

THE EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIAN MALES' ATTACHMENT STYLE AND  
ATTACHMENT FIGURE TO GOD

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men, how men obtained a secure attachment, and what it means to their life. Attachment Theory explains the importance of attachment bonds formed in infancy between the parent and child. Surrogate attachment figures have gained support in studies, indicating mental representation in attachment to God can assist in developing secure attachment style. The participants consisted of 12 Christian males, ages 21 to 57, active in their faith, and experienced an attachment to God. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. The results indicated themes that described the participant's experiences and view of God as attachment figure: father figure, close, protector, comforter, and affectionate. The results indicated themes that described the participant's experiences in forming a secure attachment to God: distressful life experiences, avoiding or distancing from God, seeking reassurance in life circumstances, understanding life experiences, open to new change and growth, open toward developing secure relationships, expanding their faith and trust in God, connecting and remaining close to God, and forming Christian attitudes and behaviors. The results indicated themes that described the participant's relationship experiences and their God and parent attachment: secure attachment with one parent, absent or lack of a parental figure, other attachment figures, misunderstanding concept of God, and spiritual or religious guide. The findings describe the meaning in participant's lived experiences with God as an attachment figure, experiences with forming secure God attachment, and their parent attachment. Implications, limitations, and future recommendations are discussed.



## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated with appreciation to my mother, Paula, who instilled in me the importance of work ethics and resiliency, I share this accomplishment with you mom.

And to the Lord God, my inspiration to begin and finish this work.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the Christian men who trusted me with their personal stories, thank you for sharing your time and your experiences, I appreciate your contribution to this study. To my dissertation committee members, this dissertation has come to completion with your support and guidance. I appreciate your dedication and academic excellence you provided throughout the dissertation process. To my chair, Dr. Laura Rolen, thank you for providing me with your patience, affirmations, and weekly feedback to help me finish my dissertation. To my committee member, Dr. Jichan Kim, thank you for providing me with your encouragement, thoughts, and feedback to help improve this dissertation project. To Dr. Rachel Piferi, thank you for your guidance and for sharing inspiring words throughout the program. Thank you to the Liberty University School of Behavioral Science Psychology Department for their support toward this study. To Pastor Joe McTarsney and Pastor Kenneth Perdue, thank you for their support in allowing me to utilize their available resources for this study. To my family, thank you for the ongoing support, unconditional sacrifice, and acts of love you offered me during this journey, I appreciate it. To my friends, thank you for the prayers and messages that helped me stay encouraged. Finally, I thank God for providing me with the wisdom, strength, and perseverance to continue this dissertation journey when I could not see the finish line. We have arrived! The honor and glory are for the Lord.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

Attachment theory has been a topic of interest in developmental psychology for years, with researchers exploring the frameworks of religion, spirituality, and psychopathology as it relates to attachment styles. Attachment theory was introduced by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth as they studied the developmental response of children in parent-child interaction (Kerlin, 2017). The theory originated from Bowlby's observations of the response of orphan children when they were separated from their mother. The detachment from the mother has been identified by Bowlby as the protest, despair, and detachment sequence response of the child from the separation (Bowlby, 1973). Bowlby indicated by his observations that attachment is programmed in children, serving as part of survival and psychological welfare of the child (Murunga et al., 2017).

Attachment theory refers to the study of the attachment bonds formed during childhood with a caregiver who serves as a projection of the mental expectations in internal working models of an attachment figure as being dependable, safe, close, and trustworthy (Bowlby, 1958). The type of attachment style developed in infancy remains with the individual throughout adulthood, supporting the framework to how individuals interact in relationships with others and handle stressful situations (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018). When an individual perceives that an attachment figure is readily available and receptive to their needs, the individual will remain motivated to appreciate and maintain the relationship attachment. When secure attachment is not established between the child and caregiver due to a secure attachment

figure not being available, the individual will lack secure attachment and have difficulties regulating emotions when experiencing distress (Bowlby, 1958).

Attachment to God has been linked to benefits in mental health and studies have indicated reparative opportunities with a suitable attachment figure can be sought out in a relational attachment to God (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Murunga et al., 2017). The criteria for God as an attachment figure have been studied, and the attachment systems appear to operate similarly to the attachment relationship found in a parent-child relationship by providing a sense of security for the individual when in distress (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Secure attachment to God has been proposed as a defense factor to stress in individuals (Murunga et al., 2017). The following study aimed to explore the attachment of Christian males to God.

### **Background**

Research has indicated that attachment styles can have an impact on psychological health, social relationships, and emotional adjustments of individuals (Malik et al., 2021). In the recent years the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) made changes in the criteria for attachment disorders that included lack of sufficient care, social neglect, deprivation, inconsistent caregivers, and uncommon setting for child rearing (Malik et al., 2021). Attachment theory addresses the type of attachment styles that can develop as a contributing attachment bond between the child and caregiver. The diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 indicate children have a higher risk for the development of mental health disorders when there are inconsistencies in their initial attachment bond (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Malik et al., 2021). The concepts addressed in attachment

theory indicate that when a child is not able to form a secure attachment with their caregiver, they are at higher risk of developing an insecure attachment style.

Attachment theory addressed the influence on the emotional bond development of children and adults as attachment takes time to develop over the lifespan (Zeifman, 2019). Children experience the attachment process beginning in their first year of life as they form attachments to selected caregivers. When there is a disruption in the development of the attachment system and an opportunity to repair is not activated in the process, the individual becomes susceptible to experiencing high levels of anger, fear, and sadness as defensive attachment behaviors, which decreases the ability to engage in emotional attunement with the caregiver (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). For adults, the attachment process may continue to be repaired when there is an attachment disruption and the adult seeks out an attachment bond with a suitable attachment figure including a romantic partner, friendships, and God (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Murunga et al., 2017; Zeifman, 2019).

### **Attachment Styles**

Attachment styles were first introduced by Mary Ainsworth in the study Strange-Situation Room to identify the type of parent-child attachment bond, which included secure attachment and insecure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Secure attachment consists of the child being able to respond to the separation from the mother by distress, happily acknowledge the mother's return, and regulate their distress to continue exploration (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Murunga et al., 2017). In secure attachment, the caregiver is responsive, nurturing, and available to the child (Kent & Henderson, 2017). Insecure attachment is comprised of two types of attachment styles: insecure-anxious

resistant/ambivalent attachment, and insecure-avoidant attachment. Insecure-anxious resistant/ambivalent attachment is shown when the child responds to the separation from the mother with distress, is unable to decrease distress upon the mother's return, and stays close to the mother instead of exploring their environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Murunga et al., 2017). The type of caregiver who contributes to insecure-anxious resistant/ambivalent attachment is sometimes available, nurturing, and attentive to the child and sometimes the caregiver is distant and inconsistent with availability (Kent & Henderson, 2017). Insecure-avoidant attachment was seen in children who showed no concern when they were separated from the mother and no interest when the mother returned (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Murunga et al., 2017). For insecure-avoidant attachment the caregiver is usually indifferent, distant, and inattentive to the child (Kent & Henderson, 2017). The type of attachment styles developed in an infant will be influenced by the internal working models developed in early years between the child and primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Granqvist, 2014).

### **Internal Working Models**

Internal working models are mental representations such as schemas, beliefs, or scripts that are developed by an infant about themselves and others that will guide their perceptions of what to expect from the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Granqvist, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2020). Children develop internal working models to attachment figures based on the type of interactions with their primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Granqvist, 2014). Internal working models are developed based on expectations the child has of the caregiver and the response received to attune to the child's needs. Based on the consistent response the child receives from the caregiver, the child will either

develop expectations that are representations of secure scripts or insecure (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). An individual can obtain secure attachment when a relationship interaction meets the criteria of being a secure base, proximity maintenance, safe haven, and separation distress from the attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1978). These internal working models will influence a person's behavior in situations and in relationships (Granqvist, 2014). According to attachment theory, attachment representations are rather stable in individuals with the ability to change based on the internal working models remaining open for revision of early relationship attachment representations (Waters et al., 2021). Internal working models have the capacity to remap representations of early attachment behavioral systems in individuals and allow for further understanding in the developmental process across the lifespan (Waters et al., 2021). Internal working models have been explored in relation to God as an attachment figure, and the findings have indicated similarities in internal working models perceived in caregivers can be perceived in God (Nygaard et al., 2020).

### **Attachment Hypotheses**

Attachment to God researchers have proposed several hypotheses as to why individuals seek out relationship attachment as indications of compensation and correspondence. In the compensation hypothesis the person will seek attachment to God when they experienced insecure attachment with a caregiver or romantic partner to repair the attachment due to lack of having a suitable attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). Compensation in situational circumstances, life events, and emotionally distressing events have often led individuals toward seeking God attachment for security and protection (Malik et al., 2021). The correspondence hypothesis indicates

that the type of attachment an individual had with their caregiver or romantic partner will match their attachment style to God (Malik et al., 2021). Attachment to God as a substitute has been found to be common among older adults without a suitable attachment figure (Loetz et al., 2013).

### **Continuity and Change in Attachment Styles**

Studies on attachment theory have been conducted to explore topics that have contributed to the understanding of developmental attachment styles and the continuity and change in attachment systems. From the ongoing research, attachment styles formed from infancy will remain continuous and influence the type of relational interaction in later life (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). The attachment bonds created from early internal working model scripts are relatively stable and individuals will seek out similar relational attachment in response to the type of attachment in their emotional attunement experience with their primary caregiver (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Maxwell et al., 2020). The formation of a stable and secure attachment in childhood is important for the healthy development into adolescence and adulthood (Klausli & Caudill, 2018). Secure attachment has been indicated to have an impact on the self-confidence of an individual in social settings and emotional interactions (Klausli & Caudill, 2018). Furthermore, stable attachment has been linked to the psychological and physical wellbeing of an individual across the lifespan (Klausli & Caudill, 2018).

Researchers have explored repairs in internal working models that influence pathways to change in attachment styles as a response to experiencing activation in the attachment system when interacting with a suitable attachment figure in a close



relationship (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). Other situational life events and circumstance that can influence change in attachment in an individual may occur when an individual experiences a health issue or terminal condition (Dresvina, 2020; Gall & Bilodeau, 2020; Loetz et al., 2013; Scheffold et al., 2019). In situations of grief due to a death or divorce, attachment styles have been indicated to play a role in the method of coping and compensating with the loss (Jueckstock, 2018; Kiesling, 2011; Malik et al., 2021). Other areas that can influence a shift in attachment include individuals who experienced a natural disaster or life-threatening accidents or events (Breuninger & Teng, 2017; Davis et al., 2019; Massengale et al., 2017; Mosher et al., 2021). Attachment style has been indicated to be influenced when there is a change in quality of family interactions or relationship status (Maxwell et al., 2020). Mental health conditions and addictive behaviors have been indicated in the literature to have an influence by early childhood attachment style and the correspondence to attachment figure (Buser et al., 2020; Giordano et al., 2017; Goodman et al., 2021; Jordan, 2019; Kerlin, 2017, 2019, 2020; Malik et al., 2021). Attachment styles are applicable to all age groups from children, adolescents, adults, and older adults. Attachment theory has addressed secure attachment may be sought after in suitable attachment figures throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1958; Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Kimball et al., 2013). This study will focus on the attachment styles of Christian men to God and review literature that has addressed God as an attachment figure.

### **Problem Statement**

Attachment insecurity is a major contributor to mental disorders, substance use, and relational issues in individuals across all age groups (Buser et al., 2020; Caspers et

al., 2006; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Jordan, 2019; Kerlin, 2017, 2019, 2020). Attachment theory is defined by an attachment system that stems from mental organization that forms a sense of safety and inner motivation that works as a function to protect an individual from physical and psychological harm (Bowlby, 1958; Kimball et al., 2013). When secure attachment is not established due to a secure attachment figure not being available, the individual will lack the ability to regulate emotions when experiencing distress, which can cause further deterioration in psychological functioning (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018). According to Nygaard et al. (2020) attachment theory supports attachment styles by the development of internal working models that serve as mental representation of a parental attachment figure; these parental mental representations have been indicated to be similar to those found in God. Therefore, studies have indicated God may serve as a surrogate attachment figure to provide for the development of secure attachment in adults and support psychosocial regulation (Nygaard et al., 2020).

Previously most of the research on attachment styles has been conducted on females as the majority representation in the samples, and the representation of males in studies of attachment to understand their attachment style have been minimal (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Davila et al., 1997; Saunders et al., 2011). The perspectives of adult males have not been fully explored regarding their attachment style; it is imperative to explore this phenomenon to understand attachment style in males and give voice to this population to mediate appropriate engagement in validating their experiences of what their attachment to God means to them in their lives. It is important to study the perspectives of males and their experiences with attachment because by studying the

attachment styles of males an understanding of their experiences related to forming a more secure attachment to God can be obtained.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men. Furthermore, how they obtained a secure attachment and what it means to their life was examined.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?

RQ 2: How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?

RQ 3: What are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment?

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

Prior research studies have been conducted on predominantly female participant samples, and limited studies have been conducted to address male attachment styles (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Davila et al., 1997; Saunders et al., 2011). A potential challenge that may arise could be not having enough male participants recruited as volunteers for the study. In addition, participants interested in the study were prescreened to meet criteria for secure attachment; this may have eliminated some of the other potential participants from being able to participate in the study. The study also excluded

females and minors, which narrowed the participant selection down to a smaller sample selection.

Regarding assumptions, it was assumed that the participants would report being Christians if they self-identify with this faith. An assumption regarding the participants is that they would have insight into their own stories and when prompted they would be able to elaborate on their experiences. It was assumed that participants would answer honestly and authentically during the interviews for the study. Lastly, participants who volunteered for this study were to be active in their faith as part of the prescreening and therefore were more likely to volunteer for the research study.

Concerning the methodology, it was important to be aware of potential covariate or potential confounding variables such as the participant's past attachment to their parents or other attachment figures. The study design included a brief screening for secure attachment to God. The second part of the study gathered the description of lived experiences and the meaning males identified in their formation of secure attachment. The study explored the meaning given by participants in their experiences in seeking and obtaining secure attachment.

Other limitations may be the impact of self-report from participants and their response to questions of attachment styles due to the quality of their current relationship or life circumstances. Studies on children and spiritual attachment to God have been minimally explored and this study will not include minors. The topic of attachment to God has been studied within the Christian and Jewish faith; there are limited studies on other religious practices and attachment. In this study, the participants were screened and

selected to be from the Christian faith, therefore this may have limited the findings to this sample of Christian men.

## **Theoretical Foundations of the Study**

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory has its early beginnings in the 1940s when a psychologist named John Bowlby studied the developmental response of children in an orphanage who were separated from their caregiver for a long period of time (Bowlby, 1973, 1988; Knabb & Emerson, 2013; Malik et al., 2021; Murunga et al., 2017). Bowlby and Mary Salter Ainsworth began to explore the importance of interpersonal connections in child development and during the lifespan (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). Attachment theory was formulated from those early studies and is identified as the attachment bonds formed in childhood with a caregiver who serves as a projection of the expectations of the attachment figure being dependable, safe, and trustworthy for the infant to attach when experiencing environmental threats (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018). Attachment theory draws on this bond necessary to promote survival in individuals; it also influences behaviors that encourage mental and physical health (Murunga et al., 2017). The criteria for attachment theory consist of the attachment figure being perceived as a secure base, safe haven, stronger, and wiser (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2020). In addition, the person seeks proximity and experiences separation distress when they are away from the attachment figure (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2020).

Foundation for God attachment has been studied for years in the field of psychology of religion to address a relational attachment framework between an

individual and God (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) have set a foundational framework in the understanding between the parallels of the Christian faith traditions with the attachment model, in particular the view of God as a secure attachment figure. In the Christian faith, God is recognized as omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent which according to attachment criteria makes God a reliable attachment figure that is continually available to offer security to humanity (Granqvist, 2020). The characteristics of God have been studied extensively and the findings have indicated that God has similar constructs to the parent-child attachment relationship (Counted & Miller, 2018). The attachment theory criteria for secure attachment are met by God as the ideal attachment figure according to the Bible and is supported by the literature (Granqvist, 2020; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). The following Biblical foundation review will expand further on the relational attachment fundamentals presented in Christianity that initiated between God and humanity.

### **Biblical Foundation of the Study**

#### **The Grand Narrative**

The grand narrative serves as a lens to examine the fundamentals of this research study on attachment to God. According to Wolters (2005) there are the laws of nature and the laws of norms, ordained and under the authority of the creator. God is the creator of all things and has formed humans in His image with creative capabilities (Wolters, 2005). Since the beginning everything created by God, including humans, was good and God made humans to be relational beings (Genesis 1:31, New King James Bible, 1982). In the Bible the first human relationship was introduced, and it occurred after God created human beings in His image to reflect God in nature (Genesis 1:26-28, New King James

Bible, 1982). The first humans according to the Bible were Adam and Eve, and they had an intimate relationship with God and each other in the garden (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019; Genesis 1:28, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). Adam and Eve were dependent on God for everything in their physical, emotional, and spiritual care. According to attachment theory and the Bible, God served as a secure base for Adam and Eve, as they were assured that God was accessible and responsive to their needs at any time (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). God also provided Adam and Eve with proximity seeking attachment behaviors by being available in the garden and allowing them the freedom and liberty to explore the land with one limitation to not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). God served as a safe haven for Adam and Eve, and they were assured they were able to return to God at any time for support and comfort (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013).

As the fall followed, Adam and Eve had distanced themselves from the secure base and safe haven of God after they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 3, New King James Bible, 1982). This separation was an indicator of humanities own search to become dependent on themselves as their own secure base and safe haven, which led to them moving away from their interdependence to God and the separation in secure attachment (Esqueda, 2014, Genesis 3:1-24, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson). After the fall, this act has developed tension and distress amongst each other and God (Genesis 3:9-24, New King James Bible, 1982; Esqueda, 2014). Attachment theory addresses the type of insecure attachment styles that are established by parental bonding (Counted & Miller, 2018). The Bible addressed generational curses that may

bring the effects of sin into the other generations possibly impacting the ability to attach to their children and establish unhealthy attachment styles that are being passed down to other generations when they are not corrected (Numbers 14:18, New King James Bible, 1982). God attachment offers the opportunity to repair broken attachment styles and foster reparenting. According to attachment theory, prolonged separation from the primary caregiver will result in the individual experiencing protest, despair, and detachment from the caregiver, this is very similar when Christian believers separate themselves from God (Ephesians 2:12, Genesis 2:17, Isaiah 53:6, Isaiah 59:1-2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013).

Throughout the grand narrative, God has always wanted to correct the original sin, yet because of the sinful nature, individuals have maintained that distance from God, impacting their relationship with him and others (Esqueda, 2014; Wolters, 2005). According to attachment theory, separation from a caregiver and lack of a secure attachment figure will lead to a person experiencing distress and relational detachment from their caregiver (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). In the field of psychology and from the perspective of the grand narrative, it can be examined how the new creation has led to living in a fallen world of chaos in the attachment to God, family, insecure identity, and poor connection with others (Esqueda, 2014). The great narrative and the Bible highlight God's plan of reconciliation to restore the world from sin and bring back unity with humanity (Wolters, 2005). Recovery for humanity can be interpreted as restoration through Jesus Christ who provided redemption of all sin by completing the ultimate sacrifice of death and resurrection (Isaiah 53:8, Luke 24:6-7, Mark 15:21-41, Mark 16:6, Matthew 28:5-6, New King James Bible, 1982). This act of redemption aimed to restore



the attachment relationship tainted by sin and human separation from God. Reparative attachment to God can influence the way Christians live and interact toward others in the world, which will honor one of the commands given in the Bible by Jesus Christ to “love one another” (John 13:34, New King James Bible, 1982).

### **Sanctification for Christians**

For individuals who identify themselves as Christian, there is a process of spiritual maturity that develops over time for those individuals who are considered saved in Jesus Christ. In Christian theology, sanctification is referred to the process by which the Holy Spirit influences a change in the person to become more like Christ (Hall et al., 2021). The nature in the type of relationship with God for Christians is in the expectation of their sanctification based on Jesus’ atonement, which allows the process for religious believers to be released and cleansed from sin. When trust is placed in God, despite the spiritual struggles faced during their relational journey, Christians are more open toward creating religious meaning making as a form to cope with life adversities and understand their suffering through sanctification (Hall et al., 2021). Religious meaning making has been practiced and studied in various religions, this study focused on the Christian faith. The type of relationship Christians have with God is a process that is influenced by moral change, sanctification, and meaning making of struggles which can influence the type of attachment style and view of God as an attachment figure. For Christians, the development of moral change in behaviors, attitudes, character, and thoughts may occur as part of their sanctification, relationship with God, and active participation in their religious faith (Porter, 2019).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following is a list of definitions of terms that are used in this study.

**Attachment** – are emotional or affectional bonds formed in a relationship between an individual and an attachment figure (Granqvist, 2020).

**Attachment Behavior System** – are behaviors that help to stay close in distance to specific caregivers/attachment figures and serve as survival (Knabb & Emerson, 2013).

**Attachment Figure** – is a mental image of a caregiver figure who meets the criteria of being a secure base, safe haven, stronger, wiser, maintains proximity, and causes distress when separation occurs. (Nygaard et al., 2020).

**Attachment to God** – are emotional or affectional bonds formed in a relationship between an individual and with a divine entity (Counted & Zock, 2019).

**Attachment Styles** – are the category type for the emotional or affectional bonds formed between an individual and an attachment figure that consist of secure and insecure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Murunga et al., 2017).

**Christian** – an individual who identifies believing in one personal and relational God and practices the teachings of Jesus Christ (Counted & Zock, 2019; Granqvist, 2020).

**Insecure Attachment Style** – is when an individual lacks the confidence based on the emotional or affectional bonds formed with an attachment figure that they will be available and responsive when they are needed by the individual (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

**Internal Working Models** – are formed schemas, expectations, beliefs, or scripts created by an individual regarding their attachment figure's behavioral pattern response and availability to the person when experiencing distress (Maxwell et al., 2020).

**Phenomenon** – is referred to the common description of individual’s lived experiences and the meaning described regarding a concept (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Proximity Seeking** – the ability to seek or maintain emotional and physical closeness to the protecting attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969; Nygaard et al., 2020).

**Secure Attachment Style** – is when an individual has the confidence based on the emotional or affectional bonds formed with an attachment figure that they will be available and responsive when they are needed by the individual (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

**Secure Base** – the perception of the attachment figure to provide the necessary emotional support and physical security, comfort, nourishment, and reassurance to explore the environment (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Nygaard et al., 2020).

**Safe Haven** – the perception of the attachment figure to be a safe place to return to when experiencing potential threat or danger and reconnecting (Knabb & Emerson, 2013; Nygaard et al., 2020).

### **Significance of the Study**

The contributions by the presented study would benefit the field of developmental psychology including the understanding of the experiences of males and their meaning in seeking a more secure attachment to God. By understanding the meaning and contribution in establishing a more secure attachment of males in society, further research would be able to explore foundational framework in application in working with Christians with insecure attachment patterns. The study investigated the central

phenomenon of attachment theory to allow for further understanding in helping to develop other modalities in the treatment of mental health disorders and relational issues.

This study aimed to expand the literature deficiencies of the attachment of Christian males to God. The study also contributed to the fields of counseling, religion, health, and education. The study was worth conducting due to the benefits of giving a voice to the underrepresented group of males by having them describe their lived experience of attachment style and how they obtained attachment to God. The study aimed to contribute understanding and alternative insight to members in society seeking to improve their attachment styles. The benefits of understanding the essence of the phenomenon on attachment styles of males may help establish a foundation for future research that can explore further interventions to improve the understanding of males' mental health, early child development, social relationships, physical health, religious connection, and overall psychological wellbeing.

### **Summary**

In summary, attachment theory has its foundational beginnings based on observations made by John Bowlby between child-parent interactions. The contribution to attachment theory by Mary Ainsworth in the studies of the Strange-Situation Room led to identifying the different attachment styles from the observations of how the child attached in secure attachment or insecure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Attachment theory addressed the attachment bonds that are created in infancy between an infant and an attachment figure for the psychological survival of the infant. Internal working models are mental expectations an infant develops toward their attachment figure for the future, and they are based on the ability for the caregiver to be a secure

base, safe haven, maintain proximity, and experience distress when separated from the attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1958). Researchers have investigated other attachment systems including God as an attachment figure and indicated similar internal working model criteria found in a child-parent attachment relationship (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Inconsistency in early attachment bond can lead to higher risks of psychopathology and development of a mental health diagnosis in children with insecure attachment (Malik et al., 2021). Attachment bonds for children and adolescents are closely related to their attachment with their primary caregiver where adult attachment bonds are closely related to romantic bonds (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Murunga et al., 2017; Zeifman, 2019). Studies by Ainsworth (1978) on parent-child interactions indicated two major categories for attachment styles, secure and insecure attachment. The development of internal working models was discussed to provide an understanding on how individuals developed a relational attachment to an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Granqvist, 2014). The attachment to God as an attachment figure was indicated to meet the criteria similar to that of a primary caregiver as indicated by attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the lived experiences of attachment to God in Christian men. The following literature review addresses the past and present research on attachment theory and the Biblical foundation in the literature regarding attachment to God.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

Foundational research in attachment theory has contributed to the field of developmental psychology making the topic of attachment an ongoing interest for many researchers. This research will focus on addressing the literature on attachment theory and the investigation of God as an attachment figure. Originally, attachment theory was developed from the observations of orphan children and the interactions between the parent-child relationship. During the infant's life the infant will display learned behaviors that activate the attachment behavioral system to allow for the infant to maintain a comfortable distance and proximity from their caregiver (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Attachment bonds with a primary caregiver are essential for the survival of the infant at an early age and these bonds will develop into attachment styles (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Attachment styles are formed based on the interactions between the child and caregiver and will remain with the child throughout their adulthood. The type of attachment styles that have been indicated from research studies include two main categories of secure and insecure attachment style (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1958; Jordan et al., 2021). Insecure attachment is composed of two styles, insecure-anxious resistant/ambivalent attachment, and insecure-avoidant attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Religion and spiritual beliefs are discussed to address the research findings between the image of God factors and the attachment of individuals. The literature has focused on examining alternative attachment figures and attachment to God has been indicated to meet the criteria of a suitable attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990).

According to the literature on the framework on attachment theory, attachment styles are relatively set and can have the capacity to change throughout the lifespan of an individual (Bowlby, 1958). For children and adolescents their attachment style has been closely related with the bond they developed with their primary caregiver. The literature review will address the attachment development of children and adolescents to God as an attachment figure (Counted, 2016; Counted & Moustafa, 2017; Kiesling, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2012). The attachment of adults and the contribution to change in attachment styles will also be discussed in this literature review. As indicated in the following research review, attachment styles can be modified in the internal working models when experiencing periods of distress (Bowlby, 1958; Dresvina, 2020). The Biblical foundation of attachment to God for this study will be discussed through the lens of the grand narrative of creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration (Esqueda, 2014; Knabb & Emerson, 2013; Wolters, 2005).

### **Description of Search Strategy**

The search to gather the resources for the literature in this study was conducted using multiple online search engines and databases. The Liberty University online Jerry Falwell Library was used to gather journal articles. The delimitations and selections for the search of resources for the journal articles were to include sources published within five years and peer reviewed publications. The key terms used to narrow down the relevant sources for this topic included *attachment, attachment theory, attachment-figure, God, males, attachment styles, pastoral care, religion, image of God, attachment to God, developmental, psychology, children, adolescents, adults, and Christianity*. The use of published digital books and hardcopy books were used as references drawn from a

Google search conducted using the keywords *attachment theory*, *attachment in religion*, and *developmental attachment*. References for scriptures were found on the bible gateway website and the New King James Bible Online version was used.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Attachment Behavioral System**

Attachment behavioral systems are organized and specifically learned behaviors that are displayed by an infant toward the attachment figure that serve to predict an outcome response from the caregiver (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). These attachment behavioral systems serve to keep the infant from physical and psychological harm as the infant seeks proximity from their attachment figure (Bowlby, 1958; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). The attachment behavioral system becomes activated when the infant perceives the attachment figure to be distant and will attempt different attachment behaviors to obtain the desired proximity from the attachment figure (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). It has been indicated that different circumstances can activate the attachment behavioral system in an infant when they perceive to be in danger or in distress (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Once the infant receives the desired comfort in distance from the caregiver the attachment behaviors displayed by the infant will come to an end (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

### **Attachment Styles**

The attachment bond is formed during infancy between the child and a caregiver who serves as a projection of the mental expectations of an attachment figure for the future as being dependable, safe, close, and trustworthy (Bowlby, 1958). The attachment styles developed in infancy remain with the individual in adulthood supporting the



foundation to how individuals will interact in relationships with others and handle stressful situations (Bowlby, 1958; Jordan et al., 2021). When secure attachment is not established due to a secure attachment figure not being available, the individual will lack the ability to regulate emotions when experiencing distress that can cause further deterioration in psychological functioning (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018). When an infant detaches from the primary caregiver when secure attachment is not able to be established and under distress, the infant will seek out other attachment bonds for protection (Granqvist, 2020).

### **Attachment in Childhood and Adolescence**

Attachment theory has been a phenomenon that has been known to have the capacity to change throughout the development in a person's lifespan (Granqvist, 2020). Attachment in children and adolescents is activated by the attachment system between their primary caregivers that will influence the type of behaviors displayed when in distress (Allen & Tan, 2016). Children will depend on their primary caregivers for comfort and require more proximity to them as a response to the attachment system activation when experiencing distress (Allen & Tan, 2016). Internal working models are formed as expectations of the response the child will receive from the caregiver based on attunement of the needs of the individual. Attachment between children and adolescents will begin to change as adolescents will seek more distance from their parents and independence to explore and return to their primary caregivers for help to meet their needs (Allen & Tan, 2016). Based on the past parental bonds the adolescent will use those internal working models of attachment cognitions to reflect those relational attachment bonds with peers or other attachment figures that will influence their future

attachment as adults (Allen & Tan, 2016, Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). When secure attachment has not been established with a primary caregiver during childhood, the child or adolescent will seek out another attachment figure to seek comfort when in distress.

In the early years of life, a child has not developed mentalization skills to allow for the capacity to understand the cognitive concept of religion or spirituality and the object permanence of God. During infancy the child relies on their senses and will seek physical attachment that is visible and readily available (Granqvist, 2020). The child may seek out a surrogate attachment to an object such as a blanket or a favorite toy for comfort if the primary caregiver is away or unavailable. As the child develops cognitively, the child can learn mental representations to allow the child to make attachments to non-physical attachment figures such as God (Granqvist, 2020).

Attachment style development to an attachment figure have been studied amongst children and adolescents to explore God as an attachment figure when a suitable attachment was not developed with a primary caregiver. Mitchell et al. (2012) explored the exclusive God-individual relationship that is established by cognitive and emotional understanding of the youth's image of God. The youth described God as "brave, large, majestic, omnipotent, important, powerful, strong, invincible, intelligent, everything is possible, and the best" (Mitchell et al., 2012, p.142). God was perceived by these youth as an "advisor, parental figure, intimate friend, provider, and relational continuity" with stability in the relationship changing over time from abstract to intimate (Mitchell et al., 2012, p.144-145). Other studies on youth attachment to God, addressed by Kiesling (2011) explore the effects of parental divorce on the children's faith and development of the type of attachment style during a major adjustment in the child's behavior, emotions,

needs, safety, and security. Children with ability to seek out alternative attachment figures, such as God, were able to find security during the transitions (Kiesling, 2011).

Counted (2016) investigated the experiences of Christian youth and the attachment figure to God using attachment language criteria to identify perception of secure base, safe haven, separation, and loss. The study indicated more securely attached youth had a more positive perception of God and were able to manage daily stressors and interactions. Youth with anxious or insecure attachment had difficulties managing daily stressors and had a more negative idea of the image of God. The participants with insecure attachment stated seeing God as being very far away from them, and therefore were not able to perceive God as an attachment figure (Counted, 2016). Attachment in youth has been studied as it relates to authenticity to themselves and in search for attachment to God. Counted and Moustafa (2017) indicated insecure anxious attachment to God in Christian youth was associated with inauthenticity, and less anxious attachment to God was related to authenticity. Youth attachment to God differed by gender with boys showing more avoidant attachment styles than girls (Counted & Moustafa, 2017).

### **Attachment in Adults**

The theoretical framework supported is attachment theory, indicating attachment is not set and can change at any time throughout the course of an individual's life (Bowlby, 1958). Attachment in adults has been indicated to move away from primary caregivers toward other attachment bonds found in peers, other relatives, romantic partners, and other suitable attachment figures (Zeifman & Hazan, 2016). Kimball et al. (2013) explored the narratives of adults in response to their relational experiences with God and identified the process of attachment to God based on past attachment style of

secure or insecure attachment to their parents. Dansby Olufowote et al. (2020) explored the process of how adults earned secure attachment in later years regarding the intrapsychic and interpersonal changes made concerning thoughts, emotions, expectations, spirituality, and finding alternative attachment figures. Attachment pair bonds in adults play an important function that are similar to those bonds needed in infancy in order to allow the adult to enhance healthy development psychologically and physiologically (Zeifman & Hazan, 2016).

The type of attachment bonds developed in childhood will continue to influence adulthood attachment and if the attachment styles were not secure, the attachment style will remain the same or the individual can seek out a different attachment through changes in their internal working model developmental pathways (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). As indicated by the research on attachment theory, any interference in the attachment of the individual can have an influence on the development psychopathology and quality of relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Goodman et al. (2021, 2022) studied suicidal ideation, self-esteem, health, and attachment to God in adults to explore if their attachment style compensates for the insecure attachment bonds experienced in childhood. Adults who reported having a disconnected attachment relationship during childhood and as adults had a strong spiritual relationship with God reported less suicidal ideation and less health issues than adults who never developed a spiritual connection in their attachment (Goodman et al., 2021, 2022).

### **God as an Attachment Figure**

The idea of God as an attachment figure has been supported by prior studies that indicate compensations for not having a suitable or available attachment figure in the

person's life can be sought out in a relational figure with God (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). The criteria for attachment figure to God appears to operate similarly to the attachment relationship found in a parent-child by providing a sense of security when in distress (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Prior studies have addressed the similarities in attachment theory and the characteristics of the image of God that are suitable for an attachment figure (Kam, 2020). God images are represented by emotional and psychological adjustment in personal referred to internal working models that form associations to reflect the image of God as an attachment figure in an individual's life (Davis et al., 2013; Stulp et al., 2019). The mental representations of an individual regarding the image of God allows for the formation of a noncorporeal or nonphysical attachment relationship that reflects that of a parent-child attachment relationship (Granqvist, 2020).

According to attachment theory, seeking and maintaining proximity from the attachment figure is important to regulate the attachment behavioral activation system. The religion of Christianity indicates that God is omnipresent and therefore meets this criterion of being always in proximity and accessible to everyone (Granqvist, 2020). Individuals seeking proximity to God have indicated they were able to obtain and maintain a close relational attachment through the practice of prayer (Granqvist, 2020). The next criteria of separation and loss according to attachment theory, cause distress and a protest response from the individual perceiving or experiencing the separation from the attachment figure. God as an attachment figure is able to meet these criteria as according to the scriptures God is willing to remain close to individuals and God does not separate or end a relationship (Granqvist, 2020). Separation from God can be perceived when a

person loses their church community, leaves their faith, renounces God, and eternal separation in heaven or hell (Granqvist, 2020).

The criteria of safe haven according to attachment theory addresses the process by which an individual seeks out an attachment figure who is perceived as safe to obtain protection from a potential danger or threat in their environment (Granqvist, 2020). Situations that have typically been identified to set off attachment system behaviors in an individual include a perceived threat or danger, experiencing a physical or mental illness, exhaustion, and threat of being separated from the perceived safe attachment figure (Granqvist, 2020). The research on attachment to God indicates that individuals experiencing any of these distressful situations will often turn to behaviors that align with their faith to draw themselves closer to God for comfort from the devastation being experienced (Granqvist, 2020). According to the literature from the psychology of religion and spirituality field, individuals experiencing distress when perceiving a threat or loss will use religious attachment strategies as a response of coping with the situation or experience (Granqvist, 2020).

Lastly, the secure base criteria are described by attachment theory as having the sense of security for the infant to explore the environment and be able to have the confidence to return to the attachment figure for reassurance, nurturance, or protection when needed (Granqvist, 2020). According to Christianity, God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent which makes God a reliable attachment figure that is available to offer protection and safety to individuals at any given time (Granqvist, 2020). In addition, according to attachment theory, a suitable attachment figure must be perceived by the individual as stronger and wiser than the individual to

help defeat the distress (Granqvist, 2020). In the Christian faith God is viewed as all powerful, all knowing, and all good which supports the function of God as a suitable attachment figure. The Bible also provides reassurance of the protection and safety God offers to believers as indicated in Psalm 23 (New King James Bible, 1982). Studies have indicated individuals who had a positive mental construct of God as a secure base experienced less emotional distress and more confidence in engaging in risky activities when compared to those who had a negative construct of God as a secure base (Granqvist, 2020).

### **Image of God and Attachment**

The integration of attachment theory to God have been studied to understand the connection between the attachment bonds of humanity and God. God image is related to the type of internal working models a person develops toward a divine attachment figure as a result of their emotional experience between them and the divine attachment figure (Davis et al., 2013). These God images are cognitions that derive from the personal knowledge, emotions, and memories the individual experienced in relationship with the divine attachment figure (Davis et al., 2013). These God image schemas are activated when the individual experiences any intrapersonal or situational cues in their environment (Davis et al., 2013). God concept is related to a person's theological beliefs regarding particular traits of God as attachment figure. These God concepts give insight into how the God attachment figure associates to the individual and how the individual should relate to God (Davis et al., 2013). The understanding of God in individuals is shaped by a variety of factors including religious cognition, family, community, and personal life experiences that will shape the development of the concept and image of

God (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019; Davis et al., 2013). Cultural backgrounds and practices have been indicated to play a role in the perceived image of God, characteristics, and attachment style response amongst individuals of diverse cultures (Kent & Henderson, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2018; Pirutinsky et al., 2019).

The parent and child attachment style have been indicated to contribute to the development in the type of image the child will have of God in the future as the child will correspond according to their relationship attachment with their parent (Beck & McDonald, 2004). If the child experienced a supportive attachment with their primary caregiver, they are more likely to have a positive and supportive image of God (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Bayne & Tylsova, 2019). Past life event stressors and negative situations have been found to contribute to the type of image formation the individual will have of God (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019). Researchers have indicated spiritual or religious involvement are linked to relationship satisfaction, positive self-esteem, and optimism (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). Higher levels of spiritual development and secure attachments were found to predict positive psychological wellbeing outcomes such as increased life satisfaction, healthier coping supporting regulation of negative distress, problem solving, increased hope, meaning in life, reduced depression, and higher enjoyment in the quality of their relationships (Augustyn et al., 2017; Goodman et al., 2022).

### **Unexpected Loss and Grief**

Throughout the lifespan there are circumstances that can activate the attachment system in an individual during time of stress or negative life event which can significantly disrupt the attachment style and attachment figure (Dresvina, 2020).



Jueckstock (2018) explored the process by which individuals sought out their religion and attachment to God during grief and loss. By addressing challenging grief emotions and remain in relational connection with God, individuals were able to cope more effectively with their loss (Jueckstock, 2018). Furthermore, Davis et al. (2019) studied people seeking religious attachment to God to help create meaning after experiencing a natural disaster in a recent flood that affected families and the loss of their home. The resilience implications can serve as indicators that religion and God attachment serve as protective factors toward creating positive meaning in disastrous experiences (Davis et al., 2019; Massengale et al., 2017; Mosher et al., 2021).

### **Life Threatening Health and Terminal Conditions**

The change in attachment throughout different experiences was addressed in studies of individuals facing life threatening health conditions. During the process of the palliative care in end-of-life patients the patients experienced adjustments, triggers, or reflection in attachment style due to the fear in the end-of-life journey (Loetz et al., 2013). Spiritual care was addressed as an indicator to establish safety and reassurance with the relationship of attachment to God during the terminal stage. Secure attachment has been indicated to impact patients coping with illness or disease and facilitated treatment compliance (Loetz et al., 2013). Patients who showed a less secure attachment to God reported experiencing hopelessness, losing control, distress, anger, bitterness, and feelings of being punished by God (Loetz et al., 2013). Gall and Bilodeau (2020) investigated the role of attachment to God in women's adjustment to breast cancer diagnosis. Patients with more anxious attachment to God showed more avoidance in coping with distress when compared to more securely attached individuals who showed

less avoidance coping prior to receiving the diagnosis and treatment (Gall & Bilodeau, 2020; Scheffold et al., 2019). Anxious attachment to God was associated with higher levels of depression during each point in the treatment process (Gall & Bilodeau, 2020).

### **Mental Health Factors**

Interference with healthy attachment styles in childhood has served as indicators in the development of mental health issues in later life (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Studies on change in attachment styles indicated the benefits to obtaining attachment bonds to a suitable attachment figure in adulthood. Buser et al. (2020) addressed the link between non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and attachment to God among a population of college students with anxious or avoidant attachment to God and non-suicidal self-injury. Students with anxious and avoidant attachment to God, or a higher power, had an increase in non-suicidal self-injury (Buser et al., 2020). Secure attachment to God contributed to lower rates of non-suicidal self-injury behaviors (Buser et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2021). Depression among insecurely attached people appears to present higher risk when spiritual attachment to God is not established (Klausli & Caudill, 2018, 2020) as opposed to those with higher levels of religious involvement and attachment to God, who presented with less depression (Paine & Sandage, 2017).

God attachment has been an area of importance when working with combat veterans who experienced combat trauma such as posttraumatic stress disorder. Veterans who experienced a secure attachment to God as an attachment figure would utilize that relationship to regulate distress with emotions and receive safety, support, and comfort (Breuninger & Teng, 2017). Trauma survivors with a secure attachment to God addressed a positive God image and meaning from their experiences, which promoted positive

affect regulation when experiencing distress from the trauma versus those with insecure attachment to God; this was seen in children and adults (Breuninger & Teng, 2017; Kosarkova et al., 2020; Zeligman et al., 2020). Participation in Christian faith-based addiction recovery programs indicated individuals who participated in the program reported a more secure relationship with God and made movement toward a more secure attachment style with others toward the end of the program (Jordan, 2019; Kerlin, 2017; 2019; 2020). Individuals with insecure attachment were found to have a higher probability of sexual behaviors and sexual addictions (Giordano et al., 2017).

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

#### **Creation**

The Bible provides a creation narrative that addressed the original attachment between God in relationship with humanity and humans in relation with each other (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). The first human relationship took place after God created human beings in His image to reflect God in nature, God created them to be male and female (Genesis 1:26-28, New King James Bible, 1982). The first human beings as stated in the Bible were Adam and Eve, and they shared a close relationship with God (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019; Genesis 1:28, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). Adam and Eve were dependent on God for their survival and care. According to attachment theory and the Bible, God served as a secure base for Adam and Eve, as they were assured that God was accessible and responsive to their needs (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). God also provided Adam and Eve with proximity seeking attachment behaviors by being available in the garden and giving them the freedom to explore and cultivate the land with the limitation to not eat of the

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). God served as a safe haven for Adam and Eve, and they were able to return to God at any time for security and survival (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013).

### **The Fall**

The fall of humanity occurred as a result of Adam and Eve deviating from the secure base and safe haven of God after they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This deviation was an indicator of their own search to become dependent on themselves as their own secure base and safe haven which led to them moving away from their interdependence relationship with God and to separation in attachment (Esqueda, 2014; Genesis 3, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson). The alienation between humanity, in this case Adam and Eve, and God due to sin cause distress from feeling separated or distant from God. Since the fall, this has created tension in the world between the family unit such as caregivers and their children, husbands and their wives, siblings, grandparents, peers, and friends (Esqueda, 2014). Attachment theory addresses the type of insecure attachment styles that are established by parental bonding and parents may bring the effects of sin into the ability to attach to their children, developing unhealthy attachment styles that are passed down to other generations (Counted & Miller, 2018; Numbers 14:18, New King James Bible, 1982). God attachment offers the opportunity to repair broken attachment styles and foster reparenting by acknowledging God's grace. According to attachment theory, prolonged separation from the primary caregiver will result in the individual experiencing protest, despair, and detachment from the caregiver (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). The protest, despair, and detachment are

portrayed in the Bible in Genesis chapter 3, as Adam and Eve experienced distress over their disobedience and were removed from the Garden of Eden (New King James Bible, 1982). The desire to belong in a relational unit has been instilled in humanity by God since the beginning; it is part of the biological, spiritual, moral, and social construct (Wolters, 2005).

### **God as Attachment Figure**

In Judeo-Christian beliefs God is referred as the Father (Isaiah 63:16, New King James Bible, 1982) with the concept of attachment to be central to Christian doctrine. In the Bible, God is portrayed as a Father to humanity who is personal, approachable, close, protector, trustworthy, and provider (1 John 3:1, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Hebrews 12:10, Matthew 10:29-31, Philippians 4:19, Psalm 54:4,7, New King James Bible, 1982) similar to the characteristics in a parent and as indicated by attachment behavior system (Bradshaw & Kent, 2018; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). Jesus Christ referred to God as the Father throughout his ministry and modeled a secure attachment relationship with God as indicated in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:9-13, New King James Bible, 1982) and throughout the Scriptures (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019). According to Christianity, God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent which makes God a reliable attachment figure that is constantly available to provide security and protection (Granqvist, 2020). The religion of Christianity identifies God as the perfect parent who surpasses any earthly parenting attachment and serves as an attachment figure for humanity (Counted & Miller, 2018). In Psalms 46:1-7, God is described as a refuge and strength, and ever-present help in trouble (New King James Bible, 1982).

### **Redemption and Restoration**

Throughout the grand narrative, God has always wanted to correct the original sin, yet because of sinful nature it has led to maintaining that distance from God, impacting relationship with God and others. The Scriptures and attachment theory allow for an insight regarding the need for restoration of the attachment bond between God and humanity by the redemption of Jesus Christ (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). Recovery for humanity can be interpreted as restoration through Jesus Christ who is the redeemer of sin by completing the ultimate sacrifice of death and resurrection (Isaiah 53:8, Luke 24:6-7, Mark 15:21-41, Mark 16:6, Matthew 28:5-6, New King James Bible, 1982). Jesus's act of redemption has restored broken attachments in relationships and separation from the Creator God (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). From a Christian Biblical perspective, living in a fallen world has led to chaos in attachment, insecure identity, and in relationships with others. A study conducted in individuals seeking therapy services indicate those with more secure attachment to God were able to develop secure attachment with other attachment figures such as the therapist, friends, partner, and coworkers (Reinert et al., 2009). Individuals with less secure attachment to God had more difficulties developing initial rapport with other attachment figures (Reinert et al., 2009). Attachment to God as a secure attachment figure can benefit the ability to have healthier relationships with God and in forming relationships with others while exploring the world with those secure attachment figures. In the Bible God has demonstrated ongoing attempts to restore the attachment relationship with humankind and researchers indicate attachment has the capacity to be repaired throughout the lifespan.

When Christian believers have had a conversion and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, they are considered saved and that can be the initiation of the attachment

relationship with God. During the sanctification, the relational process between God and the individual can gradually grow as they become closer to be more like the character of Jesus. In the Christian faith, the trinity includes the third person, which is the Holy Spirit, who is believed to serve as a moral helper to guide the moral formation for the saved individual (Acts 1:8, John 14:26, John 16:13, Romans 8:14-17, New King James Bible, 1982; Porter, 2019). According to the Bible, when the Holy Spirit indwells in the saved Christian a change in character such as behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts will occur influencing the individual (2 Corinthians 3:18, New King James Bible, 1982; Porter, 2019). During the journey in the relationship development with God, the Christian believer may encounter spiritual struggles and might respond to a perceived separation from God if they feel distress when their lives are not going according to their desired plan. As Christians continue their journey in their relationship with God, there will be some experiences or seasons when they may struggle with convictions and the individual can seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8, Romans 8:26, New King James Bible). In some situations, Christians may draw closer to God when they experience distress and trust in their close relational attachment to accept the plans God has for the individual despite their current circumstances (Romans 5:3-5, New King James Bible, 1982).

### **Summary**

In summary, the research of attachment theory and attachment to God has contributed a large amount of knowledge toward the literature of attachment, religion, clinical and developmental psychology. Attachment behavioral systems serve as learned behaviors an infant will display toward their attachment figure when attempting to seek

proximity (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Based on the attachment behavioral system response received from the attachment figure toward the infant, the infant will develop an attachment style that will remain with the individual until adulthood (Bowlby, 1958; Jordan et al., 2021). Previous studies on spirituality or religious practices have been related to having a positive influence on the quality of relationship satisfaction, self-concept, and mental health (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). The similarities in attachment theory criteria and internal working models in an attachment figure have indicated the characteristics of God serve as a suitable attachment figure (Kam, 2020). The attachment styles to God amongst children, adolescents, and adults have been explored to address the development in attachment style to other suitable attachment figures (Counted, 2016; Kiesling, 2011; Kimball et al., 2013). The literature has provided numerous studies to support the change in attachment style when dealing with a stressful or negative life changing event or situation. The Biblical foundation of this study is based on the narrative surrounding creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration that addressed the Biblical attachment between God as a parental attachment figure and humanity (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018; Counted & Miller, 2018; Esqueda, 2014; Knabb & Emerson, 2013; Genesis 1-3, New King James Bible, 1982; Wolters, 2005). The following research method chapter addresses the comprehensive procedures



utilized to study the attachment styles of Christian males and their experiences with their attachment to God.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

### Overview

In this chapter the methodology descriptions and procedures are addressed in detail. Ethical consideration procedures were also addressed for conducting the study. In the following research study, the lived experiences of Christian men and their attachment to God were examined and described. The research questions and the research design were addressed to provide further details on the methodology of the study. A description of the phenomenology and qualitative methods used for the study are addressed. The participants selected for this study were 12 Christian males ranging in age between 21 to 57 years old. Recruitment and sample size were also discussed as well as any necessary permissions needed to conduct the recruitment process for the study. The procedures used to administer the study to the participants is addressed. Instruments and measures that were used during the interview process to gather data from the participants are discussed. The software used to gather and enter the data is identified for the study. The data analysis for the research study is identified as well as the delimitations, assumptions, limitations and a summary of the study.

### Research Questions

#### Research Questions

- RQ1: How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?
- RQ 2: How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?
- RQ 3: What are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between

God attachment and their parent attachment?

## **Research Design**

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is an approach used in research aimed to describe the essence of a phenomenon to address the perspective and meaning given from the individual's lived experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach has been studied for centuries with origins from philosophical traditions with Edmund Husserl having an important influence in identifying phenomenology (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology allows for the subjective exploration of the individual's experience to facilitate new information and insight regarding the phenomenon being studied (Neubauer et al., 2019). Experiences in phenomenology are studied by analyzing the description of thoughts, memories, imaginations, or emotions given to the phenomenon by the individual experiencing the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). The following study is a phenomenological study aimed to describe the common meaning of the lived experiences of Christian males and their attachment to God. The area of attachment of males has not been studied in the past, and there are limited studies to understand their attachment styles to God (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Davila et al., 1997; Saunders et al., 2011). Therefore, this study is necessary to explore this phenomenon to understand attachment style in this group and help formulate future research hypothesis or research interventions based on the gathered information.

### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology is a type of approach used to study phenomenology where the focus is on the description of the individual's experience

regarding the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). This method approach widely utilized by a variety of researchers in psychology including Clark Moustakas was used for the study to collect and analyze the data (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). Transcendental subjectivity is when the researcher aims to remain neutral and monitor biases regarding the phenomenon being studied (Neubauer et al., 2019). Bracketing is when the researcher sets their own experiences aside regarding the phenomenon being studied to avoid having an influence on the interpretations of the study and focus on how the participants describe the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). In this study a bracketing approach was used during the study to confirm monitoring of personal experiences and biases to ensure the focus was on the objective of the phenomenon being studied. When conducting the study, it was important to remain aware and neutral regarding my Christian faith, gender as a female, attachment style, and therapeutic clinical background, to manage any interpretations based on my experience regarding the phenomenon.

Transcendental phenomenology was used in the study to focus on describing the experiences of the participants into themes. Transcendental phenomenological reduction was used to study each individual experience from the participants and gathered a complete description of the meaning and experiences to address the essence of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). The study focused on the essence of the phenomenon by combining the textual description of what was experienced and the structural descriptions of how it was experienced by the participants (Creswell & Poth,

2018). The process of reduction imaginative variation was used to condense and describe the essence of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research methods are used to gather a more in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon (Lester et al., 2020). A benefit of qualitative research methods includes the ability to capture the personal perspectives, meaning, and descriptions of a particular individual, group, or population of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of research approach can provide the opportunity for under-represented groups or individuals to be heard by voicing their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative studies can provide additional insight into gaps or deficiencies that may exist in the literature due to limited in-depth insight in a particular research area (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The flexibility of the qualitative research approach may contribute to the understanding of a variety of outcomes including specific case studies, cultural groups, produce theories, phenomenon, and narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research has specific methodology, theoretical views, and research practices to gather and analyze data (Lester et al., 2020). When conducting qualitative studies, the research findings can serve to inform, provide details of a problem, offer insight, identify issues, and other outcomes of the phenomenon (Lester et al., 2020). Qualitative methods are effective when the goal is to identify factors of gender and religion as well as collecting individual's personal perspectives and experiences in relation to exploring the essence of a sensitive phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative method study was appropriate for this study due to the objective of the study aimed to describe the common

meaning in lived experiences of how Christian males describe their attachment to God in their lived experiences.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were selected based on specific characteristics and personal experience to generate insight into the phenomenon studied in this research. The participants were comprised of 12 Christian males, ranging in age between 21 to 57 years of age, active in their faith, and experienced an attachment to God. Characteristics for the participants in the study consisted of the participants being adults and male due to the limited research conducted on this population. In addition, the interest was in studying participants who shared the experience of gaining secure attachment to God as the common phenomenon. The participants consisted of a convenience sample and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited from a variety of sources including local churches, social media, email, and college programs using flyers and social media posts; see Appendix D and Appendix E for examples. Permission was obtained from local churches and the college program directors for the sites that agreed to share the study information with potential participants. The sample size was determined based on saturation principle to gather insight into the topic and consisted of 12 male participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Study Procedures**

Prior to initiating the process for conducting the study, completion of an application for the use of human subjects was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the study follows the guidelines. Upon approval from the IRB, recruitment of participants was initiated. Permission for recruitment of participants was

sent out to church and school leaders via email to seek approval for accessing their institutional platforms for recruitment of the participants. Once recruitment began the participants were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study. The participants were pre-screened for study requirements which included experiencing the phenomenon of attachment to God. The screening questions asked for demographic information via email or phone and were later entered into the online software Survey Monkey for demographic analysis purposes. The screening survey took approximately 5 minutes. Participants who meet the selection requirements were invited to participate in the study and scheduled for a virtual video interview. The purpose of the study and the involvement of the participants was explained. Participants were provided with the time the study required and with information regarding privacy and confidentiality that would be maintained when gathering personal data from the participants. Participants were given an informed consent document, and their permission to participate in the study was obtained by gathering their signature. In-depth semi-structured interviews for each participant were conducted. The interview consisted of questions regarding the participant's lived experience of their attachment style to God. The interview was conducted virtually using the online virtual meeting software Microsoft Teams and the interview was video and audio recorded, and it took approximately 60 minutes. The participants received a \$20 gift card for participation after completing the full interview.

### **Instrumentation and Measurement**

During the pre-screening and interview process, participant demographic information were gathered; see Appendix A for examples and used in-depth semi-structured interview questions. The purpose of the participant interviews was to explore

the research questions for the study regarding Christian males' attachment styles to God and gather qualitative data; see Appendix B for examples. The interview questions that were used to gather information regarding the lived experiences of the participants in the study regarding their attachment style to God were created specifically for this study. The reliability and validity for the interview questions were insured by using the attachment theory criteria presented by Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth (1978) in the studies of developmental attachment. In addition, the confirmability of the attachment theory criteria was based on the literature review presented in the theoretical relational patterns in attachment to God using the consistency in attachment language categories (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Granqvist, 2020; Kimball et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2021). The interview question items that were used to gather data from the participants consisted of a total of 12 open-ended questions. For the interview question items 1-6, participants were asked to describe their view of God, to describe their relationships with their parents and/or others, life experience in their attachment relationship to God, to identify their attachment style, identify meaning of their attachment to their Christian living, and to describe the process of obtaining their attachment style; see Appendix C for examples. For the interview questions 9-12, participants were asked questions to describe their experience with God as an attachment figure based on the attachment theory criteria and the theoretical relational patterns of proximity seeking, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base; see Appendix C for examples. If participants struggled with the idea or language of



attachment used in the questions, clarification and prompting was provided to facilitate their understanding with the question being asked during the interview process.

### **Data Analysis**

All participants interviewed were assigned a fictitious name to respect confidentiality and privacy. The interviews were recorded using digital video/audio recording and the interviews were transcribed. Data gathered were stored in a secure digital location and was only accessed with a code to sign into the computer and system. The method approach that was used to analyze the data were those used by Clark Moustakas for transcendental phenomenology, which consisted of the researcher reading, reducing, re-reading for themes, comparing, and writing descriptions regarding the data being analyzed (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). The interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times before subdividing and extracting sections of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In-vivo coding of the data was conducted by developing thematic coding to label common themes gathered from the interviews to formulate meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lester et al., 2020). Condensing of the data information for coding was used to select the themes of focus in the experiences and process of participants' stories that were analyzed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Relevant extracts from the interviews were used verbatim to describe the corresponding theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis generated categories or themes in bulleted summaries to present the essence of the phenomenological experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lester et al., 2020).

The software used for data collection and analysis coding consisted of a variety of software systems. Microsoft Teams is a virtual meeting application that is used to

conduct real-time communion with others in different locations and documents can be shared virtually. The Microsoft Teams system was used to conduct the interviews using the audio, video, and record the live transcription that was saved and downloaded for the data analysis. Microsoft Word is a word processor used to format and edit documents or files. This software was used to store the transcriptions of the interviews and keep the data in a word document that was securely saved for each participant. Microsoft Excel is an electronic spreadsheet used to organize data that was used to enter data transcriptions, code data, organize data themes, and create charts or graphs regarding the data. Microsoft word and Excel software were used to code and interpret data themes. These software systems were used to transcribe the data, manage the data, organize the data, and analyze the data into categories and themes.

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

#### **Delimitations**

The selection of participants for the study included the following characteristics: being active in the Christian faith, male, and 18 years or older. The inclusion for the selected participants consisted of sharing a common experience of having developed a secure attachment to God. The variables of focus were Christian males, and the analysis focused on their attachment experience to God. Another inclusion criterion to participate in the study consisted of the participants having the ability to articulate and expand on their lived experiences. The geographical area was another inclusion as the recruiting for participants was conducted in the United States and used online recruiting. The study excluded females, non-Christians, and minors under the age of 18 years old.

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions of participants' honesty regarding the experiences with response to their attachment during the interview process was not assured; however, it is assumed that some participants will respond authentically during the interviews. Participants who identify as Christian may exaggerate their responses due to concerns of being judged as less religious or spiritual by the interviewer. Participants might have limited knowledge to respond to how they perceive their attachment to God was developed over time and when prompted with the interview questions they would be able to expand on their experiences. It was important to use simple language during the interview questions to avoid confusing participants with unknown psychological terms. The participants responding to the flyer recruiting Christian males and showing interest in the study were assumed to be individuals of the Christians faith and were asked to self-identify during the prescreening process. Participants volunteering for the study were more likely to be active in their faith and in their community.

### **Limitations**

Regarding the methodology it was important to be aware of potential covariate or potential confounding variables such as the participant's attachment to their parents. Another limitation to consider was the potential impact of self-report from participants and their response to questions of attachment styles due to the quality of their current relationships or life circumstances that may have influenced their response. Attachment to God has been studied within the Christian and Jewish faiths; there are limited studies on other religious practices and attachment. One challenge and limitation were the selection of participants as this was done carefully to ensure screening for participants that have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the

participants were screened and selected to be from the Christian faith; therefore, this may have limited the findings to this sample of this Christian faith group. The study was qualitative, and the interpretation of the findings and themes can only be applicable to this sample of participants. The study was voluntary and participants who were willing to participate in studies may not be a representation of all Christian males. Lastly, there was no control for characteristics of the participants such as ethnicity, race, educational level, and church denomination; this can lead to having some participants of Christian denominations, educational levels, or racial/ethnic groups that are more willing to participate in the study versus others who are less open to their participation.

### **Summary**

In summary, the chapter addressed the research method used to study the lived experiences of Christian males and to describe the process in their attachment to God. The research questions aimed to explore the lived experience of the participants and their attachment styles to God. The method design for the research was qualitative and phenomenological to study the common meaning of the lived experiences of the participants and their attachment to God. The participants consisted of adult male Christians who were 18 years or older. The participant sample consisted of a convenience sample of 12 participants. The recruitment permission and process were discussed, and participants were recruited from community churches, college programs, social media, flyers, and snowball sampling. The procedures for the study consisted of pre-screening participants and inviting participants who meet the study requirements for an in-depth formal virtual interview. The instruments and measures used to gather demographic information and to conduct the formal interview were discussed. The data analysis for the

research study consisted of transcribing the interviews and coding the data to generate categories or themes. The delimitations, assumptions, and limitations of the study were addressed in detail. The following chapter will address the results gathered from the data regarding the study on the attachment styles of Christian males and their experiences with their attachment to God.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Overview

This chapter will address the purpose of the study and the research questions that were addressed in the study. The chapter will provide a brief description of the process in collecting the data. In this chapter, demographics of the sample will be addressed to describe the participants in the study. The chapter provides the results of the study and the theme findings for this qualitative study. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men. Furthermore, how they obtained a secure attachment and what it means to their life was examined.

The data collection process consisted of the selection of participants who met the criteria for the study received an email to invite the participant to a virtual interview. Once the participant confirmed their availability an appointment was scheduled, and the participant was provided with an email invitation for their interview administered using the software Microsoft Teams. The interview was audio-video recorded and transcribed for the data analysis. During the interview process, participants were asked twelve in-depth semi-structured interview questions; see Appendix C for examples. When the interview process was conducted, clarification or prompting was provided if the participant asked or as needed. The participant interview transcriptions were stored using a Microsoft Word document and saved using a fictitious name to protect the participant's identity. In addition, a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to enter demographic information, organize data transcriptions, code data, organize data themes, and create tables regarding the data.

## **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?

RQ 2: How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?

RQ 3: What are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment?

## **Descriptive Results**

The study was comprised of a total of 12 male participants. All the participants reported having a secure attachment style to God. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 57 years old. The demographic characteristics for ethnicity consisted of 9% Asian, 8% Black or African American, 75% Caucasian/ White, and 8% Hispanic or Latino. The population of interest for the study were Christian males and all the participants identified as Christian. The identification of church attendance denomination reported from the participants consisted of the following: 5 Non-denomination, 2 Evangelical, 1 Assembly of God, 1 Presbyterian, 1 Baptist, 1 Free Will Baptist, and 1 Southern Baptist. All of the 12 participants reported being active in their Christian faith. The relationship status reported by the participants consisted of 67% married, 25% single/never married, and 8% divorced. Participants reported their highest level of education composed of 8% current student (i.e., high school, college student), 17% some college, 8% associate degree, 25%

college graduate, and 42% post-college graduate. The following table illustrates the demographic information of participants:

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Participant Pseudo-Name	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship Status	Highest Level of Education	Church Denomination
Aldo	38	Hispanic or Latino	Single/never married	Some college	Non-denominational
Cody	37	Asian	Married	Post-college graduate	Evangelical
Dan	45	Caucasian/White	Married	Post-college graduate	Evangelical
Fred	44	Caucasian/White	Married	Some college	Non-denominational
James	55	Caucasian/White	Married	Post-college graduate	Free Will Baptist
Jay	53	Caucasian/White	Divorced	Post-college graduate	Non-denominational
Joe	21	Black or African American	Single/never married	Current student (i.e., high school, college)	Assembly of God
Matthew	50	Caucasian/White	Married	College graduate	Non-denominational
Max	26	Caucasian/White	Single/never married	Associate degree	Presbyterian
Mike	26	Caucasian/White	Married	Post-college graduate	Non-denominational
Paul	57	Caucasian/White	Married	College graduate	Southern Baptist
Robert	30	Caucasian/White	Married	College graduate	Baptist

### Study Findings

The following qualitative study findings were reached from using thematic analysis and phenomenological analysis process by identifying commonalities in key words, sentences, and paragraphs that led to the main themes to reflect each research



question. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gather the data. To report the findings for this study, the data were selected in chunk form from the participant interviews and is presented in summary form. The comments selected from the participant transcripts are a combination of in vivo coding, verbatim transcription, and minimal edited transcription to maintain the participant's own words in addition also increase readability and clarity. During the interview process some participants had more to say than others which might result in more quotes, comments, and material from some participants than from other participants. The study results are presented by research question with the corresponding main themes that emerged from the data. The following table illustrates the main themes that emerged from the study:

**Table 2**

*Main Themes*

Research Questions	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
	How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?	How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?	What are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment?
Main Themes	Themes	Themes	Themes
	God as father figure	Distressful life experiences	Secure attachment with one parent
	God is close	Avoiding or distancing from God	Absent or lack of parental figure
	God as protector	Seeking reassurance in life circumstances	Other attachment figures
	God as a comforter	Understanding life experiences	Misunderstanding concept of God

	Affectionate God	Open to new change and growth	Spiritual or religious guide
		Open toward developing secure relationships	
		Expanding their faith and trust in God	
		Connecting and remaining close to God	
		Forming Christian attitudes and behaviors	

### **Research Question 1**

How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?

#### **God as a Father Figure**

The first research question examined how Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure. From the data collected during the interviews several themes developed. The first theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was God as a father figure. The participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure using identifiable attachment language that resemble the characteristics of a secure base attachment figure similar to those found in an earthly parental figure. The participants reported their view and experiences of God with characteristics such as the following: “heavenly father figure, leads, trusting, close, loving, caring, protects, comforts, reinsurance, authority figure, and provides for my needs.” The participants reported mental representations that have influenced their view of God and their

experiences with God that contribute to the participants viewing God as a father figure in their lives. This theme was represented with comments made by the participants such as the following. Aldo stated, “He is a heavenly father that leads me, and I can truly trust him.” Cody reported, “God is someone that is close and so who is clearly a father figure to me.” Jay stated, “Its combined with the love of a father figure in human form...also in a deity form that is still not fully explainable.” Matthew shared, “I consider my actual parent is God, I get that reinsurance relationship wise.” Max reported, “I view God as my father in heaven.” Mike reported, “Extremely loving God who functions in a lot of aspects as a loving parent.” Paul shared, “God is someone who oversees all my needs, he is always taking care of me, and I have such a love for my father.” Robert stated, “A comforter for me, someone who's there for me and an authoritative figure which at times makes me feel conviction.”

### **God is Close**

The second theme that was developed when the participants described their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure was recognizing that God is close. The participants reported experiencing God’s presence close to them and feeling a sense of a connection from knowing that God is near them. The participants reported their physical closeness to God which consisted of experiencing God’s proximity present everywhere in their lives. The participants described their experiences with their relationship attachment to God by seeking out closeness to God’s presence through engaging in “physical postures, prayer, chatting with God, feeling a mystical closeness to God, believing God is near, acknowledging that God is close, understanding that God is omnipresent, feeling a physical presence in spirit, and feeling that God is there for them.”

The participants reported their closeness to God which consisted of experiencing God's nearness everywhere, was part of how they viewed and experienced God as a secure attachment figure. This theme was represented with comments made by the participants such as the following. Cody reported, "I see God as someone who is very close to me. So, I get my physical closeness as I raise my hands to worship God when I go to church, and I do find a difference when I do that. This is a feeling of openness when I'm doing that as opposed to if I were just to stand. And I'm just in a different posture, or if I do kneel down, there is a sense of, yes, he's the master and I'm the servant...and sometimes I could be lying down and falling asleep and having a small chat to get physically closer to God." Dan stated, "God is omnipresent, all around and I feel him in every part of everything." Fred stated, "I know he's there all the time, even when we doubt it, because let's face it at some point in time that's become part of my daily prayers is help my unbelief, because there are those times that in secret we doubt, is this real, or is it just making me feel good. And then there's that overwhelming feeling, you know, like a hand on your shoulder, the reassuring father with the feeling of no, you're not lost it's fine I'm still here. I think all of those things and the best way I can explain the physical closeness with something that isn't physically tangible, like I know it's there. I feel it in every part of my being, and I don't doubt it anymore." Jay reported, "I would say that my closeness to God is loving, physically supernatural, mystical, and evolving as well in my life."

Furthermore, Joe reported, "I mean God is always with us. So, I think that he's extremely close enough physically. I take his physical closeness that I feel very relational. Sometimes I feel like because God is always there, sometimes we choose to ignore him, but he's always there. I guess choosing to acknowledge him bridges that gap

between physical distance between us and God. For example, when we pray, anytime you pray it's almost like you acknowledge God. I could say God is always with me distance wise. But it's not that I always acknowledge him, it's not that I'm ignoring God or anything like that, but not purposefully let's say talking to him." Matthew stated, "Well my physical closeness to God I believe God is everywhere, in spirit." Max reported, "I would say my day-to-day life, I would describe it as very close as I always strive to be closer to God physically. I have experienced that many times I would say just a sense of closeness and I've been able to see how good he's been to me, how good he's been to other people around me. And I think especially in these times just seeing the mercy that he is given, even to unbelievers, so that has drawn me closer to him. You know part of being a Christian is understanding that God is omnipresent that he's everywhere at all times, beholding the evil and the good. So, I've found myself getting closer to God as time has gone on." Mike reported, "Yeah, I think that in terms of closeness, I think it's an interesting thing because I do have to believe that God is transcendent yet imminent, like he is above his creation, but he's intimately and intricately involved in it. When you think of physical stuff, I think of standing next to someone or embracing someone or hugging someone. I have felt kind of a physical presence like in the room per se, that is spiritual." Paul stated, "For I feel closer to him now more than back during my college years. And I had my share of accidents and back injuries, so, dealing with a lot of the effects of injuries and the trauma. I keep going back to my stroke that was the biggest time in my life when I needed the most support physically because of what I went through and having God there every day to get me through each day. The relationship that I had with God, it made me know that no matter what happened in my life, basically to me that God

was there to help me deal with it.” Robert shared, “I feel close to God in our relationship. I feel like a physical closeness or a physical presence with him, when I’m in church, going about town, at home, and anything like that. There is a feeling that God is there and with me always.”

### **God as Protector**

A third theme that emerged when the participants described their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure was that of God as a protector. The participants reported seeking out to God as they viewed God as a secure attachment figure capable of protecting them from any situation. The participants reported experiencing the protection of God in their lives which influenced their view of God as an attachment figure that is stronger, safe, and a secure base. Participants reported having life experiences that influenced their view of God as a protector in their relationship attachment to God which included perceiving and experiencing God as the following: “God is behind all of that protection, God's accessible and I’m protected, God was definitely looking out for me, protective of me, God is able to take care of whatever, physical protection, I feel protected, God will intervene, God is in control, God is with me, and God is on my side.” The participants shared seeking out to God for safety and security as they identified viewing God as a protector in their lives which is an attachment characteristic found in a secure attachment figure. This theme was represented with comments made by the participants such as the following. Cody reported, “And one of the thoughts I had from the bad events was that if I were to in that very moment die, that I would have lost nothing but gained everything. And so that was a really good realization because I think that it just means that I’m, you know, bulletproof...there's nothing in this world really

destroying if death itself can't do that for me. And we know all that comes from the father so in that sense you know God is behind all of that protection.” Dan reported, “I've had near death experiences in the military and in work. And in those situations, which was interesting because you're just kind of focused on staying alive and so, for me my thoughts of God in that part of my life are very stable. And all that makes me feel like God's accessible and I'm protected.” Fred shared, “So, I was involved in a motorcycle accident...I'm flying through the air, it's not the first time in my life that I thought, well, maybe I'm going to die now. But it has probably been the first time in my life of well if this is the end that's ok because I at least know where I'm going now if I didn't wake up from this. I didn't want to die, but I knew what was going to happen next. Then I hit the ground, and I stood up after I had just bounced off the highway and rolled through a circle. I walked away from the accident and I'm a little banged up, but I can still walk, I'm not in a wheelchair, I know my own name and I know who my wife and kids are. I still have pain in my back, but I didn't need any extra parts and I wasn't wearing a helmet and somehow my head never touched the ground. So yeah, I know God was definitely looking out for me that day because I've seen what happens after motorcycle accidents and it could have been so much worse. I know God was with me that day because if not, I don't know if I'd be here today.”

Furthermore, Jay reported, “My relationship to God I would probably have to describe it as intuitive and all knowing, but also protective of me.” “Joe stated, I know God is able to take care of whatever it is. And since I was a kid, I've had a whole lot of health issues so I'm always relying on him to help me to be able to function with that physical protection, support, security, it's definitely God.” Matthew reported, “I feel

protected honestly. When we had Hurricane Sally come through here into Florida back in 2020. I just wasn't worried about anything, even though I knew this is potentially a category four storm coming. God gave me the discernment to get a backup generator, all kinds of extra food, storage water...And I just have good faith that God will intervene and like if I need to make an insurance claim. And that's just one example, and in fact we did get hit pretty hard and I ended up needing repairs. And I never once thought that God didn't have my back in the whole thing. I knew everything would work out.”

Other participants such as Max reported, “So, I was a police officer for about 4 1/2 years while I was in nursing school, and I have faced great danger. I've gone up against armed individuals and I've had guns pointed at me. I've had shots fired, you know, things like that. And it's just having God in my life has given me a tremendous sense of peace, even in difficult situations. He has given me a calm that I wouldn't have had otherwise. And in dealing with difficult situations, I've been able to help other people. And during times of difficulty and during times of peace he's always there with you. He's not going to leave you, it doesn't matter once you're a believer, once you have faith in Jesus Christ, he's there for you. You may have some difficult times, but you know, he's always there for you. So, I guess death and most common dangers have kind of lost their sting because I know that God is in control. There's nothing that I really have to fear because God is with me.” Paul stated, “Being in my career in law enforcement and corrections even though I was in a very dangerous place...I never had anything that I felt danger for...But as far as did I fear, in the back of the head, you always know that there is a danger, but if you let yourself fear it, you wouldn't be able to do that kind of job. And



I believe all the things that I've been through he never allowed me to be placed in a situation of danger, so I have God on my side.”

### **God as a Comforter**

The fourth theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure was God as comforter. The participants reported their view and experiences with God have allowed them to experience God as a comforter which provides them responsive emotional support in their attachment relationship. The participants stated their relational attachment to God has helped them navigate events or trials by knowing they can rely on God to provide them with comfort to help overcome the situation. The participants shared having multiple life circumstances where they resorted to God for comfort as they experience God as able to care for them during their distress. The experiences of the participant's view of God were reported to be those of God serving as a comforter that meets their attachment needs by providing the following: “he lifts my spirit up, reassurance, sense of peace, sense of certainty, ease, simplicity, the Holy Spirit is a comforter, calmness, and a sense of warmth.” Participants reported their relationship attachment with God provides them with comfort and certainty of not being alone to deal with their life circumstances. The participants shared finding comfort in their secure attachment to God similar to those that resembles the security needs found in a secure base and safe haven attachment figure. This theme was represented with comments made by the participants such as the following. Aldo stated, “There's so many times you know God's got your back. But then you're pushed up in the corner and the second you pray all of a sudden, I get a phone call, a text, I'm like, wow God, that was quick. He's pretty much telling me seek me first and I'll get your answers.

And he's the first and last person I would run to. I've noticed when everything is falling apart, I go to him, and he lifts my spirit up and then I tell myself how silly you are for doubting. And I've asked the Lord in prayer make me view your help as if you are as food and water. Literally not just understand what the scripture says, but I want that reassurance every day that's the first thing I run to when I get home or when I'm at work, where I really need, I go to God. Cody shared, "When I was in my second year in the university, I went to a doctor's appointment, and they told me unnecessarily so in hindsight that there's a potential for infertility and also cancer. So, none of those came true, but it was a pretty hard-hitting news for me to hear as a young man. So, I went back to my dorm room in college, and it really was too much for me and then I talked with God. And I think that this is where a sense of peace came from. So, I think that in the context of my attachment to God, it really helps me to see the bad events and likeness ultimately temporary. I think this does come back to God and the scriptures that give reassurance, you know, the gospel itself is always a comfort for me. I think like I said before, if ultimately my destination is secure in my relationship with God is secure and really, I don't lose anything ever in my life."

In addition, Dan reported, "I find that my thoughts about God enter in relationships when there's an argument with someone. And whenever I'm experiencing an argument with someone I will then think about God, I may pray for myself or the other person. And then I just have an inherent kind of like an under the surface reassurance, you know that same feeling about our relationship with God because I do feel support from my relationship with God." Fred stated, "I have to say a lot of comfort and reassurance at this point in my life is by leaning into my faith in knowing that no matter

what I'm not alone anymore." James reported, "So, I've had times in my past where it was very emotional in that it was his expressive emotion. And we're always feeling some emotion, but more my attachment, my emotional expression of attachment, my attachment to God is more of a sense of comfort and certainty. So, any discomfort I feel about all the dust stuff, all temporal things is insignificant. But the word of the Lord endures forever, the scripture says so. So, it's about being permanently attached to him with comfort and ease. Then I'll surrender to that reliability so emotionally it's more of a comfort and simplicity." Joe stated, "I'm away at college and it's a small college. And I think that God is the primary source of my emotional support. I don't really talk to my family all that often. And I don't really like to try to put things on them, they already have their own things they're dealing with. I know God is able to take care of whatever it is. So, I'd say for comfort, I would 100% say that is God, obviously it has to be the events that God leads me into my daily life. He is pretty much all the reassurance that I get, but also that I need. I mean, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit is a comforter, right. So even just the small amount of comfort that you can get from him will help and grow your attachment to God."

Furthermore, Matthew stated, "So that's just the Holy Spirit that gives me that source of where I get my comfort and reinsurance. I just always know everything's going to work out. I just focus on Christ, and I also know that even if something does happen to me, then I'm just going to eventually I'll be with God. So, like right now, everybody's afraid of a war and I am not, if it happens, I'm going with God." Max stated, "I was a crisis intervention officer with the Police Department, so I would respond to calls related to suicidal cases and people with mental health disorders of various sorts. And just being

able to use that calmness that God has given me to deal with those situations has been tremendous. I've dealt with different situations with extended family and death in the family. And been able to use that calmness that God has given me to help those I love, God has been extremely generous to me with the amount of calmness that he's been able to give me over the years." Mike stated, "I think that very few times I've felt like I was in danger, and I certainly felt I would say perhaps a sense of peace, sense of warmth, almost knowing that hey, whatever happens God is still here. Gods will always prevail, and if it's his will it's going to happen, if it's not then it won't. But I know God never wants anything awful to happen to his children. So, I know that whatever happens, I'll be alright." Robert shared, "My perception of God doesn't change, but the aspects of the dynamic and relationship changes the focus. So, when I'm feeling wrapped up in stress or anxiety from a situation then I really start to think about what and why I feel anxious. And so, what I do is I think and reflect on God's promises toward us, that he does care, and he does value me. However, there are times when we are going to go through some hard trials and tribulations, but that is for his ultimate glory. And so, I find peace and comfort in knowing that what I'm going through now, although I don't like it is ultimately for his glory, and it gives me a sense of peace and calm. That was especially during the case in 2020."

### **Affectionate God**

The fifth theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was an affectionate God. The participants shared having a close emotional relationship with God and being able to experience his affection toward them by reaffirming God's care and love for them. The participants shared having

experiences and views of God of being an affectionate attachment figure that are expressed in feeling “appreciation, immutable love, kind, caring, warmth, excitement, and intimate” when they described the way they experienced God’s emotional affection toward them in their relationship attachment. The experiences and view of God as an affectionate attachment figure were reported in the participant’s stories as they stated feeling emotionally supported and securely invested in their relationship with God. This theme was represented with comments made by the participants such as the following. Cody stated, “So I would say if you're talking about that easiness, it's kind of like having a long good old friend, I enjoy hanging out with them and seeing them, but it doesn't come with this huge euphoria whenever I see them, so just it’s a subtleness to it. I would say similar to even marriage, like my wife and I we are past our honeymoon stage, and we still love each other. So, I think emotionally with God is kind of similar that there are moments of just a huge appreciation, love, and more. And part of the process, was just understanding the heart of God for us, and so that's always what I land back on that he chases me, right. And that's where it becomes very secure with God.” Dan reported, “I’m going to put that in terms of I have good and strong emotional closeness with God. I don't feel shame or guilt or other emotions when I think about God, it's always positive. I feel blessed and I do feel love from my relationship with God.” James reported, “I've had times in in my past where it was very emotional in that it was his expressive emotion toward me. Most importantly his immutable love, his connection provides stability and reliable attachment.” Jay reported, “I would describe it as personable, relational, loving, kind, caring, and understanding.” Joe shared, “there's always a feeling associated with closeness to God, I don't think there's always a feeling of explosive with it. But it’s

almost similar to the feeling of when you're alone and somebody you know walks in the room like a best friend, it's like you get an excitement that is small but it's very important to you. I would say like a warmth and a security, that's how it feels with God."

In addition, Matthew reported, "My emotional closeness to God is closer to God than any person on this planet. I can tell God absolutely anything and receive his love for me. And so emotionally, I'm not afraid to show how I feel about God in front of other people no problem." Mike stated, "I think I get a lot of my emotional support and security from my relationship with God ultimately. I would say that it's incredibly close and very good. I think is very intimate, I feel like I can share with God anything that I'm going through or anything that's on my mind. And I can ask him for help in any area of life because I don't need to hide anything from him. I mean, he knows it anyway, but I don't feel the need to have to hide anything or sugarcoat anything I can just tell it like it is knowing that he's always loving me." Paul reported, "I can't find a word in our English language that would describe the amount of love that I have for him. And there was a week in in August where I had been talking with God every day. And so, this one night I woke up during the night and I felt His love and a peace that just filled our bedroom. It reminded me of a dream one night after we've had buried my grandfather. And what I felt in that dream then I felt in that night in August and that's the only reason I knew that it was the love of God. And it filled the bedroom and I felt God being there and Christ was on his right-hand side. And I remember him telling me that he loved me, and I told him, I said, oh God, I love you too."

## **Research Question 2**

How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?

### **Distressful Life Experiences**

The second research question examined how Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God. The first theme that was developed when participants described their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God were indicated by learning to cope with distressful life experiences. The participants shared experiences of seeking out to God for help and trusting God with their distressful situations which drew them closer in their God attachment as a protective factor. In the interviews the participants reported experiencing distressful life experiences such as mental distress, severe anxiety, suicidal ideation, grief, loss, relationship conflict, divorce, isolation, loneliness, physical harm, severe medical health conditions, life transitions that presented as threatening and distressful to the participants. All of the participants shared their lived experiences which led them to seek out to God as a secure attachment when they experienced distressful events to cope with difficult situations in their lives. This theme was represented with comments made by the participants such as the following. Aldo reported, "I would say with the life experiences I didn't like going through them, but it's needed because character is not just given to you, it's developed over the years. And through a pattern of experiences that we go through, and I believe truly that the Lord put me through certain experiences because he knew what kind of a guy I was, and I needed to hit the wall to wake up. And I thank God for that, because there was a time where I tried to take my life underneath the bridge, and I remember that night. And I was just giving up on everything. My parents, my mom and dad were

divorced. Everyone was getting married. I think my father passed away and my family was having disputes. And I just went underneath this bridge in New York, and I just said to myself, I just want to end it all. And as I was walking, I felt the Lord talking to me and I stopped and felt like my legs were full of concrete, like I could not move them. The Lord tells me I made you for so much more than this...what is wrong with you? What are you doing? And I just started crying I was talking with the Lord, just arguing, why do you want me here? Why do you want to keep me? So, I just turned around and I walked back to my car crying and just felt the Lord talking to me.”

In addition, Cody stated, “You know I feel like my attachment to God has started from a young age. And I would say that one of the hardest hardships I went through with my wife is that we had pregnancy losses, we had two pregnancy losses. The first one it didn't draw me further away from God. It was more God was necessary for my emotions at that point, to cry on him and to know that there's some reason for why this is happening. And the second time it happened the way I describe it is that I was angry. And so now even then, though, I didn't feel far from God, because instead I was angry at God, and I was able to talk to him about that. And ultimately submit to that as well. So even then I did not feel it particularly far from God. I would say mostly the response to that is probably more of a passive response. Not in the sense that I'm actively saying God, I reject you and I'm not going to turn to you, but really kind of going through the motions in those moments.” James stated, “So again, the experiences of feeling isolated, rejected, and dismissed. All the disses discharge and led me to seek attachment from girls, mostly because I really had a few male friends. In the latter 2 years of high school, I knew everybody, and I was very outgoing, but I didn't have any real relationships except this



girlfriend or that girlfriend and so on, you know, thirty of them in a few short years. But I couldn't remain attached, and that was a problem because I didn't know how to do that.”

Furthermore, Paul shared, “When I went to college, I started out wanting to be a nurse and the demands that were placed on students and the stress it totally completely overwhelmed with panic anxiety. I didn't have any idea what it was, and I had convinced myself I had a heart condition...I didn't go out of the house, and I spend a lot of time talking to God, but I still had the panic anxiety attacks. And not knowing what they were, I wasn't able to control them...I spent a lot of years dealing with that medically. And during a time, my boy's mom decided that she wanted to have a boyfriend and husband. So, I said to her stop what you're doing, get rid of the boyfriend and go to counseling...she said I'm not going to do that. I said that our marriage is over, biblically what you're doing gives me the right...adultery is the only reason for a divorce. And about a year later, I met my current wife...and after dinner I felt my blood pressure had just skyrocketed...I had a stroke and so for the next almost three weeks I had no memory of anything, I was in a coma. So, this next incident happened in 2019, I went to my doctor, and the mass I had it was cancer...because it was in my lymph node it mandated having a stage four cancer of the lymph nodes. I went through the operation, and they removed 3 nodes, I went through some immunotherapy. My wife and I were talking about the immunotherapy I was going through, and she got emotional. I told her I said we're going to trust the Lord he's going to take care of this I'm not worried and you shouldn't be worried either. And as quickly as I had said that it was as if there was another person sitting right beside us. Because inside my heart I heard you're going to be OK. And I knew it was the Lord, so as of 2019 with reoccurring CT scans, I am cancer

free.” Robert reported, “So, I would say it has been different throughout time. And I would really say it's really how my view of God has changed how I lived. So, there was a point in my life where I really was not making some great life decisions. And at which point I had comfort in knowing that God was there, and he still loved me and cared for me, but I also felt conviction at that time that God is there. He's displeased with how I'm living and the things that I'm doing.”

### **Avoiding or Distancing from God**

The second theme that emerged from the participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God included responding to their avoiding or distancing from God. Participants described their experience when responding to their perceived avoiding or distancing from their relationship with God to be emotionally distressful and damaging to their lives. The participants stated their response to avoid or distance themselves from seeking out to God in their lives impacted their type of attachment to God. The participants shared experiencing a level of avoidance or distance from God during a period in their lives when they were confronted with distress surrounding life stressors, questioning their faith/God, sin, loss/grief, mental/physical health issues, work/school stress, parental divorce, and deciding to not draw close or connect with God relationally. Participants reported responding to behaviors of avoidance, separation, ignoring, and distancing themselves from God when they experienced that God was not available to help them or when they refused to seek God. Participants reported addressing their avoiding and distancing behaviors toward God lead to their attachment with God becoming closer and more secured. This theme of the participants responding to their avoiding or distancing from God in their attachment is

summarized by the following comments. Aldo stated, "I was working at my company and for a whole month it felt like hell, because it was so weird, I never felt that in my life. I was being attacked, I feel like God didn't exist and that God was not alive, God is dead. I'm like, where's that coming from? And every day I went to work, and my coworkers would see me cry and ask if I was OK. And then I heard something on the radio this woman that goes by the name of Joyce Myers and she had a book called *Battlefield of The Mind*. And I bought that book and I read it. I'm like, holy cow and a friend of mine told me they were going through the same problem. And they said get that book, it helps, and I still have it because believe me no one wants to be in that position especially for Christians. You really do feel like you are in hell. You've worshipped and served this God that you love so much and then to come to these lies saying he's fake, he's a lie, you're pretty much going to end up in a rut yourself. But I thank God, that he pulled me out of that." Cody stated, "I would say that perhaps there's a form of cynicism that has grown from that incident, I'm not so sure he would answer my prayers because I prayed fervently for the child to live, and it didn't. So now there is a sense that anything bad can still happen in your life, which of course we know from Scripture as true. You know, God did not promise you to protect you from all the hardships and trials of life, but only that he would be with you. So that could have probably given me spells of less fervent prayer for people, for myself, because well, I don't even know if that would technically do anything."

Furthermore, Fred stated, "So, when I was probably in my early teens, probably like 12-13, as I said, my mom took me to church. I was involved in everything to the point that it just felt like Jesus was being shoved down my throat. And I kind of put up

that wall to do something and watch me do the exact opposite. So, I ran kicking and screaming away and tried to fill that void with anything I could find, some good, some not, and some horrible. I ended up in many horrible positions in my life from trying to fill that void with something else. And through it all, I'd end up at my lowest and God would pick me up. And at the time, I would believe that's what picked me up. And then as soon as I was back on my feet, I would run away and there was something missing, there was always something missing." James reported, "The latter part of 1989, I was attending school, and this was after I got out of the military. I started listening to what a particular science professor and a philosophy professor were saying. And my relationship with God before at that time was based on, he's the controlling God, not the connecting God. So, all I knew was I don't need him to control anything, and he doesn't seem to be controlling anything and these guys are saying he's not controlling anything. This is the scientific explanation of it, and I completely distance myself for a few years. I became an atheist or said I was an atheist, tried to pretend like I was an atheist. And so yeah, there was a significant distancing because it pretty much had to be an all or nothing, it was either all God or all nothing. For a while I didn't want to have anything to do with God, because again, I was trying to make a permanent God to fit into the temporal narrative that people were telling me within the church that I grew up in and he's not going to fit that template because that's not who he is. And so, it was disappointing that he didn't fit that promise the promise of the lie people were telling."

Moreover, Jay shared, "I'd have to describe the separation from the relationship in two different ways, one was previously in years before I would say it felt more like a depression, loneliness, despair or shame. I would then say that my current state of

understanding and my relationship with God I felt that in my current state would be more of a need to know more or a need to experience more. But nothing like it was in the past in terms of shame, guilt, depression, or distance.” Joe reported, “Relationally I think the closeness to God, to where there is a level where it goes from acknowledging to then it can become full undergoing, for example, like if you don't repent. Then you become cold toward God because you've done something you know you should not have done, and you could address it. So, with the perceived separation, it would be the sin and not repenting from the sin. But I usually end up repenting for the same because at the end of the day, it's not worth losing. Obviously, God is the most important thing in the world. I think the whole implication of your actions is because it affects other people and, in this case, would be because it affects God.” Matthew reported, “Well before I became a Christian, I just didn't really know what to think about God other than there must be a God. Or maybe there's numerous gods, or maybe there's millions of gods, who knows? You know my attitude before was basically just like I don't know, I just didn't care.” Max shared, “So in fall of 2020 I started nursing school at my Community College. And my first semester was during COVID, and most of what I was doing for nursing school was virtual...and the nursing program it is a very intensive 2-year program. There was lot of hardship involved and so I came up with excuses in my head to not spend time with the word and not spend time in prayer and just kind of focus on school. I would still go to church on Sundays, but I wasn't spending the time in prayer and with the word that I should. And I started feeling a ton of stress, just a ton of pressure, and my focus slipped. And because of my business and everything, I did not realize that was because I had turned from focusing on Christ.”

In addition, Mike reported, “I think I've felt a certain degree of separation from God a couple times in my life. I think one was when my parents were divorced and then another time, I was diagnosed with a physical health condition. I was in that process or in that state of just being like, alright God, why is this happening? A lot of questioning, a lot of uncertainty, I knew God was still there and still involved. However, I was just still questioning like, why me or what do I do now? How can I help stop this? But ultimately, I knew God was still there I just allowed myself to get a little, not a little, probably a lot of that anxiousness and just unsure of the future. Then once I did realize that, hey, I definitely don't feel as close as I was to God, and once I did achieve that closeness back by really focusing on prayer and going to church, listening and worship music. I did achieve that closeness back again and realized that he's got me, and he's got a plan, so now I feel stronger afterward.” Paul shared, “I went through a time when I started middle school that I stopped attending regularly, and it was when I had time, so it was like I became a fence sitter at one point in my life. And so, sitting on the fence in my mind it was having the best of being able to be in the world and also be in church and that went on for a pretty long time. And finally, when I went back to church I was listening to a sermon, and so I realized that I needed to either be in 100% with God or not just give him half because I was cheating him. So, at the age of 40 I told God, Lord, I just can't do this anymore. I said that I need you to do life with me and I need to do life with you. And probably one of the most difficult things I've ever had to deal with because it took me 28 years to get there during that time. You know, being at less than 100% and that's how I would view God, this separation I felt it's because I was not giving him a complete 100% of myself. I would describe it as sitting on a fence because I had a choice to be in at

100% or not be in it. I was only giving him the part of me that I wanted to give to him and not everything.” Robert stated, “So, I would say in the past I never felt emotionally close to God. And so, I didn't necessarily want to because I was living in a way that really was not pleasing to him. So, I would think that I knew I shouldn't be doing these things, but then I would just not think about that and think about something different. And I would say when I wanted to do things that I knew are not what he wanted me to do, I would feel a separation and distance from him, but it was not a negative experience. I did not feel bad about the distancing or separation from it, it was a way for me to remove some of the intellectual guilt associated with that.”

### **Seeking Reassurance in Life Circumstances**

The third theme regarding the participants describing their life experiences with forming a secure attachment to God was the process of seeking reassurance in life circumstances. The experiences shared by the participants were those of feeling that God has been reliable in their lives and this allowed them to trust God which brought them great reassurance regarding their God attachment. Participants stated that having a secure relationship with God improved their life and allowed them to easily deal with daily situation. The participants reported experiencing a sense of peace in seeking and finding reassurance that God will continually be available for them in every life situation. The participants stated seeking reassurance from God during life circumstances has provided hope during trials that has overall improved their attachment to God throughout their life. Participants in this study stated gaining a sense of reassurance knowing that God was close to them all the time. The following comments were made by the participants. Dan stated, “Having a relationship with God makes my life better and needed, it provides the

security and relatability with things that are not pleasant or easier to endure, kind of makes it as part of the resiliency. I don't like experiencing things that aren't fun but knowing that you have a relationship with God maybe eases that experience." Fred stated, "I might not understand why there's some difficulty in my life right now that rather than getting angry about it, I'm trying to learn from it. I was involved in an accident and to know I have that communication to be able to pray to God and just ask for understanding and even if I get told no, yet I know I'm not alone in all of this and that's assuring to me. I might not understand it, but there is a reason that has helped me process not being angry." Joe reported, "I feel like through at least the thick and thin that I've been through, that I know that God is always there. So, it gives me a sense of trust that I have in him because he's been there. I feel like God is very reliable. So, let's say something really bad happens I pray about it to God. And even if nothing happens to change the circumstances of the situation, you're still better off than if you didn't pray. The negative situation and then the positive situation of your day is going great. You praise God and thank God that's also going to help you to grow closer to God, God is blessing you." Max reported, "So, with my life experiences related to the attachment, I would say one of the biggest differences it made in my life was just a sense of peace and knowing that well, with my parents, obviously, when I was younger just having them there for me. You know, whenever I needed them and then with God it was just knowing that he's in control of all things. That I don't have to bear the weight of the world on my shoulders, I can lay those concerns or worries on him, and he has me covered."

Furthermore, Mike stated, "When the difficult times come and the trials and temptations, I'm not left completely lost or aimless, or feeling like I'm wondering. I feel



like I always have a guide in someone to watch over me, who's protecting me and taking care of me." Matthew stated, "I would say my relationship it's definitely secure and the lived experiences for me, I'm more of a signs and wonders kind of guy. So, for example I used to be military police and I was in the Navy for 20 years. And I ended up switching to being more of a counselor and at one point was wondering if I made a mistake thinking about this career change. And for a moment, things weren't going so hot. And this happened during a time when I was starting to wonder if I was on the right track in life or not, was I carrying out God's will? Is this really where God wants me...and I looked up at my two certificates on the wall and I had found that the same guy signed both certificates and neither of these institutions have anything to do with one another. And all the sudden, God was showing me you're right where I want you to be. I took that as this is God's way of saying don't overthink any of this, you know you are where I want you to be. I want you to be a counselor, and I want you to keep on that journey no matter what. And so that was 13 years ago, and I got some confirmation from that and security in the relationship with God." Paul stated, "When I had my stroke, I think it was the biggest time of my life when I felt I was being changed physically because of that kind of physical harm of a stroke. I can remember being alone in my room, I was in the ICU floor for stroke victims. And I was talking to God, and I said OK, Lord, what are we going to do now? I told God, I said, Lord, I can't do anything I said you need to do it all. And slowly day by day kind of, step by step, so to speak...through the pain and then I started rehab, and it wasn't until then that I saw myself being able to do things that I experienced that sense of I was going be OK...looking back at that whole event through all of my recovery that I did at the hospital along with rehab to learn to walk. God was in that 100% and I saw miracles, he

used me for several miracles. The day they wheeled me out they told me when people leave here, they don't leave in a wheelchair they leave on a gurney, you really have a story to share. It's a testimony so you know, God spared my life from the stroke."

### **Understanding Life Experiences**

The fourth theme was developed when participants described their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God included the process of understanding their life experiences. The participants stated understanding their life experiences allowed them to gain perspective on their past experiences and seek clarity in their current life which helped them draw closer in their attachment style to God. The participants stated that by understanding their life experiences their faith and relationship with God grew closer. Participants stated they were able to seek God as an attachment figure and emotionally repair from past experiences as they allowed God to help them recreate new meaning to their life experiences. This theme is indicated by the following participant comments. Dan reported, "There are some elements of unique things that can't be explained in life. Are kind of attributed to this relationship with God, where when all the others don't fit then maybe that's the one that fits right. So, trying to understand my own life and perspective and how things are happening and why they're happening was part of it." Fred stated, "My mother passed away two years ago and shortly after, there was a church locally...it was a random Sunday, and it was one of those voices in my head that said, maybe you should go to church with the kids. And it felt different, so we kept going and it brought back some of those thoughts and processes to help me resolve some of my anger at God. I didn't feel so lost and the more I kept going back to that same place, the more some of the things that used to upset me, like some of the things that I

couldn't express. It helped me realize that I was angry. And I decided to try to understand rather than just be angry all the time and it opened me up to a relationship I didn't even know I had abandoned. It just gave me a way to be able to process all the interesting things that my life was up to this point and some of the poor decisions that I made and some of the good decisions that were made for me. I've come to terms with understanding that everything that happened in my life is not God's fault and that while we do pray it's not a magic wand... There's a reason why we don't always get a yes or we might not see the way, but he still cares about me. As I re-found my faith in adulthood and realized that my father did love and care about me, he just expressed it very differently. So, I can reconcile both of those things and understand that my dad did love me and it's OK that I questioned that. Just like I know God loves me. Looking back at my childhood with the eyes of a father myself now, to try and understand why things were the way they are, versus how I viewed them. That sure brought some clarity to understanding... being able to look at some of the points that I thought were the lowest of my life and realizing that without those I might not be here today.”

In addition, James shared, “The process I would say if I were to evaluate it, I would say it was messy, desperate, and confusing. Knowing it's kind of that feeling, I know something has to be better than the stuff that I'm hearing from people. Because the stuff I'm hearing for people is not reliable, it's not consistent and it's all over the place. So, probable that process is more of this dissatisfaction with what I call that temporal definition of attachment in relationship and union with God and union with another. So, it's since knowing there's something better, there is supposed to be something better, and this is not it, or this is not it until it is discovered.” Joe shared, “I think something that I've

kind of noticed is I don't think there's really a negative. I guess there are negative experiences, but in my experiences an experience is still an experience regardless of whether it's negative or positive, so I guess there's always something that can be drawn out of it. So even if let's say it's a bad day or really good day. Either way, I feel like there's a way that you can see things so that it draws you closer to God and develops that secure attachment style. I think sometimes it's easier to be closer to God during the great time because he's blessing you. But I feel like in either time there's opportunity for you to draw near to God because you can see what he's doing in your life and how he's interacting with you.” Matthew stated, “Well, what helped me get there was I had reached rock bottom. I got to a point where I had nowhere to go, nowhere to turn. I was out of my own answers trying to figure everything out myself. I was in the military and attending the Navy drug and alcohol counseling school...and in the program, they’re expecting you to also work on yourself as a student and I wasn't doing any of that...I thought I had it all figured out. I was terrified of anyone finding out who the real me was because I had imposters syndrome. So, they could see right through my deception...they staffed me, and they pulled me aside. I was told you’re not doing anything and so we're looking at dropping you from this school...they told me that I needed to go check out Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings. And that's when I found out I was not alone, and they introduced me to a merciful God...I learn that I didn't have to go to church to be a Christian, I didn't have to go to church to have a relationship with God, it's really about surrender...once I surrendered to God, which is step one of Adult Children of Alcoholics where you realize that your life is unmanageable and then it truly was unmanageable. And I needed to turn my will and my life over to God.”

Furthermore, Mike reported “I feel like my attachment with God is good. After the divorce of my parents, I can see all through the trials and temptations where it's like, okay God is using this to teach me something. It might feel like he's a bit far off right now, but I know he's right there and I know he uses all of these scenarios and situations to better me into the person that he wants me to be ultimately.” Paul shared, “When I went to my first meeting for Celebrate Recovery, I was telling God on the way there I said, Lord, you know that I stay pretty quiet. And the Lord worked it out...it really allowed me to open up and share about my anxiety through school and on into after school. My life as I aged, and how I'm growing up as a child with a father that was taking up space but never giving any time, and so my father figure was my grandfather. And so, I had my list of all the faults that I saw in my life. My anxiety was the biggest problem. And then my father's anger from his father spilled over into me, and so I put anger on my list. And so, when I got to my first Celebrate Recovery meeting I said OK God, here's your list. And these are the things that he needs to work on me first before anything else. And my list just kind of went down. God began teaching me about trust and that went on for about a year and then surrender was the next one. After then relationships and being that far along into the program I realized when my list didn't exist anymore. And I shared that, the next thing you know after several months I became a small group leader. So, it's definitely helped me understand and with my relationship that I have now with God.”

### **Open to New Change and Growth**

In addition, the fifth theme that was developed from the participants describing their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God included the process of being open to new change and growth. The participants reported being open to new

change and growth in their lives was a necessary part of the process to help strengthen their attachment to God and others. The participants stated the new changes were gradual and an ongoing growth in their lives. The participants addressed being open to new change in their lives was an essential part of their growth toward developing their secure attachment with God. The participants reported being open to new change and growing in areas of their lives including attending church, becoming emotionally aware, returning to school, seeking new careers, and taking on an emotional investment in their faith and in their relationship with God. The participants shared life events and circumstances that drew them to seek new change and growth in their relationship with God and it became part of the process in forming a more secure attachment to God. This theme is summarized by the following participant comments. Aldo stated, “There was a time when I got a phone call from my pastor friend, he invited me to California, and I felt like it was the Lord’s timing. I was just reading that night about Abraham where God called Abraham to just get up and go. And I I’m like God, I don’t want to do that it’s not easy, I’m going to lose my family, my friends, my job, everything. It’s like you have to restart, you’re telling me to go to a place and to trust in you. And just go into somewhere I don’t know and just leave everything behind, God that’s so much. I’m putting everything on the line, and I prayed about it for three years. And I came to this place, it’s a city in the desert near Los Angeles. And I’m trusting in the Lord with my walk even more, and I thank God, because I felt I was in Egypt, but somehow this is like the promised land for me through God’s eyes, and it’s where I have to be. So those life experiences influence the type of relationship I have with God now.”

Furthermore, Fred stated, “When I came back trying to figure out where I was at, that last time was after my mom passed away. It was a push in the right direction because it was an experience I had never had before in church. And it was one of those eye-opening experiences and it made me realize that maybe there is something to this thing my mom believed. And it became a huge part of my life and I'm trying to carry that on to the rest of my family. I realized that I need to be better than who I was. I can improve and that even through all my fault, God still loves me, just like a parent should. So, it inspired all aspects of my life, not just for me, but for all of those around me. It's also opened me to the idea of it's okay for me to have more emotions besides just happy and mad. And expressed with my wife how I'm feeling rather than just always being the rock for everybody to lean on and allow myself to be vulnerable, which is still a new concept. And sometimes I'm not great at, but I'm trying, and I know that's part of the process that I'm still working through it.” Jay stated, “The process was expanding and allowing my religious thought and other world religions to begin to understand those at a different level. That was what started the journey of change for me. And since then, my life experience with my relationship with God has been, I would say constantly evolving and changing over the years.” Matthew reported, “And so once I realized I need to turn my will and my life over to God, that's when stuff started happening. And remember, I'm a signs and wonders kind of guy so now here was another sign. The ACA meetings, adult children of alcoholics meetings were starting to get me to see that a relationship with God was possible, and I wanted that. And I was starting to become open to the idea of church. Church used to terrify me, and these meetings helped me become open to the idea that there is something out there for me that I would like. And so, one day I was fixing my

uniform...and I had a talk show on...and the host was interviewing a pastor who used to be an NFL football player, but God moved him to start his own church...I was listening to this in the background and then at the end of the interview they announced the address of the church, which just so happened to be right across the street from where I was staying in San Diego. And I turned around in disbelief and God did that for me, he gave me a chance to meet a pastor before ever stepping foot in his church. And so, I was there early the next morning, and I felt the Holy Spirit in that place, I had never felt it before. And I liked it so much that I even came back for the second service. So that was a big part of the process, a big step, because that opened my eyes to church.”

In addition, Max stated, “I would say more so than anything that I've done it was a work of God and just as he formed my heart as he changed my heart from a heart stone to a heart of flesh. He lifted a lot of those fears that I had, those struggles that I had and drew me closer to him. And as I drew closer to him, I saw the level of peace that I experienced, and it drew me even closer to him.” Paul reported, “After 28 years of God telling me that I have plans for you and me resisting...the last time was about a year and a half ago. And God told me, he said now is the time. I said OK God and I signed up to come to Liberty. And I told the Lord, God, you're going to have to help me out. And so, I signed up for counseling to work with youth and it had to be in addiction recovery. And for two weeks, I just kept hearing in my heart, it's not too late. I asked God to change exactly what he wanted me to do. And he put me in the next generation ministry, a double major in psychology leaning on the addiction recovery side of things. So, 28 years of God asking me don't you want to do more with your life, I finally surrendered. I think that I kind of compare the change to the apostle Paul, but I'm in no way an apostle Paul.



Christ was going to use Paul for His ministry even though that Paul was going to suffer greatly. And he needed to get Paul's attention in a way that only Paul would put his attention on Christ. And I believe that God had to shake me enough to get my attention to where my focus was completely on him." Robert shared, "So, I think part of the change was in a large part a function of my wife. When I met my wife that's when I really started to feel the conviction and really have an emotional investment in my faith. Is how I would say it is where it really motivated me to change how I lived and what I was doing. And then the conviction aspect of it, and that authoritative figure really was emphasized in my mind to change how I lived."

### **Open Toward Developing Secure Relationships**

The sixth theme was developed from participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God was being open toward developing secure relationships. Participants stated being open to allowing and accepting people into their personal lives was an important component toward developing more secure relationships. Participants stated becoming open toward developing a secure relationship with God has allowed them to apply those practices with their families and other relationships in their lives. The participants in this study indicated being open to the idea of developing secure relationships has allowed them to become more secure in their attachment style with God and others. This theme is represented by the following comments made by the participants. Aldo stated, "My attachments okay, well when I first got here to California it was super insecure. I couldn't connect with people, and I wanted to go out with girls that were in the church, and I felt like there was something missing and I didn't really understand what it was at that time. I had to find connections and I started talking to

people...from that I was able to meet, over the years, quite a few people and I was able to not just feel more secure and I felt understood. So, the Lord, I believe, blessed me with people in my life to see that was part of my process to where I am right now in my relationships.” Fred stated, “In going back looking at some of the situations with my dad to try and understand why things happened, I am thankful we had 13 years of close relationship before he passed away. I can look at those things and look at the people that by God’s providence ended up in my life to help guide me into being a good man and to pass those lessons on to my son...And so that they can one day grow up and be good fathers.” Jay reported, “The process I would have to say had to do with expanding my peers in terms of who I accepted and allowed into my peer groups.”

Furthermore, Joe shared, “So, the way I see things kind of revolves around the Bible, because that's what I was raised on. I’ve grown closer to God himself as it became more of a not just knowing things, but a relationship. And then when the two are combined, it really helped me to trust God a lot more because I knew there was fruit in what he was saying and that had been one of my primary sources of influence from when I was a kid. I think to a degree it was easier to develop secure attachment relationship.” James reported, “Before I couldn't remain attached, that was a problem because I didn't know how to do that. I'd never had that kind of relationship with anybody in my life. And then I met the person who is now my wife and now we've been married for almost 37 years next month. And it was difficult creating that attachment. And understanding what that meant but I think having the longevity of that and seeing that this is not going to go away and I'm not going to let it go away really helped me to shift my perspective of who God is supposed to be, not who we make him out to be, but who he is. Another term that

I use to describe God is the permanent God. So, the living in permanence is what I call his permanence. And then this relationship, that attachment with my wife is what I call the shadow or the skia of that relationship with God.”

In addition, Mike shared, “I think I achieve this attachment style I would label all of my attachments that I have is fairly secure. I think that's just been from my early attachments with my parents, intended to be very secure and just knew that they were always there. They always cared and put me as pretty much their top priority, even above each other. And just having those two caregiver figures in my life who I knew really loved me. So, that's how my attachment with God has been as well in other relationships.” Robert shared, “I didn't necessarily change a whole lot of how I lived my life until I met my now wife. But at that time when I met her, I really wanted to get to know this person more. I started making better life decisions. And then from there I was thinking, you know my view of God really should be how I think of God and how I interact with God should be how I'm treating others. I should be there to help them, to comfort them depending on the nature of the relationship. I started to seriously date my wife then my relationship with God really start to change and dictate how I lived my life to try to be a representation to the world, to my wife, and now to my kids of the relationship I want to and strive to have with God and others.”

### **Expanding their Faith and Trust in God**

The seventh theme that was developed from the participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God included the process of expanding their faith and trust in God. Participants shared experiences regarding their growth in their faith and the work God has accomplished in their lives which has

expanded their ability to trust in God and lean on their close relational attachment. The participants described how expanding their faith and trust in God served to form their attachment with God as indicated by recalling what God has done in their lives to help affirm their faith. Participants reported learning about their faith through the Bible, church, school, books, and talking to people which allowed them to build confidence in their relationship with God. Participants described situations and responses to life trials that allowed them to place their trust in God as an attachment figure and activate their faith. The following comments were indicated by the participants regarding this theme.

Aldo stated, “A verse that came up in my life, I even have it on my wall, it was Proverbs 3:56 trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding in all your ways acknowledge him and he shall direct your paths. So, I just feel like a kid and your father is holding your hand, or he's just walking you through this beautiful garden. But you have to trust him. And there are times I will admit I'm human, but I speak with God, and I asked the Lord, give me that trust, help me trust when I doubt. I feel like I'm walking into the abyss again that he's holding my hand. You're a Christ Child and it's like you're blinded and God's just telling you keep going. I just trust in him, and my faith it was like simple child faith.” Fred shared, “I started questioning and trying to understand what this God was and just trying to figure out what that meant to me. And then I started talking to several people about this God, how is it you understand it. And I'm blessed that I had the chance to ask that of both of my parents and get their understanding. And I talked to a whole bunch of different people in my life that had Christian background. So, I wanted to talk to somebody so I can understand and broaden my worldview. So, by trusting God I'm now going to school for something I never thought I'd be going to

school working on my Bachelor of Science in Christian Ministry with a minor in counseling, never thought it would have been a thing. And with leaning into my faith and doing some of my schoolwork here at the university as well as the Bible reading programs that I'm participating in I have become more involved with the church. So, I can understand God better.” Joe reported, “It would start off with I think when I was a kid, the Bible was introduced into me even before I understood what it really was on a deeper level. I knew a lot about God before I knew God. As I got older, I started to put the pieces together and I think just from being raised in a Christian environment that was biblical that is where my worldview comes. And I think that it started off like that and that's grown closer to God myself like in a relational aspect and it really helped me to trust God to develop that secure attachment style.”

Furthermore, Matthew reported “So, after I ended up passing the school with honors because of the work that I was able to do, and I did grieve the death of my mother. After that I know that I can trust that God will provide. I was filled with the Holy Spirit, and then when I got to Pensacola, I was taking my time in finding a church that I like because I figure this is my relationship with God more than it is my relationship with any church, and I'm just focused on Christ.” Max shared, “The meaning that the process has of course certainly affected it. I can look back and see where I was, where I can look at where I am now, and you know that shows me how far I've come in my Christian walk and that has been extremely helpful. I've been able to see I've had struggles of different sorts during that time period. Over that time period I've been able to see that the trajectory is upward, which is very encouraging. And helps give me the strength to persevere. Also focusing on the blessings that you know that God has bestowed upon me

has helped keep me focused and centered on him.” Paul stated, “I would say when I was sitting with the doctor that gave me my diagnosis, I couldn't do life without my faith in trusting God. And the relationship that I have with him grows every day. And so, our relationship as I grow, God shows me more of himself. I guess the more you know, the more we seek out intimacy with God, he shares more of himself with us. I try to remember the person that I started out to be when I first started at Liberty. You know my love for God it comes first in my life. And I would tell you if someone were to look at me 20 years ago. I would say I wouldn't be sitting here right now and that's how much I've changed. I've never been a bold person when it comes to praying out loud or sharing my faith. I was always happy with being in the background and helping but as long as I didn't have to come be in front of people. And now I still have a little bit there, but not like it was. I mean I wouldn't be here doing this interview at all 20 years ago without having the boldness I do now.” Robert stated, “I was raised Catholic until I was about 12 and then Christian. So, being raised in the faith and then kind of making the faith my own a little bit more. And so, my relationship with God impacted my faith and the trust I have now I would say is very different from before where I had an intellectual understanding and knowledge of God and based on that, since there were no significant feelings of meaningfulness associated with it, and now it's incredibly meaningful to me because it's an intimate relationship.”

### **Connecting and Remaining Close to God**

The eighth theme that emerged from how the participants described their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God was by connecting and remaining close to God. The participants in this study stated the process of staying connecting and

remaining close to God consisted of seeking closeness in their relationship attachment to God through the use of personal time to communicate with God in prayer and reading the Bible as a form of hearing, receiving, and learning. Participants reported noticing the difference in their behavior when they connected with God and the change in their stress level, emotions, and quality of life. The participants shared and described their experiences with their process that led to their secure attachment to God which included seeking connection and remaining close to God regularly. The participants shared the following comments. Cody reported, "I would say that it's very relational. I think that like all relationships requires consistency or frequency but require some form of connection points with the other. So, you know right now I'm married and if we don't go on dates and we don't talk with each other regularly then that attachment can become more distant. So, in the same way, there has to be some form of regular connection with God as well. So, I do read my Bible regularly and I do pray. So, there is a connection there. I try to see it as something like a time of receiving for me, something I'm here to rest into this so when I'm reading the Bible, it's supposed to not be a chore as opposed to be something that is just me getting to talking with God." Dan stated, "I would say even though I'm a sinner and I may have maybe gone to church less or even done things in my life that are sinful. I never felt a distancing from God I just felt like I could do better. And so, for me the process I would say had the following elements, it has prayer, it has study, it has reflection. There are seasons where there's either church attending, there's more reading in the scripture, there's more prayer. All of that kind of culminated to where things are today which is good, I think that it's great. And having a relationship with God being it has that they feed each other."

Furthermore, Matthew reported, “I believe in prayer to improve my conscious contact with God. As I understand God, and I'm always praying for knowledge of God's will for me, and I'm asking for tools to carry out God's will. And I think that the closer I get to that, if I am spiritually aware and I have that anointing on me, I've got my spiritual discernment then I will see signs from God.” Max shared, “I started spending more time with the word and spending time going to Bible studies and different things. I realized I have neglected this relationship and I feel more peace as I focused more on Christ. The next semester I took a less heavy load with classes, working and just the difference in my stress level. I had much less stress because I was laying all my burdens on Christ. I was more productive in whatever I was doing because I was focusing on Christ, and not losing my focus on Christ. When I read the scriptures, when I spend time with the word every day and just focus on God and His awesome power then I realize that kind of centers me where I need to be. I've figured out what I need to do to keep focused on him that helps me to stay close to him, I would say is spending a lot of time with the word and fellowshiping with other believers.” Mike stated, “My attachment style with God has been with me throughout almost my entire life since I first came to know God. So since then, I've honestly felt so much better. I felt more fulfilled ultimately just knowing that I can have this relationship with the one who created me and the one who laid down his life for me so that I could have this close relationship with him forever, that's left me very fulfilled.” Paul shared, “So, the more I studied from the point of beginning to the point of now, I've changed dramatically a lot pertaining to my relationship with God and how I feel about him. It let me to the point that I get pretty emotional about him. When I look at my relationship, I can see how close and strong our bond is now and compared to what it



was years ago.” Rober stated, “I would say now it is close and it has not been that way growing up. I knew a lot about God growing up and I understood a lot. So, then it became less of an intellectual knowing and understanding and more of how I can actually apply the intellectual relationship I have that's now becoming a further, deeper, intimate relationship with God. And through reading Scripture on my own through listening to religious books on audio tapes, to really not only understand principles and aspects but to live them out it is very meaningful for me, and I became emotionally invested in the relationship with him.”

### **Forming Christian Attitudes and Behaviors**

The ninth theme that was developed from participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God included forming Christian attitudes and behaviors. Participants reported their attachment with God has allowed them to develop Christian attitudes and behaviors that are in alignment with their faith. The participants stated their active faith and relationship with God has allowed them to deeply experience God’s love and develop a desire to emulate God’s character in how the participants act, think, and feel in their daily lives. The participants reported when forming their secure attachment to God they began to develop Christian attitudes and behaviors by engaging in reading the Bible, attending church, giving, studying, listening, and spending time with God to help them prioritize their relationship with God. The participants reported actively practicing their faith and experiencing the importance to live a life that represents their faith and their relationship with God accordingly. The following comments were made by the participants regarding this theme.

Cody stated, "Because we know the Gospel of God's love for them it kind of makes things deeper than just the knowledge base to an experiential base. So, I think that's kind where I'm at right now. I go to church, I read my Bible, I give, so all the right Christian actions to do. But those things are just kind of natural to me, I guess they're not forced. I don't feel like I'm doing them because I need to inform grounding points. So, I guess that's maybe a good way of looking at it is there's an easiness that kind of settled into my relationship with God. It doesn't mean I don't have things I struggle with, but I think that I know that God is still on my side." Dan reported, "I think I have a secure attachment to God and then that makes things very calm like it just creates peace and stability emotionally in my life. Which means that other relationships they go better because of that, because when things are volatile or unstable elsewhere, I don't ever have that feeling that things aren't stable with God. And that's how it influences my life as a Christian, I mean because my life is a Christian. And so, to me it is all the same my life, and the life of the Christian community is all one." Fred stated, "So, with understanding that everything we do is supposed to be for the glory of God, it's for him, not for me. So, something as simple as remembering to hold the door open and say thank you and please. To help the old lady carry their groceries, say good morning to somebody, ask somebody if they're doing OK, say hello to a random stranger on the street and actually care if they answer you back and stop for a second. It is the little things as well as the big things and understanding the best way to live life. So, it's also showing me that I can be a better husband, a father, a servant of God. And looking back at those people that were in the church and showed me a positive way to be a Christian every day."

Furthermore, Joe shared, “I think it just means that I have a responsibility to live with integrity. You know, treating people the way that Jesus would treat them or treat them at least in a fair manner. I think something is really important to make sure that you treat people right no matter who they are, where they're from. And being honest I think even still there are a lot of times where God calls me to grow in my faith and do things differently from the way that I've done before. And I think one thing is really being honest even when it's not optimal. Because I think when I was younger, I used to lie a lot, like little white lies, as people say. But the older I get, the more I realize there's no such thing as a white lie. There's obviously with everything, there's no benefit to it and it's going to hurt you in the short run and the long run. But I think specifically being more honest is how it really helps me. Not just honesty, I would say I try to be kind and caring too, I think that's really important no matter who they are.” Matthew stated, “Now as a Christian I pray, I don't pray for stuff, I pray for the characteristics to carry out God's will. So, I'm asking God for strength. I'm asking God for discernment. I'm asking God for patience. I'm asking God for clarity, things like that.”

In addition, Mike shared, “So currently I make prayer, reading scripture, and trying to do my best to spend some time in silence and solitude. Trying to make that a very high priority. And I make it a very high priority to go to church every Sunday to really do my part in maintaining the relationship. But also knowing that God is always there and sometimes, rather than talking, I just need to listen.” Paul reported, “And I believe that the things that I've been through when I share with others helps them to see that my faith in Christ and my trust in God is leading me in the direction that he wants me to go. It's like they say, well, if he can do that, then maybe there is something to having

faith in Christ with somebody that's a non-Christian. I think it speaks volumes to them to be able to see the Bible in somebody else, even if I don't speak any words, it's just in my actions. And I have complete press that He's leading me in the direction he wants me to go." Robert stated, "My relationship with God impacted my life now and the attachment I have with him, it impacts it in that I have care and compassion a lot more so for other people. Because I understand and it's not only understood, but I feel and experience God's care, compassion, mercy on me that I can't help but not want to. Although I don't always do it perfectly but want to extend that to other people. And so now I have the intellectual understanding, but also the feeling of an intimate relationship. Which is a component of feeling meaningfulness. That's a good word that I think encapsulates encompasses that so because I have this strong meaningful relationship with God in that how I not only think about him, but experience in everyday his mercy, grace, forgiveness, and reprimand. I then feel compelled to and not only feel compelled but want to extend that and emulate that relationship with my wife, with my kids, with friends, coworkers, and things like that."

### **Research Question 3**

What are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment?

### **Secure Attachment with One Parent**

The third research question examined what are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The first theme that emerged when participants shared their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by

participants having a secure attachment with one parent growing up. Participants identified their attachment with their parents to be consistent, positive, close, secure, good, caring, available, strong, friendly, offered teaching, training, and guidance in their relationship. The participants reported it was the parent with whom they had a secure and closer relationship that taught them about God. The participants reported their relationship with their parent or parents did shape their view of God and influenced their relationship with God. Participants stated their relationship with their parent or parents have continued to become closer and more secure in adulthood. The theme of participants having a secure attachment with at least one parent was represented with comments made such as the following. Aldo stated, "I would say my relationship it was the best with my mom because growing up I grew closer to my mom a lot more, my father passed away a long time ago." Cody shared, "I would say that I have a pretty good relationship with my parents. So, my parents were available for us in terms of taking care of us, training us, teaching us, and disciplining us as well. I think that with that many kids, it does make it harder for them to have close emotional bonds. And I think that also goes along with having an Asian household with typically more of a disciplinarian type of relationship from the parent to child. And so, I would say it's mostly been a positive relationship and has continued to be a positive relationship into adulthood. I was thinking more positively now than before. So, I think overall it is secure and I would say that you know for sure they have my back and they're looking out for me." Dan stated, "I would describe attachment style probably secured to my mom, secured to my dad. With my mom I had a close relationship with my dad not so close." Fred shared, "Growing up my relationship with my mother was extremely close."

Furthermore, Jay reported, “My relationship with both parents was good. But as an adult, having children myself, I look back and I can see obviously, it could have been much better in terms of showing unconditional love. With words and other forms of affection identifying my love languages as a young child and be able to meet those needs, but overall, it was good.” Joe stated, “My parents, I probably describe them as my primary caregiver and teachers that took care of me as a kid, as I was younger. So, they are somebody who shows you what you're supposed to do. Basically, they house you, clothe you and feed you. My mom, I would probably say she's like a direct guide with my life. I would say not necessarily how I live my life for a guy, more about what I should do and what I shouldn't do. My relationship with my father is more like a role model. I'm not very close with my dad, but actually the stuff he does I process it and I'm like, OK, yeah, that's a good choice or I ask him what I should do.” Max stated, “My relationship was really good with my mother and really good with my father. My mother was not saved until I was 11 or 12. So you know my relationship with her was not quite as good as with my father before that point, just because she wasn't living like a believer. But once she was saved, our relationship got really good and then I would say my relationship with both was about equal. My relationship with my dad was really good. He has always been a really strong figure in my life, and he was a really strong believer, he served in the ministry. So, my relationship with my dad was really strong. And so, I and my siblings were home schooled and so both parents would teach us.” Mike reported, “Growing up I would say I had a pretty secure attachment with both of my parents. They provided for me, took care of me, but were also not afraid to most of the time discipline and correct where I needed it...I knew that if I was being disciplined or corrected, that doesn't mean

that I'm not loved in the moment. That means they're disciplining me because they love me. I think ultimately it did have a healthy balance of that love and that nurturing plus that discipline and correction. And the main thing that I've used to kind of characterize them as both of my parents worked. My mom provided as well, she did most of the cooking and taking care of the house. And then the relationship with my dad was also very good. However, he tended to be a bit more of a friend a lot of the time than a father. So essentially that's how my attachment with God has worked as well.” Robert stated, “When I was growing up, I'd say I had a strong good relationship with my mother and with my father, not so much. I think that was a large result of my mom being a stay-at-home mom at the time. I was home schooled so had lots of interactions and I would say we had a good relationship.”

### **Absent or Lack of Parental Figure**

The second theme that emerged from participants sharing their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having an absent or lack of parental figure in childhood. The participants reported experiences with having one parent or both parents who were absent or lacking a parental figure in their life. The participants described feeling emotionally distant from that absent parental figure and shared their experiences of emotional neglect from those relationships. Participants stated experiencing the absence of their parent due to them prioritizing other areas of their lives, leaving the participants without any time for secure parent-child interactions. The participants reported their relationships with their absent parental figures were “dysfunctional, neutral, distant, and not close.” The participants indicated their relationship with their absent parent or lack of

parental figure did shape their view of God and it affected their relationship with God when they did not have a secure attachment figure with their parent that served as representation of a secure God attachment. Some of the participants reported they were able to restore their relationships with their absent parents and with God in later years. The theme of participants having an absent or lack of parental figure growing up was represented with comments made such as the following. Aldo stated, "I would say it was sort of dysfunctional because my father wasn't always there for me. He was always in and out of my life, so he was always in prison. So, when I was younger, I didn't really understand that and I wanted to be with my father, even though he was the one that was walking away from the Lord, he was in sin. He was not a father he was a dad. I don't know if you know what that means, like there's men who are dads and we'll men, young men need fathers." Fred stated, "My father was a long-haul truck driver, so a lot of people actually thought my parents were divorced because my dad was not around a lot. As a child, I thought my father hated me because he wasn't around a lot, and we did not have a very close relationship."

In addition, James reported, "My relationship with my parents growing up, I didn't have much of a relationship with my parents. My dad worked nights and my parents divorced when I was 8-9 years old. And before they divorced, I didn't really have much of a relationship with him because they fought all the time. And then after they divorced, my mom went from marriage to marriage...I lived with her but didn't really have much of a relationship with her, she didn't have time for me. My dad didn't have time again, he worked nights. I didn't appreciate my stepmother at the time, so she tried but she was very different than us and so I had no real relationship with her. Some of that



is different now, but it was like that growing up and so I was a very lonely child.” Joe shared, “As far as with my dad and the type of attachment with him growing up I didn't really see him very often, he didn't really have that great of an impact in my life.”

Matthew shared, “I consider my parents to be the instruments of my existence. My actual parent is God. So, both sides of my parents, my mom side and my dad side they're both very dysfunctional families. Well, the relationship between my mom was probably not as secure with my mom just because of my stepfather, who was an alcoholic. And I found out actually just a few months ago that my mom drank a lot and that's why my dad and my mother divorced. And so that's how I learned about being apart where my parents are merely the tools of my existence.” Paul stated, “Growing up with my father, his father was never a loving man. He never showed his type of love to his wife or his children. And that seemed to spill over to my father and along he had some really deep-seated anger issues and things were his way or no way. And so, my father had plenty of time to watch football games and I can remember he lived a life of going to work, coming home, eating supper, and watching football games...and on the weekends, he had plenty of time for that, but never time for his children.” Robert stated, “My father and I didn't have a bad relationship, but I wouldn't characterize it as bad or not good. I also wouldn't classify it as a really great relationship, just kind of a neutral and not close.”

### **Other Attachment Figures**

The third theme that emerged from participants describing their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having other attachment figures. Participants reported having other individuals in their lives that took on the role of attachment figures growing up. The

participants reported experiences that allowed them to seek out more secure relationship attachments by receiving emotional support and guidance from other adults in their lives. Participants shared having other attachment figures in their lives that allowed them to experience security and develop trust in relationships outside of their parent attachment. Participants reported finding secure attachment figures in other adult relationships including with extended family members, mentors, friends, teachers, pastors, and peers in the community. The Participants reported having other attachment figures influenced their personal relationships and their secure relational attachment with God. The theme of participants having other attachment figures growing up are indicated by the following comments. Aldo stated, “Other primary attachment figures besides parent is my pastor he's like my brother. When I went to a church in New York, that's when I met this friend of mine. He's the one that the Lord used him to bring me to Christ. I really connected with him, and I met his father and his mom, and they were pastors of the church. I was under his wing, so I'll say he's like a big brother.” Cody stated “I would say there were other people in my life that took on that role like mentors or older brother type of figures. When I was working through a lot of growing up, emotional things or decisions, I had a lot of influence outside of the family in that regard.” Dan shared, “Other attachment figures I would say growing up my brother.” Fred reported, “I was lucky to have some very stable male role models in my life to show me how to be a man. Some were from church youth groups, another one was my closest friend, and other father figures and an uncle I met through the Boy Scouts of America through the order of the Arrow program.” James reported, “My paternal grandparents, I was very close to. I spent not every weekend with them, but a lot of weekends. So, I was very close to my paternal

grandparents. Growing up, not until I was in junior high, I had a teacher, who was an English teacher, and he was a mentor to me. He took me in and saw something special in me and that was probably the first person that had ever seen anything special in me that I recall. And in the end of high school, I had a teacher who also saw something unique in me.”

Furthermore, Jay stated, “And other primary attachment figures were family members and peers in the community. The only one besides my parents, I'd have to say, was my grandmother. That relationship was a lot more affectionate, caring, loving than my relationship with my parents. I was the oldest grandchild, so I was able to spend more quality time with her.” Matthew shared, “My stepparents, well my stepmother was close, and the relationship was relatively secure. It was my stepmother who is a Christian Baptist, and I would say she had an effect. Because she, out of all four members of all four of my parental figures, she is the one who seemed to have the most common sense. She was the most successful, she was the only one out of the four that I felt like I could go to for advice about anything and I'm still close to her to this day. So, she's probably the strongest attachment.” Paul stated, “And so my mother's father, my grandfather, we had a very close relationship. And even today, I still hold very fond memories of the things of growing up with my grandfather and how they've affected me in my life. I was more so attached with my grandfather since my mom was dealing with my father's industrial accident.”

### **Misunderstanding Concept of God**

The fourth theme that was developed when participants described their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent

attachment was identified by participants having a misunderstanding concept of God. Participants reported their parent attachment, and their God attachment was influenced in the way they experienced their parents felt toward them was projected into how they sensed God felt about them growing up. The participants stated their experiences with their attachment style to their parents developed a misunderstanding concept of God impacting their view of God as a secure attachment figure. The participants reported their attachment view of God was that of being “legalistic, doesn't like me, disappointed in me, has separation from me, confused, correction God, rules God, smite kind of God, angry, lose his temper, and punishment.” Participants with insecure attachment with their parent reported having an insecure attachment to God. The participants reported gaining awareness regarding their parent attachment and how it affected their initial view of God to help repair their attachment style. The participants who reported having an absent or lack of parental figure shared having a negative view of God. Participants stated they were able to gain a corrective view of God, which allowed them to develop a closer and secure relationship with God in later years. The theme of participants having a misunderstanding concept of God are indicated by the following comments. Aldo stated, “In the beginning I thought pretty much nothing of God like he was just there, and he was just really strict. Because in Canada I went to a legalistic church where you have to dress up in suits and ties. And that's what my dad was showing me, I thought that's what it was about. But when I came to the states, it was totally different and that's when I came to understand a lot more from my mom and that's when the pastor was teaching me to just come as you are and don't allow traditions to cloud your convictions. I now don't allow church legalistic to affect me and that affected my view of God as far as God not being

condemning.” Cody stated, “Probably the most misunderstood standing between me and God would be in my early teen years when I really felt like he probably doesn't like me very much because of what I do. If my parents have been disappointed in me for something, then that might have projected on my idea of how God views me too, or how he would feel of me and certain behaviors. And just the idea of that being possible to get disappointed and I don't think that is actually true now, so that's what I mean by positive and negative...when I felt shame from my own actions and that would make me feel like oh, I must have some form of separation from me and God. But when people in church came around and showed me that did not matter, they did not change their kind of love or care for me. Then that should also translate to a deeper understanding of oh, that's a glimpse of what God's like, so he is infinitely forgiving of who I am. And you know, that's where it becomes very secure with God because I know that I've heard the gospel. I heard that he is like that with me, and I don't know that I really believe that until I also saw people do that for me.”

Furthermore, Fred stated, “It confused me as a child, and it definitely was confusing. I was brought up in the UC Protestant faith and my mother took me to church regularly, she was active in the church. There were some people there that again, as I had referenced, one of those men was a good male role model of how to be a man and a Christian. And then there were other people that I looked at and saw that's not what it says you're supposed to do. And if you're a representation how does that work as our fathers are supposed to be representatives of what God is to us. And mine with my dad I did not get along, so it kind of confused some things for me.” James reported, “I don't know that I really put this together because like I said, I grew up with my childhood is

very much defined by loneliness and a kind of isolation and distanced from people. So, because that's what I was accustomed to, I was accustomed to abandonment, rejection, isolation, loneliness or dismissal. And so that's the relational way I was taught to be relational with people. Specifically, mostly my parents, but also friends because my mother moved every six months to nine months. I was always the new kid, so I never established friendships anywhere I lived until junior high. So, all I knew was how to dismiss and create rejection because I had experienced it. And for most of my childhood, I saw God as the correction God, that's what I was told. He's the rules God, the smite kind of God. And when I read Richard Foster's book *Life with God* and saw his comments about God being the God of witness, it's all about I'm with you, will you be with me. Which is throughout all of Scripture, that changed everything. And I think that the intensity by which that had significant meaning to me, it's true for within all of scripture, but it had intense meaning to me because of growing up isolated without consistent attachments.”

In addition, Jay stated, “In terms of the Baptist denomination, for which I was brought up in the understanding of God as a father figure, but at the same time could get angry at you and could lose his temper. There was punishment if you did wrong things, so that actually fit the profile of my father. So, there was a very much an understanding of alignment between the way my natural father was and my understanding as a child of what God was the father figure God.” Matthew stated, “My mom I think she loosely identified as a Christian and loosely believed in God, but she wasn't very vocal about it at all. My dad doesn't have much of a relationship with God at all, but my stepmother is a Christian Baptist. And she tried to teach me about God when I was in high school. And it

was kind of a form of punishment she would make me write down psalms out of the Bible. It was like an alternative to punishment if I did something wrong. And I think she was trying to teach me things, but maybe also trying to get me to have like an awakening, maybe.”

### **Spiritual or Religious Guide**

The fifth theme that emerged when participants described their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having a spiritual or religious guide during childhood. The participants reported their early experiences and source of spiritual or religious guide where they learned about God was from their mothers, both parents, a neighbor, and a good friend. The participants reported the benefits obtained from having the guidance of a secure attachment figure to help them learn about the Christian faith. Participants reported it was through their positive relationship attachment with their spiritual or religious guides that the participants were able to learn about God’s character that drew them closer to their relationship with God. Participants who indicated having an attachment with one parent, both parents, and other attachment figures shared experiences in their lives that allowed them to observe the example set from their attachment figures toward their own relationship with God, which allowed the participants to view God as a secure attachment. The theme of participants having a spiritual or religious guide in their life are indicated by the following comments. Aldo stated, “My mom she was a woman of God, and she was the one that really stuck in there with me and brought me to Christ. And I didn’t really give my life to Christ till the age of 14 and she was bringing me to understand who Jesus was. So, I came to understand about

God from my mom, the Lord used her to help me really understand who he was. If that didn't happen, I probably wouldn't be here sitting, talking with you.” Cody stated, “I think that it's hard for me to say considering I haven't lived in the opposite. I would say that generally I know I'm loved right by my parents and that's also what I believe of God. Like there is no time in which he does not love me.” Dan stated, “I think I have a secure relationship with God. In their own ways both parents strengthen that relationship.” Joe stated, “I personally think that I had a secure attachment style to my mom, and not my dad necessarily. My mom kind of guided me so I think the secure relationship with my mom it helps me to have more trust in God. Because I know a lot of people don't have what I had with my parents, they find it harder to first of all trust and respect authority. So, I think in a sense it really helped me to trust God a lot.”

In addition, Max reported, “Well seeing my parents and seeing their spiritual growth certainly helped reaffirm that I was not saved until I was 19. And I am now 26, so it's been about almost eight years since I got saved. Working with my parents and seeing the way they handled situations really helped reaffirm my faith and my attachment to God after I was saved. And before I was saved, it gave me a really good example to follow.” Mike stated, “I think in my relationship with my dad in particular, I did have a view like oh yeah God is my friend and we're cool. I've heard the saying before like Jesus is my homeboy. I've heard that saying before, and it's like, yes, the Lord says that we can talk to him like we're talking to a friend. We don't need any fancy words as we're praying. However, he still deserves that reverence, or what the Bible talks about as that healthy fear and respect, so I think sometimes I have lost a little bit of sight of that and just been focused on the friendship part. I know in the Bible God is referred to as a he, however, I



do believe God assumes characteristics that we would consider in our limited human view is male or female or characterize those characteristics. So, I think just that nurturance and that deep care that my mother had for me and my brother, I can kind of see that reflected in God and then view him as someone who is very nurturing and cares for all of his children.” Paul stated, “My mom and dad I can remember they were never church goers, and my mom’s parents they went to a Methodist Church, but it was like on Holidays. And so, I had two friends when I was about 10 years old, and they had invited me to their church. Through the kid’s ministry and I had an attachment with a sweet old lady when I was 10. I met her by walking down to our local pharmacy and I could remember going inside with her and she would always pray that she just wanted to go home. And at 10 years old I'm like you are home, so that was my first experience with this old lady learning about Jesus and salvation. And through accepting an invitation to get on the bus and go to church, I became saved when I was 12 and so I would wake my mom up every Sunday morning to go to church. So, essentially through my connection of becoming saved through my friendship, it led my mother back to going to church.”

### **Summary**

In summary, the chapter addressed the research findings for this qualitative phenomenological study with the purpose to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men, how they obtained a secure attachment, and what it means to their life was examined. The study provided a general description of the data collection process and data analysis process used. The participant demographic characteristics were addressed in the descriptive results. The research questions aimed to explore the lived experience of the participants view of God as an attachment figure, their experiences with

forming secure attachment to God, and their relationship between God and parent attachment were explored.

The first research question aimed to address how Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure. The research results indicated five themes that described the participant's experiences and views of God as an attachment figure is indicated by: father figure, close, protector, comforter, and affectionate. The results indicated that the interrelated themes describe the participant's experiences and view of God as an attachment figure that provides secure attachment in their relationships.

The second research question explored how Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God. The research results indicated nine themes that described the participant's experiences in forming a secure attachment to God. The first theme is indicated by coping with distressful life experiences. The second theme is indicated by responding to avoiding or distancing from God. The third theme is indicated by seeking reassurance in life circumstances. The fourth theme is indicated by understanding their life experiences. The fifth theme is indicated by being open to new change and growth. The sixth theme is indicated by being open toward developing secure relationships. The seventh theme is indicated by expanding their faith and trust in God. The eighth theme is indicated by connecting and remaining close to God. The ninth theme is indicated by forming Christian attitudes and behaviors. The results indicated that

the nine interrelated themes describe the participant's experiences with forming a secure attachment to God.

Furthermore, the third research question aimed to explore what are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The research results indicated five themes that described the participant's experiences with their relationship God attachment and their parent attachment. The first theme is indicated by participants having a secure attachment with one parent. The second theme is indicated by having an absent or lack of a parental figure. The third theme is indicated by having other attachment figures. The fourth theme is indicated by having a misunderstanding concept of God. The fifth theme is indicated by having a spiritual or religious guide. The results indicated that the five interrelated themes describe the participant's experiences with their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The results indicated from all the interrelated themes describe the experiences of the participants view of God as an attachment figure, their experiences with forming secure attachment to God, and their relationship between God and their parent attachment. The following chapter will discuss and interpret the study finding regarding the research conducted on the attachment styles of Christian males and their experiences with their attachment to God.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men. Furthermore, how they obtained a secure attachment and what it means to their life was examined. This chapter will address a brief summary of all the key findings for the study. The chapter will provide a discussion of the study findings and compare the findings to the research literature. The study findings will be discussed both scientifically and biblically. This chapter will discuss the advanced contribution and understanding derived from the study findings in the research area of attachment theory. The implications for the use of the findings and the impact on the scientific community are provided. Following will be the limitations of the study and the impact they may have had on the findings. Recommendations for future research that resulted from the study findings will be identified followed by a summary conclusion.

### **Summary of Findings**

The key findings for the study are summarized by each research question and themes that emerged from the data. The first research question explored how do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure. The finding indicated the following themes. The first theme is indicated by God as a father figure. The second theme is indicated by God is close. The third theme is indicated by God as a protector. The fourth theme is indicated by God as a comforter. The fifth theme is indicated by affectionate God.

The second research question investigated how do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God. The finding indicated the following themes. The first theme is indicated by coping with distressful life experiences. The second theme is indicated by responding to avoiding or distancing from God. The third theme is indicated by seeking reassurance in life circumstances. The fourth theme is indicated by understanding their life experiences. The fifth theme is indicated by being open to new change and growth. The sixth theme is indicated by being open toward developing secure relationships. The seventh theme is indicated by expanding their faith and trust in God. The eighth theme is indicated by connecting and remaining close to God. The ninth theme is indicated by forming Christian attitudes and behaviors.

The third research question addressed what are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The finding indicated the following themes. The first theme is indicated by participants having a secure attachment with one parent. The second theme is indicated by having an absent or lack of a parental figure. The third theme is indicated by having other attachment figures. The fourth theme is indicated by having a misunderstanding concept of God. The fifth theme is indicated by having a spiritual or religious guide.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Research Question 1**

How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?

#### **God as a Father Figure**

The first theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was God as a father figure. Descriptions of God as a father figure were shared by participants experiencing God as a heavenly father who is available and a secure base. Other participants addressed their views of God as a father figure who provides for their needs and cares for them. In addition, participants stated experiencing the love of God as a father figure taking on the role of a loving parent. Overall, some of the participants described their view and experience of God with characteristics that are similar to those found in a relational parental figure such as being a “heavenly father figure, leads, trusting, close, loving, caring, protects, comforts, reinsurance, authority figure, and provides for my needs.” The participants described mental representations that have influenced their view of God and their experiences with God that contributed to the participants viewing God as a father figure.

According to the research literature it has been previously indicated in research findings the attachment characteristics in internal working models for a secure attachment figure being perceived as a secure base, safe haven, stronger, wiser, and available (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2020). Studies have indicated similarities in the characteristics of secure attachment figures are also perceived in the characteristics of God (Nygaard et al., 2020). This is indicated by the descriptions of the participants as they identified their view of God as a father figure describing attachment language criteria of an attachment figure who is perceived as secure base and safe haven.

In the literature review, internal working models are referred to as schemas, scripts, and expectations that were developed from prior experiences with an attachment

figure's response to the individual when they are in distress (Maxwell et al., 2020). These internal working models are beliefs that serve as mental representations of how an attachment figure will behave toward the person and their needs (Granqvist, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020). Internal working models that are developed from experiences with a parent or a primary caregiver that display characteristics of dependability and trust are viewed to be secure in an attachment figure. Those same secure characteristics can be learned and experienced based on their view of the attachment figure, in the case of the participants their view of God. According to Kam (2020) individuals who reported having an emotional and psychological experience with God were able to gain knowledge of the image of God based on their acquired memories, thoughts, and develop new schemas from their personal relational experience. In this study the participant's internal working models regarding their views of God as a father figure can be perceived as having similar schemas associated with that of a secure base parental attachment figure (Nygaard et al., 2020). All of the participants identified as being of the Christian faith that follow specific theological beliefs and a set of traditions regarding the concept of God. God concept is a term used to identify theological schemas about a divine entity and their attachment figure characteristics toward humanity (Davis et al., 2013). God concept schemas also refer to how humans feel or think about God as an attachment figure (Davis et al., 2013). According to Christianity, the nature of God is believed to be that of a triune God existing in three divine entities presented as the father, the son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14, John 14:26, John 15:26, Matthew 28:19, New King James Bible, 1982). In addition, throughout the Bible it is stated that God is believed to be the heavenly father of all humanity and in the Scriptures Jesus often modeled this by

referring to God as his father in heaven and having a relationship with God (Galatians 4:6, 1 John 3:1, John 10:29, John 10:30, John 20:17, Mark 14:36, Matthew 6:9, Matthew 10:32, Matthew 12:50, New King James Bible, 1982). The theme that emerged from the descriptions of the participant's experiences and views of God as a father attachment figure are supported by the Bible and the literature.

### **God is Close**

The second theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was recognizing that God is close. The participants reported their perception of God to be close to them was part of how they experienced God to be a secure attachment figure who is near in proximity. The participants indicated having reassurance in acknowledging God's supernatural presence as being omnipresent. The participants describe their experiences with physical closeness to God when they perceived that God is watchful over everything. Some of the participants described their experience of acknowledging God's nearness which served as a reminder that they were not alone when they felt doubt even if they could not physically see God, they felt God's reassurance as they called out his name. Participants acknowledged that God is always close to them relationally and sometimes they can ignore that God is nearby when they do not acknowledging his spiritual presence. When participants stated choosing to acknowledge God's presence through prayer or calling out his name, this helped to bridges the perceived gap in physical distance between them and God. Descriptions made by the participants to seek out being close to God indicated engaging in prayer, singing, attending church, and communicating with God. Other physical actions that were reported by the participants to draw close to God included raising their hands in religious



worship and kneeling in a posture of physical surrender as a form of openness to acknowledge God's presence. The participants stated engaging in prayer as one of the main methods of physical actions to help them feel close to God. Others indicated experiencing the closeness of God by attending church services. In addition, participants indicated their supernatural closeness to God has been a loving experience that they perceived as mystical and evolving. Participants stated they noticed a day-to-day desire to become closer to God as they continued to experience the goodness of God toward them and others. God's close presence was described by a participant as being transcendent and intimately involved in his everyday life. Another participant stated remaining close to God and acknowledging God's presence when he was alone in the hospital, which helped him cope with the effects of past physical health issues. Lastly, participants stated experiencing God's spiritual presence in public and in private settings reminds them that God is a close attachment figure.

According to attachment theory, one of the attachment criteria is maintaining proximity to the attachment figure (Nygaard et al., 2020). The proximity maintenance was introduced by Bowlby (1969) as a protective biological function in an infant that serves to keep their physical and emotional proximity to their attachment figure. In prior research conducted by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2016) religion and faith-based beliefs may increase the perception of the view of God as being close and accessible. The main form of obtaining and maintaining that close proximity to God is by prayer (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). In the finding for this study, participants indicated their actions to engage in prayer allowed them to feel physically close to God and to acknowledge his presence near to them. Engaging in prayer as a method of seeking proximity to God was

supported in this study and within prior research studies as a form of maintaining religious attachment figure. The participants indicated recognizing God is close because of his supernatural presence provided them with a sense of feeling protected and reassured. Furthermore, participants stated engaging in signing, raising their hands, and kneeling as expressions to feel close to God's supernatural presence. These findings of engaging in physical actions and postures to seek out close proximity to God were different from other research findings previously reviewed. This can possibly be due to all the participants identifying as Christians and the physical action of kneeling, hand raising, and singing are commonly acceptable behaviors in the Christian faith. The findings in the study conducted by Nygaard et al. (2020) reported similarities with participants characterizing the view of God as omnipresent and closely accessible. In addition, research has indicated the development of mental schemas that are noncorporeal when reflecting the view of God and his omnipresent nature (Granqvist, 2020). In attachment theory, proximity attachment is indicated to be one of the attachment criteria in an attachment figure and according to the findings in this study participants sought an attachment relationship to God by recognizing God is closely accessible.

The Bible teaches that the nature of God is that of an omnipresent deity that is everywhere since before the beginning of creation and God's presence will never be absent (Jeremiah 23:24, Job 34:21, 1 Kings 8:27, Proverbs 15:3, Psalm 139:7-10, New King James Bible, 1982). God is close in proximity and the Scriptures indicate that if an individual seeks out to God, he is within reach (Acts 17:27, New King James Bible, 1982). The findings regarding the participants resorting to prayer as a method to approach God and acknowledge his supernatural presence is encouraged throughout the Scriptures

and serves as reminder that God is continually available (Jeremiah 29:12, 1 John 5:14, Psalm 145:18, New King James Bible, 1982). The church can serve as a constant community where God's supernatural presence can be sought as the Bible states where two or more are gathered in God's name he will be there and, in the study, participants indicated attending church to feel close in proximity to God (Matthew 18:20, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, some participants stated engaging in physical actions and postures of worship and surrender to draw close to God as a sign of recognizing his spiritual presence (Isaiah 12:5, Psalm 63:3-4, Psalm 95:6, Psalms 104:33, New King James Bible, 1982). In the Christian faith God is believed to be omnipresent, which provides support for God being close continuously.

### **God as Protector**

The third theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was that of God as a protector. The participants reported experiencing the protection of God in their lives which influenced their view of God as an attachment figure that is stronger, safe haven, and a secure base. Participants described their view of God as their protector which allowed them to feel safe when exploring their environment. Other participants indicated feeling an overall sense of stable protection from God and receiving reassurance regardless of their exposure to dangerous physical threat in their workplace as law enforcement officers, first responders, and military service members. Participants stated feeling peace knowing they have God in their lives protecting them constantly and having the assurance as Christians that God is accessible and will never leave them, which helped them to deal with any fear presented from dangerous encounters. Some participants indicated being in near death

accidents and experiencing physical health issues that led them to count on God's protection to care for their health, healing, and physical protection. A few characteristics that were used to describe the view of God as protector were that of being intuitive and all knowing. A participant indicated experiencing a natural disaster as his home was hit by a hurricane, and he indicated seeking God's protection to help him navigate the situation with confidence that God would intervene. Participants identified God as their source of physical security when experiencing a perceived threat.

The findings in the study regarding participants viewing God as a protector are supported by prior research on the attachment theory criteria of an attachment figure being perceived as a secure base and safe haven that is constantly available (Granqvist, 2020). When the participants described facing danger or threat in their lived experiences, they indicated seeking out to God as they perceived God as a secure attachment figure capable of taking charge in protecting them from their situation. When the participants reported being in life threatening situations or environment, they stated being reminded mentally that God serves as their ultimate protector. This response is typical when an individual is faced with a dangerous situation the attachment system behaviors are triggered and the individual will seek out safety behaviors in their attachment (Granqvist, 2020). The attachment behaviors serve the individual to restore closeness to the attachment figure and seek proximity (Granqvist, 2020; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). In children these attachment behaviors of proximity seeking are often shown in children crying, screaming, or holding on to the parent tightly to obtain their attention (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). These attachment behaviors for the Christian participants included faith-based attachment strategies such as calling out to God to help them navigate their

situation, reciting scriptures, and drawing to God's promises to protect them as a form of coping with the distress. Christians are reminded of God's promises of his protective capabilities and power as God is often described in the Bible as being like a "strong tower, refuge, strength, peace, most high, rock, fortress, and stronghold" (Proverbs 18:10, Psalm 46:1, Psalm 71:3, Psalm 91:9-10, New King James Bible, 1982). According to the Bible, God's promises offer hope during challenging times by reassuring Christians that God will walk beside them during trials to provide strength and protection for those that call upon the name of God (Psalm 27:1, Psalm 91:15, New King James Bible, 1982). The Scriptures also indicate to trust God with all of their heart and when they are afraid to not fear mankind as God has power over evil and he will save them from their enemies (Psalm 138:7, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, New King James Bible, 1982). This is relevant in the finding as some of the participants in the study indicated being exposed to severe life-threatening encounters with others where they could have been killed while doing their job. Participants reported being reminded of God as protector when experiencing distress, they were able to feel safe and that they were under God's sovereign care. The safety and security that the participants shared from their experiences with God as protector are indicated to be similar to those found in a parent-child secure attachment.

### **God as a Comforter**

The fourth theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was God as a comforter. The Christian men in the study perceived God as a comforter when they experienced a potential threat, danger, or distress in their life. The descriptions of the participant's view of God were identified to be those of God serving as a comforter that meets the attachment needs of a secure base

and safe haven in their relationship. Participants shared that in moments of distress from their daily lives they would seek out to God to experience a sense of comfort from their distress. Participants stated finding peace and reassurance from the comfort God offered when they were feeling fear, worry, anger, or discouraged. Some participants stated God is the first person they seek out when they experienced doubt in a difficult situation, and they were able to find comfort in their relationship with God. One participant shared a story of receiving a difficult news from a doctor of potential infertility and cancer as a young man. That participant stated feeling distressed over the news which led to him calling out to God for comfort and obtain a sense of peace over his situation. Other participants stated seeking comfort from God through prayer when experiencing conflict in relationships which helped to reassure them about the situation. The participants indicated their attachment to God has helped them perceive negative events or trials as temporary and indicated being able to overcome them with ease by seeking the comfort of God. Some participants stated being away from their family members and identified God as their source of emotional comfort that provides them daily reassurance. The participants described their view of God as comforter that often brings out emotions of peace and calmness in their lives. Participants shared when they experience stress during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, they were able to seek out comfort from God's promises and lean on God's caring character as indicated in the Bible. Some of the participants stated their comfort comes from the Scriptures and seeking the Holy Spirit. Participants indicated feeling optimistic that any situations they encountered would work out for them and if not, the participants stated feeling a sense of comfort knowing they would be with God in his eternal presence. Other participants stated working in high tension jobs as

crisis intervention responders and reported having a sense of calmness after seeking out God to help them through the difficult crisis situation. In addition, some participants described having gone through family loss and they attributed it was the calming comfort from God that allowed them to help others during the grieving process. Participants perceived their relational attachment to God served as comfort and certainty of their permanent attachment to God.

The constructs regarding the view of God as a comforter are indicative of perceiving God as a secure base. In attachment theory, a secure attachment figure is considered a safe haven and secure base when they are perceived as having the ability to provide the needed emotional support to the individual when it is necessary (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Nygaard et al., 2020). This emotional support can be displayed in different methods such as providing reassurance, comfort, delight and a sense of security when the individual is in distress or exploring the environment (Hoffman et al., 2006). The view of God as an attachment figure will be impacted by the personal and emotional experiences the individual has had with God. In this study, the participants stated having multiple life circumstances where they resorted to God for comfort as they viewed God as a caring father. The participants indicated having lived personal experiences with their faith which has allowed them to have this image of God as a comforter. In prior literature, the image of God has been portrayed positively regarding God's involvement in the lives of individuals and those studies indicated God's image as compassionate, caring, and a helper (Counted, 2016). Research has indicated God concepts are developed from the type of language used in faith teachings to describe a divine entity such as God (Counted, 2015). These God

concepts that derive from the Bible may influence the cognitive schemas that become associated with the relationship to God within the faith (Counted, 2015). Christian traditions supported the practice of God being the ultimate comforter for all who believe, praise, and seek God (2 Corinthians 1:3, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, in the Scriptures, Jesus made multiple references of seeking comfort when experiencing hardship, he encouraged individuals to draw closer to God to receive comforting support (Matthew 5:4, New King James Bible, 1982). In the Bible, the Holy Spirit has been indicated to be a helper and comforter sent by God to be with Christian believers (John 14:16-17, John 15:26, John 16:7, New King James Bible, 1982). The participants in this study addressed their God image of God as a comforter that was developed from having the understanding through their faith to seek comfort from God and they indicated having personal experiences with receiving comfort when they were in need. Participants identified finding comfort in their secure relationship with God. The literature and the Bible support the findings in this study as the participants identified finding comfort in their secure attachment to God that resembles the security needs of a secure base and safe haven.

### **Affectionate God**

A fifth theme that emerged when participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure was an affectionate God. The participants described their experiences and view of God as an attachment figure that is affectionate and resembles characteristic traits of a secure base and safe haven attachment figure. Other participants shared their experience with God to be similar to a great friend with a subtle easiness in the relationship interaction. The view of God as being affectionate were



described as God expressing his heart by being loving and caring to them which provided a sense of security in God. Positive characteristics regarding the view of God as an attachment figure were reported to influence some of the participant's strong emotional closeness to God by feeling blessed, accepted, and loved by God which helped to cope with any negative emotions of shame or guilt in the relationship. One of participants indicated experiencing God's emotional affection expressed in his connection, love, stability, and reliable attachment. Others described viewing God as a good old friend whom they feel excited about when they engage in relationship, and it brings up emotions of warmth and security. Some participants reported experiencing God's affectionate attachment to be personable, loving, kind, and caring. In addition, participants indicated experiencing their relationship with God to be emotionally close and with whom they can receive and express their emotions in an intimate relationship. Participants reported experiencing a sense of peace knowing they have a loving relationship with God who loves them and shows his affection always. The experiences and view of God as an affectionate attachment figure was described in the participant's stories as they stated being emotionally supported and securely invested in their relationship with God. All of the participants stated feeling some type of emotional experience from receiving and seeking affection found in God as an attachment figure.

In the literature, God representations take forms in two dimensions, the first one consist of cognitive and doctrinal beliefs which are based on how God is viewed by a person (Stulp et al., 2019). The second dimension of God representations include emotional and experiential feelings as they related to the person's experience in relationship with God (Stulp et al., 2019). The participants described their view of God's

identity of who he is to them and what he does for them when addressing God as affectionate. Participants reported feeling that God is personable and is easy to connect with emotionally. In a study conducted on at risk girls, they found that the girls used positive affect words to describe their perception of God including “accepting, giving, loving, nice, good, peace, beautiful, and perfect” (Mitchell et al., 2012). Participants in this study described God in terms related to relational image and seeing God as a good friend that is appreciative and supportive. The findings in this study are supported by those found in a study on youth who identified their view of God as being “non-judgmental, supportive, and trusting” and he offers “guidance, love, companionship and stability” in a relationship (Mitchell et al., 2012). The descriptions shared on how the Christian men in this study viewed God were indicated as God being caring and they experienced God as warm, loving, and kind. Participants identified God with terms of affection as they indicated experiencing a loving personal relationship with God. The findings from the study of the youth girls differed according to age as younger girls described God in terms of how they viewed God in society and older girls described terms of how they experience God personally, which support similarities with the findings of the adults in this study (Mitchell et al., 2012). Based on attachment theory, mental representations regarding a caregiver develop throughout childhood and these influence internal working models regarding an attachment figure (Stulp et al., 2019). The internal working models formed throughout development play a role in God representations and how an individual views and experiences God (Stulp et al., 2019). In this study some of the participants reported having positive views of God based on their past teachings and ongoing lived experiences with God. All of the participants indicated

currently having a close emotional relationship with God and being able to experience God's affection in their attachment.

The Bible makes refers to God having and expressing emotions that are perfect and unchanging (Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17, Malachi 3:6, Numbers 23:19, New King James Bible, 1982). When addressing the theme of God being affectionate, it is important to address that affection is a choice of the self to either act, display, or respond to an emotion toward another. The Bible reveals the character of God's emotions to include love, kind, joy, glad, compassion, delight, grief, sadness, anger, regret, patient, sorrow, happy, and giving (Deuteronomy 28:63, Ephesians 1:9, Isaiah 47:6, Isaiah 53:3, Isaiah 53:4, 1 John 4:8, Mark 3:5, Matthew 9:36, Matthew 23:37, Psalm 2:4, Psalm 21:6, 1 Samuel 15:11, New King James Bible, 1982). According to the Scriptures indicating God's active display of love and response of compassion to humanity support the consistent character of God made known in his promises and through his actions (Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17, New King James Bible, 1982). The affections of God described by participants in this study indicated how they experience God to be love, appreciative, accessible, supportive, accepting, stable, personable, relational, kind, caring, understanding, warm, reliable, secure, blessing, and intimate. In the study participants indicated their relationship with God changed overtime as it become closer when they were able to open up emotionally to receiving God's affection toward them. Participants reported the ability to experience God's affection in their life has brought a sense of security in their attachment relationship with God. In the Christian faith, one of the most significant acts of affection from God toward humanity is the gift of his only son Jesus for the salvation of the world (John 3:16, New King James Bible, 1982). The majority of

participants identified their source of emotional support and where they receive their affection is from their God attachment.

### **Research Question 2**

How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?

### **Distressful Life Experiences**

When describing the lived experiences of the Christian men with forming a secure attachment to God several themes emerged. The first theme was participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God were indicated by learning to cope with distressful life experiences. These distressful life experiences were shared in the narratives of the participants as they indicated undergoing several challenging situations and seeking out to God for help. The participants indicated trusting God with their distressful situations brought them closer in their God attachment as they felt secured by God. Participants shared the influence and the consequence of their response to the situation as it related to their attachment style at the time and their relationship with God. In the interviews the participants described their personal encounters with God in the mist of their suffering. One participant shared going through a difficult time with his family that led to him experiencing depression, grief, and suicidal thoughts leading to him developing a plan to end his life. This participant indicated during the night he was going to execute the plan to end his life, he experienced an encounter with God where he became immobile and heard God speaking to him. The participant stated this encounter with God saved his life and allowed him to work on improving his character to seeks out a more secure relationship with God. A participant

shared the experience of grief and loss after his wife experienced multiple miscarriages during pregnancy. The participant stated the after the loss he sought out comfort from God to cope with his emotions and the second time the participant stated becoming angry with God, however he stated he was able to remain close to God by talking with him about the hardship. Another participant shared his early experiences with having an insecure attachment growing up leading to feelings of rejection and isolation. The participant stated seeking multiple romantic relationships at an early age to cope with the distress and lack of being able to obtain secure attachment in the past. Some of the participants stated their experiences with their attachment to God have changed throughout their lives. One participant stated having a relationship with God and growing up he recalls feelings of conviction by the choices he would make which led to feeling distress. The participant stated he would remind himself of God's love for him and experiencing feelings of comfort once he would begin to get close to God.

Another participant indicated experiencing anxiety that led to severe panic attacks during his college years that led to isolation out of fear to experience symptoms in public. Some of the distressful hardships experienced by some of the participants include having their marriage and family separated due to spousal infidelity that eventually led to divorce. In addition, one participant shared having multiple medical emergencies after experiencing a stroke that left him in a coma for three weeks and he was also diagnosed with stage four cancer. This participant indicated having to undergo rigorous treatments and therapies to help him recover from the medical health issues. Despite the distressful lived experiences these participants underwent, they shared seeking out to God for help and trusting God with their distressful situation because of their close attachment.

The response of the participants in this study is typical as indicated in previous research, when an individual is experiencing distress in a situation this will set off the activation of attachment behavioral system. These attachment behavior systems occur as a result of perceiving the situation or experience to be dangerous, threatening, and harmful to their physical or mental health (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Granqvist, 2020). In the stories shared by the participants some experienced mental distress shown by severe anxiety, suicidal ideation, grief, relationship conflict, divorce, isolation, loneliness, and life transitions that presented as threatening. Other participants described stories related to physical harm and danger to their life as they experienced severe medical health conditions including cancer, a stroke, and being in a coma. When the participants described their lived experiences, some reported being in a different stage in their relationship with God compared to where they are now as adults. The attachment behavioral system response to seek the desired comfort when in distress will differ based on attachment style. The attachment hypothesis has indicated in previous research the two reasons a person will seek out attachment to God which consist of compensation and correspondence (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). In the findings for this study the participants were compensating in their attachment to God as they experienced life changing events, emotional distress, and insecure attachment. In the story shared by one of the participants who experienced multiple life-threatening health conditions, he reported trusting in God that he would be healed from his conditions, and he reported now being cancer free. In the study on patients in palliative care conducted by Loetz et al. (2013) they found that participants with secure attachment had more success with coping with their illness and were more compliant with their treatment. In addition, the study

conducted on women experiencing breast cancer diagnosis, patients who had a more secure attachment to God reported less avoidance in coping with the diagnosis and the treatment (Gall & Bilodeau, 2020; Scheffold et al., 2019).

When a few participants in this study stated suffering from anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts some of them reported their relationship with God was not as close as it is now as an adult. The findings in this study are supported by those reported by Buser et al. (2020) where college students who experienced more mental health issues presented with avoidant or anxious attachment to God over students who had a more secure attachment to God presented with less mental health issues or suicidal/self-injury behaviors. In addition, studies conducted on grief and loss have indicated that individuals who reported being active in their religion and having an attachment to God, were able to cope with the emotional hardship of the grief and loss process more effectively (Jueckstock, 2018).

For Christians part of the teachings of the faith identify the trials and suffering that many in the Scriptures have experience in their journey. This is particularly modeled in the life of Jesus Christ for which he endured a great amount of suffering until death for the sins of humanity. These teaching may influence how Christian's view trials in life as being part of their walk in their faith as indicated in the Scriptures taught by Jesus when he reassures his disciples to have peace as he warns them of troubles in life and reminds them to be confident as he, Jesus, has conquered the world (John 16:33, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, the Scriptures also teach Christian believers to express joy during hardship as they place their hope in Jesus who will not disappoint them and to engage in behaviors of prayer and thanksgiving to God during those difficult

circumstances (Romans 12:12, New King James Bible, 1982). In addition, throughout the Bible the words in reference to do not fear or do not be anxious are often stated in multiple verses of the Scriptures serving as a reminder for Christians to trust in God's care and to provide them with hope (Isaiah 41:10, Matthew 6:34, Philippians 4:6-7, Psalm 23:4, New King James Bible, 1982). The Bible provides examples of a variety of individuals who endured hardship and trials in their life. According to the scriptures, King David experienced several moments of distress, anxiety, depression, grief, failure, loneliness, illness, and physical dangers often seeking God for comfort as indicated throughout the Book of Psalms (Psalm 23:4-6, New King James Bible, 1982). In this study, the participants described their response to their attachment behavior system by calling out to God, trusting God, seeking God's comfort, and reminding themselves of God's love for them during the distressful life experiences they endured.

### **Avoiding or Distancing from God**

The second theme emerged from the participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God included the process of responding to their avoiding or distancing from God. Participants described their experience when responding to any perceived avoiding or distancing from God to be emotionally distressful. One participant shared going through an ongoing internal mental battle when he felt his thoughts about God were being attacked negatively, impacting his faith in God's existence. This participant stated he displayed a drastic change in his mood and experienced suffering over his wavered faith, which led to him seeking help from a friend and reading a self-help book to address support with his thoughts. Another participant stated experiencing a distancing from God after suffering the loss of his child and feeling



skepticism over God not answering his prayers. Other participants indicating despite knowing about God, they experienced avoidance toward God by doing the opposite of what was being taught to them in Church and by their parents. Participants reported during their separation from God they resorted to making poor choices in order to fill their emotional lack or absence. The cycle of going astray from God continued for some participants when they experienced God helping them and they would eventually run away again. One participant reported having a shift in his beliefs about God when he was studying in college, and he began to be influenced by secular teachings that did not align with his views of God leading to him abandoning his faith and becoming an atheist for some years. This participant stated the distancing was due to him feeling disappointed about what he was taught regarding God and the God he eventually experienced.

Participants reported experiencing distancing from God as they dealt with emotions of despair, depression, loneliness, shame, guilt, and anxiety. Other participants addressed feeling a sense of distance or avoidance toward God when they engaged in sin and there was a lack of repentance over their sin and if there was repentance the perceived distance disappeared. One participant indicated experiencing a separation from God when he felt guilt over his life choices that did not glorify God, and he would avoid thinking about God to separate himself from the emotions of distress. Participants discussed separating themselves from God as a result of becoming busy with school and work which led to them feeling overwhelmed and not prioritizing their time in relationship with God. A participant shared experiencing separation from God during the time his parents divorced, and he began to question his circumstances. Another incident he experienced a separation from God was when he was diagnosed with a medical issue,

and he became anxious and uncertain about his future. This participant was able to acknowledge his perceived distance from God and took steps to become close to God again through prayer, going to church, and listening to worship music. Some participants stated having moments in their lives where they knew about God and were not fully committed in a relationship with God. According to one participant, he would attend church and was also living a secular life for most of his early years until he became a middle-aged adult. The change began after this participant prayed a prayer of surrender and allowed God to begin working in his life. Other participants indicated feeling a separation from God when they reported withholding parts of themselves from God and not fully surrendering.

The attachment behavioral system according to studies on attachment theory, are survival behaviors that serve to protect and keep an infant close to their attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1989; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). These attachment behaviors are activated from perceived danger or threat in the environment or a situation leading to seek behaviors to draw close in proximity to the attachment figure (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). When an infant experienced a long period of time separated from their attachment figures, the infant showed behaviors of protest, despair, and detachment from their caregiver (Karen, 1994; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). In this study the participants indicated experiencing a level of avoidance or distance from God during a period in their lives when they were facing distress, depression, loneliness, shame, guilt, stress, sin, and anxiety. Those experiences led to the participants displaying attachment behaviors of protest in the forms of disagreeing with their beliefs and engaging in opposite behaviors that drew them further away from God. Other participants reported engaging in despair as

they experienced hopelessness in their situation and giving up on the idea of hope that God was close or available to help them. In addition, participants indicated engaging in attachment behaviors of detachment by separating themselves from God emotionally or going away from their faith. The experiences of the participants when responding to their attachment behavioral system activation to God are supported in the literature as indicated in the effects of deprivation when prolonged separation to the attachment figure occurs (Karen, 1994; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). In this study, all of the participants indicated with time they were able to obtain or return to a more secure attachment style with God. The experiences of the participants in this study which support the basic attachment principles are shown in participant's attempt to restore their relationship with God by seeking proximity from the attachment figure by drawing closer to God when a perceived danger or an unknown situation was presented.

The Bible provides several stories that demonstrate examples of when characters in the Scriptures experienced attachment behaviors of protest, despair, and detachment from God. As previously stated, prolonged separation from an attachment figure can result in the individual displaying attachment behaviors toward that caregiver, which are similar to the experiences shared by the participants in response to separating themselves from God (Ephesians 2:12; Isaiah 53:6; Isaiah 59:1-2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). The story of Jonah demonstrates a response of avoidance and distancing from God. In the book of Jonah, the Bible states that Jonah ran away from God's presence after he disapproved of the plan God had for the Ninevites to be given a chance to repent (Jonah 1:1-2, New King James Bible, 1982). Jonah disobeyed God and refused to go preach to Nineveh and instead went a different direction to Tarshish (Jonah

1:3, New King James Bible, 1982). Jonah left the manifest presence of God and detached himself from God's plan for him. Jonah's decisions caused him to experience being thrown into the sea during a storm and in the belly of a whale fish that God had sent (Jonah 1:10-17, New King James Bible, 1982). This story is an example of willingly disobeying God's instruction and leaving the presence of God that created a distancing or separation in the relationship. Participants indicated when they perceived an avoidance or distancing from the presence of God, they reported feeling disconnected emotionally as they had separate themselves from experiencing the peace and joy that can be found from the proximity to God. The Scriptures affirm Christians of their access to God and reassuring believers that there is nothing that will separate them from God's love found in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28-29, New King James Bible, 1982).

Furthermore, Job experienced despair and hopelessness after he endured the loss of his possessions, family, and his health (Job 1:13-19, Job 2:7-8, New King James Bible, 1982). During the trials, Job felt abandoned and questioned his situation on why God would allow this to occur. Despite the great suffering Job endured, he maintained his faith in God and was restored. In the stories shared in the Scriptures, it was not their lack of faith in God, it was their response to the perceived lack of reply they expected from God that led to them feeling deprived and separated from God. The perceived deprivation to the attachment figure's proximity when in distress can lead to the attachment behaviors of despair, protest, and detachment when the attachment figure is not perceived as available (Karen, 1994; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). As indicated in Psalm 34:18, God is constantly present and close to help through the feeling of despair (New King James Bible, 1982). Participants describe their experience when responding to the perceived

avoiding or distancing from God as distressful and impacting their attachment to God. The participants indicated when they addressed their perceived separation from God, their attachment with God became closer and more secured.

### **Seeking Reassurance in Life Circumstances**

The third theme gathered from the findings regarding the experiences of the participants with forming a secure attachment to God was the process of seeking reassurance in life circumstances. The experiences shared by the participants were those of feeling that God has been reliable in their lives and this allowed them to trust God which brought them great reassurance regarding their God attachment. Participants stated that having a relationship with God improved their life in general and allows them to easily deal with daily situation. One participant stated he was recently injured in a car accident and shared his response to the recovery has been that of finding reassurance that God is with him during the process of healing. The participant stated he has been seeking understanding and reassurance to help him cope with the limitations the accident has brought upon his daily activities. Participants stated seeking God in prayer, calling on to God, and thanking God has allowed them to feel a sense of comfort. The participants stated their attachment to God became closer as they acknowledged that God is in control, and he can be trusted. Participants stated when they experienced trials, they found reassurance in their circumstances by seeking guidance and protection from God. A participant stated one situation when he was questioning his decision to have a career change and he reported he was able to receive confirmation from God that provided reassurance regarding the new career he was pursuing in counseling. After experiencing a stroke, one participant stated being with debilitating health in the hospital and he sought

out God to help him with the recovery from the stroke. This participant stated part of his recovery treatment was to attend rehab to learn to walk again and he attributes his recovery to a miracle from God as he reported seeking God's reassurance over his situation while he was in the hospital. The participants reported experiencing a sense of peace in seeking and finding reassurance that God will continually be there for them in every life circumstance.

In the literature for attachment theory, it has been indicated that attachment in an infant is activated by the attachment system when they experience distress in their environment (Allen & Tan, 2016.) The behavioral response from the attachment system activation will be influenced depending on the type of attachment style the individual had with their primary attachment figure. Often when a more secure attachment style is present the infant will seek out proximity from the primary attachment figure in order to obtain comfort and reassurance to deal with the experienced distress (Allen & Tan, 2016). Previous studies conducted by Counted (2016) on Christian youth and their attachment language to God as an attachment figure found that youth who reported a secure relationship with God stated more positive perception of God in their language descriptions and indicated having the ability to deal with stressors and interactions. In this study the Christian men indicated having a secure attachment to God and seeking God during all of their situations. The participants indicated engaging in prayer and calling on to God to help ease the distress they were experiencing during particular life circumstances. This finding was similar to other studies in the literature where individuals indicated praying as a form of keeping a close relationship with God (Granqvist, 2020). Participants in this study stated gaining a sense of comfort, peace, and

reassurance knowing that God was close to them and available all the time. The experiences shared by the participants indicated when their attachment behavioral system was activated from their experiences, their behaviors to the situation were influenced by the internal working models formed toward God and their expectations of God's response toward them. The attachment theory criteria that were supported by the shared experiences of the participants in this study and from prior literature on attachment to God indicate that God is perceived to be omnipresent and meets the criterion of a secure attachment figure by having proximity, availability, and accessibility (Granqvist, 2020).

The theme of seeking reassurance in life circumstances for Christians is supported in scripture found in the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible. Since the beginning of creation, the scriptures in the book of Genesis provides an indication of the relationship Adam and Eve had with God and the reassurance offered from God as he provided for all of their needs in the garden (Genesis 2, New King James Bible, 1982). In addition, the Bible has indicated numerous scriptures of the word of God providing comfort and reassurance found in God to everyone who seeks him (Deuteronomy 31:8-9, Isaiah 41:10, Psalm 55:22, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, the participants indicated seeking God in prayer daily to give thanksgiving and seek God's help when faced with a troubling circumstance which is encouraged in the Scriptures to not fear and instead make their request and petition known to God (Philippians 4:6-7, New King James Bible, 1982). During the interviews, the participants indicated that as Christians their faith was often tested in daily circumstances, and they indicated it was their consistent trust in God that has allowed them to continue to actively practice their faith. The participants indicated the Bible provides the reassurance of the past and the future as

those are God's promises and they have developed a relationship to trust in God's Word despite the difficulties they have encountered it is the reassurance of God that has helped them get through their life circumstances (Isaiah 26:4, John 14:1, Joshua 1:9, Proverbs 3:5-6, New King James Bible, 1982). The participants indicated seeking reassurance from God during life circumstances has provided hope and comfort during trials that has overall improved their attachment to God throughout their life.

### **Understanding Life Experiences**

The fourth theme was developed when participants described their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God included the process of understanding their life experiences. The participants addressed that understanding their own unique lived experiences allowed them to gain perspective on their past which helped them draw closer to God in their relationship attachment. One participant stated after his mother passed away, he began to attend church again and it was during that time that he began to gain insight into the anger he had been experiencing. The participant stated the more he attended church it allowed him to open up toward understanding his anger he had toward God. This participant indicated he was able to gain insight into the good and poor decisions he made in the past and the impact on the distance in his relationship from God. This participant was able to gain realistic understanding that when bad things happened to him, it was not God's fault and that God still cared for him even if the outcome was not as he expected. Lastly, this participant stated he was able to understand the impact of the relationship he had with his father as he questioned his love and he later realized that his father did love him. The understanding of this participant's experiences led to the reconciling of his relationship with his father and with God. Some



of the participants stated understanding their life experiences allowed them to gain clarity in their current life and it drew them closer to their faith and God. One participant indicated drawing closer to God after he was able to reframe understanding his parent's divorce. Other participants described the process toward understanding their life experiences as confusing and at times it was desperate as the participants reported they wanted to make sense of their situations. An outlook that helped one participant was acknowledging the dissatisfaction with the temporal relationships and maintaining an optimistic mindset of wanting to find something better that was discovered in God. One participant stated that despite experiencing positive or negative situations he continued to aim at recognizing that something can be learned from every experience as they can be opportunities to draw you closer to God and help develop a secure attachment. This participant stated that at times it can be common to draw closer to God when positive experiences are occurring and he acknowledged that either positive or negative experience, it is a chance for individuals to understand how God is interceding in their lives.

Furthermore, one participant stated having to experience the lowest point in his life leading to desperation that promoted his need to deal with past experiences. This participant stated he was serving the military and attending a program to be a counselor when his student status in the program was at risk of being dropped from the program due to his lack of participation in his personal emotional work. This participant stated he had to acknowledge his fear or showing vulnerability around others and understand why it was difficult for him to open up to the group when everyone in the program was participating. The participant stated he began to attend meetings for Adult Children of

Alcoholics, and it was through those meetings that he was able to understand that he was not alone with his experiences. This participant reported understanding his life experiences allowed him to gain a perspective of a merciful God and he was able to surrender. Other participants viewed their life experiences as trials they had to endure in order to learn and become the person they are today through God's guidance. One participant shared about his encounters with understanding his life experiences that began when he attended a Celebrate Recovery group, and he began to open up and understand about experiencing anxiety, anger, trust, and relationship issues. This participant stated this platform allowed him to process past hurt surrounding the estrange relationship he had with his father growing up and the impact it had on not having a father figure. This participant stated the change and healing process has been ongoing throughout the years and it has influenced the relationship that he now has with God. The participants shared about the experiences endured in their lives which allowed them to later reflect and understand the meaning and purpose that was developed out of those experiences.

According to the literature review on attachment styles, a study conducted by Dansby Olufowote et al. (2020) found that secure attachment in adults can be obtained when interpersonal and intrapsychic changes were made by the individuals. These changes required a higher level of interpersonal processing and making peace with the past to help them move toward a more secure attachment (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). Intrapsychic changes found in previous research studies included surrendering a victim mentality over past experiences and re-examine their identity and self-worth (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). The previous research findings are similar to the theme found in this study as participants stated dealing with past experiences that were difficult

and understanding those lived experiences helped them to make amends with their past experiences. In addition, in this study the participants indicated that by understanding their experiences they become closer in their relationship attachment to God. Participants in this study stated that by understanding their lived experiences they were able to re-evaluate their relationships with past parental attachment figures and release any experiences of grief or loss. The participants started reaching a point in life when they were willing to address on a deeper level their past experiences with anxiety, anger, and neglect which allowed them to gain emotional growth for what they had endured. In the study by Nygaard et al. (2020) religious healing experiences and earned security were explored amongst Christian participants and the finding indicated perceived healing and life changing experiences after participants reported having encounters with God. These encounters with God allowed the participants to begin a change in internal working models toward their view of secure attachment figures and they drew closer to God (Nygaard et al., 2020). The finding from Nygaard et al. (2020) is comparable to those in this study as the participants indicated understanding their life experiences allowed them to view God as safe to help them repair their emotional healing and developed a stronger relationship with God. Some of the participants stated by focusing on the positive and negative experiences they were able to reflect on their gratitude toward God for being with them during those experiences. The process of understanding life experiences allowed the participants to gain clarity over their lives and recreate new meaning to their experiences that helped their attachment style.

When the Christian men in this study described the understanding of their life experiences, they often attributed being able to reach this state of understanding due to

their faith in God. The participants addressed being able to emotionally grow from past experiences after they were able to view those experiences from a different perspective. Throughout the Bible there are stories of individuals who experienced a variety of situations from which they learned valuable lessons from their hardships and victories. In the Bible the story of Joseph and his brothers who sold him to the Ishmaelites out of hate serve as an example of experiencing hardship, as Joseph was separated from his father and betrayed by his brothers (Genesis 37-50, New King James Bible, 1982). This life experience continued for many years and Joseph later realized his hardship had occurred as part of his living testimony and faith in God's divine providence to help the survival of the Jewish people. Joseph expressed his understanding of this experience to his brothers once he reunites with them again "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:20, New King James Bible, 1982). Similar to the story of Joseph, the participants in this study reported undergoing some challenging experiences that they later created meaning and purpose for the endured hardship. In Philippians 3:13 Christians are encouraged to forget what is behind them and focusing on what is ahead of them, which is a concept that can facilitate for individuals to make peace with their past while promoting interpersonal growth (New King James Bible, 1982). The promises that are provided for Christian as indicated in Romans 8:28 remind believers that all things work for good to those who love God and are called according to God's purpose can serve as reassurance in understanding live experiences (New King James Bible, 1982). In this study all of the participants indicated developing a strong ability to trust and place their faith in God regarding their understanding of the past and current life experiences. In Ephesians 1:7-

10, the apostle Paul addresses the redemption and forgiveness of sin found in Jesus Christ that offers Christian believers wisdom and insight on the purpose for them on earth and in heaven (New King James Bible, 1982). Part of understanding their life experiences included acknowledging past poor choices by repenting of any sin and amending their relationship with God through surrender to his plan for them. Participants stated they were able to draw closer to God as an attachment figure and heal from past experiences as they continued to allow God to help them repair and recreate new meaning to their life experiences.

### **Open to New Change and Growth**

The fifth theme that was developed in this study from the participants describing their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God included the process of being open to new change and growth. The participants reported being open to new change in their lives was a necessary part of the process to help strengthen their attachment to God and others. The participants stated the new changes were gradual and ongoing changes in their lives were an essential part of their journey toward developing their secure attachment with God. The narratives shared by the participants stated experiencing moments when they decided to open up to new change by learning more about their faith and religion. One participant stated praying for years about moving to a new state and leaving family, friends, and a job behind as he felt this is what God wanted for him to grow his faith in God. This participant stated the transition was frightening to him, yet he made the choice to lean on his trust in God's plan for him and reported this decision has completely changed his life and grew his relationship with God. Some participants reported experiencing different life changing encounters with

God that allowed them to begin the growth process. One participant stated after his mother's death he attended church and he experiencing the service differently compared to before, which allowed him to gain appreciation for the Christian faith. The participant stated having an encounter with God the day he attended church that he had never experienced before, and he decided to continue attending church weekly with his family as this became part of his new life. This participant reported that encounter he experienced led to him wanting to understand God and have a relationship with him. Throughout the process this participant stated his new lifestyle change of attending church has allowed him to become more open with wanting to improve his ability to show vulnerability by understanding and expressing his emotions toward his family and others in his life. The participant indicated he was able to open up to the idea of receiving the unconditional love and acceptance from God as his parent, which the participant indicated drew their relationship closer.

Another participant stated being open to attending meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics was a source of emotional support where he began envisioning a relationship with God was possible for him. This participant stated he had started to open up to the idea of attending church and he experienced a divine encounter when he heard the testimony of a pastor over a television show and the audience was invited to attend the church service which was located across the street from his hotel room. The participant reported he attended the church service, and he was able to experience the Holy Spirit for the first time which opened up his desire to begin incorporating attending church into his life. A participant stated part of the process was being open to allowing God in his heart and being open to drawing closer to God led to the participant experiencing a sense of

peace from his previous fears or struggles. Other participants stated part of the process of being open to change was by listening to what God was communicating to them. One participant stated after 28 years of hearing from God he finally decided to surrender to God's plan for him and he eventually enrolled in a university to pursue a degree in psychology and ministry. Participants indicated their faith and relationship attachment with God has been evolving constantly throughout their lives. Another participant stated he began to open up toward change after he met his now wife and began to evaluate his convictions over how he was living his life. This participant stated he became more open toward becoming emotionally invested in his faith and started to change his lifestyle choices to align accordingly. The participants indicated being open to new change in their lives was a necessary part of the process to help strengthen their attachment to God and others.

The change and growth found in the shared experiences reported from the participants in this study can be explained by the participants having the ability to change their internal working models and revising their expectations and representations in relationship attachments (Waters et al., 2021). In the literature review on attachment theory and change in attachment styles there are ongoing studies that indicate a repair in the individual's internal working models is necessary to influence an activation in the attachment behavioral system that is different than prior attachment style response toward an attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). The participants in this study indicated being open toward the view of God and the idea of attending church influenced their conversion toward appreciating their faith and to prioritize a relationship with God. This finding is similar to those found in the study conducted by Nygaard et al.

(2020) where participants reported experiencing religious healing experiences that led to a conversion to Christianity after experiencing those intimate healing moments that allowed for the participants to take a new direction in their lives. In this study the participants indicated experiencing personable moments surrounding their conversion that they attribute to them being a divine intervention from God and their willingness to allow God emotionally into their hearts. In addition, the participants indicated they were able to make difficult life changes of leaving their past ways of thinking or behaving to transition into a new pattern of thinking about their relationships and focus on the stability they found in God and others in their lives which influence their secure attachment.

A few of the participants who were new to the faith of Christianity stated experiencing an overwhelming physical sensation of the perceived presence of the Holy Spirit when they made the decision to convert during a church service. Other participants who had been Christians for some time indicated hearing the voice of God speaking to them regarding future plans and them making the decision toward being open to new change as they wanted to obeying God's will for them. These finding indicate similarities to those reported in the literature by participants during their spiritual healing experience with God, who reported experiencing tactile sensations, auditory sensations, and vision sensations related to perceiving encounters with an external superpower that welcomed them with a sensation of love which drove the participants to create new changes (Nygaard et al., 2020). Participants in this study stated experiencing the sensation of God's love for them and their willingness to receive God's acceptance served as a motivator to reevaluate their past choices and initiate new change in their lives. Similar



finding by Nygaard et al. (2020) when participants indicated finding new choices and a changed life with new meaning after participants reported their encounters restored and nourished their emotions which allowed them to further explore their lives. For participants in this study, acknowledging their intentional investment in their faith and working through their emotional vulnerability and growth was an area that was reported as a new change for some of the participants. In the findings by Dansby Olufowote et al. (2020) it was indicated that being intentional about attachment change by the participants was part of the meta conditions of secure attachment style change that required deliberate long-term commitment. The participants stated the new changes were gradual and they experienced ongoing growth in their lives. In addition, being open toward incorporating the new changes led to a new start in the participant's life choices and lifestyles.

In the Christian faith, when an individual accepts Jesus Christ as their personal savior from their sins, the process of sanctification and moral change can begin in the individual's life, leading to a creation of something new and conversion from their previous way of living. Throughout the Bible the concept of change and growth are used by God to mold and refine humanity in order to bring them closer in relationship with God. Change in the lives of individuals is often allowed by God to promote spiritual growth and develop a stronger faith in God. This can be seen in the stories of the disciples that Jesus called to follow him and to leave their previous lives behind (Matthew 4:19, New King James Bible, 1982). One of the greatest Bible stories on drastic change and growth can be found in the book of Acts when Saul who was known for persecuting Christians was on his way to Damascus when God appeared to him (Acts 9:1-9, New King James Bible, 1982). Saul who later became the apostle Paul was

converted to become a believer of Jesus Christ and to share the gospel with the world. After Paul's drastic change he also endured tremendous difficulty as he was imprisoned, persecuted, experienced physical issues, and ultimately in his suffering he turned to God for strength which grew his faith (2 Corinthians 6:4-5, 2 Corinthians 11:23-30, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Romans 8:18-39, New King James Bible, 1982). The apostle Paul shared his personal story of redemption and hardship to encourage others in growing their faith and trust in God (Philippians 1:12, Philippians 4:11-12, New King James Bible, 1982). In this study, some of the participants indicated their life began to change in a positive direction after they developed a secure relationship with God.

Furthermore, in the study, multiple participants indicated new change occurred in their lives following their conversion to Christianity after reports of having a divine experience with God. According to the Scriptures in the Bible, new believers are encouraged to put away their old self and to put on the new self that has been found in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 4:22-24, New King James Bible, 1982). This verse serves to describe the leaving behind of the old way of life prior to being a Christian and to move forward with incorporating new changes that are to resemble God as a new believer. Some of the participants stated their hesitancy toward attending church and having a negative image of God that became a barrier between their willingness to open up to any change in their lives. The participants stated being emotionally distant and having to come to terms with being intentional and vulnerable in order to allow God to come into their lives and create the changes necessary. In Isaiah 43:18-19, it encouraged Christians to change the focus from their past experiences and open up to the new things God wants to do for those who believe (New King James Bible, 1982). Participants indicated being

open to appreciating and learning about their new faith allowed them to feel a sense of peace over the direction of their lives. The participants indicated being open to new change in their lives was a necessary part of their experiences toward developing their secure attachment with God.

### **Open Toward Developing Secure Relationships**

The sixth theme was developed from participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God was being open toward developing secure relationships. Participants indicated taking the steps to becoming open toward developing a secure relationship with God has allowed them to apply those practices with their families and others in their lives, which allowed them to slowly accept people into their personal lives and create more secure relationships. One participant started experiencing insecure relationship attachments after he moved to a new state and felt out of place until he became open to letting people connect with him on a deeper level. This participant indicated he attributed his change in attachment style to more secured as he experienced feeling understood and accepted by people that he began to view as a blessing from God. Other participants indicated revisiting past parental relationships allowed them to reflect on the new change they wanted for their relationships, and it led to them making those desired changes. One participant stated reflecting on his relationship with his father growing up allowed him to become open to having a closer relationship with his father in adulthood that lasted until his death. This participant indicated being open to having secure relationships with other people served to model secure attachments in his life that served as a guide to develop healthy relationships with his children and future generations. A few of the participant indicated

their ability to develop secure relationships was attributed to growing up in a Christian home and being exposed to the knowledge in the Bible. This participant stated his attachment to God became closer as he learned to trust God relationally and others in his relationships. Other participants stated they noticed a change in their relationship with God when they moved away from the intellectual knowledge they had of God, to applying the knowledge in an intimate connection with God.

Participants who reported having a secure and positive attachment figure with their parents growing up indicated those childhood experiences played a major role in their ability to be open toward developing secure relationships with others.

A participant shared having undergone severe neglect as a child in his parental relationships that eventually impacted his ability to have healthy relationship attachments. This participant stated after years of challenges in his relationships he was seeking to improve his attachment in relationships and stated his process was to begin changing his perspective of who God is, which allowed him to find permanence in God. The participant indicated after he was able to gain a more secure attachment with God his perspective of relationships was changed, and he later met his now wife of 37 years.

Some participants stated their view and emotional relationship with God became more secured as they continued to study about the character of God. Other participants stated becoming open toward developing a secure relationship with God has allowed them to apply those practices with their families and other relationships in their lives. Participants were able to identify family and friends as a source of where they receive emotional support in their established secure relationships. Some of the participants indicated their relationship with God improved after they met their current spouse. Particularly, one

participant stated after meeting his now wife, he began to feel convicted for his life choices, and this allowed him to re-evaluate his relationship with God and others. This participant stated meeting his wife allowed him to seek out a more secure relationship to God, which has improved his way of interacting with his family and others. The participants addressed having a corrective relationship experience with God and others in their personal life was part of being open toward developing secure attachments in relationships.

The theme of being open toward developing secure relationships was indicated to be an important process for the participants as some of them reported this concept was new in their lives. In the literature on attachment theory the findings on secure relationships have been studied in various populations as indicated by Davila et al. (1997) who conducted a longitudinal study on the attachment style change in senior girls in high school. Their findings suggest a change in attachment style occurred in individuals who had a high level of certainty in their views on attachment related beliefs regarding their self-concept and attachment to others. In addition, the study indicated change in attachment often occurred in girl participants with prior insecure attachment style (Davila et al., 1997). In this study the change in attachment style to more secure attachment occurred in participants who reported having a prior history of insecure attachment style in their childhood relationships. The change in attachment occurred as the participants modified their beliefs of self, gained the ability to trust, developed intimacy, and learned to depend on others. For participants who reported being raised with a secure parental attachment figure their attachment style in relationships remained consistent with others and with God. Participants in this study indicated making the decision to open up toward

developing secure relationships with others required allowing others into their lives, being vulnerable, making amends with past relationship outcomes, and learning a new approach when interacting in relationships. These actions in return allowed the participants to observe and test others for security as attachment figures leading to the participants feeling understood and accepted. The findings in this study are similar to those reported by Dansby Olufowote et al. (2020) suggesting part of earning secure attachment style include implementing a new method to manage relationships and conflict by practicing a more secure attachment approach.

Corrective relationship experiences occur as a result of a change in the mental schemas that are developed from the modified internal working model of how the individual views themselves and their relationship with others that remain open to revision throughout the lifespan (Counted, 2015; Kimball et al., 2013). Participants in the study who reported an insecure attachment style with their parents during childhood indicated having the opportunity to encounter secure base attachment figures in their relationships which helped revise their prior attachment experiences regarding trust in relationships. According to Kimball et al. (2013) individuals who obtain a corrective experience in their attachment style were able to see improvements in their affect, behaviors, and relationships. In the case of the participants their attachment style was repaired as they sought out an attachment bond with an available attachment figure. The process of being open toward developing secure relationships was pursued by participants in alternative attachment figures such as friends, spouses, mentors, family, and in God. Faith relationship attachment figures in God and in congregation members have been supported in the literature and have been found to play an important role in

modeling the attachment traits found in a secure attachment figure (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). The findings in the study conducted by Nygaard et al. (2020) reported participants indicated experiencing religious healing moments that allowed for the development of new perceived relationships with God. Secure attachment styles were developed by earning more secure internal working models as indicated by participants when they described their encounter with God (Nygaard et al., 2020). These findings are supported in attachment theory literature and the research of the attachment process for disruptions or repair of attachment styles in adults (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Murunga et al., 2017; Zeifman, 2019). All of the participants in this study indicated being open toward developing secure relationships which allowed them to strengthen and acquire a secure attachment relationship with God.

In the beginning of creation, the Bible addresses God's intent for relationships when he states that it was not good for man to be alone, and God created Eve as a helper that was a fit for Adam (Genesis 2:18, New King James Bible, 1982). In addition to the relationship that Adam and Eve had with each other; they also had a close relationship with God that was a secure base (Genesis 1–2, New King James Bible, 1982; Knabb & Emerson, 2013). It was after the fall of man, to sin when Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that their relationship suffered, yet God remained faithful to them as he showed compassion toward them by clothing and continuing to care for them after they left the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:21-24, New King James Bible, 1982). According to the Scriptures, God's plan for relational restoration with humanity was accomplished after he sent his only son Jesus to the earth and Jesus took on the sins of humanity as he suffered to death on the cross (Galatians 1:4, Luke 24:6-7, New King

James Bible, 1982). The death and resurrection of Jesus is a demonstration of redemption for believers so they can spend eternity with God in relationship (John 3:16-17, New King James Bible, 1982). In Christianity God is presented as a personal and caring God who has been seeking a relationship with humanity since the beginning of creation. The participants in the study reported making the decision to make amends with others such as their parents and with God in order to obtain a secure relationship attachment style. Participants stated their desire to live and pass down secure relationship attachments to their children served as a strong motivator to be open toward developing those secure relationships and breaking down generational curses in relationship attachment from their parents (Numbers 14:18, New King James Bible, 1982).

Another example of having a secure relationship with God can be modeled in the relationship Jesus practiced with his father God as he often prioritized spending time with him in prayer (Luke 6:12, Mark 1:35, Mark 6:46, Matthew 14:23, New King James Bible, 1982). Participants indicated their secure relationship attachment was possible once they began to learn about Gods' character of being gentle, merciful, kind, graceful, and accepting served as a corrective experience in their view of relationship attachment. As indicated in Scriptures, God has continued to remind humanity that he is available and accessible to all as he stated in Revelation 3:20 when he uses a metaphor to symbolize a relational invitation by stating "I stand at the door and knock and if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me" (New King James Bible, 1982). This is a description of God's wish to come into the individual's heart with permission and serves as an invitation to have an intimate relationship with humanity. Developing secure relationships requires being open to



letting others in and this was reported to be challenging for participants who had a previous insecure attachment style over participants with a more secure attachment style. Participants who reported having a Christian upbringing and exposure to the Bible early on reported being open toward continuing their relationship with God and others. The Bible indicates to live in relationship and treat others with love as Christians are to help each other (Hebrews 10:25, John 13:34, 1 Peter 4:8, Proverbs 27:17 New King James Bible, 1982). The participants with prior insecure attachment reported being open to secure relationships with God, which allowed them to trust forming relationships with spouses, friends, church members, and mentors. All of the participants indicated their faith and the Scriptures played a role in being open toward developing secure relationships with God and others.

### **Expanding their Faith and Trust in God**

The seventh theme was developed from participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God included the process of expanding their faith and trust in God. Participants shared experiences regarding their growth in their faith and the work God has accomplished in their lives has expanded their ability to trust in God and draw close in their relationship. When reflecting on their faith all of the participants stated their Christian journey is based on their learned trust in their God attachment. One participant described his faith as childlike and leaning on his father God for guidance even if the situation may seem unclear. Participants acknowledged their human nature of uncertainty that can arise during challenging moments, yet they stated it was their constant confidence in God and seeking his help when in doubt that allowed them to grow their faith. For another participant their lack of knowledge about God led to

him seeking insight from his parents and others to be able to gain understanding and meaning about God. In addition, this participant stated learning about God through the Bible, school, and church helped expand his worldview and faith. One participant stated experiencing life changes throughout the years of growing in his faith and pursuing a college degree in Christian Ministry to better understand his faith and God. When one participant was experiencing a problematic situation at his school and he was at risk of being removed from his program, the participant stated he decided to open up to the process that led to him attending church and experiencing the Holy Spirit. This experience with trusting God in the new relationship with him allowed the participant to process his grief from the loss of his mother and had the ability to graduate from his school program.

Other participants reflected on the progress they have experienced throughout their Christian journey and indicated gratitude for the growth they have seen in their lives which provides encouragement to continue on with their faith. One participant stated it was his faith in God that supported him when he dealt with numerous medical health diagnosis. This participant stated his endured trials have allowed him to seek out intimacy with God and to grow closer in their relationship. Furthermore, this participant indicated the more he learned about God he noticed his boldness for his faith increased. Participants acknowledge the work God has accomplished in their lives throughout the years as they report seeing growth in their faith and trust in the relationship they have developed with God. Some of the participants reported Christianity was introduced to them from an early age and therefore they were able to develop a Biblical worldview from those early experiences that allowed them to learn about God. The participants

indicated those early experiences of knowing about God allowed them to experience the foundation that influenced their desire to continue developing a fulfilling relationship with God. Lastly, some participants reported having spiritual conversion to Christianity and their faith and trust in God expanded after they were able to move away from the intellectual knowledge of God to experiencing a meaningful relationship with God.

Research on religious attachment to God has previously indicated God is perceived with characteristics of a secure base and safe haven according to relational attachment criteria that is viewed as trusting, reliable, and continuously available (Granqvist, 2020; Nygaard et al., 2020). The notion of faith and trust in God are interconnected for in order to experience one the other is needed. The participants in this study shared their experiences with expanding their faith in God included learning about God's character which allowed them to understand his consistency with trust. In the literature, previous studies have addressed part of developing change in attachment style included making interpersonal changes which included taking small risks with trust and working on creating trusting relationships with others (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). The process of developing trust will be contingent on the internal working models held regarding the individuals God image experienced with a divine attachment figure (Davis et al., 2013). In this study, the participants indicated having experienced God as their caring father, protector, helper, and guide. In prior studies on religious meaning making, it was indicated that individuals who trusted in God were able to cope with hardships as they believed their faith was developing through sanctification (Hall et al., 2021). Some of the participants addressed life adversities they encountered and the change in their response to those stressors when they decided to trust God and lean into their faith.

Christianity is rooted in traditions and practices that serve as a foundation of the values and beliefs with faith being central to the doctrine. The importance of faith has been fundamental in order to follow the God presented in the Scriptures in the Old Testament and accepting the teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Christianity was developed from the belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God, and he was crucified to death for the sins of humanity, resurrected, ascended into heaven, and offers salvation to those who believe in Jesus (Hebrews 12:2, Matthew 28:2-7, Revelation 1:5-6, Romans 4:24-5:1, Romans 6:8-11, New King James Bible, 1982). The development of faith in Christian believers is indicated to be the factor that allows the individuals to believe God exist and is closely accessible (Hebrews 11:6, New King James Bible, 1982). The Bible is full of stories of people with great faith that placed their confidence and trust in God. One relationship that became more secure in their faith with God was that of Moses. Moses originally displayed a habit of questioning and doubting himself when God would command him to do something as he lacked security (Exodus 3:11-12, Exodus 4:1-17, New King James Bible, 1982). As he continued working on his relationship with God by trusting, spending time with God, and placing his faith in God, Moses was able to be used by God when he led the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10-11, Exodus 12:40-41, Exodus 14:1-31, New King James Bible, 1982).

The disciples experienced growth in their faith as they walked and learned from Jesus during his ministry. Despite the ability of the disciples to see and witness with their own eyes the miracles, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus they continued to expand their faith and trust in Jesus (Luke 17:5-10, New King James Bible, 1982). Peter serves as an example of the importance of maintain trust in God, as seen in the story when the

disciples experienced a windy storm at sea and Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, so he asked to be called out of the boat to join Jesus only to sink after he became fearful of his circumstances and asked Jesus to save him (Matthew 14:24-31, New King James Bible, 1982). Jesus questioned Peter why he doubted his faith, as they went into the boat the winds stopped and the faith of the other disciples grew as they became assured that Jesus was the son of God (Matthew 14:31-33, New King James Bible, 1982). The participants in the study addressed their continues trust in God has helped them deal with wavered faith in challenging situations they remember what God has done for them in the past. After Jesus resurrected, he showed himself to the disciples in order to grow their faith and he reminded them about their believe because they have seen him and the blessing is amongst those who have not seen Jesus and believed (John 20:29, New King James Bible, 1982). In the Scriptures, Christians are provided with instructions on how to live and are encouraged to “trust in the Lord with all their heart and to not lean on their own understanding. In all of their ways acknowledge him, and he will make their paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6, New King James Bible, 1982). The participants in this study described their faith and the ability to trust in God continue to be pivotal in their Christian walk and relationship with God. The participants stated spending time with God and learning about God allowed them to become more mature in their faith and expand on their ability to trust in God as an attachment figure.

### **Connecting and Remaining Close to God**

The eighth theme that emerged from the participants describing their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God was by connecting and remaining close to God. The participants stated engaging in personal time to communicate with God

through prayer and reading the Bible as a form of hearing from God and getting closer to God. Participants stated the time they dedicate to God was a form of receiving from God and to connect with God intimately. Participants reported noticing the difference in their behavior when they connected with God and the change on their stress level, emotions, and productivity level. One participant stated engaging in prayer, studying the Bible, reflecting, and attending church has helped him deal with his sins and this became part of the process that allowed him to remain close to God versus separating from God when he was experiencing sin. Furthermore, one participant indicated his process of connecting and remaining close to God was his ability to expand his understanding of his religion and gain insight into the difference in his religion over other religions in the world. Some of the participants reported Christianity was introduced to them from an early age and those experiences of knowing about God influenced their desire to continue developing a fulfilling relationship with God. A few of the participants indicated having intellectual exposure to God and once they experienced a relationship with God, they were able to understand his character and connect with God on a deeper level. Some participants reported their relationship with God has remained close by using prayer and seeking knowledge in the Scriptures, religious books, and applying principles that developed from their connection with God. This theme connecting and remaining close to God was developed from the experiences the participants shared and described the process that led to their current type of attachment to God.

In the previous literature review on attachment theory the initial criteria of attachment consist of maintaining proximity to the attachment figure to insure the emotional and physical protection or wellbeing of the individual (Bowlby, 1969,1982;

Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). In the research conducted on attachment it has been found that the characteristics of proximity maintenance in a parental attachment figure has similarities to those found in religious attachment to God (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020, Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). In the Christian religion proximity seeking to God is believed to be found through prayer which is supported by past literature and the findings from this study (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The participants in this study stated the process of staying connecting and remaining close to God consisted of seeking proximity in their relationship to God through the use of prayer and awareness of this spiritual presence when they dedicated time to spend with God. In a study conducted by Dansby Olufowote et al. (2020) on the process of earning a more secure attachment style, they found that individuals who utilized self-help and educational resources reported being able to use the information learned and see a change in their relationship attachment style. The prior research finding can offer support to the findings in this study as participants stated using the Bible and religious books to expand on their faith and their connection with God became closer. Some of the participants indicated experiencing a religious conversion to Christianity and reported the connection they obtained from their new relationship with God was unlike any other. Another aspect of the attachment criteria includes the response to the perceived sense of separation or loss of the attachment figure (Nygaard et al., 2020). In this study some of the participants indicated drawing closer to God for connection when they were experiencing falling into sin as they expressed having confidence that God would not leave them when they needed God the most. Lastly, the participants indicated they perceived God to have the qualities of a

parental attachment figure, and this has allowed them to remain close in their relationship with God.

The theme of connecting and remaining close to God can be addressed from a Biblical perspective as the Christian faith supports this practice. According to the Bible, Christians are reminded to remain close to God as indicated in the book of John chapter 15 when Jesus talks about the branch which is an illustration for Christians, remaining connected to the vine, Jesus, and it is then that the fruit can be produced (John 15:4-5, New King James Bible, 1982). Jesus also states that if believers separate themselves from him, they will not be able to do anything and they will be like a branch that is picked up to be thrown into the fire to burn (John 15:6, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, Jesus provides reassurance to Christian believers that if they remain connected to him and obey his teachings, they may ask for anything and he will provide it to them (John 15:7, New King James Bible, 1982). This teaching of remaining close to God and him remaining close to Christians is expressed in the stories shared by the men in this study as they all indicated the importance of spending time out of their day to connect with God. One participant shared a story of when he previously had not prioritized his relationship with God and the effects included high levels of stress, anxiety, and low grades in school. This participant stated the following school semester he was able to return to spending time in prayer with God and reading the Scriptures, which he stated provided peace and an increase in productivity in work performance.

Furthermore, other participants were able to strengthen their faith by reading the Word of God and allowing God to speak to them through the Scriptures as indicated in the Bible (Romans 10:17, New King James Bible, 1982). Prayer is a means that is



encouraged amongst Christians to communicate and connect with God as this is a method that has been practiced throughout the Scriptures and in the teachings of Jesus, as he encouraged believers to pray and let their request be known to God (Philippians 4:6, New King James Bible, 1982). Christians are also encouraged in the Scriptures to seek the presence and strength of God daily (1 Chronicles 16:11, New King James Bible, 1982). The participants in this study indicated prayer was a time they used to connect and receive from God daily, and they began to see it as a form of remaining close in relationship with God. Some of the participants indicated converting to Christianity and they stated their relationship to God had never been closer as they now live assured on the promises from God that he will never leave them or forsake them (Hebrews 13:5, New King James Bible, 1982). Lastly, a few participants stated they grew up practicing Christianity and they continued to learn about God's character as they drew closer to God in relationship. The experiences shared by the participants in the study indicated an ongoing longing to continue connecting and remaining close to God as they live out their lives including God as a central attachment figure.

### **Forming Christian Attitudes and Behaviors**

The ninth theme that was developed from participants describing their life experiences with forming their secure attachment to God included forming Christian attitudes and behaviors. Participants reported their relationship attachment with God has allowed them to develop Christian attitudes and behaviors that are in alignment with their faith and influence their Christian living. All of the participants indicated their faith and relationship with God has allowed them to deeply experience God's love and develop a desire to emulate God's likeness. Engaging in reading the Bible, attending church, giving,

listening and spending time with God are practices that are important to the participants. Participants indicated prioritizing and tending to their relationship with God is part of keeping an intimate connection. Participants indicated part of being a Christian provides them with a sense of confidence in knowing that God is with them daily and understanding his care, compassion, and mercy that nurtures them. Other participants indicated part of their Christian living included experiencing a sense of peace, clarity, and emotional stability over their relationships which comes from acting and living according to Christian practices. Participants indicated their behaviors are influenced from their desire to glorify God and resemble the teaching of Jesus on how to treat others. These behaviors included simple acts of kindness, caring, compassion, and fairness toward others regardless of who they are.

In addition, participants indicated living as a Christian and learning from other believers in the faith shaped their ability to understand how to be better in their relationships as husbands, fathers, friends, co-workers and servants for God. Overall, participants stated that a method to exercise their faith included actions and works as a response to their attachment to God. This included how participants think, feel and act in response to their Christian faith. All of the participants in this study indicated actively practicing their faith and feeling a sense of responsibility to live a life with integrity. Furthermore, participants indicated praying for spiritual change was important to further develop the characteristics displayed in Jesus Christ of patience, discernment, strength, and clarity. Part of being a Christian for these participants included their ability to share their experiences and testimonies with others to lead them to have hope and faith. In addition, allowing non-believers to see the works of God through the actions of these

Christian men regarding how they lived and interacted with others was important to the participants. All of the participants reported their secure relationship with God allowed them to find meaning and value in extending the gifts they receive from God such as grace, mercy, forgiveness, and kindness toward others.

To address this theme of forming Christian attitudes and behaviors it is necessary to review the literature and the Bible on sanctification as it relates to Christian theology. The term sanctification in Christianity is referred to the process by which a Christian believer is changed to emulate the characteristics of Jesus Christ through the works of the Holy Spirit (Hall et al., 2021). In this study, participants reported their spiritual conversion in their faith and relationship with God influenced their method of thinking, living, and interacting with others. These findings are supported by other literature reviews that indicate moral change in attitudes and behaviors of religious converts may occur throughout the process of their sanctification (Porter, 2019). Participants in this study identified experiencing a change in their new lifestyle as their Christian faith continued to develop from their beginning stages to now. In addition, it was indicated that these participants continue to seek God for ongoing refinement in their behaviors and attitudes as they continue to grow in their Christian journey. Research findings indicate spiritual maturity regarding moral change over time can be associated to the level of religious involvement in a person to display more mature traits, attitudes, character, and actions (Porter, 2019). These findings support the experiences shared by the participants in this study regarding their progress of spiritual maturity in their behaviors, attitude, and relationship with God and others. Porter (2019) addressed the spiritual maturity progress in individuals with different religions to explore the influence the religion's story has on

natural moral change and supernatural moral change. Participants in this study referenced their belief in Christian practices that resemble the teachings of Jesus which influenced a change in their behaviors. The change in behaviors can be related to the natural moral change process to want to imitate Jesus as the example on how to live because of their faith (Porter, 2019). Supernatural moral change occurs in an individual through a supernatural source influencing the change (Porter, 2019). In this study, the natural moral change can be conforming behaviors on the outside as influence to fit in and the supernatural moral change can be a form of transformation on the inside through a supernatural influence.

Christian practices are founded in the Holy Trinity which consist of God the father, God the son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit which are all in one triune God (2 Corinthians 13:14, John 14:26, John 15:26, Matthew 28:19, New King James Bible, 1982). According to the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit indwells in a person after that individual comes to faith in Jesus Christ and accepts him as Lord and savior for the justification of sin (1 Corinthians 6:11, Hebrews 13:12, Luke 11:13, New King James Bible, 1982). The Holy Spirit indwelling in a Christian believer serves to promote the process of supernatural moral change in the individual's behaviors, attitude, personal traits and character (Porter, 2019). Spiritual formation is found in the sanctification process of the Holy Spirit through the truth found in Jesus Christ for those who believe (1 Corinthians 6:11, John 17:17-19, Romans 15:16, New King James Bible, 1982). The Holy Spirit will continue to live in the believer as a type of helper to transform them toward becoming more like Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18, Colossians 1:27, New King James Bible, 1982). Participants reported being active in their faith and part of the

Christian teachings and their relationship with God, were indicated to influence their attitudes and behaviors surrounding their Christian living. The apostle James talked about “faith without works is dead” and some of the participants indicate their decision was by faith to respond to God’s call by opening themselves to God’s message emotionally and physically regarding how they behave toward others (Galatians 5:14, James 2:14-26, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, Christians are instructed to live by the fruits of the Spirit which are “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-25, New King James Bible, 1982). Disciplines of the Christian faith include prayer, reading the Scriptures, worshiping God, and applying the Bible which were reported by participants to have become part of their lifestyle as they continued to mature as Christians. The participant’s descriptions in developing a secure attachment to God included forming Christian attitudes and behaviors that indicate the process of sanctification, spiritual maturity over time, natural moral change and supernatural moral change that aligned with Christian traditions and practices.

### **Research Question 3**

What are Christian men’s experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment?

#### **Secure Attachment with One Parent**

The third research question examined the experiences of Christian men regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The first theme that emerged when participants were asked to describe their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by

participants having a secure attachment with one parent during childhood. These secure attachment experiences were shared in the stories as four of the participants indicated having a positive relationship with both of their parents. These participants stated that their parents were available, caring, loving, and offered them basic survival needs, teaching, training, correction, and guidance. One participant indicated experiencing a secure relationship with a disciplinarian type of relationship from the parent child relationship, which he attributes to cultural norms in raising children. Some of the participants that stated having a secure relationship with both parents growing up and stated differences in closeness with one parent over the other. A few of the participants acknowledged having a secure relationship with both parents and reported now as an adult they wished they would have received more affirmations, affection, unconditional love, and address their individual love language needs. Five of the participants stated their secure attachment was with their mother over their father. These participants indicated spending more time with their mother and their mothers being more available over their fathers. One participant stated his mother was the parent he felt a secure attachment to due to his father being distant from the family and later passing away. Another participant stated seeing his father as a role model and a guide despite not being too close to him he expressed having respect and security in his relationship with his father. A different participant stated having a close relationship with his father as he was active in his faith, which the participant identified as a strong father figure for him. One participant stated he noticed the relationship between his mother became stronger after she became a Christian. Lastly, a separate participant stated having a good relationship with his father and experiencing him as friend. The participants stated it was the parent

with whom they had a secure and closer relationship that taught them about God. The participants indicated their relationship with their parent or parents did shape their view of God and their desire to seek a relationship with God. The participants stated their relationship with their parent or parents have continued to become closer and more secure in adulthood.

The literature on attachment theory has identified attachment bonds that are developed during infancy between a child and their caregiver that are based on the attachment figure being available to the child's need to serve as security and support exploration of the child (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958). The attachment criteria for an attachment figure consist of safe haven, secure base, proximity maintenance and separation distress (Birgegar & Granqvist 2004; Bowlby, 1958). When the infant recognizes a caregiver to be reliable and receptive to their attachment behaviors the infant will stay motivated to keep the attachment relationship with the attachment figure (August et al., 2018). In this study 9 out of 12 participants indicated having a secure relationship attachment with at least one parent or both parents during their childhood. According to past research on parental attachment, it was suggested that if a child has one caring parent and the other is not, the child could seek proximity toward the caring parent to compensate for the distant experience of the other parent (Saunders et al., 2011). Participants addressed their attachment with their parent was consistent and they were available to them indicating feeling securely attached in the relationship. The participants described their relationship experiences with their parents as being strong, good, positive, supportive, close, friendly, and caring. The relationship attachments with their parents were stated by the participants to have remained with them and they became stronger as

adults, which is supported in the literature indicating attachment style bonds remain throughout adulthood between the adult child and the caregiver (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018). When secure attachment is formed with at least one parent it is indicated to promote confidence in social and emotional interactions for that individual in later life, which was the experiences for the participants in this study (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Klausli & Caudill, 2018). All of the participants who reported having a secure attachment style to one parent or both indicated the importance of their relationship development had on their quality of life and psychological wellbeing.

The Bible provides instruction and models the type of relationship parents should have with their children that is honoring to God. In Christianity, God's character and approach with humanity is that of loving father who interacts and protects his children. The attachment criteria for a secure attachment figure are presented as a secure base, safe haven, close in proximity, and separation distress which are indicated to be met by God (Birgegar & Granqvist 2004; Bowlby, 1958). The concept of secure attachment is understood by examining the character of God as being relational, available, close, protector, trustworthy, and provider (1 John 3:1, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Hebrews 12:10, Matthew 10:29-31, Philippians 4:19, Psalm 54:4,7, New King James Bible, 1982). Infants come into the world vulnerable and depend on their parents to care and protect them, therefore they rely on their attachment behavior system to communicate their needs in order to survive. When a parent is intentional with childrearing that honors God's design, they will model principles that are of security to their children shown in their availability to be comforting and nurturing to the child's developmental needs as



indicated by a mother showing comfort to her child and a father being tender and compassionate toward his children (Isaiah 66:13, Psalm 103:13, New King James Bible, 1982). The ability to display secure attachment as a parent to a child serves to instill confidence in their relationships and faith in God. The experiences shared by the participants regarding their secure parental attachment indicate the attachment bonds of safety and protection have remained in their parental relationships to give the opportunity for the next generation to know those attachment patterns (Joel 1:3, New King James Bible, 1982).

### **Absent or Lack of Parental Figure**

The second theme emerged from participants describing their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having an absent or lack of parental figure in childhood. The participants described their experiences during childhood with a parent who was absent in their life and the participants reported feeling emotionally neglected and emotionally distant from that parental figure. Other participants shared their experiences of lacking a parental figure such as not having their father being emotionally and physically involved in their lives. One participant stated having a dysfunctional relationship with his father due to the father being in prison and not maintaining consistency as a father figure. Another participant stated feeling that his father disliked him growing up due to the father being away for work and the relationship being distant between them. A few participants reported experiencing the absence of their parent figure after their parents divorced. An additional participant shared his experience with lack of both parental figures as a child after his parents divorced and remarried. This participant stated not feeling prioritized by

both parents and feeling lonely as a child. One participant indicated feeling that his parents are “the instruments of his existence” and reported he considers God as his parent. This participant indicated experiencing a dysfunctional family dynamic with both of his parents and his stepfather. The participant experienced the effects of having parents who were alcoholics and witnessed the impact of addiction in the relationship with his mother and stepfather. Participants indicated experiencing the absence of their parents as they prioritized their jobs and other areas of their lives, leaving the participants without any time for parent-child interactions. One participant stated having a physical father growing up without having a father-child relationship bond. This participant indicated his father withheld expressing love to the family and he expressed anger that was in accordance with their generational cycle. Other participants shared having neutral relationships with their fathers and they were not close relationships. Some of the participants indicated having the chance to repair their relationship with their parents in adulthood, and some participants were not given that corrective experience opportunity.

According to attachment theory, researchers have indicated that the attachment styles formed during childhood are continuous and play a role in relationship interactions (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). This continuous attachment style is due to the attachment bonds developed from the internal working models formed with early attachment figures that influence seeking similar attachments in others (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Maxwell et al., 2020). When a consistent response in internal working models is formed with the primary caregiver the child will develop a secure attachment style that may impact confidence in social and emotional interactions as well as psychological wellbeing (Klausli & Caudill, 2018). Furthermore, when inconsistent

internal working models are formed based on the inconsistent expectations from the child toward the caregiver, insecure scripts are developed leading to an insecure attachment style (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Insecure attachment is often the result of an attachment figure not being available to respond and attune to the child's needs (Bowlby, 1958). For this study, some of the participants reported having an insecure attachment style with their parents as children due to them not being available to them. Participants indicated their relationship with their absent parent did shape their view of God and affected their desire to seek a relationship with God when they did not have a secure attachment figure with their parent that served as representation of a God attachment.

According to the research, if secure attachment is not formed within a parent-child relationship due to the parent not being available the child will lack a secure attachment style with that attachment figure (Bowlby, 1958). When there is an absence or lack of suitable attachment figure the child shows separation distress and difficulties with regulating emotional distress (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). The attachment behaviors are activated due to the distress and shown in forms of protest, despair, and detachment from their parent (Knabb & Emerson, 2013). In this study, participants indicated having at least one parent who was absent or lacking parental figure. A few of the participants reported having both parents as absent or lacking parental figures. Studies suggest that individuals who have family history of psychopathology and nonintact families are more susceptible to developing insecure attachment style (Davila et al., 1997). Participants who indicated both parents were absent or lacked parental figure reported experiencing insecure attachment style with their parents during childhood, which is consistent with previous studies. The participants who reported having insecure attachment with their

parents revealed experiences of loneliness, rejection, confusion, isolation, hopelessness, and abandonment impacting their emotional wellbeing. These participants reported being in unloving and emotionally neglectful parent-child relationships. Previous studies on attachment styles revealed that individuals with insecure attachment style report having problems with regulating their emotions when in distress which support the findings in this study (August et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1958; Bradshaw & Kent, 2018; Jordan et al., 2021). The study conducted by Nygaard et al. (2020) examined the healing experiences of adults indicated the major source of their stress prior to their perceived healing experience was related to not seeking their parents out as a secure base or safe haven because they perceive the parents as not being available to offered comfort when in distress. Those findings are in accordance with the reported experiences of some of the participants in this study regarding separation distress toward attachment in the relationship with the absent or lack of parental figure of one or both parents. Dansby Olufowote et al. (2020) indicated part of the journey toward earning more secure attachment included making interpersonal changes which included revisiting parental attachment figures with a new lens to understand their behaviors and reframe the parent's insecure attachment, with the intent to make peace with past experiences through forgiveness. Some of the participants in this study indicated coming to terms with their lived experiences regarding their absent parents, and others reported they were able to develop a relationship with their parent in later years.

The research on attachment theory indicates the potential impact in the development of psychological and mental health factors for children with insecure attachment styles (Granqvist, 2014). In addition, psychology of religion has addressed the

importance of children developing secure attachment from their parent relationship as this suggests the influence in the function of a child's faith and spiritual growth (Granqvist, 2014). The Bible addressed parental responsibility for the wellbeing of their children and the need to provide physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Scriptures talk about parents who lack in their obligation to provide for their household are considered to have denied the faith (1 Timothy 5:8, New King James Bible, 1982). Parents are instructed to tend to the nurturing of their child's emotions and teach them about discipline and instruction (Colossians 3:21, Ephesians 6:4, New King James Bible, 1982). In addition, parents are urged to teach and guide their children with direction that reflects God to encourage the continuation of those principles throughout their adult life (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Proverbs 22:6, New King James Bible, 1982). An example in the Scriptures of absent or lacking parental obligation can be found in the story of the priest Eli and his sons who were practicing sin, and their father Eli did not correct them from their actions, resulting in drastic consequences from neglecting the responsibility of active parenting (1 Samuel 2:12-36, Samuel 4:11-18, New King James Bible, 1982). The Bible encourages active and consistent parenting that will be honoring to God, when parents are absent emotionally or physically, they neglect this instruction. The participants in this study shared their experiences of lacking secure care and the effects on their emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, participants reported experiencing the physical absence of a parental figure impacted their self-concept and identity. Some of the participants were able to restore their relationships with their absent parents in later years and some were never restored.

### **Other Attachment Figures**

Furthermore, the third theme that emerged from participants describing their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having other attachment figures. Participants reported having other individuals in their lives that took on the role of attachment figures growing up. One participant stated during his teenage years he started attending church and he met a pastor who began taking on the role of a friend, older brother, mentor, and a secure attachment figure. Another participant started seeking out emotional support outside his parents from mentors that helped and influenced his personal development and attachment. A participant stated having several attachment figures who exemplified strong male role models in his life which included members from his church youth group, volunteers from the Boy Scouts of America, and a close friend. Participants reported finding attachment figures in other family members such as siblings, stepparents, and grandparents that served as reliable attachment figures. These participants stated feeling secure with these attachment figures and comfortable seeking advice from them. A few participants reported having a close relationship with their grandparents and they viewed them as secure attachment figures that would spend quality time with them and experience a close relationship that was loving, caring, and affectionate. Other participants reported finding attachment figures in teachers from school that recognized their special talents and became mentors to them throughout the years. Participants stated having others as the source of where they find emotional support and security. Overall, participants indicated finding secure attachment figure in other family members, mentors, friends, teachers, pastors, and peers in the community. These other attachment figures

were indicated to influence the participants personal relationships and their relationship attachment with God.

The development of attachment styles at infancy has indicated to remain stable and continuous into adult life (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). If an infant engages in detachment from the caregiver due to the attachment figure not being available, the infant will seek out other attachment bonds for protection and care (Granqvist, 2020). Therefore, changes in attachment style pathways are possible when repairs to the internal working model system occur as a response to the activation behavior system when interacting in a relationship with a suitable attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). When the participants in this study shared their relationship attachment style with their parents growing up, the theme of seeking other attachment figures emerged. This was due to some of the participants reporting not having a secure attachment with either one of their parents and they identified other individuals in their lives that provided the role of a secure attachment figure. The literature has conducted research on the notion of surrogate attachment figures indicating the benefits of applying the principles of secure attachment criteria with others that present as suitable and safe (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). In this study participants identified other attachment figures that were comprised of extended family members, mentors, friends, educators, religious leaders, and peers in the community. These findings are supported in other research findings indicating surrogate attachment figures pose the opportunity for the individual to practice trust and model a secure attachment approach in relationships (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). Alternative support figures are considered other adults who provided support to the child outside of

the parent-child relationship. These alternative support figures have been studied and found to be helpful for the child to receive the support needed in order to develop a close relationship to overcome the insecure internal working models formed from their experiences with their parents (Saunders et al., 2011). The participants in this study shared experiences that allowed them to view more secure relationship approaches by receiving emotional support and guidance from other adults in their lives.

The Bible makes multiple references to helping others demonstrated by acts of service in love (Mark 12:31, New King James Bible, 1982). This includes sometimes being called to take on roles of parental figure toward other children who may lack a parental attachment figure as Christians are asked to be generous and look after those who are fatherless in the world (Exodus 22:22, James 1:27, Psalm 82:3, New King James Bible, 1982). The opportunity to be an attachment parental figure to another provides the chance for that individual to receive guidance, support, and assistance in forming a nurturing relational connection. Participants in this study indicated having other attachment figures in their lives allowed them to experience emotional support and develop trust. A story from the Bible that addresses taking on the role of a surrogate father figure was that of Esther and her cousin Mordecai. Esther was raised by her uncle Mordecai who served as alternative support figure to her because she was an orphan and he raised her as his daughter (Esther 2:7, New King James Bible, 1982). The story of Esther serves as an example of the influence a supportive attachment figure can have on the individual as they navigate life, this is indicated by Esther who followed her uncle's advice and trusted in God's providence. In this study, the participants reported their parents were alive during childhood and they were not orphans, however some of the



participants reported feeling the absence of their parent emotionally and physically. The other attachment figures that stepped in to fill the attachment figure role for the participants included extended family, mentors, friends, teachers, pastors, and community members. In addition, in the Scriptures God refers himself as the “helper to the fatherless,” which provides great reassurance on God’s availability as an attachment figure (Psalm 10:14, New King James Bible, 1982). Participants indicated having other attachment figures as a source of where they found emotional support and security.

### **Misunderstanding Concept of God**

The fourth theme that developed when participants described their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having a misunderstanding concept of God. The participants stated their experiences with their attachment style to their parents developed a misunderstanding concept of God impacting their view of God as a secure attachment figure. Participants identified their early views about God consisting of him being strict, traditional, and legalistic which later they learned that God was accepting of all people regardless of works or merit. Other participants reported feeling that God did not like them when they misbehaved or if their parent displayed disappointment toward them, they felt that God was also disappointed. Participants reported the way they experienced their parents felt toward them was projected into how they sensed God felt about them, which influenced their God attachment. In addition, when participants experienced guilt or shame over their own behaviors or decisions, they attributed those actions would create a separation between them and God. One participant indicated knowing about the gospel and having faith, however it was until he experienced others in church not treating

him differently for his actions and instead showed him love, care, and forgiveness that he experienced a corrected view of who God is to him, leading to a more secure attachment with God. Another participant indicated he felt confused about God as he was raised attending church, and he had some positive role models and others that were not positive in the church. This participant stated feeling confused over his perception of fathers being good representation of who God is to their children and he stated not have a good relationship with his father.

Additionally, one participant shared his childhood experiences with living in loneliness, isolation, abandonment, rejection, or dismissal, which negatively influenced his perception of relationships. Those views of relationships influenced his views of God as the corrector, rules God, and wrathful God. This participant stated it was later in life that he read a book and gain insight to a meaningful new view of God being a witness, which helped him view the possibilities of secure attachment in relationships. One participant reported his view of God was that of a father figure who could punish for doing wrong, was easy to lose his temper, and angry. This participant stated the presentation learned at his church on the view of God's character corresponded with the negative manner in which his father treated him at home. Other participants indicated receiving their knowledge and view of God from rehearsing and writing Bible verses as an alternative form of punishment over misbehaviors. The participants in the study were able to identify their experiences with their attachment style to their parents and the impact on their view of God. The participants who reported having an absent or lack of parental figure shared having a negative view of God. Participants indicated they were

able to gain a corrective view of God, which allowed them to develop a secure relationship with God.

Research on the concept of God and image of God have been explored to understand the influence on the emotional and mental representations of a divine attachment figure on individuals (Counted & Miller, 2018; Davis et al., 2013). As previously stated, God images are internal working models that have been developed overtime of a particular divine attachment figure and how the individual experiences the God attachment figure (Davis et al., 2013). God concepts are related to an individual's theological beliefs regarding particular traits of the divine attachment figure and provide insight into how the divine attachment figure associates to the individual and how they should relate to God (Davis et al., 2013). This study focused on the experiences of Christian men; therefore, the divine attachment figure images of reference are God, Jesus, Holy Spirit and how the participants experienced them in relationship. The study explored the views around image and concept of God regarding attachment to God and attachment with their parents. The findings indicated participants felt the approach in which their parents displayed their behaviors and views of God impacted how they felt about God. This finding is consistent with early attachment bonds formed from internal working models that remain rather stable and the person will search for an attachment type that match the response they received in their attachment to their caregiver (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Maxwell et al., 2020). In addition, the lack of information or misleading information about God led to the participants developing a misunderstanding concept of God. This is suggested in the findings with participants indicating their view of God was that of "legalistic, doesn't like me, disappointed in me, has separation from me, confused,

correction God, rules God, smite kind of God, father figure, angry, lose his temper, and punishment.” These internal working model scripts were indicated to have influenced how these participants thought, behaved, and their expectations of others and God. This is supported in studies suggesting social behavior is influenced by mental evaluations from personal relationship experiences (Counted & Miller, 2018).

In addition, participants addressed viewing God in the similar manner in which their parent treated them, indicating a corresponding view in the relationship. Prior studies on attachment theory have proposed the hypothesis of compensation and correspondence in attachment relationships. In this study, the findings are comparable to other research studies supporting the correspondence hypothesis that an individual’s style of attachment with their parent will mirror that of their attachment style with God (Malik et al., 2021; Murunga et al., 2017). Participants expressed difficulties relying on their parent and experienced hesitation in seeking God for emotional comfort due to the view that God would be disappointed, angry, reject or punish them. Studies found that children who perceived God as untrustworthy or unsafe were less likely to seek God out when they were in need and resorted to isolation or withdraw (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019). The findings in this theme indicate participants with insecure attachment with their parent resulted in insecure attachment to God. Lastly, participants reported they were able to obtain new insight to restore previous internal working models they had of their view of God, and this allowed them to develop a more secure relationship with God.

The nature of God can often be misunderstood by non-believers and believers of the faith, as it was in the time of Jesus the pharisees were knowledgeable about the Scriptures in the Torah, yet they were unable to recognize that Jesus was the living word

of God (John 5:39, New King James Bible, 1982). In this study, the theme that emerged was having a misunderstanding of the concept of God amongst participants growing up. Participants stated their concept of God as an attachment was that of being “legalistic, doesn't like me, is disappointed in me, has separation from me, confused, correction God, rules God, smite kind of God, father figure, angry, lose his temper, and punishment.” The descriptions shared by the participant to identify their concept of God appears that of unapproachable and intimidating God. The Bible describes God's character as being love and acts with unfailing love toward humanity (Isaiah 43:4, John 3:16, 1 John 4:8, 1 John 4:10, 1 John 4:16, 1 John 4:19, Psalm 143:8, Romans 8:38-39, 2 Thessalonians 3:5, New King James Bible, 1982). The Scriptures describe God as Holy and sacred (Exodus 3:5-6, Matthew 17:2, Isaiah 6:1-5, Revelation 1:13-18, New King James Bible, 1982). God is described as good and shown by his sinless nature as this was demonstrated in the life of Jesus who was without sin and lived a perfect sinless life (2 Corinthians 5:21, Isaiah 53:9, New King James Bible, 1982). God is described as faithful demonstrated by his constant presence and patience (Hebrews 13:5, Lamentations 3:22-23, Psalm 145:18, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, God is described as generous shown in the Bible by his giving acts of grace and blessing toward others (James 1:5, Matthew 7:11, New King James Bible, 1982). The Scriptures describe God as merciful and this is shown in his forgiveness (Ephesians 2:4-5, Lamentations 3:22-23, 2 Samuel 24:14, New King James Bible, 1982). Lastly, God is described as just and righteous in his treatment toward humanity (Exodus 34:6-7, Jeremiah 9:23-24, Psalm 25:8, Psalm 33:5, Psalm 89:14, New King James Bible, 1982). The views and concepts of God can be misunderstood when the information about God is misleading or unknown. The qualities for a secure base

attachment figure include traits of “protective, supportive, loving, and guiding,” which are characteristics found in God (Granqvist, 2014; Psalm 73:23-24, Psalm 139:7-10, Psalm 143:8, Psalm 145:18, New King James Bible, 1982). Knowing about God is not the same as experiencing God and eventually the participants stated they were able to experience God which helped them to have a corrective experience in their view and concept of God. The participants were able to acknowledge their parent attachment and how it affected their initial view of God to help repair their attachment style.

### **Spiritual or Religious Guide**

The fifth theme that emerged when participants described their experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment was identified by participants having a spiritual or religious guide during childhood. The participants reported their experiences obtained from having the guidance of a secure attachment figure such as a spiritual or religious guide to help them learn about the Christian faith and a relationship with God. One participant addressed his relationship with his mother grew closer as she was able to provide him with the guidance needed to be able to view God as not being “condemning or legalistic,” and this positively changed his view of God as an approachable attachment figure. Another participant reported generally he knows his parents love him and this is consistent with what he believes about God, that God loves him all the time. An additional participant reported feeling that both parents helped him to strengthen the secure relationship he has with God. One participant shared his experience with having a secure relationship with his mother assisted him with understanding healthy relationship interactions which helped him to have trust in God and respect for authority. Another participant stated seeing the example

of his parents with their spiritual growth and how they addressed situations provided guidance for him to reaffirm his faith and attachment to God. One participant reported the relationship with his father allowed him to view God as a friend that is approachable and deserving of reverence. This participant also reported receiving nurturance and care from his mother which allowed him to view those characteristics in God as nurturing and caring of all his children. Lastly, one participant shared that his parents were not regularly involved in church and his first experiences with God began when he was invited to attend the children's ministry with two friends and through the guidance of an adult friend in the community. This participant stated it was his relational attachment to an older lady friend in his neighborhood where he learned about Jesus and salvation. The participants reported that after he was saved, he invited his mother to church every Sunday which led to his mother returning to church.

In this study, participants were able to discuss their early experiences with exposure to God by a spiritual or religious guide. The participants who indicated having an attachment with one parent, both parents, or other attachment figures reported they were able to see the example set from those attachment figures toward them and toward their own relationship with God. Which allowed the participants to learn and view God as a secure attachment figure. These spiritual or religious guides that influenced their God attachment development varied for the participants consisting of their mothers, both parents, neighbors, and good friends. The participants in the study reported the benefits obtained from having the guidance of a secure attachment figure which help them learn about the Christian faith and drew them closer in their relationship with God. There is support in the literature as indicated by individuals who reported the importance of

religious and faith communities that served as models in the process toward developing more secure attachment (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020). Participants reported it was through their positive relationships with their spiritual or religious guides that they were able to learn about God's character. Other studies found that individuals who had significant relationships with others projected those relationship experiences into their image of God (Bayne & Tylsova, 2019). The correspondence hypothesis indicates that the type of attachment an individual had with their attachment figures will match their attachment style to God (Granqvist, 2014; Malik et al., 2021). In this study, some of the participants shared experiences in their lives that allowed them to observe the example set from their attachment figures toward God, allowing them to view God as a secure base for attachment by mirroring those traits in their relationships. Other participants in the study who lacked spiritual or religious guides during childhood reported having a corrective experience with God in later life, which occurred by the revision in their internal working models regarding secure attachment figures and attachment to God (Kimball et al., 2013). Studies on God attachments indicate internal working models developed in individuals based on the perception of a suitable attachment figure were also perceived in concept and image of God as a secure attachment figure (Nygaard et al., 2020). The described lived experiences of the participants can be understood as the repair of their internal working models that influenced their pathways toward change in attachment style as they responded to the activation of their attachment system when experiencing a close relationship with a secure attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021).



The task of spiritual or religious guide is a common practice demonstrated in the Bible seen in mentorship and discipleship others in their faith. A few examples in the Scriptures can be demonstrated in the relationship between Moses and his father-in-law Jethro who provided advice and guidance to Moses while he was leading the Israelites (Exodus 18:1-27, New King James Bible, 1982). Another spiritual guide in the Bible was that of the pries Eli and Samuel who was dedicated to serve God since he was a child and he continued to guide other leaders throughout his life (1 Samuel 2:11- 26, New King James Bible, 1982). Furthermore, Jesus served as an example of a spiritual guide to the disciples and equipped them to go and share the gospel to others (Luke 9:1-6, New King James Bible, 1982). These stories regarding these spiritual and religious guides in the Bible indicate the importance of modeling secure and trusting relationship attachments that will help them grow their faith in God. When an individual feels safe and secure with an attachment figure they will be more open toward following their guidance due to the established trust. In the teaching of Jesus according to the Scriptures, he invites all to follow him and provides guidance in the Scriptures in order that Christians may grow spiritually and in relationship with him (Matthew 16:24, New King James Bible, 1982). The call to be a spiritual or religious guide is open to all who are willing to provide the need of spiritual mentorship to others. The participants in the study indicated the change that occurred in their relationships with God due to the spiritual guidance they received from their attachment figures. The role of spiritual or religious guide is demonstrated in this study by parents, neighbors, and friends who decided to provide these participants with the gift of sharing their faith and relationship attachment.

## Implications

The implications for research from the study findings contribute to the field of developmental psychology including the understanding of the experiences of males seeking a secure attachment to God. The theoretical implications for research support existing attachment theory in attachment style continuity and change by the process of repairing and forming new internal working models in the attachment behavioral systems (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021; Murunga et al., 2017; Waters et al., 2021; Zeifman, 2019). The implications in the findings from this study suggest the participants were able to confirm or repair attachment style by forming secure internal working models based on their experiences in relational attachment to God. The findings in the study fit with prior research on the role surrogate attachment figures serve to help in the development of secure attachment style. In the study findings, participants were able to describe their experiences with developing secure attachment with other surrogate attachment figures (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2011). Implications from the study indicated Christian males were able to describe their experiences in developing and maintaining a secure relationship with God as their attachment figure, which support research on God attachment and attachment criteria that operate and resemble that of a parental attachment figure in a parent and child relationship (Counted & Miller, 2018; Granqvist, 2020; Kam, 2020; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). The attachment hypothesis of compensation and correspondence from prior research indicate the reason a person will seek out attachment to God (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). From the findings, the implications in this study regarding the compensation hypothesis indicated the participants compensated in their

attachment to God due to not having a suitable attachment figure when they experienced life changing events, emotional distress, and distressful life experiences. Furthermore, the implications from the findings in this study are comparable to other studies regarding the correspondence hypothesis that indicate a person's attachment style with their parent will mirror that of their attachment style with God (Malik et al., 2021; Murunga et al., 2017). The theoretical implications of this study provided support for prior research findings in the topic of attachment theory and provided new knowledge for future research to the scientific community on the attachment styles of Christian males.

The implications for practice from the study findings contribute to the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, counseling, mental health, and education. By understanding the meaning in the lived experiences of secure attachment in males, further research would be able to explore foundational framework in application when working with Christians with insecure attachment styles. The study investigated the central phenomenon of attachment theory, implications from this study can facilitate further understanding in helping to develop programs and other modalities in the treatment of mental health disorders, developmental psychology, and family therapy. The implications of this study can help mental health professionals including clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, faith-based therapist and counselors in revisiting the role of the therapeutic alliance, formulating therapy interventions that are specific to males, and incorporate a faith-based approach in therapy when working with clients on attachment styles. Furthermore, from the findings the implications of the impact on the emotional health on the participants who had other/alternative attachment figures, this

understanding may serve to guide educational programs and to develop community mentorship programs to support deprived children with a suitable attachment figure.

The implications for ministry from the study findings contribute to the fields of religion, counseling, and education. This study expanded the knowledge in the literature deficiencies regarding the attachment styles of Christian males to God. The practical implications on the attachment styles of Christian males to God, can serve the church and religious institutions to educate and train members providing pastoral counseling care services. Additionally, implications from the findings regarding the type of language used in faith teachings surrounding the image of God has on attachment can help church leaders, by remaining aware of the importance of accurate God representations in the church and the impact they have on how God is conceptualized by others and the influence on their God relationship.

The implications from the study findings contribute to the exploration of an underrepresented group of males that described their lived experiences of attachment style and the process by which they obtained secure attachment to God. The practical implications of the study contributed understanding and alternative insight to be used by other individuals seeking to improve their own attachment styles. The implication of the study provides understanding of the essence in the phenomenon on attachment styles of Christian males which can help establish a foundation for future research that can explore further interventions to improve the understanding of males' mental health, early child development, social relationships, counseling practices, religious intervention, and psychological wellbeing.

### **Limitations**

The limitations to consider for this study included concerns of not have sufficient male participants for the study; however, this was not the case during the recruitment process as there were enough volunteers interested in responding to the study. During the prescreening to meet criteria for the study, potential participants were excluded from participating in the study based on the study eligibility criteria. The study also excluded females and minors. Attachment to God was studied within the Christian faith community and the study did not explore other religious practices or faith groups. A challenge and limitation were the specific selection of participants to ensure screening for males that have experienced the phenomenon. For the study, participants were screened and selected to be from the Christian faith, therefore this limits the findings to this sample of Christian men.

The methodology for the study was qualitative, and the interpretation of the findings and themes can only be applicable to this sample of participants. Concerning the methodology, it was important to be aware of potential covariate or potential confounding variables such as the participant's past attachment to their parents or other attachment figures. The study design included a brief screening for secure attachment to God and relied on self-report. The second part of the study gathered the description of lived experiences and the meaning males identified in their formation of secure attachment. Other limitations may include the impact of self-report from participants and their response to questions of attachment styles due to the quality of their current relationships or life circumstances that may have influenced their response about their current attachment over responding to the experiences in forming their attachment style.

In addition, during the interview process for the study some participants had more to say than others which resulted in more quotes, comments, and details from some participants than from other participants. For this study there was one investigator conducting the study, interviews, and the data analysis which was appropriate given the nature of this dissertation study. However, it is recommended in the future and when possible, to have two investigators to limit any potential interviewer biases during the process of interviewing and the data analysis.

Regarding assumptions, it was assumed that the participants would report being Christians if they self-identify with this faith. An assumption regarding the participants was that they had insight into their own stories and when prompted they were able to elaborate on their experiences. It was assumed that participants would answer honestly and authentically during the interviews for the study. In addition, participants who volunteered for this study were to be active in their faith as part of the prescreening and therefore present to be more likely to volunteer for the research study.

The geographical area of the study included individuals residing in the United States; this may present as a limitation for the study as this represents only individuals from that particular country. The study was conducted online and the access to recruitment flyers, screening, and interview meetings were conducted electronically. This may be a limitation for those without access to the internet or with limited knowledge of technology/software use to access the information about the study. The study was voluntary and participants willing to participate in the study may not be a representation of all Christian males. There was no control for characteristics of the participants such as ethnicity, race, education level, and church denomination; this presented with having

some participants of Christian denominations, education level, or racial/ethnic groups that are more willing to participate in the study. This study did not control or focus on a particular ethnicity and the sample included a majority of participants identifying ethnically Caucasian/ White. A potential justification can be due to some groups being more inclined to participate in the study versus others who are less open to their participation. Diversity representation in a sample is important to explore in research and therefore sample diversity may present as a limitation in this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In this study the focus was to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men. Furthermore, how they obtained a secure attachment and what it means to their life was examined. This study included males only due to the limited studies on adult Christian males, it would be important to address future research on adult Christian females to explore any gender differences or similarities in attachment style experiences. This study did not control or focus on a particular ethnicity and the sample included a majority of participants identifying as Caucasian/ White. This justification can be due to some ethnic groups that are more willing to participate in the study versus others who are less open to their participation. In this study one participant reported experiencing a more disciplinarian type of parent to child relationship which he attributed from being raised in an Asian household. To better understand these results, future studies could address exploring other non-Caucasian/white ethnic samples, and other diverse cultural groups to explore their attachment styles and parent attachments. In the study all of the participants identified with having some level of education from some college, being a current student, college graduate or post-college graduate, it is recommended to pursue less

educated sample group to explore if there are any differences in attachment style experiences. Additionally, some of the participants reported having a neutral, absent, or lack of parental father figure in childhood, from this observation it is suggested to consider exploring paternal attachment figure for future research. Studies on children and spiritual attachment to God have been minimally explored and this study did not include minors, which is a recommendation for future research study. The topic of attachment to God has been previously studied within the Christian and Jewish faith; there are limited studies on other religious practices and attachment. Moving forward from this study, it is suggested to focus on other religions or spiritual beliefs and attachment styles, as this study focused on Christianity.

### **Summary**

According to attachment theory, attachment styles are relatively stable and can have the capacity for modification throughout the lifespan of an individual by the process of repair in internal working models in the attachment behavior system when interacting with a secure attachment figure in a relationship (Bowlby, 1958; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Malik et al., 2021). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of attachment to God in Christian men. Furthermore, how they obtained a secure attachment and what it means to their life was examined. The research aimed to explore how do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure. The results indicated five themes that described the participant's experiences and views of God as an attachment figure is indicated by God serving as a father figure, close, protector, comforter, and affectionate. The findings in the study indicated that the interrelated themes describe the participant's experiences and



views of God as an attachment figure that provides secure attachment in their relationships. The attachment criteria traits for a secure attachment figure include secure base, safe haven, stronger, wiser, dependable, proximity seeking, and separation distress (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2020). The findings in this study indicated the participants identified their view of God similarly to the characteristics found in a secure attachment figure.

Furthermore, the research aimed to explore how do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God. The results from the study indicated nine themes that described the participant's experiences in forming a secure attachment to God. The themes are indicated by learning to cope with distressful life experiences, responding to avoiding or distancing from God, seeking reassurance in life circumstances, understanding their life experiences, being open to new change and growth, being open toward developing secure relationships, expanding their faith and trust in God, connecting and remaining close to God, and forming Christian attitudes and behaviors. The findings in the study indicated that the interrelated themes describe the participant's experiences with forming a secure attachment to God.

In addition, the research aimed to explore what were Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The results from the study indicated five themes that described the participants having a secure attachment with one parent, having an absent or lack of a parental figure, having other attachment figures, having a misunderstanding concept of God, and having a spiritual or religious guide. The findings in the study indicated that the interrelated

themes describe the participant's experiences with their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment.

Recognizing that previously most of the research on attachment styles included female samples as the majority, and the representation of males in studies of attachment to understand their attachment style were limited (Dansby Olufowote et al., 2020; Davila et al., 1997; Saunders et al., 2011). This study helped to address the gap in knowledge in the literature by exploring the perspectives of males, the meaning in their lived experiences and their views of God as an attachment figure, their experiences with forming a secure attachment to God, and their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment. The findings of the study contribute knowledge in the fields of psychology, counseling, religion, health, and education. The implications for this study are profound in understanding the phenomenon of attachment styles of Christian males to God. Based on these conclusions the findings contribute to the understanding of humanity having access to experiencing a close relationship found in God where security, safety, protection, and comfort are readily available. The formation of a stable and secure attachment style is important for the development of psychological wellbeing, physical health, and the spiritual growth of an individual across the lifespan.

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## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. In your life have you experienced a secure relational attachment style to God?

**Secure Attachment Style** – is when an individual has the confidence based on the emotional and/or affectional bonds formed with an attachment figure that they will be available and responsive when they are needed by the individual (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Yes\_\_ No\_\_

2. Age \_\_\_\_\_

3. Religion: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Church denomination: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Are you actively practicing your faith?

Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

6. Gender:

Male \_\_\_

Female \_\_\_

7. Ethnicity:

American Indian or Alaska Native \_\_\_

Asian \_\_\_

Black or African American \_\_\_

Caucasian/ White \_\_\_

Hispanic or Latino \_\_\_

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander \_\_\_

Other \_\_\_ Unknown \_\_\_ Decline to state \_\_\_

## PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

## 8. Relationship Status:

Single/never married \_\_\_

Married \_\_\_

Separated \_\_\_

Divorced \_\_\_

Widowed \_\_\_

## 9. Highest Educational Level:

Current student (i.e., high school, college) \_\_\_

Less than high school \_\_\_

High School / GED \_\_\_

Some college \_\_\_

Associate degree \_\_\_

Vocational degree or certificate \_\_\_

College graduate \_\_\_

Post-college graduate \_\_\_

Decline to state \_\_\_

## 10. Contact Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### **Proposed Research Interview Questions**

RQ1: How do Christian men describe their experiences and views of God as an attachment figure?

RQ 2: How do Christian men describe their lived experiences with forming a secure attachment to God?

RQ 3: What are Christian men's experiences regarding their relationship between God attachment and their parent attachment?

## APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you describe your view of God?
2. How would you identify your relationship with your parents or other primary attachment figures growing up?
3. How would you describe how your attachment style to your parent or primary attachment figure affected your view of God?
4. How would you describe your life experience with your type of attachment relationship to God?
5. How would you describe your process of obtaining your current attachment style?
6. How would you describe the meaning of your attachment style to God has on your current Christian living?

### **Proximity Seeking Questions**

7. How would you describe your emotional closeness to God?
8. How would you describe your physical closeness to God?

### **Separation Distress Question**

9. Have you experienced a perceived distancing or separation from your relationship attachment to God? and if so, how would you describe your experience when responding to the perceived distancing or separation from God?

### **Safe Haven Question**

10. How would you describe your perception of God if you have experienced a potential threat or danger in your life?

## PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Secure Base Questions**

11. How would you describe the source of where you obtain emotional support and physical security?
12. How would you describe the source of where you obtain comfort and reassurance?

## APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT TEMPLATE SOCIAL MEDIA

ATTENTION Christian Men: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to investigate the role God plays in individuals' attachment styles and attachment figures. To participate, you must be a Christian male who is 18 years of age or older, active in your faith, and have a secure relational attachment to God. Participants will be asked to participate in a virtual interview. Participants that meet the participating requirements will be asked to schedule a virtual interview with me. The interview will be conducted by the researcher and will consist of questions regarding your process of relational attachment to God and attachment style. The interview will be video and audio-recorded and should take about 60 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click on this link (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BDH7NRP>) to complete the screening survey or contact me for more information. A consent document will be provided via email one week before the interview. Participants will receive either a \$20 Amazon gift card for full participation or a \$10 Amazon gift card if the interview was started but not finished.

## APPENDIX E: RESEARCH FLYER TEMPLATE

**Research Participants Needed: The Experiences of Christian Male's Attachment****Style and Attachment Figure to God**

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Male
- Christian
- Active in your faith
- Have you experienced a secure relational attachment to God?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to understand the process and meaning of individuals seeking to obtain attachment from God as an attachment figure. Participants will be asked to explore their experience with seeking a secure attachment to God by participating in a virtual, audio and video-recorded interview, which will take 60 minutes to complete. Benefits include sharing your experience and contributing to research information which will help us understand how to further develop interventions for others for improving their attachment style. Participants will also receive a \$20 Amazon gift card after the completion of the study, or a \$10 Amazon gift card if the interview was started but not finished. If you would like to participate, please click on this link (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BDH7NRP>) to complete the screening survey. A consent document will be provided via email one week before the interview. Irene Insunza, a student in the School of Behavioral Science, Department of Psychology, at Liberty University, is conducting this study.