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Kristina Marie Freed, PhD

ABSTRACT

One of the most profound human lifespan needs, especially among youth, is to have a worthy purpose for living. A growing body of research has identified a serious discrepancy between a Christian's doctrinal and experiential knowledge of God, leading to disengagement from the practice of discipleship. This may be related, in part, to an unfortunate null curriculum rooted in the assumption that believers understand God in such a way that predisposes them to a discipleship lifestyle. This paper suggests that the missing relational context and the discrepancy between doctrinal and experiential knowledge of God may be remedied by an intentional study of a biblical model of divine attachment that combines a positive doctrine about God that inherently supports a positive experience with him.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most profound human needs is to find a worthy purpose for living—to be part of something greater. Christianity offers to meet that need by promoting a relationship with Jesus Christ but has of late found itself losing credibility and adherents. Pew Research Center (2015) found that the number of Christians in America—Protestants and Catholics alike—is declining as a share of the population. In absolute numbers, fewer adults are identifying as Christian, while an increasing number of Americans identify with other faiths in addition to those who claim no religious affiliation at all. Pew Center's research has also identified that worship service attendance and religious affiliation are declining from one generation to another. Older generations are not sharing the faith in a way that is relevant to younger generations, not only because society has changed so much in recent decades, but also because "the relational context for learning is lacking" (Putman 2010, 23). As a result, younger generations struggle to find Christianity relevant.

At the same time public polling has identified the issues noted above, another body of research has identified a serious discrepancy between the two ways of knowing God: God concepts (conceptual/cognitive knowledge) and God images (experiential/affective knowledge). Zahl and Gibson (2012) found that Christians' God images are not as positive as their God concepts. At the same time, their cognitive knowledge of God exceeds their affective knowledge of him. In other words, while believers may have positive cognitive knowledge, their affective experiences are not as positive nor as extensive. Kam (2018) found that many Christians who are struggling on their discipleship journey are "crippled by impressions of God as mean, distant, harsh, or cold to them" (341). As a result, religion is not fulfilling their deep-seated desire for purpose.

The current difficulties facing Christianity may be related, in part, to an error at the beginning of the discipleship effort: an unfortunate *null curriculum rooted in the* assumption that believers understand God in such a way that they should be positively disposed toward a discipleship lifestyle. In seeking to address this null curriculum, we should consider that Jesus himself said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32, NKJV). It has been noted that "an accurate picture of his character is more likely to draw people to respond to his passionate love" (Peckham 2015a, 157, footnote) but engagement with Christianity is declining. Therefore, it would behoove Christians to not only consider whether an accurate picture of Jesus' character is indeed being lifted up but how focusing on such an accurate picture could revive the relational context necessary for discipleship.

The missing relational context and the discrepancy between God concepts and God images may be remedied by an intentional study of a biblical model of divine attachment. This should be supported by a biblical model of divine love as well as by concepts from within the psychology of religion.

THE PROPOSED MODEL

Following the identification of the presuppositions behind this proposed model, this paper will illustrate the utility of this idea by providing a brief overview of the psychology of religious experience as it relates to the discrepancy between God concepts and God images. A short definition of attachment theory and a summary of religion as an attachment process will be provided. It will also identify a specific model of divine love that provides a more supportive foundation for divine attachment than others. A brief synopsis of biblical instances of divine self-utterance indicating how God interacts with humans in the context of attachment will be supplied. Finally, it will summarize how these ideas may help with the transformation of God concepts, lead to harmony between God concepts and God images, and foster the relational context out of which discipleship grows.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

It is beyond the constraints of this short paper to discuss the reasons for presuppositions that undergird this proposed model, of which there are four, so they will simply be declared here. First, the theological context for the model comes from within the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, which holds a high view of Scripture and deeply values discipleship throughout the lifespan. Second, the nature of both divine love and divine attachment is rooted in canonical theology (see Peckham 2016), which, among other things, privileges the biblical text over the prominent streams of Greek philosophy. Third, where God is represented in the biblical canon as expressing emotion, this theological method permits divine emotion to be interpreted as theopathic rather than anthropopathic, insisting that his emotional experiences are always appropriate (see Peckham 2015b). Finally, the use of attachment theory as the lens through which to interpret specific instances of divine utterance in Scripture should not be understood as imposing a philosophy upon Scripture. Instead, attachment theory serves as a specific minimal framework by which one may contextualize certain divine utterances and determine whether, by those utterances, God presents himself as an attachment figure or behaves in ways that can be interpreted as providing attachment caregiving.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Meaning-making models, usually subconscious and unchallenged, are internal working models of the world that enable individuals to evaluate new information and assign it appropriate value (Paloutzian and Park 2013). If intentionally addressed, existing religious meaning-making models may be challenged, allowing them to be transformed, though this transformation may be slow and possibly accompanied by emotional trauma. However, when the process is understood, the transformation may be accelerated, and emotional trauma may be minimized. This knowledge may not make the transformation more comfortable, but it may be better tolerated if it can be seen as an avenue by which one may draw closer to God.

Paloutzian and Park (2013) succinctly described how challenges to meaning-making models affect believers. Once the individual has appraised the situation, there are three possible outcomes:

1. The individual determines that the initial appraisal of the situation was excessive and assigns a more appropriate, downgraded value to it. This leaves the meaning-making model intact.

2. The individual determines that the situation was appraised appropriately but has also determined that the meaning-making model is insufficient to meet the challenge. As a result, the meaning-making model is dismissed to

some degree or discarded altogether. This outcome often leads to a loss of faith.

3. The individual determines that the situation was appraised appropriately and that the meaning-making model is insufficient to meet the need. However, rather than dismissing the meaning-making model, the individual recognizes an opportunity for growth in the crisis. Therefore, the meaning-making model is reformed by including the new information gained through the experience.

Understanding meaning-making models and how individuals may respond to the challenges allows the ministry provider to anticipate what believers may experience during the God concept transformation and to meet the challenges that arise. Transformation is not a comfortable process, but it can be significantly less complicated if seen as process rather than as an event.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment, the most foundational psychosocial relationship between humans, was first suggested by John Bowlby (1969) as a framework for understanding the behavior of young children in relation to their mothers, not just in the presence of their mothers but especially in their absence. Attachment may be defined as an intergenerational, innate, enduring, co-regulating behavioral system of attention-seeking behaviors met by responsive caregiving behaviors. Bowlby observed that these behaviors can be summarized as attachment-seeking behaviors and caregiving behaviors: Attachment-seeking behaviors can be classified as either proximity maintenance or separation distress, both of which are employed to keep the attachment caregiver close. Attachment caregiving behaviors are characterized as a secure base and safe haven, the function of which is a supportive environment from which to explore the environment as well as a safe haven to return to when under threat or in times of stress.

Rather than being merely a system of behaviors for meeting needs exclusive to childhood, attachment is not a need anyone outgrows (Brown, Hawkins Rodgers, and Kapadia 2008); it is a core experience held by everyone. Bowlby (1979) believed it to be a vital lifespan experience "from the cradle to the grave" (129). He observed that humans of all ages are happiest and best able to use their talents optimally when they have the confidence that there are trusted and supportive individuals who will assist if

necessary—individuals who function as secure bases from which they may operate (Bowlby 1973). Accordingly, attachment figures may change generationally and incorporate individuals outside the original family circle, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood (Bowlby 1979). Ainsworth (1989) agreed with Bowlby, suggesting specific extensions beyond parents, dependent on different types of social interactions: older siblings and other relatives, friends, coaches, teachers, mentors, religious leaders, and youth leaders. The quality of attachment caregiving received across the lifespan, and from a variety of attachment figures, impacts not only those relationships but also one's physical and mental health (Granqvist 2002; Leman et al. 2018; Ellison et al. 2012).

Gordon Kaufman (1981), commenting on Bowlby's theory from a theological perspective, wrote that God is "an absolutely adequate attachment-figure" (67) and that attachment to him is not "an optional or merely morally desirable characteristic" but "an indispensable and ineradicable characteristic of our human nature" (58). Three decades later, (Boccia 2011) proposed that God endowed humanity with the capacity for attachment relationships as the foundation for attachment to himself. Knabb and Emerson (2013), exploring the concept of divine attachment in the first three chapters of Genesis, found that all characteristics of the attachment system are apparent in the Creation narrative and that the original attachment relationship between God and humanity was forfeited at the Fall. They suggested that attachment to God provides a vital context for understanding the need for redemption and restoration.

RELIGION AS AN ATTACHMENT PROCESS

Research into religion as an attachment process strongly indicates that religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences—deeply personal to millions around the world—are better understood when placed within a framework of religion as an attachment process (Cherniak et al. 2021; Granqvist 2020; Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013; Kirkpatrick 2012; Kirkpatrick 2005; Kirkpatrick 1997; Kirkpatrick 1994; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990). The presence of the dynamics of the attachment system within Christianity was first acknowledged by Reed (1978), who noted that the relationship between Israel and God exhibited "every form of attachment behavior, and of the behavior of the attachment figure, identified by Bowlby" (14).

A SUPPORTIVE MODEL OF DIVINE LOVE

Religion as an attachment process involves believers' perceptions of having a relationship with God. These perceptions are sustained by the God concepts they hold, which are rooted in their understanding of the nature of God's love.

In attachment literature, the God of the Bible has been recognized as a relational God (Miner 2007) who meets the criteria of an attachment figure offering proximity, safety, and security (Kaufman 1981; Stirrup 2011; Clinton and Straub 2010; Kirkpatrick 1992; Granqvist et al. 2012; Miner, Dowson, and Malone 2014; Hall et al. 2009; Hall and Hall 2021). As beings created in the image of God, our capacity for attachment—human or divine—is derived from this relational God (Houser and Welch 2013; Boccia 2011). Given that Scripture reveals that God's relational nature is love (1 John 4:8) and that he loves humans (John 3:16), and also that secure attachments are characterized by a quality of love that contributes positively to relationships (Saribay and Andersen 2007; Bowlby 1969), an exploration of the nature of divine love is foundational to any theological framework for divine attachment.

The canonical model posits that God's love is volitional in that God is not essentially related to any world, but he freely created the world and chooses to love the world freely, though not in a way that binds him to any specific course of action or behavior. Moreover, God bestows upon humans not just his love but also the freedom to love him in return or not, ruling out the concept of unilateral election love. Instead, election love results from a bilateral or reciprocal love relationship between God and humans.

The concept of divine attachment is best supported by this model of divine love that allows for God's love to be volitional—permitting him to love not because he must but because he freely chooses to do so. God indeed is genuinely interested in a love relationship with humans whom he created with the free will to choose to love him in return. Attachment caregiving, then, as an extension of God's love, and is a relational behavior that He chooses to make available to his creation. This gives them the freedom to seek attachment to him as opposed to forcing his attachment caregiving on them.

DIVINE ATTACHMENT

Attachment to God is presently measured by the extent to which a believer perceives God to be a secure base for exploration and a safe haven in times of distress, as well as by the extent to which the believer seeks proximity to him and experiences anxiety when feeling separated from him (Zahl and Gibson 2012). The idea that perception, a subjective experience, is the benchmark for whether God is a sufficient attachment figure raises theological concerns for which there is no current alternative in the literature.

God as an Attachment Figure

Early research into God as an attachment figure grew out of research into adult attachment. Miner (2007) noted that "psychological theories of attachment to God have developed as analogs of human attachments" (112). He recognized that these psychological theories "lack a clear presentation of the God to whom humans are supposed to attach" (115). This proposed model aims to make that clear presentation of God as an attachment figure by employing Scripture—specifically divine utterance—as normative.

It is beyond the constraints of this paper to itemize every instance of divine utterance wherein God reveals behaviors that may be interpreted as providing attachment caregiving. A brief survey of two instances each from the Old and New Testaments is provided for consideration.

Secure base

The distinguishing characteristic of the secure base function of an attachment figure is that it provides an environment from which an attachment seeker may explore their surroundings without fear.

Old Testament

In Genesis 12:1, God told Abram to "Go…to the land I will show you." While God was speaking directly to Abram, he was demonstrating to all believers that it is his nature to provide the security from which the surroundings may be explored. God also indicates that he will be available to provide guidance along the way. In Isaiah 43:2, God assured Israel, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." It may be understood that Israel should feel secure to be exposed to the surrounding environment, having received the promise from God that he would be with them. Such promises, native to the character of God, are available to all believers.

New Testament

Matthew 10:16-22 records Christ's explanation to his disciples that he was sending them out "as sheep in the midst of wolves." In the Great Commission found in Matthew

28:19-20, Jesus again spoke to the disciples and told them to "go into all the world...I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus' commitment to his followers provides the secure base from which they are sent out, and also his promise to always to be available to them.

This textual evidence (and more) supports the concept of God as a secure base according to the commonly held characteristics of a secure attachment figure.

Safe Haven

The distinguishing characteristic of the safe haven function of an attachment figure is that it provides a safe place to which the attachment seeker may retreat in times of distress or fear.

Old Testament

Speaking to Abram again, God urged him not to fear, declaring to him, "I am your shield of defense" (Gen 15:1). In Psalm 50:15, God exhorted his people, "Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will rescue you." Both of these verses recognize the distress or fear God's people may experience and assure them that he serves as a safe haven for them.

New Testament

In Matthew 11:28, Jesus actively encouraged people to seek safe haven in him: "Come to Me, and I will give you rest." In Luke 13:24, Jesus further evidenced his desire to be a safe haven for Israel, sorrowfully declaring, "How I long to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks." These verses indicate that God knows his people will experience distress and fear, but he expresses his longing to be their safe haven and to care for them.

This textual evidence, and more, supports the concept of God as a safe haven according to the commonly held characteristics of a secure attachment figure.

SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED MODEL'S BENEFITS

If God is the "ultimately adequate" attachment figure, an understanding of religion as the process of becoming securely attached to him has the power to improve religious experience by transforming God concepts. This, in turn, can transform internal working models and meaning making models. It would also lead to harmony between God concepts and God images, and foster the relational context out of which personal and corporate discipleship grows.

For youth struggling with their God representations and discipleship experiences, it is first recommended that they participate in an intentional biblical study of God concepts (cognitive/doctrinal knowledge) embedded in divine utterance. This would reveal to them any false or unbiblical beliefs they may have about God which might hold them back spiritually. Insecure internal working models of God could then be transformed by the new biblical data, allowing them to see and interact with God as the perfect secure attachment figure he reveals himself to be. Additionally, the biblical data about God would enhance meaning making models, increasing the chances that youth could meet challenges or crises in a way that keeps their faith intact rather than exposing them to the likelihood of apostasy.

Accurate God concepts are also necessary for the development of positive God images (affective/experiential knowledge). To encourage this development, it is recommended that youth be educated about and given opportunities to participate in healthy attachment seeking behaviors (spiritual disciplines). The cumulative effect of these practices would be to improve their ideas about God and provide a context for positive experiences with him.

Attachment has the potential to improve existing intergenerational relationships in the church, just as it does in families. Congregations can provide a stable, biblical context for improving God concepts and fostering the development of positive God images. New avenues would be open for youth to experience new discipleship relationships in which they may be contributors, not just consumers. Engagement in group attachment behaviors (seeking and caregiving) would lead to the strengthening of all attachment relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

There are specific instances of divine utterance in which God reveals himself in ways that may be interpreted as providing the attachment caregiving behaviors commonly labeled secure bases and safe havens. For believers, this provides the genesis of a positive, transformed God concept rooted in divine self-revelation rather than personal perception. A more comprehensive study would provide additional textual instances and serve as a body of evidence believers could contemplate while undergoing a transformation of their faulty God concepts. Attachment to God in this improved context could reduce the discrepancy between God concepts and God images, allowing for more positive affective experiences. These provide the kind of

environment in which the relational context necessary for discipleship flourishes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conference youth directors and pastors should receive training (curriculum forthcoming) in Divine Attachment for Discipleship Transformation for Youth.

2. Youth directors and pastors should plan a yearly review of the Divine Attachment concepts with young people in their pastoral care at retreats, weeks of spiritual emphasis, and youth Sabbaths.

3. Lay members who minister to youth should receive training in the concept.

4. When young people ask for Bible studies, youth leaders should be trained to explore the students' God representations before progressing through the series of fundamental belief Bible studies.

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