing his experiences at the beginning of the pandemic (a time of great anxiety and uncertainty) said, “I get this sense of Christ communicating with me and comforting me... the caringness and comfort that He brings ... there was, you know, there was a lot of things outside of my control. And so I found a lot of comfort in, in relying on God's sovereignty.”

Other participants said:

“I get scared and so I will either sing something simple or just say Jesus' name over and over.”

“He's there and He helps us to always overcome ... you give it all up to Him and ... He will take care of us”

When recalling dangers faced while deployed in a combat zone one participant said, “That is, as long as I am walking with Him, He He'll protect me ... He got me home safely and for all the attacks that we went through, I walked out of there unharmed.”

Another combat veteran said, “I was completely alone, and I felt that He spoke to me at that point. Full comfort, I didn't feel fear for my life anymore.”

A third combat veteran said,

I can't really explain ... what it's like when you see somebody survive when,

when they shouldn't have or when somebody perishes when they shouldn't have.

You know, you enter a room that you should not have walked out of, but you do.

(Here, the participant was overcome with emotion) It's obvious that that you know the Lord's hand is at play.

Another participant described his experience of learning to trust God after receiving a life-altering medical diagnosis:

... even if my possessions and my family or my physical health, even if those are gone like God (is) still there and He's still, He's still listening, and then I gotta listen for Him to whisper in the storm. So I guess I kind of led led me to a greater I guess like a ... greater trust and that I can rely on Him even if I can't hear Him.

### **Attachment Theme 3: God as a Secure Base**

The third attachment theme that emerged in interviews was viewing God as a secure base. Similar to the *Safe Haven* theme, the trusting bond demonstrated by children with a secure attachment to his or her caregiver is characterized by behavior that shows a child who confidently explores his or her world because of the secure base provided by the caregiver (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Seven of the eleven participants indicated that God provided that sense of security that allowed them to confidently live in a world that is often uncertain and sometimes dangerous. This theme emphasizes the way that the attachment figure provides a sense of security that allows the care receiver to explore his or her world with full confidence. This idea was expressed in the following ways:

Describing a crisis faced by this participant's family, she said that her relationship with God (as facilitated and encouraged by her Pastor) gave her confidence to say, "There (was) no doubt in my mind that we're going to be that norm. We're we're going to get through."

Describing the struggles she encountered as she worked through a challenging academic program, one participant said, "Like that motivation comes from God saying

you've made it this far already. Like, how could you not continue with this and you're doing well? Feelings of like, 'I can't quit' and I get that from God.”

Speaking of how our special place in God's heart creates confidence, one participant said, “(We are his) treasured possession and a holy people ... set apart and who He loves dearly and would give up anything for.”

Commenting on one of the first things he learned about the benefits of following God when he was only 11 years old: “God's will is, you know, omnipresent and His will is fulfilled. And that's what gives me the confidence to know that all I have to do is follow the Word.”

#### **Attachment Theme 4: Proximity Seeking**

In addition to the previous attachment themes seen in experiences with God, seeking proximity to God was evident in the experiences described by eight of the eleven participants. This attachment theme also figures prominently in the literature related to human attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1982). As mentioned earlier, it is also clearly evident in Biblical writing. Not surprisingly, this behavior was also evident in most of the interviews conducted for this study. This was seen most often when discussing communication with God as 7 of the 8 specifically mentioned aspiring to pray more. One participant said, “My relationship with God definitely increased ... (when) I started taking time to pray more.”

Another stated, “But whenever I feel like, you know, I'm ... I'm getting further away from Him than I want to then I'll just go into prayer.”

In terms of the importance of frequent connection to God through prayer, one participant said, “It's never as much as I want.”

One participant mentioned a combination of factors that demonstrated proximity-seeking behavior:

I would say a time that I felt very close to God, more so than usual, is probably in 2020 through the pandemic. And there was a lot of things going on at work and was a very stressful time and I felt very close to God. And I think the reason why is I was spending a lot of time reading the Word every day and a lot of time praying and thinking and reflecting about who God is and what He says. I think I felt most close to God because of the ... I mean honestly... I would say the frequent communication I had with Him.

#### **Attachment Theme 5: Distress at Separation**

*Distress at Separation* was the final attachment theme identified in interviews with participants when discussing their attachment to God. As was the case with the other four themes, this is a theme that is prominent in human-to-human attachment studies as well as in direct observation of everyday life of children and their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Distress at separation is evident in human attachment studies as young children vocalize (cry, call out or even scream) when their caregiver is absent. Also, young children who can run or walk often try to follow a caregiver who is attempting to leave their presence. As noted earlier in the literature review, Bowlby (1969/1982) identified three stages in this phenomenon: protest, despair, and detachment. These stages were also evident in the experiences described by participants in this study. Protest was identified as individuals indicating a strong inclination to ask God “why” when they were struggling or suffering. This is illustrated by a participant who said that in the midst of a major life crisis, she remembered thinking, “Where are you (God) in this crisis?”

Another participant, in response to a life-altering medical diagnosis, expressed despair as he prayed, “Why is this happening to me?”

Detachment and despair were evident in the narrative of an individual who had experienced abandonment and trauma as a child and indicated struggles in forming a secure and consistent relationship with God. While certain of salvation, there was an absence of peace or contentment.

Finally, when asked to describe the experience of feeling separated from God, one participant said, “That loneliness that you know ... Just kind of lost. I think lost is the best word.”

### **Research Question 3: How do individuals describe the experiences involved in arriving at their current attachment to God?**

In terms of describing how each participant arrived at their current state of attachment to God, each individual identified a specific point in time at which they began their relationship with God. Following the establishment of the relationship, both positive and negative experiences were described as having been a part of the journey to one’s current attachment to God status. Each participant’s path to God and with God is briefly summarized below to illustrate the evidence of these themes.

#### **Initial Experiences with God or Religion**

Encounters with God in childhood were present for most participants, with ten of the eleven individuals indicating that they had been exposed to religious experiences of some kind during their childhood. Four participants specifically stated that they had trusted Christ as Savior in childhood. One indicated that she had accepted Christ during

adolescence (7<sup>th</sup> grade). The remaining individuals indicated that their relationship with God had begun during emerging or early adulthood.

**Childhood beginnings.** One example of the experience of beginning a relationship with God in childhood was from an individual who had accepted Christ as Savior at a church camp when she was eight years old. She described the experience in this way: “And so once I had accepted Christ ... (it) had a lot of impact on me. I felt safe and secure and protected.” Later, some life experiences served to help her draw closer to God, while others led her to feel separated from Him. Overall, she indicated that “In my times of need, I think, that’s the times I feel most close to God.” These times of difficulty included military combat, frequent relocations, financial and family stressors, and dealing with past trauma. This participant, more so than others, expressed an intensely deep longing for a greater connection to God.

Another participant indicated that he had accepted Christ as Savior at age 11. He identified the investment adult men made in teaching and helping him begin his spiritual journey. In describing the experience, he said,

(I was) a young person with not very many coping skills ... so I ... would choose to maybe steal or cheat or lie. It’s shameful ... and it’s not a way to live. (But) when you’re in a community of people ... who live those values or follow God’s will, everything is better.

He expressed a strong and consistent faith and connection to God that had carried him through significant trauma in his past and some ongoing issues as well. His current faith experience demonstrated an intense, almost desperate faith. He communicated a greater need for God’s daily presence than other participants.



Another participant who first identified as a Christian at around 11 years of age related his experience of hearing the Gospel through the testimony of a weightlifter who came to his school as part of an evangelistic outreach. He described the experience this way: "...it clicked for me that science can't explain everything, so that's that night ... I prayed that prayer (of) salvation to allow Christ into my heart and life." His current experience in relationship with God is characterized by great confidence and an overriding sense of peace and contentment. Interestingly enough, his knowledge of Scripture seemed the most comprehensive as he alluded to Biblical stories and specific verses significantly more often than other participants. While his life journey included at least two significant traumatic events, his faith and knowledge of Scripture appeared responsible for helping him walk through these events keeping his faith intact.

The fourth individual who accepted Christ in childhood did so at age 12. She was attending church on her own. She described it in this way:

So I was saved and baptized when I was like 12 years old and I actually did it on my own. My mom was really upset because she wanted to be there, you know, to witness me give my life to the Lord and and do the baptism and everything, and she missed out on that.

This individual communicated that her faith journey had included many low points as she had experienced many severely traumatic events. Her faith appeared to be strong (despite the trauma) due to a firm confidence in God's enduring love and unwavering commitment to her.

Interestingly, in this sample, the four who accepted Christ during childhood did so apart from parental influence. It is also interesting to note that two of the four appear to

have remained consistently committed to the Christian lifestyle (with a few periods of questioning), while the other two had experiences during which they chose to live in ways not consistent with Biblical or Christian standards.

**Adolescent beginnings.** One individual indicated that she had been raised in the church, attending with her grandmother. She accepted Christ as her Savior in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and remained consistent in her commitment to Christ throughout her middle and high school years but was not consistent during college. She said,

Going into college, you know, things were a little different. I was on my own time schedule and I would go sometimes ... I still identified as a Christian but you know, ... there were some time period(s) where I would go months without going to church.

While she indicated that church is important, she does not attend consistently. However, she often studies the Bible on her own. She also indicated that her involvement in her Ph.D. program had provided positive experiences in terms of spiritual growth. She said of her professors,

I can feel God in those people ... just the grace ... that I've been shown throughout this difficult time with schooling and, and working ... I feel like that is helping me become who I want to be.

Overall, this participant expressed a strong faith, but is currently somewhat distracted in her relationship with God as her work, the pandemic, and her Ph.D. studies have created significant constraints on her time.

**Beginnings in early/emerging adulthood.** All participants (even those who accepted Christ in childhood or adolescence) indicated that they had experienced a

significant encounter with God during emerging adulthood (after high school to around the early 30s), with six of the participants indicating that their relationship with God began during their early adult years. Interestingly, two participants were raised in the Catholic church but joined Baptist churches as young adults because they found answers to faith-based questions there. A third participant attended a Baptist church in childhood but then pursued membership in the Catholic religion for the same reason.

One of the participants who had been raised with strong connections to the Catholic church (she attended Catholic school K-12, her father was a deacon in the Catholic church, etc.) began questioning the church as a young adult. She described her experience in these terms: “But as I became an adult and when I first went to college... I started breaking away from the Catholic Church because I just ... (thought) this is not really ... what God is all about.” She came to Christ as an adult when she and her husband moved to a new area, and friends invited them to a Baptist church. Of her experience at this church, she said,

But a big part of ... attending this church was the fact that there was Bible study. I wanted to learn more ... I, I really, really wanted to learn more ... and so when I started attending Bible study, I just loved it. I mean ... it was just ... wonderful because it gave me that opportunity to really understand more and, and to really just shape my life a little bit more around what Scripture guides us to do.

Another individual who had grown up with a similar background (strong connection to the Catholic church) also accepted Christ as a young adult under very similar circumstances. She recounted how as a child in Catholic school, she had many spiritual questions which were not answered. But then, as a young adult, friends invited

her to a Baptist church. She described the experience this way: “I went to that church and they opened up ... the Bible and said, ‘OK, here’s where we’re finding this.’ And I went, ‘Oh, my gosh! This is what I’ve been looking for!’”

Both individuals described above are currently actively attending and serving in their churches. Both express strong faith and confidence in their relationship with God.

In contrast, one participant began his faith journey in a Baptist church but left it due to conflict among the members and the fact that he and other adolescents felt they were not welcomed there. Of this experience, he said,

When I started getting old enough to understand what was going on, my first church ... I basically rejected everything about religion ... for about 20 years. I realized that atheists were more religious than the Christians I was around.

As an adult he reached out to a priest from the Catholic church. Of this experience he said,

(The priest) didn’t believe in doing the classes and all that. You worked directly with him ... he went through everything like how to read the Bible ... he made it make sense ... they didn’t teach you when I was little at the church I went to.

He indicated that his experience in the Catholic church was warm and welcoming, unlike his earlier experiences in the Baptist church. His current position could be described as learning and growing within his new faith tradition.

One participant indicated that through childhood and adolescence, she had obtained a knowledge of God, but it was not meaningful to her. She said, “So as a kid, I obviously went to church all the time with my family, but then as I started to play sports that kind of dwindled away and I went less and less.” In her case, the catalyst for a

renewed desire for a relationship with God was an extreme family crisis. In her current relationship with God she expresses enthusiasm and strong faith in who God is and how He seeks relationship with us.

The two remaining participants accepted Christ during early adulthood. One accepted Christ while a student at a Bible college, and the other accepted Christ while in medical school. The individual who accepted Christ in Bible college had grown up in a Christian home but realized as he studied Scripture that he did not yet have a personal relationship with Christ. The individual who accepted Christ somewhat later (but still in early adulthood) had spent about four years seeking understanding about God. He ultimately came to Christ when he observed the transformation that took place when a close friend became a Christian.

One of these young adult converts has been in a relationship with God for a relatively short time. He expressed a strong reliance on God and a desire to explore ways that he could draw closer. The other individual has been a Christian for a long time (more than 50 years). He shared many experiences of God's work in his life (healing from illness, guidance through difficult times, etc.). His faith might best be described as quiet and contemplative. It was characterized by a great depth of knowledge that was tempered by a child-like curiosity about God and His work in our lives.

In addition to these accounts of how each participant's relationship with God began and progressed to the present time, some common factors were identified that advanced individuals' relationship with God. These experiences are identified as other catalysts for change and will be summarized in the next section.

**Research Question 4: How do individuals describe their experience related to changes within their attachment to God?**

In terms of events or circumstances that precipitated change in an individual's relationship with God, the most notable theme centered around crisis. Individuals who experienced crises related to family relationships, romantic relationships, church trauma, health/wellness crises, military service, combat trauma, financial difficulties, adversity, and generalized fear or anxiety indicated that the crisis was instrumental in forming an initial relationship with God or re-focusing priorities such that their relationship with God took a primary place in their life. Childhood trauma and abandonment were mentioned by several individuals but were not described directly as having a connection to their relationship with God. It is mentioned here as a factor because it may be a relevant direction for future research since several participants mentioned it while describing spiritually formative experiences.

The following are quotes that describe experiences that encouraged movement toward God. Family or relationship crises figured prominently in several interviews. One example of a family crisis as a major formative experience appeared to involve a participant's parents. She indicated that her reaction to this crisis was first anger at God, stating, "He's not here for this. Why is this happening?" This anger seemed to be based to a degree on cognitive dissonance as she had knowledge of God's goodness and love for her, but the circumstances were such that it seemed that He was not hearing or responding to her prayers. During this time, she described herself as "angry and bitter." She also stated, "I just felt as if no matter how much I just tried to convince myself that 'He's not giving you more than you can handle, it just wasn't ... it wasn't good enough

for me.” She later realized as the family worked through the situation with strong support from their pastor and church family that God was with them throughout the crisis. She stated that the experience proved her beliefs to be true. Examples of these beliefs are: “He (God) doesn't give you more than you can handle” and "Even though I'm not seeing the change right now ... it doesn't necessarily mean He doesn't hear me."

An example of church trauma that initially caused a negative change in the participant's relationship to God was described in this way, “And I was one of those kids ... I kinda got in trouble a little bit, but they made it clear we weren't welcomed ... so a lot of us just didn't come back.” Eventually, this participant returned to a place of belief through affiliation with a different denomination.

Other negative events identified as a catalyst for positive change included health/wellness crises (including unplanned pregnancy, abortion, suicide attempts, the development of disabilities, and diagnoses of cancer), military service, combat trauma, financial difficulties, adversity, and generalized fear or anxiety. Several of these factors were combined in a story shared by one participant related to her service in the military and subsequent deployment to a combat zone. This is a brief excerpt from her story:

So we had no idea what was going on. And I was fearful for my life. And there was a time I happened to be alone in the tents, and the Gideons had given me a small... New Testament Bible. It fit in our uniform perfectly and I came across Psalm 23 and I was so comforted. I felt so close to God. I'm all alone which never happened. There was always people and noise around. I was completely alone and I felt that He spoke to me at that point ...full comfort ... I didn't feel fear for my life anymore.

Later in the interview, this participant also said, "... during times of trouble is usually the times I feel closest to God."

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Creswell & Poth (2018) identify the primary importance of validation strategies within qualitative studies. They identify nine strategies commonly used in qualitative research and recommend that researchers implement at least two of these strategies. All nine strategies are listed in Table 6 (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Table 6**

*Summary of Common Validation Strategies (from Creswell & Poth, 2018).*

<b>Researcher's Lens</b>
1) Corroborating Evidence Through Triangulation of Multiple Data Sources 2) Discovering Negative Case Analysis or Disconfirming Evidence 3) Clarifying Researcher Bias in Reflexivity
<b>Participant's Lens</b>
4) Member Checking 5) Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation in the Field 6) Collaborating with Participants
<b>Reader's or Reviewer's Lens</b>
7) Enabling External Audits 8) Generating a Rich, Thick Description 9) Having a Peer Review or Debriefing of the Data and Research Process

For this study, the first validation strategy used was *Corroborating Evidence Through Triangulation of Multiple Data Sources*. To accomplish this, three data sources were used. The first data source was an observation of participants during the live interview (via Microsoft Teams video call). All interviews were conducted with real-time audio and video connections except for one, which was audio only. This provided an opportunity to collect data by observing facial expressions, hand gestures, body language,



etc. The second data source was the interview recording which was reviewed multiple times. The value of the recording was that it provided a means by which the transcript data could be verified and/or corrected in places where the transcription was not accurate. The third data source was the printed transcript, which was reviewed multiple times and then used for coding. In addition, the data was analyzed using three methods (thematic analysis, inductive approach, and deductive approach).

The second validation strategy used in this study was *Generating a Rich, Thick Description*. Each aspect of the research process was described in detail, including the selection of participants, how the sample size was determined, demographic information, specific details related to how the interviews were conducted, and a detailed analysis of interview responses. This detailed account is provided in chapter 4 of this paper.

A third validation strategy used in this study was *Having a Peer Review or Debriefing of the Data and Research Process*. The involvement of my dissertation chair in reviewing each stage of the research process, examining a sampling of the data collected, challenging my assumptions and conclusions during analysis, and collaborating in the final write-up served as an expert peer review. The second committee member also conducted a secondary review.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers to “how believable a study is” (Noble & Heale, 2019). Credibility is evident when scientific rigor is demonstrated within the various stages of the study. The presentation of a comprehensive literature review with a strong theoretical and biblical foundation, as well as the evidence of careful research design and thorough analysis contributes to the credibility of this project. Credibility is

also confirmed through investigator triangulation, as noted above, based on the review and response of the dissertation chair.

### **Transferability**

“Transferability refers to the generalizability of the inquiry” (Nowell et al., 2017). In other words, did the investigator provide sufficient information to help future investigators determine whether the findings might apply to other individuals or groups? The demographic characteristics of participants in this study are clearly defined, along with the means by which they were recruited. While the participants in this study belonged to a narrowly defined group (individuals who identify as Christians, who are enrolled at an evangelical institution of higher learning, and who are over 18 years of age), limiting the transferability of findings, the clearly defined parameters would help a future investigator understand this limitation.

### **Dependability**

Tobin & Begly (2004, as cited by Nowell et al., 2017) indicate that a study is considered dependable if researchers use a process that is “logical, traceable and clearly documented.” Within this study, a logical process is outlined, adhered to, and clearly documented. Future investigators would find within this project a clear road map they could replicate to examine results with other groups of participants (for example, different religious affiliations, different age groups, or the inclusion of individuals with other specific demographic variables).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability indicates that an investigator’s “interpretation and findings are clearly derived from the data.” This goal is achieved in two ways within this study. First,

an abundance of direct quotes are included to support the analysis and interpretation of data, and second, the dissertation committee serves an important role in carefully examining the manuscript for any errors in judgment or interpretation.

### **Summary**

The data collected for this qualitative phenomenological study provides interesting insight, as attachment to God was explored within the lived experience of individuals who identify as Christians. Within the context of the recorded interviews, evidence was found to support the idea that behaviors and themes evident in human-to-human attachment relationships are also evident in human-to-God attachment relationships. Additional insight related to the ways in which individuals began their relationship with God was obtained from the interviews, as was information related to how an individual's relationship with God had changed over time.

The five attachment themes identified in the research question were found to be present in the experiences of the study participants (God as one who is stronger and wiser, God functioning as a safe haven and secure base, individuals seeking proximity to God, individuals expressing distress at separation from God). These themes were evident somewhat in behavior but clearly evident in experiences, ideas, and desires expressed by participants in this study. In the next chapter, a summary of these findings, along with a discussion of implications and limitations, will be explored. Finally, recommendations for future research will be proposed.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of attachment to God in individuals who identify as Christians in order to understand how attachment to God is described and developed. Further, the experience of change within one's attachment to God was explored. This chapter includes a summary of key findings and explores what these findings mean in relation to existing research literature, theoretical constructs, and Biblical literature. Implications related to research, theory, and practice within the fields of education, counseling, and Christian ministry will be examined. The limitations of this study will be identified, along with recommendations for future work. The chapter will conclude with a brief statement regarding the importance of this work.

### **Summary of Findings**

The data collected in this study was coded and organized around four themes that corresponded to the four research questions. First, the data was examined to understand how participants described their lived experience in relationship with (or in attachment to) God. Second, the data was examined to look for language or behavior similar to language and behavior described in human-to-human attachment relationships. Third, the data was examined to understand how individuals arrived at their current relationship with God. Fourth, the data was examined to understand the experiences involved when one's attachment to God changed.

### **The Lived Experience of Attachment to God**

As expected (because participant selection criteria specified only participants who identified as Christian), individuals described their lived experience in relationship with God as deeply meaningful. A second finding that logically followed the first was that individuals demonstrated that their relationship with God was characterized by seeking proximity to Him. In other words, because the relationship with God was seen as important and deeply meaningful, individuals exercised a number of behaviors and mental processes to increase their proximity to God. The third concept or theme that emerged related to how individuals described their relationship with God was that they felt secure in their relationship based on the character of God (one who loves unconditionally and is always there for His children) rather than their own ability to think, speak or act in ways they considered spiritually correct.

### **Evidence of Alignment with Human to Human Attachment Constructs**

To examine whether human-to-human attachment behaviors or emotions align with human-to-God attachment behaviors or emotions, five attachment behaviors described by Bowlby (1969/1982) were used for this investigation. They are 1) seeking proximity to one's caregiver, 2) seeing one's caregiver as a safe haven, 3) seeing one's caregiver as a secure base, 3) seeing one's caregiver as one who is stronger and wiser, and 4) experiencing distress at separation from one's caregiver. Evidence of all four behaviors was evident in the lived experience of the study participants. In addition, a related theme, *Experiencing God as a Provider*, emerged as significant within these relationships.

### **How Was Current Attachment to God Achieved?**

The question of how individuals arrived at their current attachment relationship with God revealed that while some participants had an initial exposure to God or experience with Him in childhood, all indicated that a significant change in their attachment to God occurred during early adulthood. In addition to the factor of age, some participants indicated that various crises and traumatic events served as a catalyst to begin or strengthen their relationship with or attachment to God. Another significant factor was the influence of spiritual mentors in helping individuals understand more about God.

Other experiences described as influential in forming the current state of attachment to God were somewhat predictable within the context of evangelical belief and practice. These included the practice of Christian disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, Bible study, fellowship, service, etc. Other experiences that tended to help individuals arrive at their current place of attachment to God included: the practice of gratitude, the influence of other believers, the experience of suffering, learning more about God through His Word, experiencing answered prayer, and experiencing grace (as expressed by other people).

Conversely, individuals also indicated that when their behavior did not align with Biblical standards, their attachment to God was perceived as diminished. However, this experience of cognitive dissonance (acting in ways that were not congruent with their faith/beliefs) motivated them to change their behavior to experience a renewed proximity to God.

### **Experiences Related to Changes in Attachment to God**

While most of the experiences described could be considered typical behaviors that help individuals grow in their attachment to God (such as Bible reading, Bible study, prayer, praise, fellowship, worship, and obedience), another major theme that emerged was that of crisis as a catalyst for change. This crisis as a catalyst for change theme was evident to some degree in all but two interviews.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **The Lived Experience of Attachment to God**

#### ***Meaningful***

Consistent with previous research (Leite et al., 2020), participants in this study indicated that their relationship with God was deeply meaningful. The qualitative interviews provided a rich description of what this meaningful relationship looked like within each participant's personal experience. Participants revealed that their relationship with God helped them make sense of difficult or devastating circumstances, it gave them strength to endure significant crises, and it gave them courage to continue a chosen path even when great difficulty was encountered. It also helped as they recovered from serious personal trauma and helped them retain hope despite medical, career, relationship, or financial crises. Individuals indicated that outcomes resulting from their relationship with God produced a sense of joy, gratitude, support, calm, comfort, guidance, confidence, hope, and contentment even while experiencing adverse situations.

Data collected through these interviews helps provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of a relationship with God. It may also inform future research in spirituality as it helps shift the focus from behaviors associated with the formal practice of religion, such as frequency of church attendance or formal prayer, to

more meaningful measures such as resilience in the face of adversity, hope in the face of dire circumstances, courage and calm during times of crisis, and sustained belief despite difficult or tragic situations. Rather than treating spirituality as a dichotomous question (are you spiritual or not and/or are you religious or not?), this data emphasizes that a meaningful relationship with God is complex and multi-faceted. This idea is gaining attention as writers like Williams (2021) encourage the examination of religion through the lens of human experience rather than relying solely on an analytic approach.

### *Seeking*

A second theme that emerged related to the first research question is the theme labeled “seeking.” This is significant in that every participant expressed some form of seeking behavior that began early in life and continued over the course of time during which they engaged in a relationship with God. Participants in this study indicated that their lived experience involved consistently seeking proximity to God through various methods. These included increasing in knowledge about Him (through personal Bible reading and study as well as listening to Bible preaching and teaching) and the regular practice of Christian disciplines such as prayer, worship, service, and fellowship. In addition, individuals mentioned practicing behaviors such as gratitude, repentance, obedience, and trust in the face of suffering.

The act of seeking God and the reward for doing so is a concept supported in Scripture as God encourages individuals to seek Him and promises to reward those who do so (Isaiah 55:6; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Jeremiah 33:3; Matthew 7:7). Some of the ways identified in the Bible by which individuals may seek God are exposure to Scripture



(Romans 10:17), humility and repentance (2 Chronicles 7:14; Isaiah 55:6-9), and belief/faith (Hebrews 11:6).

Seeking relationship with God is a concept that might also be considered in relation to Baumeister's work related to the human need for belongingness (2012). This theory's fundamental tenet is that humans need to affiliate with others or experience a sense of belonging that is "analogous to our needs for food and water" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 1). While Chan et al. (2018) found that only individuals who were socially disconnected relied on religious beliefs to bolster a sense of purpose and social comfort in life, the findings in this study related to the factor of seeking God would seem to contradict this. In this study, all individuals exhibited a desire to seek greater proximity to God regardless of social connectedness. It is important to note that social connectedness was not specifically measured in the current study, but observation and review of interview transcripts revealed that most participants appeared to have adequate social support/connection, yet each one still sought proximity to God.

This finding is significant as the data showed that *seeking* appears to be a behavior and/or mindset consistent among all participants. Individuals who appeared to be insecure in their attachment to God were seeking proximity to Him, and individuals who appeared to be secure in their attachment to God also demonstrated this seeking behavior.

### ***Security***

A third theme that emerged within the lived experiences of individuals was the firm sense of security in knowing that God's love was consistent and eternal. Although some participants mentioned that there were periods in which they turned away from

God, they affirmed that feeling distant from Him was strictly their own doing. Each one expressed certainty that God had never turned away or distanced Himself from them. As with the previous finding, this is a concept found in existing literature related to spirituality but is also one that is addressed many times in Scripture (John 10:27-28; Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16). The contradiction identified here (that both anxiety and security could be present simultaneously in one's relationship with God) does not appear to be measured within the ATG scale (Beck & McDonald, 2004) and was not found elsewhere in the literature.

### **Evidence of Alignment with Human to Human Attachment Constructs**

One of the most interesting findings in this study was the high degree of alignment between participants' lived experience in relationship with God and the basic constructs of human-to-human attachment. Just as Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth (1985) found that infants and children seek proximity to their caregivers, express distress at separation from their caregivers, see their caregivers as a safe haven from perceived danger, as a secure base from which to explore, and see their caregiver as one who is stronger and wiser. This study found that individuals in relationship with God related to God as their ultimate attachment figure (Cicirelli, 2004; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016) or one who provided safety, wisdom, confidence, constant availability, and continual presence. While the strength or depth of these characteristics varied among participants, they were clearly evident within the words spoken and, in some cases, even in behaviors.

These findings are consistent with Biblical teaching that describes God as one who can overwhelmingly meet the attachment needs of human beings. A brief review of Biblical passages that support these four attachment constructs is provided in Table 7.

**Table 7***Biblical References to God as an Attachment Figure*

<b>Proximity Seeking</b>	
<b>God seeks proximity to humans.</b>	Adam & Eve (Genesis 3:8-9), Hagar (Genesis 16:8-12), Abram/Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), Isaac (Genesis 26), Jacob (Genesis 28, 31, 35), Moses (Exodus 3), Joshua (Joshua 1:5, 9), Gideon (Judges 6:11-24), and Solomon (1 Kings 3:5-14; 2 Chronicles 1:7-12).
<b>Jesus seeks proximity to humans.</b>	All of humanity (Luke 19:10b), Zacchaeus (Luke 19), the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9:9-13), Peter the Apostle (John 21:15-17), Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19).
<b>God as a safe haven</b>	
<b>God is the omnipotent (all-powerful) one who protects and defends those He loves.</b>	2 Thessalonians 3:3, Isaiah 41:10, Psalm 23
<b>God as one who is omnibenevolent: a loving, nurturing, and protective Father.</b>	Luke 11:2-4, Matthew 6:9-13
<b>Individuals crying out to God in times of trouble.</b>	Psalms 13:1, 18:6, 23, 27, 31:22, 69:1-4, 80:7, 102, Exodus 2:23, Judges 6:7, 2 Chronicles 13:14,
<b>God as a Secure Base</b>	
<b>Individuals with great faith demonstrating courage and resilience while facing extremely difficult circumstances.</b>	Joseph (Genesis 37-48; Genesis 50:20); Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (the Book of Daniel); Joshua, David, Elijah, Nehemiah, Esther, and others.
<b>Distress at Separation</b>	
<b>David (and others).</b>	Psalm 22:11; Psalm 22:19; Psalm 71:12; Psalm 38:21
<b>Christ (on the cross).</b>	Matthew 27:46

This finding contributes to the literature in confirming the common conception found in theological writings, historical and current religious music, and the writings of Freud and others that an unseen deity can function in the role of a parent (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). However, contrary to opinions that identified one's relationship with God as a delusion or sign of neurosis (Freud, 1927), the individuals interviewed for this study described their relationship with God in terms that were logical, well-considered, and confident. These results align with empirical evidence demonstrating that a secure attachment to God is associated with positive outcomes in spiritual as well as psychological domains, with individuals securely attached to God demonstrating

“psychological well-being, satisfaction with life, and positive coping ... more happiness with their relationships and satisfaction with life and an increased capacity to work through problems, leading to higher reported autonomy and mastery of their environment” (Augustyn et al., 2017, p. 204). In addition, Leman et al. (2018) found that “secure ATG is positively correlated with self-reported psychological well-being” (p. 168). One other example is found in Njus & Scharmer (2020) who found that “theists securely attached to God were higher on every measure of well-being than were atheists, agnostics, and theists insecurely attached to God” (p. 178).

The idea that God might function as a surrogate parent is also found in Scripture. There are frequent references to God functioning as a father intimately involved in His children’s lives. One of the most notable instances of this is in Matthew 6:9-11. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, the model He provided addressed God as “Our Father.” Other verses in the New Testament also refer to God as our Father. For example, 1 John 3:1, Matthew 6:6, John 1:12, Matthew 10:29-31, and Luke 12:32 (Bible Verses about the Father, n.d.). The Old Testament abounds with references to God as the Father of the nation of Israel, but many other verses might also be applied to Christians of today. One example is Psalm 103:13, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001/2016).

### **How Was Current Attachment to God Achieved?**

Participants in this study began their faith journey at various ages and in various ways, with some indicating a childhood in which religion played an important role, while others indicated that they were exposed to religion in their early years but were not deeply affected by it. In terms of a point in time when participants indicated beginning a

relationship with God, some identified a time in childhood ( $n = 3$ ), while others indicated that this initial faith decision was not made until emerging adulthood ( $n = 8$ ).

**Table 8**

*Age Relationship with God Began*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Relationship with God Began</b>
<b>F</b>	8
<b>M</b>	11
<b>M</b>	11
<b>F</b>	19
<b>F</b>	19
<b>M</b>	20
<b>F</b>	22
<b>M</b>	25
<b>F</b>	26
<b>F</b>	29
<b>M</b>	29

A key concept that emerged was that while knowledge of God or even a spiritual commitment to Christ may have occurred in childhood, all participants indicated that the decision to pursue an active and personal relationship with God occurred during emerging adulthood. This was universally identified within this study as a pivotal and deeply meaningful experience in each person's life.

*The Experience of a Close Relationship to God*

After this experience of seeking a relationship with God, nine of the 11 participants identified helpful outcomes, including positive effects in social, emotional, financial, physical, or cognitive domains. This is consistent with research cited previously (Augustyn et al., 2017; Leman et al., 2018; and Njus & Scharmer, 2020), where positive life outcomes were associated with secure attachment to God. Notably, these positive

outcomes were often independent of life circumstances, some of which were difficult or even traumatic. These experiences are consistent with Biblical teaching, which asserts that a relationship with God does not guarantee a problem-free life but that individuals can experience inner peace even when circumstances are not good. Jesus said, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, John 16:33).

### ***The Experience of Perceived Distance from God***

The experience of positive outcomes was not universal within the study, as two participants indicated that they were not consistently experiencing a close relationship with God and were not experiencing the positive effects typically associated with that relationship. Both of these individuals indicated that current responsibilities and circumstances made it difficult to make their relationship with God a priority in life. This experience appears to align with the teaching found in Matthew 13, where Jesus indicates that some individuals hear “the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, Matthew 13:22). A closer examination of several words in this passage provide additional insight. The words are *cares*, *riches*, *choke*, and *unfruitful*. According to blueletterbible.com, these are defined as follows. The word “cares” in this passage is the Greek word *merimna* which means care, anxiety, or distraction. The word “riches” is the Greek word *ploutos* which means “abundance of external possessions.” The word “choke” in the Greek language is *sympnigō* which means “to strangle completely” or to “press round or ... almost suffocate him.” Finally, the word “unfruitful” is translated

from the Greek word *akarpos*, the common usage of which means “not yielding what it ought to yield.”

From this brief exploration, it may be inferred that individuals whose circumstances are such that they do not (or believe they cannot) prioritize their relationship with God may see the relationship hampered or destroyed (strangled or suffocated) and rendered useless (not yielding what it ought to yield) due to either negative influences (produced by anxiety) or influences commonly considered positive (the distraction of abundance in a material sense).

### ***Christian Disciplines and Experience with God***

Regardless of when an individual began his or her relationship with God, most acknowledged that “seeking” behavior was involved in the process of arriving at their current status of relationship with God. For some, this took the form of obtaining a greater depth of knowledge of God through reading and studying the Bible. Prayer was also mentioned as a key element influencing growth of the relationship with God, with most individuals characterizing their prayers as ongoing communication rather than formal or liturgical prayers. Individuals also identified spiritual mentors (chaplains, pastors, and other Christians) as instrumental in helping them solidify and strengthen their relationship with God. Finally, activities typically referred to as Christian disciplines also emerged as factors that helped strengthen a person’s relationship with God. In addition to prayer and Bible reading/study, participants also mentioned the importance of praise/worship, fellowship, obedience, gratitude, and repentance.

These characteristics are consistent with Scripture as one’s relationship with God is never represented as a one-time event but instead is a process by which individuals

may expect to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, 2 Peter 3:18a). The process of growth through the practice of Christian disciplines is also supported by authors such as Foster (1998) and Willard (1997) who have written volumes about the practical and spiritual value of practicing these behaviors.

### ***Summary***

To summarize the findings related to the question, “How do individuals describe the experiences involved in arriving at their current attachment to God?” no unusual revelations were discovered. The individuals involved in this study indicated that their spiritual journey began at a specific moment in time that was meaningful and memorable. After the establishment of the relationship, the experiences described were varied but shared a common thread in that each individual experienced positive spiritual outcomes when they sought proximity to God through prayer, Bible reading/study, fellowship, repentance, obedience, gratitude, service, and worship. These results were independent of life circumstances that were sometimes positive but often negative. Conversely, individuals experienced less than positive spiritual outcomes when they walked away from God and did not engage in the activities mentioned above. While all participants indicated that their experience had included some periods during which they walked away from God, each person expressed a confident belief that God never walked away from them.

### **Experiences Related to Changes in Attachment to God**

#### ***Crisis as a Catalyst for Change***



The interviews for this study revealed that over time, each participant had experienced some degree of change in his or her relationship with God. The main catalyst for significant change for most of the participants was a life crisis of some sort. This is identified earlier in this paper as *Code 10: Crisis as a Catalyst for Change*. Individuals recounted experiences of crises related to physical health/wellness, personal safety, finances, abandonment, mental health (anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts), divorce, issues that threatened one's basic family structure, the COVID-19 pandemic, and relationship dissolution. In each situation, the participant described an immediate state of distress and a time of crying out to God for help or relief. Most, but not all, indicated that they experienced some degree of support from God during their time of crisis. Later, most participants indicated that the crisis situation(s) had served as a catalyst to strengthen their relationship with God.

While participants indicated that their relationship with God changed due to seeking His help in their time of crisis, information related to whether this signified a change in attachment to God status is unclear because the participants' attachment to God was not measured for this study. Several cues such as the mention of childhood abuse, trauma, and/or abandonment, might indicate that anxious or avoidant statuses were possibly present, but a definite identification was not available. If additional studies of this type are conducted in the future, it would be helpful to measure a participant's attachment within human relationships (Fraley et al., 2011) as well as his or her attachment to God (Beck & McDonald, 2004) to determine what might have led to a change in attachment to God.

***Correspondence, Compensation, and Crisis?***

In the current literature, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2016) identify crisis experiences as evidence for the safe haven paradigm in that individuals turn to God for help or protection during major crises in life. The interviews conducted for this study indicate that while the safe haven effect was a part of the crisis experience, significant change in one's relationship with God, as a result, was also a significant factor. While additional investigation is needed, it may be possible that "crisis" could be a third option (with the first two being compensation and correspondence) for explaining how an individual might arrive at his or her attachment to God status. Granqvist and others (Granqvist, 1998; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist et al., 2012) identify correspondence and compensation as the two main pathways to establishing one's attachment to God. Correspondence is identified as the pathway traveled by individuals with secure human-to-human attachment styles (attachment to God corresponds to one's attachment to human caregivers), and compensation (attachment to God compensates for deficiencies in attachment to human caregivers) is identified as the pathway traveled by individuals with anxious or avoidant human to human attachment styles. The interviews conducted for this study suggest that "crisis" may be a third pathway, albeit one that may represent the disruption of an earlier path rather than a new path.

### ***Summary***

This study confirmed the evidence established in the literature review that God often serves as an ideal attachment figure for individuals who identify as Christian. According to the data collected for this study, this was true regardless of an individual's past or present church affiliation or their current level of commitment to religious

activities such as church attendance and prayer. Consistent with previous literature, the interview results also suggested that individuals who make their relationship with God a priority in life tend to enjoy more positive outcomes across a variety of domains.

Several themes were common within the interviews related to individuals' current experience in relationship with God. They were: 1) the immense value participants assigned to their relationship with God and the resulting degree of meaning the relationship engendered, 2) the pervasiveness of seeking behavior, and 3) the sense of security individuals enjoyed because of their relationship with God.

While much of the information gleaned from the interviews was unsurprising as it essentially confirmed what was already stated in previous literature, one factor that may be an interesting focus of further investigation is the role crises in life play in changing one's attachment relationship with God.

## **Implications**

### **The Importance of Spirituality/Belief in the Study of Psychology**

One implication for theory and practice within the field of psychology is a reminder to researchers that belief in God and the practice of spirituality are rich and complex and that there are a host of positive outcomes associated with an individual's experience of faith. While the study of faith and/or spirituality was marginalized in scientific circles for decades, an interest in and respect for religious beliefs has recently increased (Lucchetti et al., 2021). Hopefully, this study and others like it will encourage continued respect, understanding, and investigation of the complex and valuable impact a relationship with God has on individuals.

An implication for counselors and faith leaders is confirmation of the vital necessity of prioritizing one's relationship with God. Thus, a renewed emphasis on the practice of basic Christian disciplines would appear to be in order. Recent polls indicate that just 10% of Americans read the Bible on a daily basis (Macinnis, 2022). Belief in God is also in decline, with only 81% of Americans affirming this belief (Jones, 2022). Jones also reports that among 18-29-year-olds, the situation is even worse, with 32% indicating that they do not believe in God.

While the adage "use it or lose it" cannot be applied in terms of losing one's salvation, this study suggests that individuals who place a high priority on continually cultivating their relationship with God through Christian disciplines such as Bible reading and study, prayer, worship, gratitude, obedience, repentance, and service enjoy positive outcomes not consistently experienced by individuals who establish a relationship with God and then do not seek growth within that relationship.

### **The Importance of Diversity in Practice**

Faith leaders should take note of the wide range of experiences that emerged in the discussion of behaviors that tended to help individuals draw closer to God. This is an apt reminder that one's relationship with God is a unique and individualized experience. As such, the ways in which individuals might choose to experience this relationship are varied. Faith-building experiences and the implementation of Christian disciplines should reflect this diversity of practice. For example, some participants indicated growth through the emotional experience of worship, while others indicated that significant growth resulted from more cognitive disciplines such as Bible study.

### **The Importance of Seeking the Seekers**

Another important finding relevant to faith leaders is that seeking behavior and a deep longing for connection to God was evident in every person interviewed. This is important because of the apparent contradiction. While it would make sense to observe a strong emotional longing for attachment to God in the experience of individuals who were not actively practicing their faith, it was surprising to see this intense longing also evident in the experience of individuals who identified as Christian, were enrolled in an evangelical university, and appeared to be making an effort to connect with God in meaningful ways. This also has important implications for evangelical institutions of higher learning. It is not safe to assume that students' spiritual needs are being met. This may be particularly true of students who study online. Thinking in broader terms, this has implications for society in general, as recent surveys related to individuals' attitudes toward the Bible indicate that for individuals who report that they never read the Bible, one-third report being curious about it (Macinnis, 2022). There appears to be a need for intentional efforts to encourage transformative spiritual experiences (like Bible reading) throughout society in general, and specifically for students enrolled in online programs.

### **The Importance of Early Adulthood in Attachment to God**

Although additional research is needed, the fact that all participants in this study made a decision to strengthen their connection to God during emerging adulthood may indicate that this developmental stage could be a sensitive period for spirituality and attachment to God. This connection was a finding not predicted from existing literature on attachment to God. However, it aligns with characteristics identified by Arnett in his seminal research on emerging adulthood in that one main characteristic of emerging adulthood is that it is an age of identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; 2007). While Arnett

focused on exploration related to love and work (Arnett, 2007), later research (Koenig, 2022) also examined identity formation in emerging adulthood related to religiosity and spirituality. Koenig (2022) found that emerging adults generally demonstrate an increasing interest in spirituality while exhibiting a decrease in religious behavior during emerging adulthood.

The implication here is that churches, clergy, counselors, Christian educators, and parents should understand that if or when emerging adults appear to lose interest in religious activities, it does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of interest in God. Individuals interested in fostering spiritual development during this time may need to recognize that traditional means of outreach or connection may not be effective. It may be necessary to consider novel ways of meeting the spiritual needs of emerging adults.

### **A Need for Awareness and Intervention**

When looking at the available literature on changing one's attachment status in human relationships, the first step is typically that of raising awareness of the internal working models established during early attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1977). Similarly, literature on changing attachment to God indicates that awareness of one's current attachment status and recognizing God as the ultimate attachment surrogate may help facilitate change (Granqvist et al., 2010). Churches, clergy, counselors, and educators can assist individuals by disseminating information about human attachment status and the ways in which it may help form an individual's attachment to God. Researchers have a clear opportunity to examine past and current literature and then formulate investigations to help respond to unanswered questions related to God attachment.

### **Limitations**

The results described in this study should be considered in light of the following limitations. First is the limitation associated with the use of self-report data. This is a significant factor, given that the topic of this study was related to one's relationship with God. Because of the researcher's position as an administrator in a program in which the participants were enrolled, response bias may have been a factor. Although participant responses seemed to genuinely reflect their honest evaluation of lived experience in their relationship with God, the possibility that participants may have enhanced their responses is a possibility to be considered

A second limitation that may have been a factor is the limited diversity in participant selection. Because response to the recruitment announcement was robust, there was an opportunity to balance the participant selection by gender. But because the screening questionnaire only asked three questions (age, enrollment at Liberty University, and belief status), it was not possible to consider race, religion, or socioeconomic status when scheduling interviews. Future projects should revise the process to collect additional information that can be used in screening.

A third factor that was initially seen as a potential limitation but did not appear to be a factor was the use of videoconferencing technology rather than meeting the participants face to face. The concern before the interviews was that meeting virtually might create trust issues and inhibit the honest exchange of ideas. However, it appears that this was not a limiting factor because of the widespread use of videoconferencing technology (due to the COVID-19 pandemic). A limitation that emerged during the interview process was that when a participant could not engage by video and audio

connection, there was a degree to which responses were not as robust. Because this limitation was immediately recognized, only one interview was scheduled in which the participant connected via audio link only.

A fourth factor that should be considered when examining the study results is that interviews were conducted while the world was still in the midst of a global pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on mental health, physical well-being, and financial standing may have influenced the responses provided by the study participants.

One final factor related to the research design is that data related to the participants' human-to-human attachment style, and human to God attachment style was not collected. Because we did not gather data regarding a participant's initial attachment to God style, it was not possible to determine whether the attachment relationship improved or diminished. This hampered efforts to evaluate the fourth research question (How do individuals describe their experience related to changes within their attachment to God?).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations are suggested for future research:

First, future studies should further explore the role of crisis as a catalyst for change in one's attachment to God status. To do this, it might prove helpful to establish past and present attachment styles to explore how these statuses might have changed. Researchers might consider using an instrument such as the Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2011) to measure participants' attachment across several different relationships. Attachment to God status



should also be established using an instrument such as the Attachment to God Inventory developed by Beck and McDonald (2004).

On a related note, the contradiction noted in that individuals simultaneously expressed anxiety and security in their relationship with God could be explored. This is a departure from the pattern noted in human-to-human attachment, where it is typical to see individuals occupying just one status. In a related vein, comparing human-to-human attachment styles with human-to-God attachment styles is an interesting avenue to explore. For example, how might an individual's attachment to people improve as their attachment to God improves?

To avoid limitations related to lack of diversity in selection, it may be helpful to request more information in the initial screening questionnaire. To avoid response bias based on the researcher's position within the university, it may be helpful to enlist an independent interviewer or to reveal the interviewer's affiliation only when debriefing the participant after the interview is complete.

### **Summary**

Attachment to human caregivers is a well-established and well-researched topic within developmental, personality, and social psychology literature. Attachment to God is a topic that has also received a great deal of attention since first introduced as a "potentially powerful theoretical framework for the psychology of religion" (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). While the study of religiosity and spirituality has sometimes been reduced to simplistic questions related to external behaviors such as church attendance

and prayer, this qualitative study provided greater depth of insight into the complex nature of one's relationship with and attachment to God.

This study confirmed information published about individuals relating to God as an attachment figure. Similarly, outcomes previously described related to positive outcomes related to spirituality were confirmed. Conversations with study participants also revealed the need to establish and continue habits of prayer, Bible study, fellowship, repentance, obedience, gratitude, worship, and service.

Three findings that merit further exploration are: 1) the impact of crisis as a catalyst for change in an individual's attachment to God status, 2) the apparent contradiction in finding that individuals can simultaneously express security and attachment anxiety in their relationship with God, 3) the possible identification of emerging adulthood as a sensitive period for spiritual development.

Overall, this study provides interesting insight to add to the existing literature on attachment to God. These findings provide information and a challenge for individuals, parents, educators, clergy, and counselors who hope to strengthen attachment to God in people within their sphere of influence.

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## APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT

### **Individuals in Relationship with God**

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of the research is to explore what kind of experiences are evident in a person's relationship with God. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

I am seeking participants who are 18 years of age or older, who identify as a Christian, and who are currently enrolled as students at Liberty University. Participants, if selected, will be asked to participate in an initial interview (1 hour), possibly be asked to participate in a follow up interview (15 minutes), and finally will be offered the option of reviewing transcripts of their responses (15 minutes). Each interaction will be audio- and video-recorded. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. Individuals who complete participation in this study will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

[If you choose to participate, please click this link that will take you to our survey.](#)

A consent document will be provided to you if you pass the survey linked above. The consent document contains additional information about our study. Please read the consent form, type your name at the end of the document, and then click the button at the bottom of the page to signify your agreement with the consent form.

Any questions about the study can be directed to Mrs. Ginny Cashion at <email address>.

## APPENDIX B: SCREENING QUESTIONS

Are you 18 years of age or older? \_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_ NO

Are you currently enrolled as a student at Liberty University? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

Do you identify as a Christian? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

**Consent Form****Consent**

**Title of the Project:** Individuals in Relationship with God

**Principal Investigator:** Ginny Cashion, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

<b>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</b>
--

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and currently enrolled as a student at Liberty University who identifies as a Christian. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

<b>What is the study about and why is it being done?</b>
--

The purpose of this study is to explore individuals' experiences in their relationship with God.

<b>What will happen if you take part in this study?</b>
---

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Engage in a recorded (video and audio) interview (approximately 1 hour). The interview will be conducted through Microsoft Teams.
2. If clarification of your responses is needed, you may be asked to participate in a recorded (video and audio), follow-up interview (15 minutes). The interview will be conducted through Microsoft Teams.
3. Review a transcript of your responses (15 minutes).

<b>How could you or others benefit from this study?</b>
---

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society would include greater understanding of how people experience a relationship with God.

<b>What risks might you experience from being in this study?</b>
--

In general, the risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Because I, in addition to being a student in the Ph.D. program, am also employed by Liberty University, I am a mandated reporter of any disclosures related to child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or harm to self or others.

<b>How will personal information be protected?</b>
--

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of each participant. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- All data will be stored in a password-locked computer, available only to the researcher, and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will be emailed a \$25 Amazon gift card after they have completed all of the procedures listed above.

#### **Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

The researcher is a student in a Ph.D. program at Liberty University and is also employed as an administrator in the School of Behavioral Sciences. To limit potential or perceived conflicts the researcher will not hold a participant's decision to not participate against him or her. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Ginny Cashion. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Rachel Piferi.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email. \_\_\_\_\_

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to record me (audio and video) as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## APPENDIX D: MEETING INVITATION

Congratulations on being selected to participate in the study: Individuals in Relationship with God. This is an invitation to your initial interview. Please set aside one hour for this appointment.

If you will be unable to meet at this time, please propose a new time.

Thank you so much for your participation.

---

## Microsoft Teams meeting

**Join on your computer or mobile app**

[Click here to join the meeting](#)

**Or call in (audio only)**

[+1 434-219-5359,,735508229#](#) United States, Lynchburg

Phone Conference ID: 735 508 229#

[Find a local number](#) | [Reset PIN](#)

[Learn More](#) | [Meeting options](#)



## APPENDIX E: EMAIL REMINDERS

**Email**

Good morning!

Thank you once again for agreeing to meet with me for an interview on the topic "Individuals in Relationship with God." A copy of the informed consent document is attached for your records.

I look forward to meeting with you today at 11:00 am (ET).

Sincerely,

Ginny Cashion

## APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The semi-structured interview will begin with these questions:

1. Tell me about your relationship with God.
2. Can you share some of the more meaningful experiences you have had in your relationship with God?
3. What circumstances or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences in your relationship with God?

Because this is a semi-structured interview, the participant's responses may lead to additional questions.

