

Our Father which Art in Heaven: Conservative Christian Protestants' Perceptions and
Meanings of Gendered Family Metaphors for God

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to those people in diverse families and family relationships who pause in their joys, sorrows, frustrations, love, jealousy, care, weariness, and giving, to wonder about God.

Abstract

This study employed a sample of 575 Protestants to examine how Protestants perceive God in family roles by looking first at what roles God is perceived in and if gender, controlling for age, will predict perceiving God in specific family roles. God was most often perceived as a father, husband/groom, mother, and brother for the whole sample. However, when dividing the sample by gender, this did not hold true for the men who saw God first as father followed by brother, mother, and husband, in that order. Gender was significantly related to seeing God as a husband/groom when controlling for age. The second part of this study used a sub-sample of 18 mostly Conservative participants to explore how they perceived the nature of God in those family roles. God as father was seen in these three ways: a controlling, distant father; a kind, traditional father; and a modern, flexible father. God as mother was seen in a more traditional way, although participants came to the conclusion that they actually think of God as a “mothering” father or more generally as a parent. God was also seen as a brother, though this was less developed. God (usually as Jesus) was also experienced in five husband-type roles which include: tender and intimate lover, passionate and desirous lover, companionable partner, sacrificial and forgiving partner, and providing and protecting husband. Many connections between family relationships and family based God images were found.

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God, as portrayed by Michelangelo, is a kindly older man that a child might hope for in a grandfather. Christians most commonly referred to God as “Our Father” (Japinga, 1999). God is also described in Proverbs 18:24 as a “friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” Christ of the New Testament is the metaphorical bridegroom of the church-bride. More recently, evangelical feminists have approached God with the curiosity of the endearing baby bird in the classic children’s book and asked, “Are you my mother?”

Family metaphors are commonly used within Christianity to describe God and the varied relationships of God with people. In many cases these metaphorical family relationships are expressed as direct examples of how family members do (or ought to) relate to each other. Fathers are expected to give their children good gifts as “your heavenly Father gives the Holy Spirit to them that ask him” (Luke 11:13), and husbands are admonished to “love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25).

Metaphors are most often thought of as figures of speech in which one word to symbolize an object or idea is used in place of another to imply something similar about the two. But metaphors are much more than a method of expression or way to think about something. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), authors of the classic book *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors do not only provide a way of thinking about the world: they are our world because they shape how we interpret and experience our lives. They use the example of “argument is war” to demonstrate that we actually understand and experience things in our lives (e.g. arguments) in terms of other things (e.g. wars). We really try to win arguments by defending our position, attacking the

other's position, shooting down the other's ideas, and abandoning indefensible positions. Though Lakoff and Johnson argue that most of the metaphors we live by are not conscious, the profusion of relationship books, sermon ideas, songs, Christian talk shows, and self-help manuals that focus on God as a metaphorical family member, suggest that family metaphors for God should be purposefully integrated into Christian's lives and family relationships. The prevalence and richness of family metaphors for God in Christianity begs the question of how these metaphors are being used by Christians. Does the role of father offer one way to think about God or is God an actual father who is interpreted and experienced as such? And then we have natural family relationships to consider. Is the husband the actual head of the family as Christ is the actual head of the church, or is the husband role like the role of Christ in some ways but not others? Are husbands experienced as having God-like authority or is there a place where the metaphor breaks down conceptually for Christian couples?

This study examines how Christians perceive God in family roles by looking at what family roles they think of God in and the nature of God in those roles. The quantitative study looks at how views of the Bible and gender are linked to which roles Protestants think of God in. The qualitative study explores what kind of a family member (e.g. father, mother, brother) God is to them. The term "God" in this study is used broadly to refer to any and all persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) or other conceptions of God. Pronouns for God are avoided except when using the language of a participant or using pronouns that correspond to descriptions of God in a male or female family role.

Protestant affiliations share the Bible as a sacred text but have interpreted the meaning of gender and gendered family roles differently. They are also influenced by their religions in different ways. Wilcox and Williamson (2007) found that mainline Protestants have clearly moved toward gender egalitarianism in their views of family roles but also that these views appear to be more influenced by social convention than their churches. Conservative Protestants are more likely to view scripture as inerrant and to use them as a common sense guide to their everyday problems which suggests that they will be more directly influenced by writings and teachings of their faith (Wilcox, 2004). While they are more likely than other Protestants to have patriarchal views, their ideal male family roles have become less masculine. In other words, fathers may be seen as head of the house, but the ideal father role embodies many traditionally feminine characteristics such as nurturance and gentleness.

Mainline leadership has symbolically established a commitment to gender equality, incorporating gender inclusive language and images of God as mother. But, debates on gender and family roles are often based on specific Bible passages and official positions of churches. There are underlying assumptions that Christians view God, themselves, and family roles in light of these positions, although there is evidence that the connections are not so direct (Wilcox and Williamson, 2007).

This study, using Symbolic Interactionism and Hermeneutic Theory, stops to examine those assumptions by looking at how affiliation, views of the Bible, and gender are linked to perceptions of God in gendered family roles and to explore how God expresses those roles to participants. Its aims are to examine the assumptions that Christians perceive God as male in family based metaphors and have different

perceptions of God in gendered family roles based on their views of the Bible, gender, and family experience. The study also aims to discover more about the perceived nature of God in these gendered family roles and the ways participants perceive God relating to them in those roles. Of particular interest is how personal experiences are used as a lens through which to view God and how perceptions of God are used as a lens through which to view family and one's role in the family.

Review of Literature

There is an abundance of books and articles on the topic of gender, Christianity, and family life. Many are prescriptive of how God intended gender and family roles to be in a specific order and characterized by fixed roles and responsibilities, usually presumed to be based on innate, gendered traits. Others are critical of this traditional hierarchical approach to the "godly family" and make a case for mutual submission and egalitarianism. Still others focus on practical solutions for married couples, informed by psychology and counseling as well as the Bible. This variety of approaches was even exemplified by the Promise Keepers, an evangelical men's movement popular in the 1990s (Lockhart, 2000). Lockhart reviewed books on masculinity and cultural products of the Promise Keeps from which emerged four gender ideologies: traditionalist, psychological archetypes (primarily modifications of Jung), biblical feminist, and practical counseling. Literature on gender and Christian family life is broad and diverse. This review focuses more narrowly on conceptions of gender and family life as it relates to thinking of God in gendered family roles.

Christian Theological Arguments on a Gendered God in Family Roles

Christian theologians have engaged in rigorous debate about the nature of God as gendered and its implications for the future of Christianity, spiritual development, and family life. Ralph Quere (1985) makes a theological argument based on the Doctrine of the Trinity that God is not male, but is revealed as father as a relational rather than gendered term. Quere differentiated between God's characteristics and essence, arguing that God has masculine and feminine characteristics, but that the essence of God is based in ungendered fatherhood. Johnson (1997) similarly argued that the essence of God is a father based on the incarnation of Jesus Christ with Mary as mother and God as father. He went beyond Quere in implying that God is more masculine in how God relates to humans and that all Christians – men and women - respond to God in predominantly feminine ways because they are the collective church-bride. C.S. Lewis (1965) also provided support for this interpretation in his science fiction novel entitled, *That Hideous Strength*. In the novel there is a spiritual leader called, The Director, who advises Jane, a woman unhappily married, that she must submit to her husband. The Director tells Jane that she could have avoided the biological male by choosing not to marry and remaining a virgin and continues, "But the masculine none of us can escape. What is over and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it" (pp. 315-316).

Bartowski (2001), who does a review of evangelical advice manuals on marriage and conducted fieldwork at an evangelical church in Texas, discusses the heterogeneity of gender ideologies among evangelicals. One view he describes is *essentialism*, the belief in the natural distinction between men and women and how the more radical essentialists argue that God and Jesus are male and that this has clear

implications for the structure of society and the family. Many essentialists argue that God is male and should be addressed as “Father” (Bartowski, 2001). Presumably this also means that God should not be addressed as “Mother.”

Evangelical feminist theologians and writers have also contributed to the discussion of God in gendered family metaphors and its implications. Unlike feminists who have rejected the Bible as inerrant in favor of a more egalitarian ideology, evangelical feminists view the Bible as the inerrant and divinely inspired solution to spiritual issues as well as for oppression in the home, church, and society. Evangelical feminists rely on hermeneutical methods of interpretation much contested in the broader Christian community (Cochran, 2005). One of the first evangelical feminists was Virginia Mollenkott who shocked the Christian world in 1983 with her book, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. In it she outlined biblical metaphors for God as a birthing woman, midwife, beloved female, homemaker, and diverse mother images. Japinga (1999) also elaborated on feminine metaphors and names for God and emphasized the limitation of metaphors to describe something as big and unknowable as God. Still, she points out feminine metaphors for God, such as God being like a betrothed woman searching for a lost coin (in the Gospels) or God as a midwife (in the Psalms).

Evangelical feminists do not argue for the abolition of gendered family metaphors. In fact, they seem to enjoy discussing God through these metaphors as much as anyone. The difference is that they argue for more inclusive gendered family metaphors for God, the development of feminine metaphors in scripture that they consider neglected, and fresh interpretations of masculine and feminine family

metaphors for God (Cochran, 2005; Finger & Sandhaas, 2001; Japinga, 1999; Mollenkott, 1988; Mollenkott, 1983; Schumacher, 2004).

Implications of the Metaphors on Family Roles and Relationships

Johnson (1997) argued that God's presentation of himself as masculine (as a father) and then as male (Jesus) has specific application to how Christians should live. Gender, while unimportant in a purely spiritual reality where God is the only authority and gender is unnecessary, is a very relevant "second order reality" that is applicable to humans and human relationships until "the end of the age." Johnson believes that culture has a significant role in shaping the meaning of gender but also that Christians have a responsibility to interpret gender as God intended. He also said that men and women should generally live within the gender prescriptions of their culture, citing the apostle Paul. For example, women work in our modern culture, so a mother who works is not in violation of gender norms or God's intention for women in the gendered "second order reality." Once he acknowledged cultural variance, Johnson set forth an argument that the Bible, inspired by God, includes gender ideals that Christians should take seriously. These ideals are less open to cultural interpretations and are most clearly expressed in the metaphor of Jesus as husband and the church as wife. For Johnson, men parallel the role of Christ which translates into men being endowed by God with authority in the church and home. Women picture the church by modeling submission; men picture Christ by modeling humble leadership through service and sacrifice. In the spiritual reality, both men and women respond to the Christ-husband in the feminine role of submission.

Bartowski's (1997) review of Christian literature revealed that the belief that God is male, revealed as father, son, and husband, has implications for society and family; this is one of the essentialist cornerstones for male headship in families. Like Johnson, the Christ-husband is one of the most direct applications of this. Husbands are proxies for Christ in the marital relationship. Wives who refuse to submit to their husbands are rebellious against the authority of Christ. Bartowski (1997) cited Christian essentialist authors who directly parallel the hierarchy of God-Christ-church to the family hierarchy of husband-wife-child.

Mollenkott (1988) suggested that there is a powerfully compelling implication to thinking of God as male: "If God is male, then the male is God" (p. 39). She developed an argument that this gendered view of God leads to idolatry because fathers and husbands as symbols of God and Jesus become gods to themselves and to the women who relate to them. She challenged the goodness of Johnson's (1997) belief that men represent the Christ-groom and women represent the church-bride by suggesting that this encourages girls to be passive and irresponsible and boys to be prideful and domineering, and that this is certainly not an ideal for either gender. There is some evidence from evangelical Christian literature to suggest this possibility. Bartowski (1997) cited author, Darien Cooper, who wrote a best seller in 1974 entitled, *You Can Be the Wife to a Happy Husband*. This book posits that women's liberation is actually being free from the heavy responsibility of making decisions. Evangelicals who ascribe to hierarchical interpretations of gendered metaphors for God would likely object to Mollenkott's assertion on the grounds that men and women are equal before God and are both obligated to respond to Christ in a submissive way that encourages mutual

consideration. They contest that the roles of men and women may be different, but they are equally valuable (Bartowski, 2001; Johnson, 1997; Wilcox, 2004)

Japinga (1999) discussed the potential spiritual significance of thinking of God in gendered metaphors, claiming that male language for God implies that men are more God-like. She tells the story of a little girl who asks God if boys are better than girls and adds, "I know you are one, but try to be fair" (p. 56). Japinga focused more narrowly on family metaphors with her claim that inflexible family names for God make it difficult for some to relate to God in a positive way, especially those who have been abused or neglected by their fathers.

Most of the literature on the implications of gendered family metaphors for God is focused on evangelicals who tend to be more literal with their application of those metaphors. Mainline Christians have generally less literal views of the Bible compared to evangelicals and interpret family metaphors for God less literally as well. Mainliners have also tended to follow the cultural movement toward gender equality and have not defined themselves by their views on gender roles the way that evangelicals have (Christopherson, 1999; Jellen, 1990; Wilcox & Williamson, 2007). This is not to say that gendered family metaphors for God are not an issue for mainliners. Wilcox and Williamson (2007) claimed that the egalitarian drive among mainliners has necessarily influenced their symbolism. Mainliners are more likely to incorporate gender neutral language and feminine family metaphors for God into their Sunday services and literature, providing symbolic evidence to their commitment to gender equality in the home and church.

God as Instrumental and Expressive

Some researchers have not considered God as portrayed in gendered family metaphors but have instead looked at attributes of God that have been associated with traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. Schoenfeld and Mestrovic (1991) made a claim that God as seen in the Western world, particularly by Jews and Christians, exhibits expressive and instrumental traits by being merciful and stern, loving and jealous. This dualism, they claim, was often interpreted as being masculine and feminine and is in response to the system needs of a society. Although they labeled these traits as masculine and feminine, they noted the irony of this as they criticize this labeling because they believe such traits can exist in males and females equally. Their descriptions of God's instrumental and expressive traits were more archetypes of qualities that can be found in both sexes. Nelson, Cheek, and Au (1985) use the General Social Survey data to examine perceptions of God having more instrumental or supportive traits. They found that Americans do tend to choose "father" more than "mother" as an adjective for God, but that the "father" image of God is less differentiated and includes both instrumental and supportive traits. Contemporary Christian views of God were more relational than traditional, and the male metaphorical images for God were composed of masculine and feminine qualities (Nelson, Cheek, & Au, 1985).

Part of the discussion of the instrumental and expressive God is about the role of monotheism. Historical gods and goddesses have possessed instrumental and expressive traits, but they were often divided into various gendered deities (Schoenfeld & Mestrovic, 1991). The monotheistic theology of Christianity – particularly

Protestantism – and Judaism requires an androgynous God to meet the system needs of people.

Schoenfeld and Mestrovic (1991) discussed how Protestantism tended to emphasize the masculine instrumental system needs that were task oriented rather than relational. Rationality was valued over emotionality. Mary was eliminated as an object of worship and a demystification of religion (so characteristic of the Catholic church) was pursued in favor of a more matter-of-fact approach to God and religion. For Catholic Christians, the virgin and mother Mary was a legitimate symbol of femininity that included both powerful images that tended to balance male imagery and passive images that were largely subordinate (Leonard, 1998). Mary was, in one sense, a passive vessel that was always subordinate to Jesus, her son. On the other hand, Mary represented to women a sympathetic figure who could understand their suffering. Protestants, without such a symbol, placed the feminine role on God via God's expressive traits or on people (often via the church) through relational metaphors of God and Christians.

Disparities between Theology and Practice

We can see from the literature and research on Christians – mostly evangelical Christians – that there is diverse thought about how God can be conceived in family roles and diverse interpretations of what those conceptions mean. Much of the research focused on public messages from various Christian groups –such as books, media, and proclamations of religious leaders. To what degree do these public messages impact the everyday family lives of Christian men and women? Peterson and Donnewerth (1998) challenged the idea that unfalsifiable beliefs about gender roles are sustained through

conservative religious media. They found that the support a belief receives within the more immediate context of Christian community was shown to be more effective in sustaining traditional beliefs on gender roles. This fits with Wilcox and William's (2007) findings regarding disparities between professed gender ideologies by religious leaders and the practice of Christians in everyday life.

Even in groups most committed to traditional gender ideologies based on biblical principles, disparities between belief and practice exist. Perceptions of the ideal father, mother, husband, and wife do not necessarily follow traditional expectations. In an ethnographic study of gender negotiation within a Conservative Protestant group, Rose (1987) found a united language about gender roles but also contradiction and complexity. The congregation under study embraced the gender ideologies articulated by the Christian Right in its heyday, but while women submitted themselves to traditional female roles, they rejected traditional roles for their husbands who were expected to be actively involved in family life and childcare and to express themselves in traditionally feminine ways like sharing vulnerabilities or crying. These fathers and husbands varied from the traditional ideas of how men ought to be in these roles. While the structural expectations of male leadership and female submission were left intact, how this played out in the interactions between husbands and wives was very different, resulting in a different kind of leader-husband and father.

In a study that looked at both Conservatives and Mainline Protestants on gender and family roles, Wilcox (2004) discussed this same issue. Conservatives articulated a more traditional gender ideology but also an aggressive agenda to make fathers active participants in family life. This resulted in what Wilcox calls an "expressive

traditionalism” for men who are symbolic leaders of the home but also function in the home in expressive as well as instrumental ways. The paradoxical result is that, despite their traditionalism, Conservative men may be more progressive than their more liberal counterparts if progressivism is measured by time spent in childcare, housework, and other family activities.

Although Mainliners have embraced elements of the dominant culture including gender equality, their ideas of familism may be linked to metaphors for God in family roles. Unlike the metaphors interpreted by some Conservatives that emphasize hierarchy and authority, the biblical metaphors of Mainliners tend to be in keeping with the “Golden Rule” where more universal values such as honesty and kindness are given sacred qualities (Wilcox, 2004). Biblical images of God as a father, mother, friend, and lover demonstrate the unconditional love of God that cannot be earned or destroyed. In this way, family roles, challenges, and rewards are interpreted as having a higher meaning because they reveal the unconditionally loving character of God.

It is important to recognize the complex relationship between theology and practice – the possibility that family life and roles impact theology just as theology may impact family life and roles. There are two bodies of literature that have examined potentially reciprocal influences between God images and family roles and relationships. These are attachment and sanctification.

Attachment

Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth, attempts to explain the bond that infants have with their caregivers and how that bond impacts their future orientation to close relationships (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). More specifically, they

posited that the close bonds that infants have with their caregiver or attachment figure provides two important things: 1) a safe haven in times of stress and 2) a secure base from which to explore the world. Ideally, infants form this close bond with their caregiver, showing preference for that person over others and showing anxiety when they are separated. It is through this attachment relationship that infants learn how to regulate distress, regulate emotions, and develop a sense of security (Ainsworth, 1985).

Depending on the relationship between the primary caregiver and infant, the child develops a secure or insecure attachment style. The insecure attachment style can be either avoidant or anxious (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby emphasized that attachment styles are enduring and relevant for the entire lifespan. This is supported by a body of literature started by Hazan and Shaver (1987) that showed stable patterns of adult relationship expectations, concerns, and behavior that mirror the attachment styles described by Bowlby and Ainsworth. The *secure* attachment style is characterized by the belief that the partner is generally good and can be trusted to be there in times of need. The securely attached person believes that s/he is worthy of love. *Avoidant* attachments are characterized by a general distrust in the good will of the partner and the person's efforts to maintain an emotional distance from the partner to avoid being hurt. *Anxious* attachments are characterized by a general distrust that the partner will be there in times of need. People with an anxious attachment will doubt their lovability and worry about being abandoned by their partner.

Kirkpatrick (1997) argued that Christianity provides another application for the theory of attachment because of its inclusion of a personal God and its emphasis on relating to God in a personal way. When Americans were asked which statement best

describes their view of faith - “a set of beliefs; membership in a church or synagogue; finding meaning in life; or a relationship with God” – the last response was the most popular choice by far (Gallup & Jones, 1985, as cited in Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2009, p. 3). God, as perceived by Christians, has all the characteristics of an attachment figure, and the religious experience of Christians can sometimes be conceptualized using attachment theory (Kirkpatrick, 1997). God is a safe haven that people often turn to in times of trouble and is a secure base from which to explore the world (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2009). A body of literature has developed over the last few decades that examined religious experience in light of attachment theory, resulting in the emergence to two models: the compensation model and the correspondence model.

The Compensation Model

Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) found that a cross-section of adults with secure attachments (as measured by a brief survey) described God as more loving and less distant than did those with an insecure attachment. In a longitudinal study of adult participants, Kirkpatrick (1997) found that women who displayed more insecure (avoidant or anxious) attachment characteristics were more likely to report “finding a new relationship with God” by Time 2 than were the participants who displayed more secure characteristics at Time 1. This fits with the compensation model of attachment: people may seek a close relationship with God to compensate for insecure attachment styles they developed in their human relationships. Granqvist (1998) also found some support for the compensation model in his study of 203 students in Sweden. Insecure respondents were more likely than secure respondents to have experienced a major

religious change in adulthood, and secure respondents were largely agnostic. This relationship between attachment and religiosity was moderated by parental religiousness.

Additional studies linked insecure attachments with more God-seeking behaviors such as sudden religious conversions, more reported religiousness, more frequent prayer, and participation in more emotionally expressive religions (Granqvist, 2005; Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999, 2000; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). It seems possible that people with insecure attachments may seek religion or relationship with God to compensate for disappointing human relationships.

The Correspondence Model

The correspondence model of attachment posited that people use the working models that they have from their human relationships to relate to God (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Dickie, Ajeg, Kobylak, and Nixon (2006) predicted that nurturing parents would predict self-concepts and self-esteem, which would in turn predict images of a nurturing God. They found that parents, and especially mothers who nurtured and disciplined their sons, contributed to their sons seeing God as nurturing, feeling close to God, and being more religious. For the women in the sample, mothers and fathers who were perceived as having nurturance and power contributed to daughters seeing God as nurturing and powerful. Parents who were described as punishing and judging directly correlated with punishing and judging images of God in their children.

In their college and community samples, Beck and McDonald (2004) found that the more anxiety that people displayed in their love relationships, the more anxiety they reported in relation to God. Miner's (2009) study of 116 adults in Australia also found

that participants who showed an insecure attachment to both their parents and God scored highest on anxiety and lowest in existential well being.

This fits with the work of Kirkpatrick (1997) and Granqvist (1998) on compensation because, although people with insecure attachments may be more likely to seek a close relationship with God to compensate, once the relationship is established, they go back to their typical, insecure way of relating. There appears to be evidence for both the compensation and correspondence models of attachment in relation to God. People seek a relationship with God to fill an attachment void (compensation) and then relate in the way they have learned from their human relationships (correspondence) (Beck & McDonald, 2004).

Sanctification

Sanctification is the inscribing of spiritual character or significance to natural matters (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). The perception of an object being a manifestation of a person's images, beliefs, or experiences of God is one way they proposed sanctification can occur. Viewing family roles as reflections of God's character, such as parents extending mercy to their children when they have made mistakes as a symbol of God's mercy to humankind, is an example of sanctification. The other way that Mahoney et al. (2003) suggested sanctification can occur is attributing qualities typically associated with the divine to natural objects without reference to a particular deity. The idea that family relationships enjoy a special, "blessed" status or that a birth is "miraculous" are examples of this.

Pargament and Murray-Swank (2005) discussed how sanctification can be perceived as a natural experience that sheds light on something divine. On the other

hand, it can be seen as a way that something sacred makes a mark on the world. Jews believe that they can share in G-d's holiness through human actions that adhere to God's commandments, and the Koran describes Allah's self expression through nature (Pargament & Murray-Swank, 2005). In this way, humans and nature become sanctified as they express something true of the divine realm. Christians also have strong traditions that connect humanity and divinity, such as the expression of the Holy Spirit by the human demonstration of the fruits of the spirit, by taking holy communion, or believing themselves to be filled with the spirit of God. Although Pargament and Murray-Swank do not discuss it, living within the framework of family metaphors for God is a very specific example of sanctification. Family relationships tell us about the nature of God and the ideal structure of family and society. God's presentation of self and way of relating to humanity tells us about who we should strive to become as individuals and families.

Parental sanctification has been associated with less verbal aggression among Conservative and Liberal mothers, decreased corporal punishment by mothers with liberal biblical beliefs, and more use of corporal punishment among mothers with conservative biblical beliefs (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). College students who reported greater beliefs of sanctification regarding sex were more likely to report positive feelings about sexual activity and also more likely to have engaged in premarital sexual activity (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003).

In a study of sanctification in the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Goodman and Dollahite (2006) found that people who consider their marriages to be

sanctified think of God being present in their marriages in both direct and indirect ways. Some participants, who thought of God being present through their theology, focused more on the teachings of their faith and its application to their marriage more than any direct influence of God. Other Christian participants cited the importance of following the example of Jesus in relating to each other (i.e. unconditional love, forgiveness, patience). Some also talked about God being a resource to them in their marriages, sometimes giving examples of going to God in prayer when they needed help.

Sanctification may also present religious people with psychological risks, like when a family structure or function falls outside of what is defined as sacred, such as single parent families or households where the woman is the spiritual leader (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003). Conflict may emerge from within a family when there is disagreement on what kind of structures or roles are blessed or sanctified by God. When a relationship or family tie is severed (e.g., through an unwanted divorce), the sense of loss may be more acute if the relationship was believed to be sanctified. These findings suggest that thinking of family relationships in light of metaphors for God in family roles may have a variety of implications for family life – from the theoretical to the practical.

Gender Attitudes and Cohort

It is well documented that changes in attitudes about gender roles in the U.S. have been moving in a more liberal trend for decades (Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Cherlin & Walters, 1981; Ferree, 1974; Mason & Lu, 1988; Thornton & Freedman, 1979). General Social Survey data from the 1970s to the late 1990s reveal increasingly liberal gender role attitudes toward women in politics, women's career achievement,

gender power equality, and mother's ability to care for children and participate in paid employment (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). Brooks and Bolzendahl (2004) examined potential contributors to change in gender role attitudes including: cohort effect, marital status, labor force status, education, religion, and rights-based ideology. They concluded that cohort replacement processes account for about 55% of the total change in gender role attitudes from 1985 to 1998. Lynott and McCandless (2000) argued convincingly that differences in gender role attitudes are more about experience – often related to cohort – than to age, showing how different experiences have different impacts on women from the Great Depression, Baby Boom, and Baby Bust cohorts.

Discussion of God as a “she” can also be located in time. Virginia Mollenkott began introducing this possibility in Mainline Christian publications in the 70s, and Evangelicals began publicly considering gender bias in biblical translations around the same time (Cochran, 2005). In the 1980s there was heated controversy about attempts to introduce gender inclusive language into church services (Cochran, 2005; Ostling, 1983). Controversy erupted again in 1997 when the International Bible Society announced a gender neutral edition of the New Living Translation of the Bible.

Both the general liberalization of gender attitudes over time and the more specific historical occurrences regarding God as both “she” and “he” suggest that cohort probably matters in how willing a person is to consider God in a feminine family role. For these reasons age is used as a control when examining Protestant's perceptions of God as a family member.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the framework of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) which is well situated to study the process of meaning and private interpretation of meaning in the social world (Jeon, 2004). Qualitative family researchers have used SI to explore parenting, gender role negotiation, marital meaning, and intimate partner violence, how Jewish Israeli traditionalist women construct and negotiate their identity as women through their religious frameworks, and how Iranian women filter gender oppression through the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism (Gerami & Lehnerer, 2001; Hall, 2007; Yadgar, 2006). This study specifically uses SI to frame the perceptions of God in family roles and how personal experience with relationships and families contributes to the private interpretation of how God is in those roles. The created meanings of God in a family role - influenced by personal experience of family and family relationships - serve as a basis for how to relate to God in those roles.

Hermeneutic Theory was used in crafting interview questions and analysis. This theory asserts that meaning, once recorded, is independent of the author's intent but is open to an assortment of interpretations that fit within the framework of the reader (Nash, 2006). Since the framework of the reader is impacted by multiple and sometimes inconsistent sources, discrepancies among existing and new information must be incorporated into a new consensus (Nash, 2006). Many participants derive religious beliefs from the Bible, sermons, and Christian media and must interpret those texts and new information from other places in ways that can lead to a new personal consensus about God, gender, and family. It is through the hermeneutic strategies of interpretation that the gaps between theology and everyday life are bridged. Everyday life experiences attach new significance to parts of the sacred text and new ways of interpreting it. The

text, reinterpreted through the lens of new experiences, takes on new meanings.

According to Symbolic Interaction Theory, these new meanings will be acted upon to create new experiences, and the process continues.

Research Questions

Research Questions for the quantitative study include:

1. What are the family roles that Protestants think of God in?
2. Are religious affiliation, gender, and views of the Bible related to what roles God is perceived as occupying?

Hypotheses for the quantitative study include:

1. Protestants will see God predominantly in family roles explicitly referenced in Scripture including: God as Father and Jesus Christ as husband/groom. This will be followed by God as Mother as an extension of God's parental role as Father and Jesus as brother by extrapolation of father metaphor (God is my father and the father of Jesus, so Jesus is my brother).
2. Gender, moderated by views of the Bible, will predict seeing God in female roles when controlling for age. More specifically, women with less literal views of the Bible will be more likely to see God in female roles than women with literal views of the Bible or than men regardless of their view of the Bible.
3. Gender will predict seeing God or Jesus in the husband/groom role when controlling for age.

Research questions for the qualitative study include:

1. What, if any, family roles do participants think of God as occupying?
2. What is the nature of God in those roles in relation to participants?
3. What explanations do participants give for how they came to see God in those roles?
4. How does God in family roles compare to participants' natural family in those same roles?

Although it is not appropriate to craft hypotheses on studies based on phenomenological experiences of meaning, our theories of Symbolic Interactionism and Hermeneutical Theory lead us to some general expectations. One is that the meanings and experiences of God in family roles are related to past experiences of family roles and relationships. Another is that, aside from the literal words of scripture, multiple sources of thoughts, experiences, and feelings will interact with each other in forming the interpretation of God as a family member.

Methods

Participants and Procedures for the Quantitative Study

Potential participants for this study were identified in two ways. First, about 300 leaders of Protestant churches in rural Midwestern communities and a large urban area were contacted and asked if they would be willing to extend an invitation to participate to their congregations. One follow-up call was made if an initial call was not answered or responded to. If they agreed, an invitation was put in a Sunday bulletin or forwarded to an email list of congregants. The invitation specified that the study was for adults who identified as Protestant. Interested people filled out and returned the invitation to the researcher who sent them more detailed information about the study and a link to

the survey. The invitation offered paper or online surveys, but all participants chose the electronic version of the survey.

This method of recruitment yielded only twenty participants, so the researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota to recruit through email lists. Email lists were purchased from a company that collects contact information from public directories of diverse Christian groups and organizations such as the Association of Christian Realtors or from church directories. An invitation to participate and one follow-up invitation were emailed to people from this email list. Three other list serves were used which include: 1) the Religion and Family Life section from the National Council of Family Relations, 2) a purchased list of African-American church emails, and 3) a Christian homeschooler group.

Response rates could not be accurately calculated because it was not possible to know how many people actually received the invitations. The reasons for this are that exactly how many invitation were extended at churches was not known and many of the addresses on the email lists were invalid or required verification from the recipient before they could be delivered. Some people forwarded the invitation to others whom they thought fit the research criteria and might wish to participate. A total number of 618 participants took the survey, but 43 were removed because participants were not Protestant or did not reside in the United States at the time the survey was taken. The total sample for the study was 575.

The sample had almost equal numbers of men and women (53% male, 46.6% female, 2 missing) and was predominantly white, non-Hispanic (87.1%). White-Hispanic and Hispanic participants made up 5.2% followed by African-Americans at

4.3% and Multiracial participants at 2.6%. Asian/Pacific Islanders were at .5% with missing data on 8 participants. Most were married (81.3%) and had a baccalaureate degree or higher (83.4%). The sample was highly religious with 94.4% reporting attending church more than once a month and 96.2% reporting praying once a day or more. This makes sense because one of the criteria for participation was that participants be committed to their Protestant faith.

Affiliation was categorized using two methods. The first was introduced by Smith (1990) who used questions from the General Social Survey to classify affiliation along a fundamentalist-liberal continuum. Using Smith's classification system, the sample consisted of 47.3% Fundamentalists, 12% Moderates, and 23% Liberals with 14.1% excluded, and 3.1% missing. It should be noted that the excluded participants include those who do not identify with a specific denomination, a point that Smith was criticized on. Steensland, et al. (2000) used the historical development of religious traditions to classify denominational affiliations into seven categories. Using this classification system (RELTRAD), the sample consisted of 2.6% Black Protestants, 56.3% Evangelical Protestants, 29.7% Mainline Protestants, 2.4% Other Protestants, 5.3% with no denomination, and 3.7% missing or uncodeable. Many of these categories proved to have too few cases to show statistical significance, so the RELTRAD classification was dropped, and Smith's classifications were used in the analysis.

Measures for Quantitative Study

Religious Affiliation and Classification

Participants were asked, "What religious denomination are you?" and could write in their response. Affiliations were then classified according to the criteria set by

Smith (1990). When participants wrote in that they attended a non-denominational church that was like [named denomination], they were coded by the denomination named.

Views of the Bible

Participants were asked, “Which statement best describes your view of the Bible?” and given the following choices: 1) “The Bible is the actual word of God, and it is to be taken literally, word-for-word,” 2) “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word-for-word,” and 3) “The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by humans.” There was also an option to write in a response. Some participants used different words to write in very similar answers to the three listed above or elaborated on one of the views listed above and were coded accordingly.

God in Family Roles.

Participants were asked, “Do you ever think of God as a kind of family member?” This question was followed by the question, “If yes, what are the family role(s) you think of God occupying? Check all that apply.” They were given the choices: mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, wife/bride, husband/groom, and the option to write in an “other” response. All of the roles they checked were used in the analyses. One thing to note is that 23 participants said that they did not think of God in family roles but then checked some of the family roles that were labeled, “family roles you think of God as occupying.” These were included. Nine said they did think of God in a family role but did not check which roles. They were left in for the question of

whether participants see God in family roles but excluded from the question of which roles participants perceive God as occupying.

Analyses for the Quantitative Study

The first hypothesis could be confirmed or disconfirmed by looking at the descriptive data: what roles do participants most often think of God as occupying? To examine relationships between the variables, *chi-square* tests were run for gender, perceived family roles for God, views of the Bible, and denominational classification (Fundamentalist, Moderate, and Liberal).

The second hypothesis – that gender, moderated by views of the Bible, will predict seeing God in female roles when controlling for age – was tested using logistic regression. This statistical test was chosen because there was more than one independent variable (gender and age) and the dependent variable was nominal (God in various female roles). Four models were tested with the following four dependent variables: seeing God in the role of mother, sister, wife, and daughter. Gender and age were the predictors in each model and the dependent variables were dichotomous. Those who did not think of God in the role of mother, sister, wife, and daughter were given the dummy code of “0” and those who did were coded “1.” The model that included the moderating variable, “views of the Bible” was not tested because of insignificant relationships between gender and seeing God in the female family roles.

The results from the *chi-square* test and early qualitative interviews led to the development of a third hypothesis: gender will predict seeing God or Jesus in the husband/groom role when controlling for age. This was also tested with logistic regression. The model consisted of gender as a predictor variable, seeing God or Jesus

as a husband/groom as the dependent variable, and age included in the model as a control.

Participants for the Qualitative Study

The sample for the qualitative study was a sub-sample from the quantitative study. The informed consent for the quantitative study included information on the qualitative study and informed potential participants that they might be invited to participate. When participants completed the survey, they were given a brief description of the qualitative study and asked if they were willing to be re-contacted with more information. If they said, “no,” the survey was completed and left anonymous with no identifying information. If they said, “yes,” they were redirected to a screen that requested contact information. The primary criteria for contacting participants for follow-up interviews was (1) if the participant lived within three-hours-drive of the researcher and (2) if they perceived God as occupying family roles. All of the participants lived in Wisconsin or Minnesota. They came from both rural and urban areas. The second criterion was to select as diverse a sample as possible in terms of their perceptions of God in family roles. A total of 33 potential participants were contacted via email, given the details of the interviews, and invited to reply if they were interested. Those who did not respond were sent one follow-up email. Eighteen total participants indicated an interest to participate and were interviewed. Two others initially expressed interest but eventually declined due to other commitments. Although there was considerable overlap in the data collected from participants, saturation was not reached. Interviewing stopped at 18 because the list of potential participants had been exhausted.

Table 1 describes the sample for the qualitative study. The names have been changed to pseudonyms, age has been categorized, and some demographic information omitted to protect the identity of the participants. Ages of participants ranged from 20 to 84 years. There were seven men and 11 women ranging in education from a GED to graduate and professional degrees, although the majority (10) held advanced degrees. Seventeen identified as White Non-Hispanic, one as White Hispanic, and one did not answer the question on race. Three had never been married and did not have children, and 15 had been or were married and had children. The majority (14) identified with what Smith (1990) would call Fundamentalists and Steensland et al.(2000) would classify as Evangelical. Three identified as Moderate and one as Liberal.

Table 1: Description of Interview Participants

Name	Sex	Age	Ever Married	Children	Affiliation	God in Family Roles
Aida	F	18-39	Y	Y	Evangelical	Father Mother Husband
Angela	F	60 or older	Y	Y	Episcopal	Mother Father
Brett	M	60 or older	Y	Y	Baptist (General Conference)	Father Brother Mother
Crystal	F	18-39	Y	Y	Pentecostal	Husband Father Mother
Jacob	M	60 or older	Y	Y	Christian & Missionary Alliance	Father Brother Husband
Jacquie	F	40-59	Y	Y	Christian & Missionary Alliance	Father Husband Mother
Janet	F	40-59	Y	Y	Lutheran	Father Brother Mother
John	M	18-39	Y	Y	Evangelical	Father Mother Sibling
Joshua	M	18-39	N	N	Pentecostal	Father Husband
Leah	F	18-39	N	N	Baptist	Father Husband Brother

Lynn	F	60 or older	Y	Y	Nazarene	Father Brother Groom
Macy	F	18-39	N	N	Pentecostal	Mother Father Husband
Mark	M	60 or older	Y	Y	Independent Fundamental	Father Brother Husband
Meredith	F	60 or older	Y	Y	Lutheran (ELCA)	Parent Sibling
Ramond	M	60 or older	Y	Y	Presbyterian	Father
Sharon	F	40-59	Y	Y	Independent (similar to Baptist)	Father Mother Husband
Terrence	M	40-59	Y	Y	No Denomination (Fundamentalist beliefs)	Father Husband Brother
Valerie	F	40-59	Y	Y	Evangelical	Father

***NOTE: family roles are listed in the way they were rank ordered by participants.*

Data Collection Procedures for the Qualitative Study

The qualitative study was a naturalistic, phenomenological inquiry into the ways that participants see God as a family member, how they relate to God in a family role, and their experiences as family members. A constant comparative method of data analysis was used to explore participants' perception of God's role and their experience of relating to God in that role. The researcher approached each interview with an attitude of openness and interest in following the experience of the participants and allowing their perceptions, experiences, and beliefs to shape the interview.

Interviews took place over a period of six months at a time and place convenient to the participants. Most interviews were done in conference rooms of coffee shops, but a few took place in offices, and one at the participant's home. The interviews ranged from forty minutes to ninety-five minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher or a transcriptionist. Transcriptions were then verified by the researcher by comparing them to the recorded interviews. There was a recording malfunction for

two of the interviews. In these cases, the researcher sat with the interview guide and typed notes based on recollection of the interviews. In both cases the interview had taken place on the same day that the malfunction was discovered so that the interview was fresh in the mind of the researcher. When writing the notes the researcher erred on the side of caution by only writing responses that were clearly and specifically recalled. Their responses to the questions were included, but quotes were not as the researcher could not be certain that the quotes were recalled with perfect accuracy. One exception to this was a quote that the interviewer had jotted down during the course of the interview.

This study is part of a larger study that asks about perceptions of Jesus and self, questions about God in family roles, and about connections between God images and personal family roles. For this study, the portions of the interview that asked questions about God in family roles and connections to personal family roles were used. Participants were asked in the survey to rank the top three family roles they think of God occupying. Some of them thought of God in a single role and others in multiple roles. These responses provided a basis for what roles they were asked to elaborate on in the interviews. It should also be noted that sometimes they talked about other family roles they had not listed – either because something in the interview prompted them to think about it or because the interviewer, in the spirit of the constant comparison method, added a question about a specific family role that had generated interest in previous interviews (e.g. asking men if they were able to think of Jesus as a groom). The questions asked for the section on God in family roles were as follows:

1. In your survey, you indicated that you most often think of God as a(n) [insert family role]. Can you tell me more about that image?
2. Please describe what kind of a(n) [insert family role] God is to you.
3. How did you come to see God that way, do you think?
4. When you think about your natural [insert family role], how does s/he compare to God as a (n) [insert family role]?
5. Think about a role that is difficult to imagine God in. What about that family role makes it difficult to imagine God in it?

The questions asked about connections between God images and personal family roles were based on the surveys. Examples of these questions are as follows:

Example 1: You indicated that you view God as a father, and that you are also a father. Can you talk about if and how God as a father impacts your own fathering?

Example 2: You indicated that you view God (Jesus) as a bridegroom and that you are a wife. Can you talk about if and how Jesus as a bridegroom impacts you as a wife?

Follow up questions were asked to explore any connections participants made between their images of God in family roles and their own family roles.

Although these questions provided the main structure for the interviews, the researcher was flexible and open to following the meaning making and perceptions introduced by the participants. Different questions sometimes needed to be asked in order to get at the deeper meaning of God images and how they impacted how participants related to God. One example of this was asking, “Can you think of a

specific time when you approached God as a(n) [insert family role]? What was it about you or your situation that lead you to approach God that way instead of another way?” This kind of question was often used to clarify differences between similarly described roles, such as “God as father” and “God as mother.”

Follow-up questions were added under each broad question in keeping with the constant comparison method and the way that the participants talked about how they related to God and their families. The constant comparative research method involves a continual interaction between the text and analysis procedure. Analysis feeds back into the collection of the data and is re-analyzed (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). Analysis of the information was continual throughout the interviews and while reviewing the transcripts. As stories were told, attention was drawn to what was being emphasized by the participants, encouraging elaboration on those things. An example of this was when men expressed awkwardness about thinking in the groom/bride metaphor because they, as part of the church, were cast in the role of bride. Questions about this metaphor were added to interviews with men after it had come up with the first two men interviewed.

Design Procedure

The analysis procedure used for this study was the constant comparative method that involves a constant interaction between the sampled text and analysis procedure. Data are collected and analyzed for emerging themes or categories, and looped back into the data collection (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). The investigation continued to evolve as new information was received. When connections were made among the responses of one interview, subsequent interviewees were asked if they saw connections within their own stories. One example of this is the evolution of perceptions some participants had

with their parents and with God as a parent. The researcher noticed connections when coding the first few interviews and became much more alert to those connections in subsequent interviews, often bringing potential connections out for the participant to comment on. For example, “I notice that your current perception of your father is that he is much more tender-hearted than how you first thought of him as a child. I also notice that you describe your perceptions of God as a father moving from a strict, disciplining father to a more sympathetic and loving father. Can you comment on how these views changed and if you think they are connected?”

Themes emerged from the analysis of the transcribed interviews. The researcher employed the technique of bracketing or suspending personal beliefs about the realities of the natural world in order to be open to the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1990). After reading the transcripts completely at least one time, the researcher analyzed the texts for emerging themes. Basic descriptions of the participants’ responses were noted under general categories (e.g. God is like a father). Within these general categories, *meaning units* were categorized and given descriptive names (e.g. God disciplines me). Meaning units are smaller segments of the whole that can be identified and analyzed in relation to each other to illuminate understanding of the whole (Dahlbert, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001). From these categories of meaning units the themes emerged. Van Manen (1990) described themes as structuring the experience of the phenomenon being investigated. Themes were identified in this study if they seemed to give structure to the participants’ experiences of God in a family role or to their experiences of their natural family members and family roles. It had to give shape or structure to how this phenomenon was experienced in the participants’ everyday lives.

This is important because many people used a family label for God but could not specifically identify experiencing God in that way or thinking of God in that role in a way that was meaningful to their lives. Family labels for God are part of the quantitative study, but the qualitative study is most focused on those God images that mattered to how participants thought about and experienced God, themselves, and others in everyday life. Both the cognitive-based concepts of God and the more experiential-based images were explored and are discussed in the results. Connections across themes were also examined.

In the process of coding participants' descriptions of Jesus as lover/partner/husband, an interesting connection emerged as relevant. The process of coding included putting every word that participants used to describe Jesus as husband on paper. Every word or phrase was put down, even as participants repeated the same word or phrase over and over again. Once this was concluded, there was a block of words and phrases, many of them repeated multiple times. From there, the words and phrases that fit together were put into categories of "similar descriptions" (i.e. longing, desire, passion). There were five categories of words and phrases when this was completed. Reading over them, the researcher recognized them as descriptions of five of Lee's (1977) love styles.

In 1977, Lee developed a typology of love styles that has proven helpful in understanding romantic relationships. He gathered over 4,000 statements about love from which he constructed a 30-item questionnaire. Factor analysis showed six dimensions of love which will be described briefly. Eros is a love based on beauty and attraction. The romantic elements of love are emphasized, and it is characterized by

physical attraction, emotional connection, and the idealization of the lover. Storge is a love that develops slowly from a deep and satisfying friendship. Stability, companionship, and a sense of closeness are highly valued. Passion and the ups and downs of intensely emotional connections are avoided in favor of a peaceful, enduring, and companionable love. Commitment is highly valued by Storge lovers. Ludus is a game-playing kind of love, often played with multiple partners. It may include deception or manipulation but avoids commitment, jealousy, and expectations for the future. Agape is an altruistic love that is other-centered. Agape lovers make no demands and take delight in giving to their partner. A gentle tolerance for the other and unconditional love and caring describe the Agape style. Pragma is a love style of thoughtful reasoning. Compatibility is determined by a careful consideration of the benefits of the relationship. It is essential that the advantages of the relationship outweigh the disadvantages. In this way, pragmatic considerations are the basis for forming the love relationship. Mania is an obsessive love style characterized by high emotions, jealousy, and dependence. Manic lovers are often anguished about their love that is obsessively desired but ultimately uncertain. They may push for more intimacy than their partner can give and require constant reassurance.

To check if the blocks of descriptive words and phrases truly corresponded with Lee's love styles, the researcher systematically examined each category of words and phrases and jotted down the corresponding love style on the side only if the content fit the love style and did not contradict it. At the end of this process, the researcher was satisfied that five of Lee's love styles were represented including: Eros, Mania, Storge,

Agape, and Pragma. (Ludus was not represented by this data). These love styles will be integrated into the description of the findings.

Trustworthiness

Polkinghorne (2003) argued that threats to validity in qualitative research come in two forms: validity of the text itself and validity of the analysis of the text. The extent to which the text actually reflects the participants' experiences are referred to as the validity of the text. Validity of the text is threatened in the following ways: (a) the limitations of language in structuring the experiences accurately, (b) experienced meaning can only be articulated to the extent that it has reached conscious awareness, (c) people often resist revealing the depths of their thoughts and feelings, and (d) the co-creation of the texts introduce the potential of the influence of the researcher distorting the experience (Polkinghorne, 2003).

Polkinghorne (2003) suggested addressing these concerns in the following ways: (a) encouraging language that is descriptive as well as metaphorical or symbolic in nature, (b) active and focused listening that is open to multiplicity of experienced meaning, (c) developing a rapport with the participant that includes assurances of openness without judgment, and (d) guarding against bias by listening rather than evaluating and following up on what is unexpected.

The researcher made conscious efforts to focus on the participants' words and meanings during the interviews - encouraging elaboration, asking for clarification, and following up on unexpected descriptions and meanings of participants. The researcher used Hermeneutical Theory in the interviews to explore apparent contradictions and paradoxes by asking the participants to talk about their thoughts and experiences in

greater detail and depth. It was common for the researcher to begin follow-up questions with the words, “How does this fit with what you talked about earlier...?” Diligent efforts were made to maintain a posture and expression of openness to the participants’ experiences by repeating the participants’ words as encouragers, nodding, smiling, and responding with warmth and neutrality, regardless of the researcher’s personal opinions. Co-creation of participants’ experiences was openly acknowledged by the researcher, who was explicit about her role in structuring that reality. To minimize the risk of the researcher distorting the participants’ experiences, the researcher’s understanding of the experiences were often reflected back, and feedback was invited from the participant, often beginning with the words, “Would it be fair to say...?” or “Tell me if I’m getting this right.” The following conversation with Josiah demonstrates how this typically happened. Keep in mind that this dialogue came after the interviewer had carefully listened to Josiah’s description and had asked for and received clarifications and elaboration. Note: “I” is for “interviewer”:

- I O.K., so just so I don’t make a mistake when I’m home...
- J Sure
- I ...interpreting (chuckles) what you’re saying, let me check it out with you. Um, you are naturally more inclined to some qualities than to others.
- J Yes.
- I And Jesus embodied SO many characteristics...
- J Yeah.
- I ...that it’s O.K. that you’re lower in some...
- J Yeah.
- I ...than in others, BUT it’s also important that you be open to God, um, kind of inserting those things into you as God wills.
- J Sure, and it’s, it’s also...

Co-creation occurred as Josiah affirmed the researcher’s interpretation and then added more ideas that he thought were relevant to the emerging and shared meaning.

The researcher then checked her understanding of this new information with Josiah, and he clarified, added to, or affirmed it. We see a similar example with Terrence:

- I O.K. So I want to make sure I understand this. You don't approach God or pray to God as your brother, but you think of it as a way that God is connected to you, or understands your human experience?
- T Yeah, just, exactly. He suffered everything. He even suffered temptation. So, that helps. And I think, you know it wouldn't be wrong for me to pursue to see that more in prayer and, and entering into his presence as husband and brother.

As with Josiah, Terrence follows up his affirmation of the researcher's understanding with more information. He further develops the thought with examples and adds his idea of how he might respond to the co-created God as brother image.

Attempts were made to make the circumstances and process of analysis transparent. This and the use of verbatim accounts of participants allow other researchers to decide if the interpretation is reasonable. When quotes for participants are used, minimal encouragers from the researcher (e.g. "mm-hm") and some interjections (e.g. "um") were removed unless they contributed to the meaning of the account, such as if the process of explaining is demonstrated to be difficult by the frequency of false starts, stutters, and interjections.

Results for the Quantitative Study

Descriptives

Table 2 displays the frequencies and percents of the family roles God is perceived as occupying. A total of 457 (79.5%) participants perceive God in a family role, and 118 do not.

Table 2: God as Family Member

	Any		Father		Mother		Husband/ Groom		Wife/ Bride		Brother		Sister		Son		Daughter		Other	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
All	457	79.5	443	77.0	164	28.5	174	30.3	33	5.7	163	28.3	49	8.5	39	6.8	11	1.9	77	13.4
Women	220	82.1	214	79.9	88	32.8	103	38.4	14	5.2	76	28.4	25	9.3	16	6.0	5	1.9	40	14.9
Men	236	77.4	227	74.4	76	24.9	71	23.3	19	6.2	87	28.5	24	7.9	23	7.5	6	2.0	37	12.1

The first hypothesis states:

Protestants will see God predominantly in family roles explicitly referenced in scripture including: God as Father and Jesus Christ as husband/groom. This will be followed by God as Mother as an extension of God's parental role as Father and Jesus as brother by extrapolation of father metaphor (God is my father and the father of Jesus, so Jesus is my brother).

The data partially support the first hypothesis. God as father is most reported (n=443, 77%) for the whole sample, for men, and for women. God (or Jesus) as husband/groom (n=174, 30.3%) and God as mother (n=164, 28.5%) follow in that order for the total sample, but are different by gender. More women perceive God or Jesus as a husband/groom than a mother, but more men view God as a mother than God or Jesus as a husband/groom. The hypothesis is also supported in that brother comes in as the fourth most common perception of God or Jesus for the whole sample (n=163, 28.3%), but there are differences by gender. Brother is the second most frequent image of God for men and fourth most frequent for women. In other words, the hypothesis is fully supported when considering the sample as a whole. When separated by gender, the hypothesis is fully supported for women who see God as father, husband/groom, mother, and brother in that order but partially supported for men who see God as father, brother, mother, and husband/groom in that order.

Analyses

Chi-square tests were run with gender and the perceived family roles for God which included: any family role, mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, wife/bride, husband/groom, and other. The only significant relationship is between gender and the husband/groom role ($p < .001$). This finding led to the addition of another

hypothesis, but first the second hypothesis was tested. The second hypothesis states that:

Gender, moderated by views of the Bible, will predict seeing God in female roles when controlling for age. More specifically, women with less literal views of the Bible, will be more likely to see God in female roles than women with literal views of the Bible or than men regardless of their view of the Bible.

Before testing with the moderating variable, the relationship between gender and female family roles was tested. Gender appears to predict seeing God as a mother, sister, wife/bride, and daughter when age is not controlled for, but this turns out to be spurious. When age is added as a control, the relationships between gender and seeing God in each of these female roles are not statistically significant. Consequently, the full model with the moderating variable was not tested.

Here is where an added hypothesis regarding gender and seeing God as a husband/groom was tested. This hypothesis was added based on the *chi-square* results and data from the qualitative interviews. It states: Gender will predict seeing God as a husband/groom when controlling for age.

Logistic regression was conducted to assess whether gender significantly predicts whether or not participants view God/Jesus in the role of husband/groom when age is in the equation. When both predictors of gender and age are considered together, they significantly predict whether or not a person thinks about God/Jesus as a husband/groom, $\chi^2 = 34.41$, $df = 4$, $N = 568$, $p < .001$. Table 2 presents the odds ratios, which suggest that the odds of estimating correctly who will see God/Jesus as a husband/groom improve by 73% if the participant's gender is known. This remains significant ($p < .01$) when age is in the equation.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Predicting Who Will See God as a Husband Groom

<u>Variable</u>	<u>β</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Odds Ratio</u>	<u>p</u>
Gender	.55	.191	1.73	.004
Age	-.03	.007	.97	.000
Constant	.32	.365	1.38	.382

Findings for the Qualitative Study

Descriptives

All eighteen (100%) of the participants thought of God in a parenting role. Ten thought of God as a mother, a father, as both mother and father, or more generally as a “parent.” Eight thought of God as a father but not a mother. A total of eleven participants - four men and seven women - thought of God or Jesus as a husband/groom. Seven thought of God or Jesus as a brother and two more generally as a sibling. There was insufficient data to develop themes of God as brother. Participants’ descriptions of God as brother were more conceptual than experiential, and the descriptions lacked detail and richness. Fourteen participants identified with more fundamentalist ideologies and/or denominations. Three came from moderate denominations, and one came from a liberal denomination. All of the participants in the sub-sample attended church at least weekly and prayed at least once a day.

Themes

Themes were organized by family role and by ways that various human roles and God-roles interrelate.

God as a Parent

Every participant thought of God in some kind of parenting role, and this was the role that was most developed for participants in terms of how they perceived and

related to God. Various reasons were given for why they perceived God as a parent including: projecting their own parent(s) onto God (8); teachings or memories from childhood including Sunday School lessons, hearing parents pray, and children's songs (6); references to God as a parent in scripture (6); feeling parented by God, especially being disciplined (5); and popular Christian culture including books, songs, media, and Christian counseling (5). The following themes come from participants' descriptions of God in parenting roles.

God is a demanding, controlling, and distant father. Four participants perceived God as a demanding, controlling, distant, or even tyrannical father. For three of them this image of God as a father had changed over time to a good, traditional father (Lynn) and a modern, flexible father (John and Jacob). For Jacquie, there was a difference between how she tries to think of God, as more gentle, and her default image of God as cold and distant. These God-images were compelling and had strong connections to each of their own fathers as well as a commanding influence on how they relate to God.

The demanding-controlling-distant father-God is described as angry, guilt evoking, and chronically disappointed in their failings. Lynn said that her church upbringing led her to think of God in the father roles as, "a large...kind of unreal, guilt emoting (sic), angry power...and that's when I came up with this guilt and towering thing... . You had to *do* things to go to heaven!" Jacob talked more about his current and more benevolent image of God but did briefly discuss a father-God that was distant, rigidly strict, and judging, which was also how he described himself in his earlier years of ministry and family life. Similar to Lynn, he said that he used to believe that he had to be good enough for God to love him.

John described his “old image” of God as father from a relational standpoint with himself cast as the inadequate son:

It’s just if, if I were up to bat and striking out and my dad were the coach, and I’d strike out and look back, and I see his, you know, he’s just shaking his head. He’s going, “Oh, come on!” You know, that, that was a powerful relational process between me and God. And so my hope would be next time I get up to bat, I would get a hit – maybe a homerun. Let’s forget about that strike out because I just hit a homerun, and then, and then, then God would be proud of me. That’s maybe the inverse of his disappointment, and me feeling completely responsible for his disappointment and therefore I could perform well, and *cause* God to be proud of me. Uhh, that probably has a lot to do with my real relationship with my earthly father.

Jacque’s image of God was slightly different in that she did describe him as “caring” along with “standoffish” and “judgmental.” The caring she described as implicitly understood, but as she puts it, “not like ‘come into my lap; let me wrap my arms around you’”. She expressed an interest in relating to God in some of the gentler ways God is described in the Bible, but has difficulty reconciling the reverence for God with the intimacy of a close Daddy-child relationship, saying, “I don’t know anybody that I’ve embodied as being reverent, and I have awe for as well as being able to say, ‘you’re my daddy,’ and I can just come up to you.”

These experiences of father-God highlight the differences between a perfect father-God and imperfect, unworthy child, bringing out a sense of inadequacy, humiliation, and hopelessness about ever pleasing the “father.” John described his humiliation as being public, saying that it felt as if God’s disappointed response toward him was known by all, such as in the baseball analogy when the father-coach openly expressed disappointment in his son which results in his son’s public shame. The disparity in expectations and reality often resulted in feeling guilty for not measuring up

to God's standards and despair at the unlikelihood of the standards ever being met. John spoke of his guilt when he said, "I've really had to do a lot of work to decentralize this guilt relationship with God, and this sense of trying to please and make God happy, because of how miserable I've made God." Participants described different responses to the feeling of never measuring up to the standards of their father-God.

Lynn reacted by leaving her childhood church and practice of faith for most of her adult life and living contrary to what she had been taught in church; John reacted by trying even harder to be worthy enough to earn the respect and love of God as father. He became very active in doing good things claiming that, "Much of my motivation was this counteracting my guilt with good – by being a good person." Jacob reacted similarly to John by trying to conform to father-God's expectations and becoming demanding and rigid himself. He became more disciplined in his religious practice and his personal life. From his own disciplined life, he developed expectations for people under his ministry and for his family that they were unable to meet, disappointing him as he supposed he had disappointed father-God. Jacquie responded by trying to experience God in new ways, especially by being more open and real as she relates to God. She talked about wanting to pray as she is right now rather than as she should be, and that in the last few years she has been, "testing the waters. It's like...can I, can I trust that?" All of these participants refer back to their natural fathers to explain how they came to see God as a demanding-controlling-distant father. These relationships will be explored in another section of this paper.

God is a kind, traditional father. Nine of the participants (Bob, Sharon, Mark, Lynn, Macy, Janet, Aida, Leah, and Terrence) described God as a kind and attentive

father who fills a traditional father role. Two other participants (Jacquie and Valerie) described wanting to experience God this way instead of as a more distant father and were actively trying to do so. This kind, traditional father is wise and authoritative.

Although most participants did not have an active mental picture of God as father, Lynn saw him as “Michelangelo’s God...bearded and very wise! (laughs) Larger than life!”

Aida said:

I don’t see his face or anything, but, someone big who is comforting, that you could sit in his lap, and he could hold you in his arms. Kind of...I suppose, I suppose if I were going to put a face on God the father, he would be big and have a big beard because that’s always been comforting to me.

This father-God’s primary roles are guiding, disciplining, protecting, and providing. Participants describe themselves approaching this kind and traditional father-God when they are confused, afraid, or in need of something. Macy said she thinks of God as a father when she is confused or has a problem. When asked about situations when she might approach God as father, Aida responded, “When I really don’t know what to do. When I’m at a loss and I feel helpless or like a little child, I suppose.” Jacquie responded to the same question with, “Yeah, we have needs for my family...um, health. I don’t, I don’t know that I have anything that I would hesitate to ask, although I might think that I might have to prioritize it. (laughter) So I guess I am hesitating in a sense.” She linked her hesitation to the transitioning of her perception from God as a fear inspiring father to a more gentle and kindly father. Leah emphasized God’s role as a provider, saying that she goes to God in this role, “...if I stress out about money stuff I remember, God is a father. He’ll provide. Um, yeah I guess God as father would be my default image of God.” Janet also said that she approaches God as father for her

provisional needs. The following sections explore how participants perceived God in the roles of guide, disciplinarian, protector, and provider.

The roles of guide and disciplinarian for the kind, traditional father-God are rooted in God's character which is wise, unconditionally loving, altruistic, and authoritative. Most of the participants said or implied that God would not stop loving them because they failed, in contrast to the demanding-controlling-distant father whose love for them was conditional on their performance as "good" sons or daughters. Lynn contrasted her new image of God as the kind, traditional father to her old image of God and to her natural father. Speaking of her new image of father-God, she said:

- L He was not, I had no idea what unconditional was until I knew God. ...the love difference was absolutely amazing.
 I So your old God image, was that an image that had conditions on love for you?
 L Oh absolutely! Yeah.
 I O.K.
 L You had to *do* things in order to go to heaven!

Terrence talked about father-God's loyalty to him, claiming that God would not disown him or change his name as long as he continued to believe in God. He described father-God in this way:

He's stern. Like a father. He never, he might be disappointed for a moment, but he, he would never change my name. If I fail him and my faith did not fail, I would fail but my faith would not fail. In other words, what I'm saying is that...he would, just like I would never throw my children out any more than he would throw me out the door...

Leah blended the images of a strict father with high standards and those of a kind and loving father when she says:

I mean, he made this Bible full of rules, so high standards, yes. Other images of God as father. I guess provider, leader, cares, takes responsibility. (pause) I

guess there's a lot with care, responsible, provide and there's sort of more negative, like hierarchy, authority, obedience.

The kind, traditional father-God is clearly the authority figure in a hierarchical relationship with those who identify as his children. It is father-God who makes the rules, has the expectation that these rules are followed, provides guidance, and disciplines when necessary. This is accepted by the participants with little resistance because they perceive father-God as having superior wisdom and their best interests at heart. Bob said:

Well, he establishes rules. ...He's expecting me to abide by them. He is certainly understanding when I make a mistake, as I sometimes do. But, uh, being God, he always knows the end from the beginning so he sees things differently, obviously, from me. And that about sums it up.

Macy also talked about how she sees the character and role of God as father:

...someone, I think of a lot of wisdom, and someone you can go to if you have questions or you're kind of confused about something. That's how I see it, I guess. Not really nurturing but if you want or need to have guidance, I guess.

When asked how God fathers her, Macy said:

Um, by either reassuring me with what I'm doing or the decision I'm making or kind of giving me a feeling of, yikes, something else needs to be done here. Or just kind of telling me to wait, you know. Those are the main things I would say.

Terrence described father-God as not only guiding or providing advice, but actually teaching his children how to do things. Speaking of God, he said:

He's just like that. If you watch a family work, a dad's teaching a little boy how to play baseball. Wow, that's, wow. I mean...He teaches us things. He teaches us by example, and it all makes sense.

Mark experienced a more hands-off type of guidance from a father-God that does not tell us specifically what to do but lets us learn through our own experiences, providing support as we go through them. He said:

He is a loving father, a wise father, a father who clings to his children, and a father who wants to see his children come to spiritual maturity. He doesn't take the problems out of the way for them, but just gives them the strength to go through it.

Valerie viewed God as a kindly but somewhat distant father, attributing the distance to her lack of experience with a close father rather than to God's character. She had a strong sense of hierarchy as she related to God but struggled to experience God in a more personal way, saying:

I see God as an overall presence over...kind of the authority figure. The more mature, looking up to, in control, dominant. ...as I approach God, as far as a submissive and under his authority, I don't ever think of me as getting the belt or the whip or anything. I don't think of him as that kind of father, or anything. I just think of Him as an overseer who directs and leads and guides.

Some participants did talk about resisting father-God's guidance at times but ultimately realized that it is best to follow his rules and guidance because the kind, traditional father-God is altruistic and motivated by a desire for his children to thrive. Bob said, "I have found there are instances where he [God], the Holy Spirit, wanted me to do something I didn't want to do. And I knew what it was, and I had to do it, but I didn't want to." Terrence talked about his theological beliefs on God's discipline and the idea that discipline precedes experiencing God's love, forgiveness, and peace. For Terrence, God's discipline may be stern, but it is important for him that the discipline is not done in anger:

When we, when we know we've done wrong, when we've not believed, we will be disciplined sooner or later. Especially if we keep our hearts soft and the deceitfulness of sin is always gonna be there, so if we're not doing certain commands, it'll be hard in there. But I would say disciplinary, and then the loving and forgiving and peace comes after that. He doesn't discipline in anger. It's more of a gentle, loving discipline. He's not out of control. He's got a soft control (laughs).

Terrence credited God's discipline for his shift to seeing God more as a personal God, specifically a father, instead of as a savior only. In what appears to be a contradiction to his theological beliefs, he talked about first thinking about God in terms of a savior who forgives, and then, by the experience of being disciplined, shifting to relating to God more personally:

...as I walk through my life, and my spiritual life, it has kind of changed. I saw him as a savior and forgiveness for a long time. As I went through the discipline of a loving father (laughs), then I start to see him more as a father, and more a personal relationship. Not just forgiveness. Not just that, but more of a personal relationship.

This is similar to Lynn who had seen God as a demanding-controlling-distant father. Her experiences of feeling disciplined and forgiven were closely connected to her shift to relating to God in a more personal way, although for her, perceptions of a personal God and experiences of feeling forgiven and disciplined are more overlapped and less linear than how Terrence described it. Lynn said:

...because he is so loving and he created us, and he, my relationship with him is, I know that if I go against his will, I'm going to go through a learning experience (chuckles) or discipline. You know I was also amazed, just *amazed* at how gently he corrects, but that's I think the role of a father to guide and discipline when necessary and show us the way in which we should go. ...He just is amazingly forgiving. Forgiving! I didn't say forgiving, but he is amazingly forgiving and always gives you another chance. And when I became born again which I did and began to have a *personal* relationship with God, I found out how compassionate and, and gentle and loving he was. ...and so now I approach him as I would any loving, a person who loves me *so much* that he want good for me and not as a scary, uh, that scary person that I thought he was.

Participants who viewed God as a kind, traditional father talked about how they can depend on God to meet their instrumental needs. Father-God is also expressive in that he demonstrates love and may even be perceived as showing physical affection such as inviting children to sit in his lap. Although expression of love is part of this

father-God's character, his role is less about nurturance and more about providing for the instrumental needs of his children. The character traits of this father-God tend to be more traditionally masculine. Macy says about God's character, "it's a lot of characteristics like strength, very stable...just very much the same, steady." Aida compared father-God to her own father, describing how she experiences God as a loving father with traditional roles. She shifted from a more general description of ideal fathers to her own father to God as a father without distinguishing among them:

... someone who is protective, someone who provides for all of our needs. ... I would say fathers are also sacrificial. They give for their family and put their family first. I don't know if that's limited only to dads but that's, I guess in addition to being protector and provider, he also provides leadership. He was the person who would decide what the rules were or if they could be, not bent, but if exceptions could be made. He was, he was the judge basically. If we had disputes or something, so I guess that goes with God's all knowingness, just being the one who sets the standard.

Sharon also talked about father-God in endearing terms, always available and ready to perform the traditional roles of a father. To Sharon, God as a father is:

...the perfect one (laughs) which no one has in real life! But, uh, the one you can call at any time, that Abba Father or that verse whatever it is, "call me Abba Father." The protector, the security, the provider, the one that would defend in any way.

Terrence implied that these roles of God as provider and protector have had practical implications for his life. He is the sole earner for his household and had been laid off for some months at the time of the interview. This experience of not being able to provide as he wanted to contributed to his view of God as a provider and him as a child who must depend upon the father-God who has promised to provide and protect. Terrence said:

I just see him as a provider, a miraculous provider. Since I've been laid off...a healer, you know. That's where you can start to become like a child. That's really cool, to become like a child.

One of the participants, a single mother, said that she regularly asks father-God to help her provide for the material needs of her children. Similarly, Leah described going to God as a father when she is under financial pressure, reminding herself that God provides.

The images of the kind, traditional father include a few components of the demanding-controlling-distant father. He does have high standards and the expectation that those standards are followed. He also disciplines, sometimes very sternly, when his children go off course. There is an expectation of obedience and that children recognize that his ways are best. Unlike the demanding-controlling-distant father, this father does not seek to control his children by giving or withholding love. There is a fundamental belief in the unconditional love of this father-God which is missing in the other image of God as father. The kind, traditional father is often seen as seeking closeness, as having a desire for intimacy with his children. There is no joy taken in discipline nor are there any selfish reasons for disciplining, such as expressing anger. This is not clearly the case with the demanding-controlling-distant father. Each image followed a more traditional father role, but one is oriented around the father's supreme authority and the other is oriented around the best interest of the child. In both images, the father is the authority, but the kind, traditional father is all about the well being of the children, and all of father-God's authority and attributes are used to that end.

God is a modern, flexible father. Five of the participants (Jacob, Josiah, John, Meredith, and Crystal) described God as a modern, flexible father who demonstrates

instrumental and expressive traits, and tailors parenting to the unique qualities of the child. This well rounded image of God may relate to the fact that, for two of the five, parenting roles were not confined by gender: Meredith called God a “parent” rather than “father” or “mother,” and Crystal described God as father and God as mother so similarly that she concluded she does not clearly distinguish between the two. Meredith described God’s role as providing unconditional love and creating a safe environment so that she can trust. This description connects to attachment theory and is flexible and unconfined by traditional assumptions of paternal and maternal roles. Crystal’s perception of God as father was also broad and inclusive, but also precise. It demonstrated God’s dual roles as a protector and a comforter. When asked about when she approaches God as a father, she said:

C Well, I think that when I’m feeling, when I’m feeling really sad or upset about something. I mean, I remember times, specifically where something has happened to me and I feel so, kind of lonely and empty, and I don’t really have, I don’t really say anything because I don’t know what to say or how to say it, and I always, well not always, but at times I’ve imagined God as my father and just kind of, I imagine big arms (laughs as she holds arms out widely).

I Very big arms!

C Big arms, like forearms. I always in my head see forearms that are muscley and big! (laughs) Kind of surrounding me and wrapping around me, and that’s when I feel most strongly that God is my father, and I think that part of it is protection that I feel, but more than that it’s kind of the love that doesn’t matter anything else that’s going on outside, that the love is always there, gentle but strong.

This concept of God as a modern, flexible father was the most developed by participants and was deeply rooted in experiences that participants could articulate with detail. Examples of the everyday nature of God’s personification as the modern, flexible

father included perceptions of participants being hugged, smiled upon, spanked, danced over, tickled, guided through rites of passage, and audibly spoken to.

This modern, flexible father-God is similar to the kind, traditional father-God in that he has unconditional love for his children and always has their best interests at heart. John talked about how his changing image of God as a conditionally loving father to an unconditionally loving and nurturing father opened up new possibilities for more authentic self expression:

... Trying to be open to the possibility that I could be an abject failure and be loved by this fatherly God., that's been the kind of the trajectory I've been on. It's been for many years now, expanding the idea of God to, this is still in the father frame, but it's using the traditionally feminine understandings of nurture. And a God that would allow me to disclose things, confession, I guess using a religious term, and that, instead of shaking his head and going, "Good grief," making some comment about understanding. About, I know that you're hurt and just a complete affirmation that I'm loved. God's love is not contingent on my behavior. It's contingent on the fact that *he's* decided to love me. I'm his creation. It would be beyond the realm of possibility that he would reject me, so rather than this performance based manipulation that I was trying to pull on God, to really get to a relationship that is very nurturing, and encouraging, and I can take risks in this relationship, and it's going to come out good for me every time.

Josiah, not yet a parent, imagined how a father might think of his parenting role, saying, "I will do what I need to do today to help this child's best interests, and even though the child doesn't see it in their best interests, I see that it's the best, so I'm going to apply it." He continued to describe his own resistance to God applying the "best interest" principle in his life. When asked if he saw God's actions as being in his best interest at the time, Josiah says, "Oh, no. Oh, no. No, no. I came, at best, screaming. (chuckles) I jumped. I rolled. I danced. (chuckles) I hit things. I ran away. I did

everything I could do, but I was in the stage of learning the hard way. ...It helped me to learn.”

The modern, flexible father may also appear indistinguishable from the kind, traditional father by taking on the roles of wise guide and stern disciplinarian. Josiah and Jacob both described their personal experience with God as father in a more traditional way, with an emphasis on hard discipline. The difference is that the roles of guide, disciplinarian, provider and protector, characterize the kind, traditional father-God: he *is* these roles. The modern, flexible father-God has the capacity to fill these roles but may choose to relate differently if that is what the situation calls for. His character is described more broadly to include traditionally maternal as well as paternal traits.

Jacob described a strict father-God that comes down hard on him when he is wrong but also said that the reason for this is that his nature responds well to this kind of discipline. He continued to say that he has witnessed father-God being very gentle and lenient with others because that is what they need to thrive. In Jacob’s view, God as father is flexible and responsive to the unique personalities of his children, making necessary adaptations in his fathering to best meet their diverse needs. Jacob shifted from seeing God as a demanding-controlling-distant father to a modern, flexible father. He attributed this shift to three things: 1) coming to believe that he is God’s beloved child regardless of whether God approves of his behavior or not, 2) noticing the unique responses that various people have to different styles of leadership, and 3) perceiving father-God to relate to people differently based on their unique personalities and situations. Jacob gave examples of God sometimes fathering the people of Israel with

strict severity and other times with mercy. He also talked about how Jesus spoke harshly to religious leaders of his time but very gently to the poor and disenfranchised. As Jacob's image of God as father changed, his own style of ministry and relating to his family also changed, which will be explored in another section.

Josiah also experienced father-God as a very stern disciplinarian but said that, once his lessons were learned, God began relating to him differently. His story of relating to God as a father began with him expecting a permissive father, being disappointed that God is a tough, disciplining father, and eventually coming to experience God as an empowering and encouraging father. He did not see the tough, disciplining father as an erroneous perception. Rather he saw God to be intentionally changing his fathering to meet Josiah's maturation needs. His account is also a good example of how detailed and sensory these experiences were to some participants. He said:

O.K., He [God] said, "I am a father to the fatherless."...it was in a farm house, second story, looking at a bare light bulb with flies flying around when he said it to me. It just about blew me away, but I know when he said it, I had all these presumptions of what that would mean: that I would get all of this stuff. I'd get his car (chuckles). You know, I'd just be spoiled rotten (laughter). Well, that's not exactly what happened. In fact, there's a lot of hard discipline, hard lessons that were in store for me. I don't say hard because the lesson was so hard, but my expectations made it harder, because I was expecting a smooth, easy, unchallenging ride, as far as life was concerned. He had a better understanding of what was going to take place, so, knowing what was in *my* best interest, he put me through things that I would have never chosen for myself to discipline, train, teach me what I needed to know...give me the understanding that I need, and it was a discipline that had empowerment in mind, but I definitely did not feel like empowerment when I was going through the painful circumstances I went through. But the end result empowered me to a place where there's a distinct change. There's a distinct turn where he's like "O.K., the teaching period it done." (chuckles) "You are now released. Go ahead." (chuckles) It was up to me to apply all of the things that I had learned in the school of hard knocks to go forward and put forth some effort. But discipline, I don't want to say it's

non-existent now, but it's definitely minimal compared to what it used to be. (chuckles) It's more of "Do it. This is it." And it's more encouragement and empowerment and, very different character in the relationship.

Josiah also has a picture of himself as a child "sitting in the lap of a loving dad," but said that he no longer embraces those thoughts because, "I don't think it's necessarily appropriate for me to think as a child anymore." His image of God as father has shifted to a less hierarchical one to the point that he more often thinks of God in a partner-type of role, such as husband/groom, which will be described later.

John described himself as a sensitive person who did not fit gender norms when he was a boy. Although he has an image of God as a demanding-controlling-distant father, he did not see this as a helpful image that he wants to hold on to, saying:

That old idea of God isn't dead. It's de-centered, it's marginalized, it's maybe, dying? But it's not gone. And there are days where I respond that way rather than where I really believe. I respond to where I used to believe, which makes me wonder to what extent, where am I really on this process? So that's not dead, it's just, I want it to be dead.

John's image of God as a modern, flexible father was based primarily on him seeing God's traits and roles more broadly to include "nurturing" and playfulness. He did not explicitly claim that God tailors fathering to the needs of the child but said that he was a child that required a different approach than what he received from his own father as well as from his image of God as father. His changing image of father-God demonstrates God's capacity to meet him with the kind of nurturing fathering that he needs to thrive. He also described sensory experiences of God, specifically of a playful God as we see in this example:

This is the weirdest thing. This has happened one time in my life. ...It was the lowest time of my life. I had this whole string of bad things that had happened, and I was often praying, and just, just begging God for some sort of relief from

this awful string of events, and there was this good time where I just sat in my closet, and it was like a large walk in closet that we had in this house. I went in there, turned the light off, and I was just sitting there, praying. And something, I was talking to God, and something tickled me, and I just started laughing. And, well then it, then I thought about how ridiculous it is to be sitting here laughing in the dark in the closet, but I couldn't stop laughing! (laughter continues) And, and I was like, "God, what are you doing!" And it was like, it was almost like I was being tickled. You know when you want it to stop, but you can't stop it, but it's kind of fun at the same time. And so I don't know how long I was in that closet, but it was like, it was like we were playing. Like I was a kid, and he was the dad. It was almost like he was tickling me, and I, I mean, I didn't actually feel tickles but, there was a sense that, you know, it's going to be all right. ... I'm sure my endorphins were kicking in, and all that kind of stuff, but it happened in the context of, of prayer, and, and it really felt like a father playing with his son - throwing him on the bed, and tickling him.

The modern, flexible father is equipped with a broad capacity to relate to his children. He can punish or forgive, deprive or indulge, enforce justice or show mercy, be strong and tender, commanding and approachable, powerful and nurturing. He is whatever his children require and will easily adapt to fit their needs and personalities. He was often experienced as a kind, traditional father or even as demanding and controlling, but he is always unconditionally loving and able to modify his parenting toward the best interest of the child. Unlike either the demanding-controlling-distant father or the kind, traditional father, the modern, flexible father can be very nurturing and provide for the expressive as well as instrumental needs of his children. All five participants, with the exception of Meredith who saw God as a "parent", did clearly envision this God in a father role. If God as a father is so encompassing, then what roles are left for God as mother and are they distinguishable from God as father? These questions and others are addressed in the next section.

God is a mothering father. Nine participants said in the survey that they think of God in a mother role, but in the interviews, two of them (John and Brett) said they

really do not access this image enough to talk about it in a meaningful way. Although Angela reported perceiving God as mother, her image of God was not a strong personification in any family role but more of an image that is wholly God-like. Two more participants – Meredith and Crystal – did not distinguish between God as father (modern, flexible) and God as mother. Both images shared the same characteristics. Meredith’s parent-God image was characterized by unconditional love and by providing an environment of trust where she can feel safe. Crystal’s image was of a strong, loving, adoring God who takes pride in her as a daughter. The remaining four participants who wrote “mother” as one of their images of God – Sharon, Janet, Aida, and Macy – described God as mother but came to the conclusion that their image is really of God as a father with some “mothering” characteristics.

After Sharon described her image of mother-God being like a bird who provides safety and comfort, the interviewer asked if there are certain situations in which she might approach God as a mother rather than as a father, to which she responded:

I don’t know that I’ve thought that one through. Well there’s times that I would say when I’m really having something difficult, and I just say, “Help, God.” Sometimes it’s to Abba Father, and I’m calling out to him. Maybe, you know when I think about it, perhaps it’s more when I’m desiring the comfort that he gives. ... Perhaps it’s the comfort, being under the wings, I’m close to hold you. There’s also a scripture, a Bible study that was brought out. It’s in one of the minor prophets, I can’t remember which one, where it’s like when you’re nursing a baby, and they’re still and quiet in your arms, maybe you know that one. Sometimes I think of that. That’s where, “Being still and know that I’m God,” tells me I’m in his hands.

Although Sharon was talking about her image of God as mother – at one point a nursing mother - she used the pronouns “he” and “him” and even calls mother-God “Abba Father.” It is interesting that she does not talk about this apparent contradiction or appear to register it as a contradiction at all. Other participants also referred to

mother-God with masculine pronouns. Macy referred to mother-God as “he” and

continued with her interview. Later, the interviewer asked about it:

- I All right. So there’s a couple interesting things that I want to pursue here. Let me do a quick one before I forget it. So when you talk about God as a mother you refer to God as “him.”
- M Mm-hm. I caught myself! (laughs)
- I You caught yourself! All right. Is that the typical way you would think of God, as a him? Do you think of God as a “him” with mothering characteristics or do you sometimes think of God as a “she,” as a more literal mother?
- M I usually think of God as a “he” with motherly characteristics.

Janet’s responses were similarly explored when she used masculine pronouns for mother-God to which she replied, “No question that I really see God as a father with some motherly characteristics.”

Jacque came to the realization that she really doesn’t think of God as mother when she described the “feminine” characteristics of God as being very secondary to her more prominent image of the demanding-controlling-distant father. This seemed to parallel her struggle to see father-God in a more gentle way. As she struggled to express her experience of God as mother, the interviewer ventured a guess that Jacque believes these characteristics to be true about God but does not experience them, to which she replied, “Um, (long pause) I think that I experience them. Yeah, I don’t know. That’s tough. I do experience them. Um, maybe not in a way that I would picture them coming from a mother.” As she continued to struggle, the interviewer asked if she might be seeing God as a father with mothering characteristics to which she replies, “Yes! Yeah, that’s exactly what I do.”

Of these four who could talk about mother-God as distinct from father-God, Aida was the only one who did not refer to mother-God in masculine pronouns. She also did not refer to God as “she” or “her.” Instead, Aida talked about her image of mothers as an example of how God can be. This way of talking about her image of mother-God does not position her to use a pronoun for God.

The two who saw father-God and mother-God in indistinguishable ways worked with gendered pronouns differently. Crystal used masculine pronouns when referring to Jesus or to God in masculine roles and feminine pronouns when answering questions about God as mother, although she at one point defaulted to “he” and corrected herself by changing it to “she.” Meredith stated at the beginning of the interview that, although she sometimes sees God in a gender neutral parent role, she will refer to God in masculine pronouns because she is not interested in being dogmatic on this point. The following descriptions of God’s mothering were given before participants acknowledged that they actually view God as a mothering father than as a mother, so the language may indicate that they are talking about a mother-God rather than a mothering father-God.

The mothering side of God is more narrowly and traditionally defined by participants than descriptions of God’s fathering. God as a mothering father is nurturing, supporting, caring, listening, comforting, soothing, reassuring, serving, patient, protective, and emotional. When asked to describe her image of God as mother, Sharon said, “The nurturing. I picture the scripture where it says the bird under the wings, you know? Patting you on the back, ‘You can do it. I’ll take care of you.’” The image included similar functions to God as father, such as the “taking care of”

(providing) and the implied protectiveness of the mother bird's wings, but they are embedded in contexts that do not challenge traditional gender norms (e.g., maternal instinct). Jacquie also described God's mothering as, "...just the feminine characteristics of a traditional mom. ...caring, compassionate, a good listener, encouraging...those..." Janet described God's mothering to include a loving attitude, advice giving, and a helping role and said that she might think of God's mothering role when she is in emotional situations.

Macy also connected God's mothering with emotional support and said that she goes to God for mothering first, because her own relational experiences have taught her that Mother will take her "small" concerns seriously, but Dad may not. She described God's mothering this way:

The way I envision that is more open arms, more wanting to hear the emotional side, the comforting side. If something goes wrong or if you're anxious, more coming in and just reassuring about something. I guess the more kind of tender side and more delicate feelings and problems. ... Whenever I think of mother-God, the word "comfort" comes to my mind – the word "comforter" is what I always have, that pops up in my head when I am praying or whatever in a situation like that when I need the reassurance or the comfort or just the soothing of God.

When comparing her response to God as father and God as mother, Macy said about the mother image, "I'm more emotional, less reserved, less, um, less guarded, I guess."

Aida's description of God's mothering was similar to the others with the addition of servanthood and a direct comparison of God's fathering to God's mothering.

When asked to talk more about her mother image of God, Aida said:

That's the nurturing, supporting, caring, wanting to spare your kids heartache, wanting to protect them. I know that protection I said was a father thing, but it's also very much mom, wanting to be the giver of sustenance, and, well, Dad goes out and makes the money. Mom's the one who, the hands-on gentleness. I think

of the mother aspect as more, not so much as words or leadership as modeling with their actions. . . .and I know that Jesus served others even though he was, status-wise, far above them, but that servanthood is what I see in mother. . . .and putting others first is so, so much Mom.

Aida connected the human experience of complete powerlessness and vulnerability to how she experiences God as mother, describing her image of mother-

God in this way:

Just the mom holding her infant. I guess that would be it, taking care of someone who's totally dependent. It kind of breaks down when you're looking at moms dealing with temper tantrums and fifteen-year-olds who are getting more independent. I think a lot more of God's motherhoodness or whatever, a totally dependent infant.

Later, she recalled how she had described her approach to God as father when she feels lost or helpless and commented:

It's kind of funny that it's sort of the same as what I said for father, being in that situation where you can't rely on yourself or your own power, just feeling like. . . .you're powerless. I can't really say anything more than that.

Although she saw God as father and as mother in traditional, gendered ways, she appreciated with both images the freedom to be small, helpless, and vulnerable. This recurs across all the images of God as a parent. Participants described their discontent with being inauthentic in relation to the demanding-controlling-distant father. They emphasized the unconditional love from the kind, traditional and modern, flexible fathers and how it provides a context for honesty and vulnerability. Participants described themselves in positions of need when they approach God as mother – needing comfort, empathy, security, or reassurance.

A noteworthy point about the mothering part of God is that it focused on very predictable, gendered mother images. This is in contrast to the father image that spans from a harsh and even abusive dominant father model to a very nurturing, sensitive, and more egalitarian father. Images of God's mothering do not include any hint of deviation from the "good mother" norm: there are no selfish mothers, power wielding mothers, fear inspiring mothers, or goddess types of mothers. This traditional mother image that turns out to be a mothering father-God image raises questions about the participants who perceive God as a kind, traditional father and as a mothering father. The combination is very similar to the modern, flexible father, especially if the perception included the parent-God's flexibility in how s/he parents. This assumption – that the two are actually the same image - is not made here because the participants clearly described two traditional parent figures and add the perception of God as a mothering father rather than a true mother-God after those images were articulated.

Participants gave diverse descriptions about how God as a parent is similar or dissimilar to their own parents. Some have parents who were good listeners, long-suffering, sacrificial, and family focused, and they compared these to God. Some contrasted God with their parents' tendencies toward worry, irresponsibility, and inconsistency. Among the many accounts of how God as a parent compared and contrasted with their own parents, some themes emerged.

I know my parent loved me, but not like God does. Janet summed up the sentiments of many participants when she said that her father loved her, but was not loving. For Janet, this statement held the most similar and dissimilar thing about natural parents and God as a parent. The similarity for participants was that they expressed

knowing that their parent (usually their father) and God as a parent loved them. The perceived difference was the way in which God loves them or the extent of God's love for them as compared to that of their parents. Terrence said that he knew his dad loved him, but it was "the way the world loves." Jacob could think of few similarities between God as father and his natural father except that he knew that his dad loved him even though love was not expressed often or well by his father. On a broader level, Jacob described his father as a racist and chauvinist, but added that God as father loves and values differences among his children.

Unconditional love was frequently cited as what separates the kind of love God as a parent has from natural parents. Jacob said that God does a better job separating approval from love so that God can disapprove of a child's behavior without threatening their love relationship, which was not something his own father could do. Lynn talked about her father and unconditional love this way:

Well, my father, I truly believe my father loved me. He was not a, he was more like the old father! The old God. He was a disciplinarian. He was, you know, his discipline was a leather strap which I got occasionally but not too often. He loved kids, but he was not, what's the word? Agape. He was not, what's the word? That kind of love. Come on, come on! Most love, condition, *unconditional!* He was not, I had no idea what unconditional was, unconditional love was until I knew God.

Although most saw unconditional love as something that differentiated God as parent from their natural parents, Aida and Meredith described unconditional love as a quality that is similar between their natural parents and God as a parent.

God is a more emotionally expressive parent than my natural parents. Some participants described their fathers as being emotionally inhibited (with the exception of Crystal, Mark, Meredith, and Aida). Crystal saw her mother as being more emotionally

inhibited than either her natural father or God as a parent, and said that it is difficult for her mother to express pride in her when she has done something her mother disapproves of. She contrasted this with God as a parent who she perceived as being proud to claim her as a daughter, even when she has not acted in a way that would cause a parent to feel proud. Both Meredith and Aida described both their parents and God as being emotionally connected and expressive. Josiah talked about his father's inability to express emotion and compares it to experiencing an overwhelming expression of emotion from God as father:

My dad was, um, a nice guy. He tried, but he was very backward in a lot of ways, not very expressive, hardly at all. Not affectionate at all, and he tried later, in his later years to, to be affectionate, but it was so foreign to him. It was like being (chuckles) hugged by the iceman! (Laughter) It was like, uh, this is gross (More laughter), but he was trying, and it's, you know, the thought that counts. But my dad tried his best, but was FAR, far removed from what the Lord has been, and I would say, most specifically, with the tenderness, because the way God approaches me, with such tenderness, is, is unbelievable and, I guess it was so intense, so powerful that it kind of made me uncomfortable at first (chuckles).

Macy's account is similar if less extreme:

Well, I guess with my own father, we've never been real openly affectionate in, like, you know, hugging. You know, I never went to my dad with crying, or if I ever had a problem, I never did that. But, I would go and talk with him, but it was more in a straight forward, more non-emotional way. ... I think, yeah, he's dissimilar in that it is, it's more uncomfortable for me, I guess, you know, sharing or asking anything or, um, being, I don't know. I guess, like, envisioning Jesus as father, you know, with open arms and going to him as a child. You know, I never felt that way with my father.

Jacob said that his dad was limited in communication as well as emotion, using yelling as the primary way of getting his point across. Having a broad range of emotional expression is one way Jacob believes God as father can tailor his parenting approach to the diverse personalities and situations of his "children." Leah talked

somewhat differently about this because she also did not experience her father as emotionally expressive. She believes God to have those qualities but does not relate to God that way or experience them. Speaking of God as father, she said:

I think there are ways that he *is* tender and he *is* nurturing. I'm just, I'm missing those because I don't look for them, I don't see them, I don't experience them. But that's, that's an issue at my end, not that God isn't that way. Um, so would it be hard to put those in the father category? Um, maybe a little for me because my dad wasn't like that, but, theoretically, no. I mean especially for someone that grew up with a dad that was tender, compassionate, or whatever the qualities were. Um, yeah, they could think of that as an aspect of God's fathering. (pause) Yeah! I think that could work.

My experiences with my natural parents impact how I relate to God as a parent.

There were no explicit interview questions about how participants' parents impacted how they related to God as a parent, but this was often what participants began to talk about when asked about their image of God as a parent or how they came to see God as a parent. Mark described his father as bright and loving, then added, "...having him as my dad really made it easy to relate to God. ...My dad, there was nothing I could have ever done that would have resulted in him rejecting me. Uh, he wasn't like that." This connected with Mark's view of a God that is loving and generous. Although Mark believes that his father helped him relate to God better, some participants expressed that they are missing potential ways of relating to God as a parent because their own parents did not relate to them in those ways. When Valerie was asked to describe what kind of a father God is to her, she just began to come up with some descriptive words when she said:

O.K., maybe I should back up a little bit. I grew up without a father. So, he died when I was one, and I had a step-father when I was eight, who, kind of was and was not there—mentally, emotionally. And, so I don't really have a good, I feel like that's one of my weaknesses, growing up without a good base of what a

father would look like. So I feel God, I view as what a father could, should, maybe be like, but I don't have a grasp on the compassion, because I didn't see that in a father figure. What I do is the, uh, dominant, the fear, respect kind of put together.

Lack of experience with a father does not always limit the range of ways that participants can think of God as father. Janet described God as father differently from her own father who was not very attentive or consistent but a fun, "life of the party kind of guy." She concluded that maybe God is the father she wishes her own father had been. Leah had earlier said (as quoted in the last section) that she believes God is nurturing, tender, and compassionate, but that she just cannot experience them because of how her own father was. But Leah also talked about God as father in a compensatory way - that he "fills in the gaps" that her father left:

My own dad was fairly, kind of strict, dominant, high standards, and so I think, subconsciously I've carried some of those over to God. But then also I can stop and recognize, O.K., my biological father didn't do a good job of providing, but that's O.K. because God would be different, and he would provide. So, it's almost like a positive, negative thing, like, I don't know how to put that. There are things about my own dad that I bring over and apply to God and then there's lacks of things or missing things that I say, oh, but God does this.

For those who perceive God as a father but not as a mother, the researcher sometimes explored if their relationships with their mothers might broaden the range of possibilities for what kind of a father God is to them. Leah did talk about her mother as being more emotionally present but does not think of God as a mother. When asked to elaborate on what doesn't fit about thinking of God as a mother, she said:

Um, I guess partly it's a reaction against the more liberal Christians that are sort of pushing that way... like, promoting gender neutral Bibles, and God is father and mother. So, and I don't know much about those churches, but it's an awareness that there is that tendencies out there, and kind of my desire to not drift that way. That would be one thing. Um, the second might be gut level, oh that sounds weird to just kind of, just, a split second unconscious reaction. Is

there anything deeper than that? You know, I don't know. I feel like my church is very conservative, and my mother would say male dominated. (Laughter) So maybe, maybe I've just grown up in a, I don't know, it's just, maybe I should think of God as mother, and that would be a totally good way and neat things I would learn about God that way, and yet, because of how I've grown up, it's hard for me. So like, it doesn't fit my box, but maybe I need to get out of the boxed way of thinking. Mmm. But then, you look at the Bible and God represents himself as father and not mother, so it's not just my church. It's like, this is what's in scripture.

For Leah, without thinking of God as a mother, her experience of her own mother and broader maternal archetypes are not available to supplement her perception of God in traditionally paternal ways or to open up new possibilities for relating to God as a father.

Sometimes experiences with natural parents did not only make a difference in how participants think of God's character as a father or mother. It influenced in very specific ways how they approach God. Macy says that she approached God as mother with smaller things, more emotional things. For bigger decisions that require guidance but less of an emotional response, she goes to her father. She said:

Like when I was little, things that seemed absolutely ridiculous to my dad didn't seem ridiculous to my mom, and they seemed more like a big deal. And, you know, some things that were more emotional, like with feelings, you know, or whatever it was to my mom, it was a big deal, and she'd treat it that way. ...and it's the same kind of feeling that I get now when I, pray or ask for help from God with the vision of him, with God as a mother. It's kind of the same feelings.

Macy said that she goes to God as a mother first and then, maybe, to God as father later because that is what she found to work best in her own childhood. She now goes to God as a mother first (although she refers to mother-God as "he" and thinks more of a father with motherly characteristics). This is one story she told to demonstrate

why approaching God as mother first is the best choice based on her experiences as a child:

I remember when I was around ten, when I was just horrified, and had a terrible year, thinking that, you know, the rapture was going to take place, and I was going to go to hell! (chuckles) And it was terrible! It was every night and, so I didn't want to go to sleep, and I didn't want to be alone and to be reassured that everything was fine, and there was one time at least that I remember where my dad was frustrated with me because I was crying – very emotional, very distraught – and, you know, he just thought I was being a baby. And my mom took it very seriously and she would pray with me, and so, through that, it kind of, I guess, reaffirmed that it *was* important to Jesus, and that he would hear it. I guess it really helped that she said, “let's pray about it.” You know, and that always helped a lot too, and helped, I think, um, let me know that Jesus *did* care about it, and he *was* concerned.

John's father, in his childhood, was distant and demanding, which influenced him to try to be especially good and win father-God's approval or make up for the ways that he had been a disappointment. John's relationship with his natural father and God as father mirror each other in complex and intricate ways, although John never explicitly said that a change in one relationship directly impacted a change in the other. One example of this was John's changing relationship with his father once he became an adult, followed by a change in his relationship with God as father. (Note that the change with his natural father was preceded by a major change in how John related to God as father, which will be described under the next theme). John had long harbored strong resentments toward his father and, as an adult, made a choice to go to his father with his feelings and ask for forgiveness. This conversation and experience of mutual forgiveness led to a new, more tender relationship with his natural father. When asked if this experience of his father as forgiving and loving opened up possibilities for God as father, John said:

I think, I think yeah. I think it opened that up, opened it up in a way that, I mean, maybe it had been opened already. But it maybe pushed me to go into that openness more. It gave me, it's one thing to have a very potent and startling thought, but it's another thing to have a relational experience that can be carried as a metaphor for something else. I know with me, I can have a thought, and later deny it. It's hard to have an experience with another person, and later, I mean, you can, I guess. People do it all the time, but it's, for me it's a lot harder to do that.

According to the stories of these participants, the power of relational experiences with their own parents formed a basis for relating to God as a parent either in similar ways or different ways. Other times, relational experiences were limited in how they could impact perceptions and experiences of God as a parent because they were seen as being too different or not being connected at all, such as experiences with a mother when God is seen very specifically as a father and not a mother. Participants also talked about how experiencing God as a parent impacted their relationships with their natural parents.

My experiences with God as a parent impact how I relate to my natural parents.

Few people told stories of parent-God experiences impacting relationships with natural parents, but this possibility did emerge with John's account of God in parental roles and the reciprocal influences between his relationship with his dad and with God as father. John, after experiencing God as distant and demanding in childhood (like his own father) began to think of father-God in a different way. This was a result of some preaching he heard, new friends that he had in college, and experiences with God as father (i.e., being tickled). John's belief was that God was orchestrating things around him so that God could gradually reveal a new father image to him. Once the kinder, gentler image of father-God had been mostly revealed and experienced by John, he

began to think about his natural father in a different way and be more open to the possibility that there was more to his father than the strict exterior. At one point John asked his father's forgiveness for harboring resentment against him and began experiencing his dad in some of the same new ways that he has experienced God as father. In this example John talked about how his view of his natural father changed:

I remember actively trying to construct a life where I didn't incite his [father's] disappointment, or his anger. Well, that meant we didn't, we didn't have much of a relationship. Because in large measure, he didn't know how to do anything else. If you could take away his anger, take away his disappointment, or whatever, then there wasn't a whole lot left that he did. I later found out that there was a whole lot left that he was, and didn't know how to do. He didn't know how to turn his being into doing. And that was actually a much sweeter time in our relationship when I got to learn, "Oh wow! He is actually, he's really a big hearted, loving, incredibly sensitive, big hearted person."

By forgiving his father, John reciprocated his own experience of being forgiven by God as father. He also became more open to forgiveness from God as father by feeling forgiven by his dad.

Meredith implied how experiencing God's unconditional love and incorporating that into her own experience of others could have made a difference for her own mother. In this case, if her mother could have loved and valued herself as God loved and valued her, she may have avoided some of the pain of alcoholism, depression, and eventually suicide. Her mother was a loving and giving person (as God is) to everyone else, but was unable to "mother" herself in the way that God does – with unconditional love and a place of complete safety.

God is like a parent, but God is not a parent. Many participants qualified their comparisons of God to parents with the statement that God is much bigger or greater than a parent. Meredith especially emphasized that the parent metaphor is useful to an

extent in understanding and relating to God, but that it is limited because God does not have the imperfections and limitations of humans. Sometimes this difference came out when participants compared their natural parents to God as with Aida who adored her father but says, “Of course I knew my father wasn’t perfect” even though she views father-God as being perfect. Lynn, when speaking of her father, said, “His love was conditional. That to me is the biggest, well, plus he was a human and, you know, a sinner and all those things that we all are.” She could understand her father’s imperfections as compared to God as father because he is human. This distinction also enabled Leah to accept her father’s faults, saying, “But again, my dad is human. God isn’t. So I’m not bothered by differences or whatever.”

The stories of participants suggested that experiences with natural parents may be one of the most salient models of how to relate to God as a parent, especially for children. Interactions between parents and perceptions of God as a parent were still evident into adulthood for many participants. This does not mean that the perceptions of God as a parent and ways of relating to God are fixed. Experiences of God as a parent changed for many of the participants through diverse means including: exposure to new ideas about God as a parent, experiencing God’s parenting as different from before, experiencing natural parents in different ways, transferring other relational experiences to the experience of God as a parent, and because of maturation and personal development.

Ideas about gender and God sometimes interacted in the process of how God as a parent was experienced. The most obvious way this happened was if God was perceived as a mother or father or both. When God was experienced specifically as a

gendered parent (always “father” in this sample), there were a variety of ways that gender ideologies further impacted the experience of God. Some participants, even though they viewed God as father and not mother, transferred things from their relationships with their mothers or other women to their views and experiences of God as father. Some did not or could not do this, in which case, God as father was influenced mostly by their relationships with their own fathers and beliefs about God from scripture, other Christian sources, and teachings of their churches.

God in a parent role, though limiting, provided a framework that participants used to approach God and contribute to their image of God. It was closely connected to their perception of their own parents and had implications for how they parent their children, as we see in the next themes.

I hope that God as a parent impacts my parenting by impacting me. When asked if thinking of God as a parent impacts their own parenting, three participants said that they hope that it does, but that the impact is indirect: God as a parent impacted the kind of person they are which then impacts their parenting. These participants did not experience the parent metaphor as literal so it fits that they would not apply it as literal either. Bob explained how being a Christian was not something he had to explicitly consider when making decisions or living life because he *is* Christian and it is this “being” that makes him think and act the way he does. When asked if the image of God as father impacted his parenting, Bob said:

I would hope so. Um, I’m not aware. It’s not really something I would think about. But the role of father, certainly, is demonstrated in the role of God. There again, I don’t specifically think about that. Uh, being Christian, a converted Christian is like being married. I’m getting a little of the subject, but when I was married, when my wife was alive, I didn’t have to get up in the morning and

think, “I’m married.” I *was* married. As a Christian I don’t have to think that I’m a Christian. I am, but I don’t worry about it or think about it.

Sharon responds similarly to Bob to this question when she says:

I hope so. I certainly as a mom, and my kids are older, look back and see the mistakes I made and realize, “Boy, I sure goofed a lot.” But you can’t go back, and you move forward. But I think if I was where I was then, when my kids were little, or where I am, where I am of knowing God, that certainly would have helped a lot to have been able to be a better mom.

Sharon went further with her response to suggest that as she progresses in “knowing God,” her parenting will improve. She said that the impact of God on her parenting, “was probably more general. I don’t think I thought about God as a father or mother.” She continued to talk about some of the qualities of God that would positively impact parenting, such as caregiving and sympathy, how she has developed these over time, and how they would make someone a better parent. Meredith also talked about how God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit encompass all good qualities, and how knowledge of them gave her a lot of choices about how to parent her children. She also believes, as Sharon does, that God helps her develop those good qualities and that this translates into better parenting. She also acknowledged a more direct influence of God in how her children turned out. She said that her children love her and remember their childhood with fondness and that “it is because of the grace of God more than my parenting.”

Leah, not yet a mother, speculated about how thinking of God as a parent might impact her own parenting, saying:

Hm. So how would God as father impact the way I might parent? Um, I think it might make me a little nervous like, oh shoot, I’m shaping the way my children think about God. If I screw up, they’ll have a messed up view of God! So it would be a little sobering. ...the fear and I think there would be desire – I want to parent well so my kids will have a positive view of God.

Although Leah did not directly apply the God as parent metaphor to how she might parent, she does believe that there is a direct link between experiencing a parent and experiencing God. This belief adds a significant weight to the already profound responsibilities of childrearing. Bob and Sharon talked about how being Christian or knowing God leads to personal growth and, ideally, better parenting. Leah's understanding of God as parent and the human tendency to project, made a new and compelling meaning of the role of parent: Parents represent God to their children. Some other participants shared Leah's meaning of parenthood and were more literal as they tried to apply the characteristics of God as parent to their own parenting.

I try to directly apply how God parents me to my own parenting. Nine participants gave specific ways that they translate God's parenting of them to how they parent or wish to parent their own children. These descriptions ranged from more general principles of parenting such as providing for children to some very specific applications in communication, positive relating, and discipline. There were four general ways in which parents tried to apply God's parenting to their own. These include: providing, showing unconditional love and care, disciplining, and structuring parental roles.

Janet was the only participant that specifically mentioned that she connects providing for her children to God providing for her. Then again, for Janet, God providing is an important characteristic of God as father. She is a single mother who talked about relying on God to provide and emphasized how her college aged children still depend on her to help them out with provisions. She also "sanctified" the parental role when she says that having children felt very spiritual for her, that she felt "really

blessed that God would give me a gift like that.” When talking about her grown children’s material needs, she said that she tries to provide for them in the way that God provides for her.

Showing unconditional love and care to children is also something that Janet and many other participants talked about. Janet said that she tries to reassure her children that her love for them is unconditional, because she believes God’s love for her is unconditional. Unconditional love was a critical concept for Lynn all the way through her interview and continued to be for her parenting. Although her children were grown when she first experienced an unconditionally loving father-God, when asked if this experience impacted her parenting, she replied, “Ooooooh, absolutely! Totally changed it.” Lynn described the kind of parent she was before experiencing God as father by saying, “Well, I was a conditional lover. Um, my children didn’t live up to my expectations. I still loved them, but I was not able to show my love.” When her children did not behave how she wanted them to, she was not able to act affectionately toward them or show them love and acceptance. She said that she “really was a poor mother” and how her oldest son, “since I became born again, he has nothing to do with me, absolutely nothing. And I miss him, and I care about him, and I love him just as much, and if he knocked on my door today, I’d throw my arms around him *if* he would let me. But it’s like he’s afraid that he’s going to catch it (laughs)!” To describe how she is a different parent as a result of experiencing God as a parent, Lynn told a story of her son being accused of molesting her granddaughter and how she responded:

And my youngest son grew up knowing how to manipulate me, and he had an alcohol problem. He had a drug problem. ... but his ex wife told me that she thought he may have sexually molested my oldest granddaughter. And, although

I wanted to protect and find out, I realized – and it was like it came at me all at once – that God still loved him. You know, he loves child molesters, and if that was true, it did not change my love for him, which was *amazing* to me because I love both these people. And, thankfully, it turned out to be a lie (chuckles) by an ex wife, and it *wasn't* true. And I never told him that, but that's when I realized, "Whooo! I have really changed!" because, to me, the lowest, I mean, that is like the worst crime that I ever, you know that I can even imagine is taking advantage of a child, so anyway it kind of showed me that my love has really changed.

Further exploration of this topic shed more light on what this means for Lynn.

She said that, before she experienced an unconditionally loving God, she would have chosen to not believe the accusation because she could not have believed it and still loved her son. Given this choice, she would have dismissed the accusation, adding that, "... after God it was like, well we can all do things that are horribly wrong, but God never stops loving us, so it really showed me how expanded I had become, I guess." Lynn's changes were largely in how she feels about her children and her ability to express feelings of love toward them. Other participants, who have dependent children at home, expressed specific ways that they show love as a result of feeling love from God as a parent.

Aida talked about the importance of showing her children unconditional love and being real with God in front of her children when she says, "I do feel that I also do show that they're loved, and they do know that they are unconditionally loved. I pray with them, and I'm not afraid to pray, say, 'Lord, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry'." She talked about her imperfections as a parent, how she loses her temper, makes mistakes, and is inconsistent. By being real with God in front of her children, she believes that she is demonstrating that her faith in God is real. If she can be honest about her mistakes in

front of God, that this shows them that God's love is unconditional and that she really believes what she teaches them.

Crystal focused more on parent-God's willingness to allow her to make her own decisions – good or bad – and then to show an unconditional commitment to her by being there, even when she makes a bad decision. She reflected upon how this influences her own ideals for parenting when she said:

Well, something that specifically comes to mind is respecting choices that my children make even if I think that something else might be better for them because God does that all the time as my father and as my mother. He knows what would be best for me, but, if I make a decision that isn't exactly what he thinks would be perfect for me, he doesn't force me to change my mind. Or, when I make that decision and then make a mistake, he doesn't say, well I told you that would happen! But he's there to say, "It's O.K. Why don't we go this different path now?" ...So I guess that's more something that I hope and pray for. I want to have the strength and wisdom as a mother to respect my children – not always like what they are doing or think that their decision is the best – but always to have that respect and the knowledge that they're good people, and, you know, much like I feel, God, God knows me. He knows me better than anybody else knows me. And he knows that I want to do the right thing. I just might not always have the, the wisdom to do it.

Crystal also wanted to give her children the benefit of the doubt, to not rub it in when they choose not to follow her advice and then fail, and to have confidence that they will eventually get it right. Back to talking about how God relates to her as a daughter, Crystal said:

I feel that God, even when I'm having my low times with God, I feel that there is that level of confidence where, I've always felt that God was thinking, "... well, you know, Crystal, I know she'll end up doing the right thing because she's my child, and I've been with her a long time, and I'll just hang back here and watch, and when she asks for me, I'm going to be there.

Although it was common for people to talk about God loving them, it was less common to talk about God respecting people because of the implied equality of the term. When Crystal was asked if God respects her decisions, she clarified:

He respects them in that they're my decisions to make. ...He respects that that's my realm because that's what he's given me. It's only my realm because he's given it me. And I always think of it in that, ever since he gave human beings that right to make their own decisions, that he has stuck by it, and he respects that.

It is in this way that the problem of human family metaphors and implied equality with God is resolved for Crystal. God as a parent can respect Crystal because it was God who gave her the right to make decisions for herself in the first place. By respecting Crystal's right to make a decision, God is respecting God's own decision to give her free will. By having confidence in Crystal's ability to eventually make the right decision, God is having confidence in God's own creation of Crystal as a creature that is good. This is reminiscent of the repeated line of the biblical creation story when God created something and said, "and it was good."

John also spoke very specifically about how God as a father impacted his relationship with his children, specifically with regard to positive relating and showing unconditional love and acceptance. When John described the sense of father-God tickling him (as cited in the theme of God as a modern, flexible father), he finished by saying, "...and, and it really felt like a father playing with his son. Throwing him on the bed, and tickling him." He continued, unprompted, to connect this to how he relates to his son, saying:

I think of now I have a son...and I'm always throwing him on the bed. He's kind of getting a little big for that now, but still. I still do it. I'll do it till I can't. But sometimes it's an intervention for his sadness, or disappointment, or

something. And if I can get him to laugh, I have done something, I have done a really good fatherly service to him. I've shown him love, because his sadness or his anger was replaced with laughter. And so I look at that experience in the dark closet [with God as father], laughing, as not, it's something that I now do. I've never associated those two before, but... he [son] needs it. Yeah. Yeah.

John also talked about disagreements and conflicts with his children and how he wants those to be unconnected to his love for them. John had previously described not feeling accepted for who he was by his own father as well as watching his father and brother in frequent conflict which he avoided by avoiding his father. All of these were present in this description of how he wants to be with his children and his father:

I want my son to know, and my father to know that they can tell me things. And I'm gonna have a belief about it, and I'm gonna have a response to what they tell me. And I want belief and response to match, and I want that belief and response to be personal in that, whatever it is you just told me, it can't go outside of this big sphere of love that I have for you. And, if in some way it's threatening, then the sphere's gonna get bigger. I want them totally accepted by how I initiate with them, and how I respond to them. And especially in the context of having a disagreement about whatever it is they just told me: I want those to be separate. If they tell me something I disagree with, I want them to have complete confidence that they are loved and accepted. And then we can talk about what it is that they have said.

John did not leave it with his description but went on to process how his own relationship with his children is modeled on how he wants his relationship with God to be and to compensate for the things his own father was not when John was a child. His parenting, according to him is modeled on two influences that he described:

One certainly is how I want my relationship with God to be, and how I believe it is, how I live as it is usually, but not always. ...But then also, I think of, regardless of how good the reconciliation was with my dad, it didn't make up those two decades prior. And there's just some huge, gaping holes of nurture that are not there. And so, in light of the continually forming idea that I have in my mind of my relationship with God, contrasted with what I had as an earthly father, is really informing the kind of father that I'm trying to be with my kids.

Feeling a God-inspired, unconditional love and being able to express that love and care to children was one way that participants believed that God as a parent impacted their own parenting. Another frequently cited way that parent-God impacted parenting was about how to deal with children who make mistakes or misbehave. Some participants had earlier described their vivid perceptions of God disciplining them, and others described a more salient image of God forgiving them. Both of these perceptions of God surfaced again when they were asked if experiencing God as a parent impacts their own parenting.

Thinking of how God as a parent disciplines me impacts how I discipline my children. Participants talked about how parent-God's discipline impacts their own parenting in four ways: 1) encouraging them to be consistent, 2) setting a standard of mercy and forgiveness, 3) demonstrating a motivation of love rather than anger or irritation, and 4) providing a model of discipline tailored to the child's specific needs.

Aida and Josiah both talked about the importance of consistent discipline and connected it to how they think of God as a parent. Aida reflected upon her shortcomings as a parent. She described herself and her husband as inconsistent in parenting, and talked about how she is critical of him for this and then finds herself doing the same thing. When asked if thinking of God as a parent impacts her own parenting, Aida said,

It should! (laughs) I don't live up to it, I'm sure. I would like to be a consistent parent. I see my inconsistencies terribly when I get mad at my husband for whapping them upside the head, and then when he's not there I do the same thing, because they get frustrating and, yeah, I'm very much less than a perfect parent, and I know I miss the mark on almost everything that comes to being a parent.

Although Aida talked about her lack of consistency in connection to her desire to be impacted by God as a parent, she did not specifically link the two. Josiah did this when he talked about his attitude towards child discipline. He does not have children but gave examples of disciplining the children of his friends and family and the importance of following through with teaching them an important lesson. Josiah directly connected the way that he disciplines children to how God disciplines him when he said:

If this child needs to understand something, needs to learn something, I'm going to get in their face, and I'm going to be, I'm going to see it through until they learn the lesson. Even if they don't want to learn the lesson, I'm going to be faithful to make sure that they get the hint that there's an opportunity to learn something and that they get that, not just from myself, but from the way God conveyed it to me, because he's not let me go. I've done the temper tantrum. I've kept on and kept on and kept on and kept on (laughter) until I finally figured it out and got the lesson and got the result of what he [God] was trying to show me. So in the same way I've done that with friends' children, with people maybe that were even older than me, but that weren't as mature in a certain area, and I felt I needed to step in and help them, for their interest, not just because I was being rude or mean or a jerk. Even if I came off that way, I knew I had their best interest in mind, so I was going to step in and help them.

Josiah saw God as a modern, flexible father who tailors discipline to the needs of the child. While he acknowledged that God might approach some people in a very gentle and tender way, his own experience of God as a father was of a harsh disciplinarian that put him through some very difficult learning experiences, experiences that were in Josiah's best interest. It appears that Josiah's experience of God as a tough disciplinarian strongly shapes his perception of how important it is to not give in, but to stay with the lesson until it is learned.

Aida and Josiah talked about consistency differently. Aida expressed that she is inconsistent when she loses her temper with her children, and Josiah talked about inconsistency as giving in to children.

Valerie and Crystal responded quite differently to the question of how God as a parent might impact their parenting. The more salient example of God as a parent for them was that God is forgiving and merciful toward them, even though such generosity is unmerited. Valerie said that she might actually say to her children, “a consequence would really be appropriate right now, but I’m going to do what Jesus does to me. I’m going to give you grace like he gives us grace, or I’m going to show mercy like he shows mercy,’ so that I do approach that way.” Crystal also talked about the importance of forgiveness and added that she does not want to shame her children specifically because God does not shame her. When asked if God as a parent impacts her parenting, she said:

Yes, it does. (Pause) I guess what’s standing out to me in my mind right now is forgiveness. When my children do something that makes me angry. ...I do feel my initial reaction is probably, usually overreaction because I come from a long line of (laughs) over-reactors! (laughs) But then when I look at their faces, and I see how my response is making them feel, you know, it makes me feel sad that I’ve, I feel in a way that I’ve let them down, because I remember feeling the way that they look when I’ve been ashamed of something I’ve done. And I remember how God responded to that, and it’s never been with anger or, you know, shame. I’ve never felt ashamed by God. I’ve felt the need for forgiveness but not shame. So I think that’s, when I see shame on my children’s faces, I feel ashamed of myself! (laughs) Because I think, well, things that I have done to disappoint God where he could have made me ashamed, but he didn’t as my father or my mother. It makes me just reflect on what would be a better way of talking to my children.

Traces of the other components of this theme were also brought up by Crystal.

She does not want to be motivated by anger nor does she want to overreact as Aida

describes herself doing. Crystal wants to consistently respond out of love, which means for her that she will be forgiving and careful to avoid shaming her children.

Terrence emphasized the importance of not disciplining in anger and believes that God's discipline of him helped him to understand this. He began by explaining how, when he first became a father, he did not have a "vertical relationship" or a relationship with God as father, but only a "horizontal relationship" with his children, adding:

... and I would discipline the children sometimes in anger. That crushed me, because it's worse than, it's worse than sparing the rod. In other words, it's, in Proverbs it says if you spare the rod, you spoil your children. I'd like to see a proverb right under it that says if you discipline your children in anger, you might as well spare the rod. But God helped me through that, but he used it as a way to discipline me, and because of that, now I see how he's always been with me. Now I can do the same for them. As he's always been with me, I can be with them.

Terrence focused on avoiding anger as a motivation for discipline, but he also brought up consistency. To always be there for his children as God has been for him is a goal for Terrence. He further clarified the reasons why he might become angry and does not find them legitimate. He explained:

And that's only pride that would cause such a thing, and that's unbelief. God punishes pride, so, if you had time to get angry, it was probably over embarrassment, or something stupid like that, junk like that. And we've got to put that aside. By looking at how he's always disciplined me, he never did that. He was patient, he let me come down to the bottom of myself, and when my heart turned to him, and was in agreement with him, then he moves us on. That's how I want to be with my children. I want them to not just be, not just to conform their actions, but to, to have my heart for them. Does that make any sense? It's kind of like, they could, just on the outside, comply. I don't want compliance, and I don't want results, as much as I want their hearts. And that's the bottom line for me. ... You can live according to the flesh, like I said, but if you live according to the spirit, then you'll have the father's heart.

Terrence sees a wrong approach to discipline as a spiritual problem. If he is wrongly motivated in how he deals with his children, then he is walking in a human rather than a God-provided path. He took the metaphor of God as father all the way through his example and added this spiritual dimension. God is not simply modeling to Terrence how to be with his children: God actually wants Terrence to have “the father’s heart”, to feel the way that God does and be motivated by those feelings. Josiah, who talks about the importance of consistent discipline, added the motivation aspect as well when he said, “It’s not always fun to be the mean guy, or to say, ‘No, I don’t want you swinging on that, and stop throwing that in the house,’ or whatever, but (chuckles) if I can see the best interest, in this child, and not just that they’re annoying me, or whatever (chuckle)...”. Having the right motivation for disciplining children is the foundation for the last component of this theme: tailoring discipline to the child’s specific needs.

Jacob gave descriptions of father-God parallel to Josiah’s. Both experienced God as being necessarily harsh with them. Josiah’s experience of God became gentler only after he had learned his lessons (at which time Josiah thought of God more as a husband/lover). Jacob’s experience of God broadened over the course of his own life experience to include tough love and tenderness. He talked about how his own father handled everything the same way but adds that he came to recognize new things about God through his own parenting experiences (which will be discussed in the next theme). These new understandings of God as father greatly impacted Jacob’s parenting.

Jacob who at one time had focused on the harsher examples of God’s punishment began to notice how differently God related to Israel at various times and how Jesus related to people as described in the Gospels. Through this broadened

awareness, Jacob began to try to find new ways to show care for others, including his children. His belief that God approaches people individually prompted Jacob to try to find unique ways to relate to each child so that he can maximize their relationship and the likelihood of the child responding positively to his efforts. It is difficult to fully describe the influence of God as a father on Jacob's parenting because his descriptions are so reciprocal in nature. Having children broadened Jacob's view of God which, in turn, changed Jacob's view of good parenting. As he parented differently, he became attuned to different aspects of God.

Macy, speculating as she is not yet a mother, described the importance of not minimizing her children's concerns and also about being attentive to each child's individual needs. She had earlier described her father brushing off her "trivial" concerns and how her mother had prayed with her about those concerns. She translated this to mean that God as a parent (specifically, a mothering father), cares about her petty worries. She added another link to this chain of influences when she said:

I definitely think that it [thinking of God as parent] will impact it in my patience and not brushing off my child or children if they come to me with something that seems relatively small to myself, but I see that it is really disturbing to them. I think it will impact me and make me stop and think, "O.K. Wait a minute. Is this something I should be concerned about, and try to help and try to show the more compassionate self?" I think in those kinds of situations it will really impact me.

She continued by talking about the importance of trying to figure out what is best for each individual child because, "I don't think that God as a father or in any role just treats all human beings the same, you know, or, if they are, if we are doing something wrong, that he uses the same measures for everyone to try to get us on the right path."

All of the participants so far talked about how God impacts their character so that they can better function as a parent – by being more consistent, more loving, having unselfish motivations, being in control of their temper, and willing to be attentive to each child’s needs. Aida added a structural dimension to the theme. Her conception of God as a parent implied a structure for how she and her husband should parent. She expressed frustration about being forced into a leadership role within the family when she said:

I would like my husband to be the spiritual leader as well, because that’s something I think he can do... but if he doesn’t step up to the plate I’m not going to just say, “Oh that’s too bad. You’re dad’s not going to pray with you, so...” no, of course I’ll step in and, and try to be what I think they need for spiritual leadership. And I’m not going to just blame it on ---- and say it’s his fault and they’re not going to be raised knowing that God is real because he’s not taking his leadership role? No. I, as a parent, take that responsibility very seriously...

This contradiction between Aida’s real and ideal family structure resulted in complex family dynamics. While acknowledging her husband’s authority, she felt compelled to undermine it, as she described here:

...and when we fight, I know I’ve been counseled not to contradict him or not to undermine his authority in front of them [the children]. At the same time, when I see things or when he says things that are definitely not biblical, I’m not just going to stand there and say, that’s too bad. I do contradict him. I do undermine his authority when I know that he’s not acting in a way that’s healthy for my children. So, I feel like I am taking on a lot of what I prefer a father, the father’s spiritual roles. ...I don’t feel comfortable in that role, however I’m not going to just stand by and say, well, if nobody, if he’s not going to fill that role, nobody’s going to do it. It’s definitely going to be me. I don’t want to be negligent.

Aids said that, “I have learned from single mothers that you step up to the plate if there’s no one else to do it.” Earlier in the interview, Aida talked about her idea of complementary roles and what this means for single parents:

I've been in contact with a lot of single parent homes recently and realizing, looking at their children and seeing, what is it that makes their behavior different than my children's behavior and realizing how hard it is for moms to be both at the same time. It, we're not God! (laughs) And I think we're innately created to be in a team. ...Not saying that single parents can't do it, but it's a lot harder to try to be those two complementary roles at the same time, so...(trails off).

Aida indicated that she thinks of God as a father and mother – though she later clarified that the image is more of a father who embodies motherly as well as fatherly characteristics. When asked if she tries to emulate God as a mother or if her image of God as father and mother run together, she said, “I think they run together.” In this way, God is a single parent who takes on both roles. But this is not a structure that she views as positive if she takes it on. In fact, her belief that she is fathering and mothering her children is very stressful for her. This may be because she sees men and women as a kind of separation of God's integrated characteristics, which fits with her complementary view of gender.

Although some of her distress may stem from not following a parental pattern that she believes is God ordained, it may also be influenced by her personal preferences. Aida said that she prefers to be in a supportive role. She claimed that this is how she is built and cites a job interest assessment that showed her to be best suited for customer services and administrative roles. It is impossible to know how much of her discomfort stems from the idea that she is not emulating God's plan for her as a parent or from her being in a role that feels poorly suited to her personality.

When asked how, if at all, thinking of God as a parent impacts their own parenting, participants gave a variety of responses that are often interrelated but sometimes unique. It is important to note that these responses are probably a reflection

of what was most salient for these participants at the time. Since this was only one question of many, participants may have responded with what came to mind first and often were not prompted into full elaboration of other possible influences of God as a parent. It is possible that Josiah, who emphasizes being tough and consistent in discipline, would also agree that he is more forgiving and merciful because of experiencing God as a parent. This specific example comes to mind because Josiah describes God as harsh but also as tender and forgiving. The transcripts show how the interview moved along once the participants gave their first response to the question of how God as a parent impacts their own parenting. Although participants were prompted to further explain or clarify their initial response, they were not usually asked to consider other ways that they were influenced by thinking of God as a parent.

The final theme of God as a parent is powerful in that it came from unsolicited participant responses. There were no questions about how having children might impact one's view of God, but participants talked about this anyway. Sometimes, when participants were asked about how thinking of God as a parent influences their own parenting, they would say something like, "It's the other way around!" They were then encouraged to elaborate, and these accounts provide the data for the next theme.

Becoming a parent impacts how I think about God. Parenting was seen as one way that participants could learn about God as a parent and expand their understanding of who God is. Leah speculated about the possibility of becoming a parent and what it might mean for how she sees God when she said:

I imagine I'd see a whole lot of new things about God just based on being a parent and being responsible and just having that life experience. I think I'd start

to see new things about God, or I think that's what one of my co-workers said about when he became a parent.

Experiencing strong emotions such as love and generosity in relation to children was one way that participants described getting a better sense of God's feelings toward them. Meredith talked about holding her first child and feeling the strongest attachment she had ever felt. This led her to think of how much God loves her because God was willing to give his son, Jesus, for her redemption. Josiah described his holding his niece and the "...emotion you have for this little being in your arms, that was doing nothing for you (chuckles), but cooing or gooing or even crying and your emotion felt so strong that you wanted to help, bless, encourage, see the best for this child growing up, as vulnerable as they are in a world that is not protected...". He continued to describe how God communicated to him through this experience, saying:

...and so he [God], as I'm holding the child, he's communicating to me that I am the child. He's me. ...and so he's showing the emotion I'm having for this child is just like the emotion he has for me. He's communicating his tenderness towards me, as an individual, and so in the same way, this is such a personal example used for me, I would communicate that same tenderness to a child because it's very appropriate.

Valerie added the possibility of experiencing hurt in relation to her children and how she might think about how she hurts God. She continued with another possibility of feeling proud of her children, "if they've done something incredibly well or wonderful, serving someone or giving someone help, I think how *I*, how much I love you and how much I was pleased with what you did and then how much more Jesus is." Although Valerie can think about the relationship between being a parent and experiencing God, she said, "so I do make the comparison, but not regularly." The image of God in family roles is not a potent one for Valerie. Still, what she described is

similar to what Aida described in relation to her husband. Aida said that she can empathize with God's hurt when she does not have time for him because she hurts when her husband does not have time for her. Valerie can experience a similar sense of empathy for God as she relates to her children.

Sometimes it was very hard for participants to say what is influencing what because, although they recognize similarities between how they relate to God and how they relate to their children, they are not sure where the thought or feeling originated. Crystal talked about how God as a parent lets her make her own mistakes but is supportive of her when she needs help. She believes that this influences her parenting style. Jacquie also talked about this but expressed uncertainty about the direction of the influence. When asked if God impacts her parenting, she said:

Um, (long pause) how God as a parent impacts my own parenting? Well, (long pause) I don't know if it goes that direction or the other direction (chuckles). O.K., I think about how God is, he listens, he helps, he directs, let's me make mistakes, and, and that part I do see, because I think that that is what I do with my children. And I try to encourage. I help. Sometimes I let them make mistakes. But sometimes I understand more about who God *is* as a parent, because *I* am a parent. I understand more about him wanting me to come to him as I just am, even if I'm upset or angry, just being true to him, just as I want my kids to come to me that way. ...So I think that that shapes my, that helps me understand who God is...in my relationship with him as well as how I believe that he is a parent to me, and that sometimes, I mean it does shape, I suppose, the way I treat my kids, but I've never thought of it in that way, I guess.

She believes that God wants her to be real and to approach him the way she is rather than who she thinks she ought to be and clearly attributes this understanding of God to being a parent. This is how she feels about her children, and she believes having this experience helps her to understand that this is true about God as well. She is less willing to locate the direction of influence for the other commonalities. Jacob is an

example of a participant who can clearly locate the source of new revelations about God: He is certain that the birth of his daughters was the beginning of a new and profoundly impactful understanding of God.

Until he became a father, Jacob did not understand (or perhaps believe) in God's unconditional love for him. Once his daughters were born, he said that he realized that he loved them regardless of whether he approved of what they were doing or not. From this experience he came to believe that God loves him simply because he is God's son. He also began to notice facets of God that he had not noticed before. Growing up with a very strict father, Jacob paid attention to biblical accounts of God being strict. Just as his dad approached every situation in the same strict way, Jacob saw God as being almost exclusively strict until he had daughters and noticed that he approached each one differently, depending on her personality. This led him to notice scriptural accounts of God and Jesus acting out other things such as compassion, mercy, and gentleness. He talked about positive changes in how he relates to God, to his family, and to his congregation, attributing these changes to his experience of being a father.

Jacob also brought up the case of his relative who responded quite differently to becoming a father. This relative became a father and has since become a more rigid and harsh person. He began to strongly adhere to the most patriarchal, authoritarian images of God and acts these out with his sons by basing privilege on birth order and biological sex. Jacob attributed the difference in their response to fatherhood, in part, to the fact that he has daughters and his relative has sons.

Becoming a parent provides some participants with new experiences and insights that they can use to better understand or relate to God. Usually this is through a

projection process. Participants project their own feelings in relation to a child onto God in relation to them.

God as a Husband

Eleven participants of eighteen – four men and seven women - indicated that they sometimes think of God as a husband or a groom. Four other participants commented on why they do not think of God in the role of husband/groom. Of the eleven participants who reported thinking of God as a husband, four of them (three men and one woman) expressed that, although they have a concept of God as a husband, they do not really access the husband-God image in a meaningful way. The remaining seven varied greatly in how they relate to the God in a husband role. Many talked as much about the barriers to experiencing God as a husband as the experiences themselves. Several participants specifically noted that the husband role is associated more specifically with Jesus than God. Those who did not make this distinction spoke of Jesus and God in this role. Since there was a clear preference of some toward Jesus and ambivalence by the other participants, I refer to this role as husband-Jesus.

Almost all of the participants who commented on how they came to see God this way cited scripture as the primary reason. Other reasons included hearing husband analogies in church, connecting their relationships with a spouse to ways of relating to God, or having a need associated with the role of a spouse that they went to God for help with.

All of the comments on the Jesus as husband image, including those who talk about why they do not see God or Jesus this way, were included in this analysis because the reasons people give for not thinking of Jesus as a husband are intriguing and equally

relevant as how they do think of Jesus as a husband. First are the perceptions and experiences of Jesus in the husband role. I used the labels of lover and partner as well as husband because the participants did, using my own judgment along with participant's words to choose which label to put with which theme.

Jesus as lover is tender and intimate. Some participants described Jesus as a romantic lover characterized by a mutual attraction, intimacy, and idealization of the Jesus-lover. Josiah said, "I am seeking my lover, and so it's the same kind of passion, the same kind of tenderness, the same kind of intimacy. I am approaching him with, seeking to be, attractive, desirable, and, wanting to get a little sugar (laughs)." He later adds, "he's [Jesus] the object, I guess, of desire. His love is (pause) perfect (chuckles) and right and good and not small and petty, has value and wisdom and everything that someone would want, so there is an absolute, undeniable attraction." While Josiah talked about Jesus being the idealized object of his desire, Macy talked about Jesus as a husband having "an overwhelming amount of love for me, and love and admiration and pride in me and what I'm doing." She also talked about taking pride in the fact that Jesus has such an avid interest in being in a relationship with her, saying that when she thinks of herself in relation to Jesus as lover, she feel like, "Wow! I'm something! I'm pretty special!" Both accounts speak to the Eros emphasis of romantic love of beauty and attraction as well as the idealization of one's lover.

There is a storybook quality to these descriptions, and Aida provides an explanation for this. She does not believe that her view of lover-Jesus comes from romantic fantasies in storybooks but that humans' enduring stories of love and adventure come from a deep seated longing for salvation by the ultimate lover who is

powerful and powerfully desirous - capable of consuming love and unwavering devotion. Here is Aida's description:

... I read a book called the *Sacred Romance*, which I read over and over again, but it talks about how, in all the stories that people – whether it's secular or sacred – that people dream up, that is how our desires for the ultimate story, the ultimate adventure, the ultimate love story are played out. He [the author] used examples of *The Last of the Mohicans*, or the, all of those where the hero comes in and saves the day, but you're not sure that it's going to work out till the very end, that adventure, that being loved with abandon or whatever is all rooted around it, and our desire to be completely intimate and really be beloved, cherished.

She considered her own longing for intimacy in her marriage and makes sense of it through the metaphor of Jesus as lover. Aida believes that God created humans to long for intimacy, in part, because God longs for an intimate relationship with people. She also saw the longing of other people through the lens of this metaphor, saying, "...all those sexual relationships that people seek after today, like one night stands, that's because we were built, we were created for that intimacy that was originally created for us and God."

Crystal expressed similar sentiments as Aida regarding the human desire for connection and intimacy. Her perception of Jesus as lover was compatible with Aida's but her frame of reference allows her to positively compare her experience of Jesus as lover to her relationship with her husband. She went further than the other participants by actually describing intimate moments she experienced in relation to Jesus as love when she said:

Well, I think particularly when I'm by myself, and I'm in prayer and having just a private prayer time by myself. I think there's just that feeling of such a strong connection, a feeling that I don't really want to share with anyone else. And that's the only kind of relationship I can think of. There are moments with God, it's not for anyone else. It's just for me and God and for me and Jesus. And, it's

just such a strong sense of intimacy and reciprocal love that I think only can be compared to the kind of love between a husband and a wife.

The description is deeply personal and exclusive. Although Crystal also expressed that Jesus as lover wants to have this intensely intimate relationship with all people, she experiences her relationship with Jesus as lover in a very private and exclusive way. It is just for the two of them and no one else. These descriptions of intense emotional connection and a sense of exclusivity fit the description of Eros lovers who value feeling “in love” and believe in the specialness and exclusiveness of the relationship. The next theme was drawn largely from Aida’s rich descriptions and overlaps with some of the characteristics of Jesus as an Eros lover. Some unique emphases and nuances prompted a distinct theme for the pursuing and passionate lover.

Jesus as lover pursues me with passion and desire. The consuming love and unwavering devotion of Jesus as lover is intensified in this theme. Longing becomes raging passion, intimacy becomes a desire for such closeness that it threatens to fully envelope, anticipation becomes angst, exclusivity becomes all encompassing, and pursuit borders on obsession.

Although John did not personally access the metaphor of Jesus as lover, he did have an image of God as a lover of humanity. John’s description is that of an intense lover, of “being madly in love, greatly desiring a relationship, and maybe we only do crazy things to get it, because that’s how much it matters. It’s passion that’s pursued.” Aida talked about how a female Christian writer of the middle ages, “was condemned for her very passionate descriptions of her relationship with God as that was just

unheard of, and yet God does want intimacy... . That's why we seek out intimacy in relationships, even when we fall flat on our faces."

Both descriptions include elements of the Mania love style. The degree of passion and the response it incites fit with the obsessive quality of this love style, also characterized by emotional upheaval. But satisfaction is elusive as there is dependence on the lover for reciprocation and a fear that the lover's level of passion may fall short, causing an imbalance in the relationship.

Aida thinks of herself as the more passionate lover in her marriage but as the less passionate lover with Jesus, saying "And I still, I want to discover more of how passionately, how unreservedly God loves me...but I don't feel that I've experienced it in such a way that I could speak with authority." Shortly after she says, almost musingly, "I just wish I had something more concrete or personalized. That's just something I, ideally, would like..."

Although the desire for intimacy is shared with the last theme of Jesus as lover, this image includes a deep suffering. Jesus as the passionate pursuing lover more openly considers the possibility of rejection and ultimate aloneness. For Aida, this fear of never realizing deep intimacy in human love relationships easily shifts into an empathy for Jesus as lover who experiences rejection from her in the way that she experiences it from her own husband. When asked when she might approach Jesus as a husband, Aida said:

That desire for adventure and passion and being known wholly, w-h-o-l-l-y, without being rejected, and, I think (cries throughout this), sorry, my own, not unrequited, but unfulfilled desires for intimacy or whatever with my own husband (pause) makes me know that God wants even more than that. Hm, talking about relationships is hard! (laughs through tears).

Aida expressed a desire that is much more demanding than that of closeness or connection. She wants to be completely and wholly understood and still be accepted. At the same time, she recognized how she is sometimes a dismissive lover in relation to Jesus in the way that her husband is often dismissive of her. She quoted a poem that is important to her, saying:

...it's like God saying to us, "I created the sunrise and I gave you all these wonderful things today, and I waited for you, (begins crying again) I waited for you, and you never showed," and I know that (continues to cry) when I feel pushed off or ignored by my husband, that that's exactly how God feels when I run through my day without giving him a second thought. And so, in a way, that neediness has put me in touch with, you know, how much God loves us, and yet he doesn't force himself on us.

This introduced another complexity. Although Jesus as lover shows a crazy and consuming love for humanity, and pursues them madly, he will live with rejection rather than force himself on them. Jesus as lover is characterized by both obsessive love and restraint. But paradoxes exist in Aida as well who longs for something that only a god can provide – being fully known and accepted. Although her perception of God is that he ardently pursues intimacy with her and has the ability to know her and unconditionally love her, she seeks this elsewhere, from a human lover that cannot possibly meet her expectations. Neediness is also associated with the Manic love style. As Aida considers her need for complete intimacy and her attempts to find it in her marital relationship, she concludes this way:

I have to say that God is all that we need. He is, he provides everything. ... I don't think I should be looking to satisfy all my needs and expect some finite person to be everything I need.

Relating to Jesus as a lover can be perceived as romantic or as tumultuous, but these are not the only ways people described their experiences. Many participants talked about Jesus as a helpful partner and companionable friend.

Jesus as partner is a companionable friend. Some participants described Jesus as a constant, companionable partner who can always be counted on to be there. Macy used words like “stable” and “always there” to describe Jesus as partner, and Valerie also said that she thinks of Jesus as a “constant companion” who loves her the way she is, although she qualified that this is more of a friend image than a husband-as-companion image. This fits with the Storge style of love which is built on mutual affection and friendship and avoids the intense emotions that characterize Eros and Mania. The image of Jesus as a companionable partner includes deep affection but not the breathless romantic love of Jesus as a tender intimate lover or the intense emotional arousal of Jesus as a passionate and desirous lover. It is more of a steady and slow burning kind of love, free of the ups and downs of the previous two. The relationship is experienced as a cooperative one where there is mutual comfort and help. For some people, this was experienced quite literally as Sharon described when she was asked if she ever thinks of Jesus as a husband:

For the two dear friends that are widows and one that is single, yeah, I do. And I know how one years ago, she put on a little, an older lady, widowed, and she put on a ring and sort of had a little ceremony with her close friends to say he [Jesus] is my husband now. So I sometimes do [think of Jesus] as being a helpmate, but also God, not to take away the magnitude of God, I mean that we can't even fathom him, but also being right there beside my friend.

Later in the interview Sharon talked about her own experience of Jesus as warm and comforting when she is in bed alone, saying, “And I think of that then when he’s

[her husband] gone. Then it's my comfort or my thinking about the warmth of God, and he is with me."

Sharon also introduced the challenge of viewing Jesus as a companionate partner: Jesus as God is not an equal, but words like "partner," "companion," and "friend" suggest an egalitarian relationship. Sharon did express a struggle of reconciling these two images. She described Jesus as a companionate partner with whom she has a cooperative relationship but then reconsidered when she says, "I mean, certainly God's going to be God whether we cooperate or not, and so I can't put myself on a level of being on his, I guess I could be on his team, but it's not quite the same. (chuckles) It just doesn't feel, it takes away from who God is, to me."

Others, such as Jacquie, expressed a struggle in reconciling parts of these two images. She views Jesus as "the companionate of marital relationships, going to each other for discussion, talking about decisions, planning, that type of stuff." When asked how Jesus is in relation to her she said:

Um, more of a, a companion, even though I still see Him as the head. More like the traditional head of a family, and I know that's getting into language that I don't necessarily know how that fits into my thinking. And that I look to him for decisions. He empowers me.

She easily describes Jesus in egalitarian language such as "going to each other" and "talking about decisions" while simultaneously referring to him as the head who empowers her and guides her in making decisions. These two ways of describing Jesus do not appear to be challenging for Jacquie. The struggle of the metaphor is less about reconciling Jesus as head and companion and more about its implication for family life. In other parts of the interview she talks about the challenges of applying the metaphor

to her own relationship with her husband, a topic for another paper. She is able to describe Jesus as a companionate partner and perceive him as someone who is above her.

Another component of Jesus as companionate partner is that there is a sense of a shared journey and purpose. Jacquie hinted at this when she talked about her and Jesus “making plans.” Jacob, who admitted that the husband metaphor is more distant for him, was able to provide an excellent description of how he can relate to Jesus as a companionate partner. He thinks of Jesus pursuing him in a way that a man might pursue a close friendship with another man. He characterized such a friendship as having “close camaraderie” and described close friendships that he has had with other men where they talk together and cry together and offer mutual support. He added that there is often a sense of purpose in these partnerships, such as joining a team or accomplishing a task. Jacob ended by saying that the idea of Jesus as a groom is more about Jesus as a close friend who sometimes pursues him for friendship and to share a purpose together. The descriptions of peaceful compatibility and the assumption of enduring love and friendship illustrate the Storge love style.

Jesus as partner is sacrificial and forgiving. Jesus as a sacrificial partner was present in many of the descriptions and across themes. In the passionate lover descriptions by Aida, Jesus is the one who prepares the sunrise for his lover and then waits, only to find that she does not appear. Yet, he continues to do it every day in hopes that his lover will eventually take notice and reciprocate his affection. Jesus as companionate partner is recognized by many participants as one who does not need help, but partners with them anyway to provide help and comfort to them. These

descriptions fit with the Agape love style which is an altruistic and giving kind of love that expects nothing in return. When Lynn was asked to describe the characteristics of the “groom” (what she called Jesus), she said, “willing to trade your life for the welfare of the bride, to give your life for the welfare of the bride, to cherish and honor and, you know, that whole, that whole thing.” She also said that, although this is her concept of Jesus as a groom, she has trouble experiencing it because neither her father nor her two husbands were sacrificial. She did say about God that “He just is amazingly forgiving. Forgiving! I didn’t say forgiving, but he is amazingly forgiving and, uh, and always gives you another chance.” But this was a more general image of God and not specific to God in the role of husband or groom. It does bring out another component of Agape love, which is the patient tolerance of the other person’s failings. Leah’s image of Jesus as sacrificial partner, like Lynn’s, was more conceptual than experiential. She also noted the limitations of her concept of Jesus as a husband:

So what kind of husband is Jesus to the church? Um, sacrificial love, lays down his life, kind of pursues us as sinful people when we go off the tracks, forgiving, and this is coming out of Ephesians 5 and stuff we talked about in class, but it’s a very limited picture of Jesus as husband. I mean, human husbands do a lot of normal things like wash the dishes and pick up the kids and earn a salary, and I don’t think of any of that with Jesus. It’s just this love and sacrifice imagery drawn on the gospels and the crucifixion and Ephesians 5, so it’s like a very narrow picture of what a husband could be, leaving out tons of other things that would apply to human husbands.

Terrence also talked about Jesus as a sacrificial partner as a concept rather than an experience. He framed his concept in a parable of Jesus and then interpreted it:

He [Jesus] said the kingdom is like a field, and a man found, a man came along and found a treasure in that field, and with joy he hid it again, and then he went and bought the whole field. ... the field is the world, and the man is Jesus, and the treasure is the bride. So if we start to see the parable in that sense, we start to see that he gave everything for us. And I see that he did that for me, so I can

apply that to my own walk, that he gave everything, he purchased me for his bride (laughs).

In this parable, the man sells everything he has to buy the field, so he can have the treasure, and Terrence thinks of Jesus in this way – sacrificing all to purchase the world and have him, the treasure, the bride. This gentle caring, other-centered, Agape love is often associated with divine love and easily fits many of the participant's perceptions. Some of the descriptions of Jesus as a sacrificial partner are experienced, but most are described as concepts that are believed but not necessarily felt or otherwise experienced. This is also true of the next theme which is closely related to Jesus as sacrificial partner: Jesus is like a traditional husband who provides and takes care of me.

Husband-Jesus is a traditional provider and protector. This theme addresses some of the practical elements of relationships with an emphasis on roles. It is not a perfect parallel to the Pragma love style but, like Pragma, focuses on the realistic components of Jesus as a husband and the expectations for Jesus in that role. Sharon most clearly articulated this theme when she talked about how she came to see Jesus as a husband. While most said that the image comes from scripture, books, or childhood teaching, Sharon said that she first thought of Jesus as a husband because she had a need for a provider and protector. She referred to hearing a noise during the night and needing someone to go and check it out: This is her husband's role. She continued to describe the things that she needs and how her husband, and then Jesus as husband, provide for these needs:

Well, probably I still, maybe this is non-traditional for today, but it's traditional from years ago, see the husband as more the protector of the family. The one, who in our house, makes sure that the taxes get done, and certain...you know, every family divides things out differently, but he probably takes on more of

those things. ...Like the buck stops with him, so to speak. So I guess I see it, not just only for my single friends [thinking of Jesus as husband], but also for me and my loving husband. ...Being sure that things are being provided for, the main bacon bring homer (chuckles).

Sharon mingled her ideas of her husband's role and the role of Jesus as husband so freely that it is difficult to know if she is describing one in terms of the other or not.

When asked how Jesus is a husband to her, she spoke of her idea of husbands in general, of her own husband, and of her widowed friends' experiences of Jesus as husband. Although she clearly said that she sees Jesus as a husband because she needs that role to be filled, she mostly talked about how her husband fills that role or how Jesus fills both the companionate and sacrificial partner roles for her widowed friends. This appears to be more conceptual than experiential for Sharon. She said that she might unconsciously approach Jesus in a husband role but that she mostly thinks of it in relation to her widowed friends. She also seemed open to Jesus as husband providing both companionship and provision for her in the event that she would need it. It is as if Jesus is a "husband in the wings" for when her husband is no longer serving in the necessary role of provider and companion. Husbands – both natural husbands and Jesus as a husband – fill certain needs for Sharon, which is a very pragmatic view. Pragmatic lovers must find value in the partner's contribution to the relationship.

Macy, yet unmarried, also commented on Jesus as a providing and caretaking husband. She talked earlier about Jesus as a tender and intimate lover who admires and loves her but also thinks of Jesus as husband in a very functioning way, saying:

'Cause like when I envision being married to someone, a husband, I think of growing together, and I guess that's how I see God – helping me grow – and granted, I'm not helping God grow! (laughs) As far as on my end, it's that same

kind of thing. And also, that stereotypical husband looking out, looking out for his spouse, protecting and also, like a father, guiding.

Similar to issues raised under the theme of Jesus as companionate partner, Macy discussed the inequality between her and Jesus as husband. Jesus provides growth, protection, and guidance for her, but she cannot reciprocate because Jesus does not have these needs. The implication is that she can be a pragmatic lover by looking for how she will be advantaged by the relationship with Jesus as husband, but it raises questions about if Jesus gains anything from being a husband to her.

The issue of inequality in the relationship of the participants with Jesus as husband recurred across many of the themes and participant descriptions. Participants could perceive both themselves and Jesus as Eros and Storge lovers: they could see both themselves and Jesus as being infatuated with the other or enjoying the companionship and enduring love of the other. They only described Jesus as a Manic or an Agape lover and themselves as Pragmatic lovers. Jesus was the possessive one and the sacrificial one, and they were the ones who were looking to get needs met through the relationship. Although only Jesus was described as Manic or Agape, there were some elements of these in participants as well. Aida wanted to be fully known and consumed by the love of another, both associated with Manic love, and expressed her desire to love God with the same unreserved and passionate love that she believes she is receiving from Jesus as lover. None of the participants claimed being Agape lovers to Jesus, but they did talk about how marital partners, especially husbands, ought to have Agape love for their spouses. This was especially true for participants holding more

traditional views of marriage who emphasized the husband's role of sacrificing for the wife and being tolerant toward her.

Inequality issues also surfaced as participants struggled to better understand Jesus through their relationships with their natural spouses and vice versa. The next three themes focus on many of the barriers participants cite for thinking of Jesus as a husband and includes all of the participants who comment on Jesus as husband, even if they did not actually experience Jesus in this way.

Jesus is perfect, and husbands are not. Participants confronted limitations with the Jesus as husband metaphor when they considered their own husbands. Women who talked with satisfaction about their marriages and those who spoke with dissatisfaction both discussed running into this limitation with the metaphor, although the dissatisfied women elaborated more on the incongruence between Jesus as husband and their own husbands. Lynn, divorced twice, talked about the differences between her husbands, her father as a husband, and Jesus as he is described in the Bible. One of the recurring themes of her interview was how Jesus loves and forgives perfectly, and that the prominent men in her life did not. This incongruence sometimes made it difficult for her to experience God or Jesus through these family metaphors. She said:

That's a tough one for me because I have two failed marriages! (laughs). And so my earthly role models are not very good. My father was not a good husband. But all the qualities that the Bible says a husband should be, how he should love his wife and all those things point to the way Jesus loves the church, so I can see it in the Bible and the writings. To feel it in the way I relate to the father and the brother role, I can't because I have no experience with a groom like that. So maybe if I did, I would. But that's a tough one for me because of my earthly experiences.

Valerie, when asked if she thinks of Jesus in a husband role, reacted very strongly with a “No, that doesn’t happen!” When asked to talk more about her reaction, she said:

No offense to my husband, but I just can’t imagine (chuckles). Uh (pause), no, that’s a good one. I’d never thought, I’ve never pondered that much. I can’t imagine him [Jesus] being at that level, because that’s so human, and I put Jesus so above what a husband is, because you see the good and the bad and the ugly with your mate, and so, we’ve had a rough marriage. We’re very committed and we’re very much working hard at our marriage, but it’s not been easy, and I think of a relationship with Jesus as being perfect.

Valerie’s response to the question of thinking of Jesus as a husband could be described as incredulous. It contained more emotional and physical cues (laughing outright at the question and shaking her head vigorously) perhaps because she is currently working within the limitations of her own relationship and dealing with “the good and the bad and the ugly” with her own husband. This is different from Lynn, single for many years now, who is more subdued with her emotional and physical cues, even though she is quite animated in other parts of her interview. Sharon talked about the incongruence between Jesus and husbands in terms of her own experience early in her marriage when she felt taken advantage of. This concern came after she said that Christ wants his bride to be “ready and willing” and then hastily added:

Yeah, but I don’t want to be ready and willing for just, I think there’s that difference that this is human. We are total human, whereas it’s different when it’s Jesus. Kind of back to that thing of not being a doormat, and not that my husband was abusive or anything like that, but I just didn’t talk up.

Crystal, who talked about her marriage with satisfaction, also brought out how the metaphor is imperfect because God is perfect. She expressed feeling confident that both God and her husband will reciprocate her love, but she is not as certain that her

husband will always reciprocate her immediate bids for intimacy. She explained it this way:

When I feel drawn to God and drawn to my husband, I know that God will always be drawn to me and vice versa. And that's not always true about my husband because...*it's God!* So there are definitely things that are, are different because God never makes a mistake, and my husband does make mistakes (both laugh). And, you know there are things, I guess, about my natural husband that I think, I wish he wouldn't think that way, or I wish he wouldn't do that, but, although there are things about God that I don't understand, but there again, because it's God, I can say, well that's God, and I just don't know everything. With my natural husband, you know, I can say, I think I *do* know, and my way is better! (laughs).

Crystal continued in the same vein as the other women about God treating her with unselfishness and love but added the component that God is always right, unlike her husband. This necessarily results in a different way of interacting, as Crystal described. Sharon described something similar in the next theme of not being equal to Jesus. She talked about discussing things with her husband to make a decision but asking God what he would like for her to do.

Leah, never married, goes to a church that develops norms for family structure based on the metaphor of Christ (groom) as the head of the church (bride). She and her boyfriend are trying to figure out how this might work if they marry. She said, "Yeah, that's what I'm trying to figure out with me and my boyfriend! (I laughs). So my church is very big on like headship and submission and guys are more vocal and out there while we're supposed to follow. We're pretty conservative, I think, when you look at Protestants." Leah does not voice any objection to this way of structuring marriage or interpreting the metaphor, but she does have the experience of watching her mother try

to work within this structure and decide that it was a mistake. She processed her thoughts externally by mulling over her mother's situation and how it applies to her:

But then I look at my parents' relationship, and I look at my mom because I talk to my mom all the time about this. And I think my mom in retrospect that she, she over-submitted to my Dad. She kind of bought into all this Christian teaching about, you know, wives submit, and did that for twenty years, and I think now she looks back and says that it was terrible. She got kind of squished along the way. She enabled my dad to make really bad parenting decisions, and she now thinks, like, that's not what submission means, that the wife needs to be giving feedback, needs to not let the husband do whatever he wants, that he needs a wife that's giving him intelligent, you know, helpful input. Um, so I'm trying to figure out, what do I think? Do I go with kind of my church with, like, submission [unintelligible few words] the law? Do I go with my mom's view?

The problem, as Leah described it, is not the hierarchical structure of the marital relationship, but the fact that husbands are not perfect in the way that Jesus is. If husbands are at least trying to be the way the Bible says he should be and wives are responding in the right way, it might work out, in her view. She considered how this might work out in theory:

So I mean, theoretically, the husband is leading well and putting the wife first and sacrificing where needed and serving her and humble, not thinking he has it all figured out but wanting her input. Um, and likewise, theoretically, the wife is respecting the husband and supporting him and affirming and encouraging, but, also, you know, giving input – have you thought about this and why don't that and I don't think I agree with this. So, but that's a theory, and I have no idea what it actually looks like in practice! (chuckles)

Leah has a very clear understanding of the marital implications of the metaphor and she shows commitment to it, but the imperfection of husbands (and wives) complicate how it is applied. None of the men talk at length about this limitation of the metaphor, but Josiah mentioned it. He shared the more literal interpretation of the metaphor as it relates to marriage structure and said that, while men have to make a

role-based mental shift to think of themselves as brides, women have to make a shift about relating to an imperfect man rather than a “God in the heavens kind of thing.” While Leah is committed to the theory, she remained uncertain about its application. Josiah seemed more certain that it will work if the husband and wife can make the necessary efforts and accommodations around human imperfection. Other participants loosely referred to the implied hierarchy of the metaphor but think of their own marital relationships in different degrees of egalitarianism. For them, a significant failing of the metaphor is that they do not have the equal relationship with Jesus that they try to have with their husbands.

I cannot be equal with husband-Jesus. Female participants provided the data for this theme as it was not mentioned by the male participants who think of Jesus as a husband or who commented on why they do not think of Jesus as a husband.

Jacque talked about Jesus as a companion as cited under that theme and struggled to think of Jesus as the head while relating to Jesus as a companion. Although it is not all worked out in her mind, she seemed to feel all right about holding the ambiguity about her role in relation to Jesus being companionate and unequal. As far as her relationship with her husband, her preference is do what works, as she explained:

You know there’s so much talk about complementarianism and egalitarianism and I’m just like, I don’t really know where I stand on that. And the truth is, I don’t really care. I mean, if it’s not black and white in the Bible, why should it be a black and white issue for us, so let’s just move on and quit arguing about the grays and so, and maybe that’s why it’s vague when you asked that question is because it’s vague in my mind in how I relate. You know? ...In that particular situation I don’t think that it’s something laid out how that should be, so, I think it varies in situations, and sometimes I have a strength in a situation, sometimes he does, and I need to follow his lead.

This was the way that Jacquie resolved the incongruence in her own life, by claiming that she cannot fully understand the ways of God who can be a companionate partner and the “head” and also by asserting that the implications for marital relationships are “gray” and choosing what works in her own relationship. Sharon also acknowledged that she relates differently to her husband than she does to Jesus as husband, saying:

Well I’m thinking when it’s my husband, if there is an issue, I’d probably say, well I hope I would say something like, “How are we going to handle that?” (Chuckle) And, uh, with God it’s more like, “What do you want me to do? How are you going to help me through this?” So, I see it a little differently.

In her relationship with her husband, cooperation is required, but she noted that God will do what is needed with or without her cooperation. Like Jacquie, this difference does not seem to be troublesome for her. It is simply a way that the metaphor does not directly apply to her marriage.

Crystal, compared to other participants who spoke on this issue, used the most egalitarian language in her description of her and her husband’s relationship. She said, “I see marriage as an equal partnership and as reciprocating love and support and respect,” and then went on to say that her “strong, intimate relationship with God” is what she compartmentalizes as the “husband” part of God. When asked how the “equal partnership” concept works with her relationship with Jesus as a bridegroom, she said:

Well, of course I don’t see myself as equal to Jesus! (laughs). But, I do, it does transfer in that I feel, there might be a close to equal desire for each other at certain points, I mean as close as it can be. I mean, it’s God! So, it’s hard to compare God with the natural. Um, say the question again. I think I lost it.

Crystal, unlike Jacquie and Sharon, continued to struggle with the incongruence between the two relationships. When the question was repeated, “You view marriage as

partnership and your natural relationship as a partnership. And so, how does that work with you and Jesus as a groom?” Crystal continued to grapple with the metaphor in an effort to make meaning of how it might apply. She said:

Well, also there are certain things that I feel, I know that God wants what is best for me, and I know that I want to please God and to worship God. That’s interesting! I’ve never thought of that before because, now as I’m saying that, if I was saying that about my natural husband, I’d be mad! (Chuckles) If he wanted me to just live to please him and worship him, but...(laughs). Yeah, because, you know, we’re never, we’re not equals with God. We’re not. That’s just the way it is. So I don’t know how that translates. I guess I didn’t. I never really have considered that.

It is clear that the God as husband metaphor is meaningful to her and her relationship to her husband, but it is also clear there are very significant differences between the two. Perhaps it has worked for her because she has never considered it in this way. None of the participants who brought up the metaphor’s limitation had found a tidy way to reconcile the fact that they relate to their husbands in a more egalitarian way but do not think of themselves as equal to Jesus as a husband. They all have a level of commitment to the metaphor and an interest in making meaning of their own marriages through its lens: They all seem able to do so, despite the incongruence.

It is awkward to think of husband-Jesus as a lover. Participants encountered some awkwardness when faced with thinking of Jesus as lover through the sexual facet of the metaphor. Those who believe that it is a valuable lens through which to see Jesus still showed signs of embarrassment by laughing, averting their eyes, and searching for the right words to describe their thoughts, feelings, and discomforts. Several acknowledged some scriptural support for the metaphor but expressed subtle disapproval or misgivings about it. Previous descriptions of Jesus as tender and intimate

lover and Jesus as passionate lover show that some people were willing to approach sexuality. Still, this was the one metaphor that participants went out of their way to cite as problematic for them. One of the survey questions asked if there is any family role participants have trouble seeing God in, and four participants said the husband role, three of them claiming that this is because of the sexual implications. The men, all of whom have a public heterosexual orientation (I have no knowledge beyond their public orientation), were faced with the additional discomfort of thinking of themselves in the feminine role of bride or as being in an intimate relationship with Jesus, a man.

The survey in its original form did not directly ask about Jesus as a lover, only about if participants related to Jesus in a husband role. Questions about men's experience relating as a bride were added because of two things: 1) the survey results indicated that gender was a significant predictor of whether participants think of Jesus in the husband role and 2) the first two men interviewed brought it up in some way. Female participants also showed more intense reactions to Jesus as lover than was expected. This data resulted in more attentiveness around this issue and follow-up when there seemed to be something more to explore. Here are the things participants said are hard about thinking of Jesus as a lover.

Jacquie, who thinks of Jesus more as a companionate partner, did not make any objection to thinking of Jesus as a lover, but talked about this image being difficult for her when she said:

I think husband, in the sense of lover is the most difficult. Yeah, and when I hear sermons on the language in Song of Solomon being, you know, really intimate, or they'll say "Well this word is the Greek word of when we come together and at this point, um, God was saying it about the intimacy." I get a little (laughs), O.K, that's difficult for me - the close intimacy of lover I do have problems,

difficulty with. And I think that's just because it's, I don't know, I can't get over (laughs) these ideas. (more laughter) I mean, that's just really close!

Valerie also had trouble thinking of Jesus through a sexual lens, so much so that she found more innocuous words to use rather than “lover” or “sexual.” She had difficulty imagining Jesus as a husband primarily because of her struggle in her own marital relationship, but also added, “ And I can't imagine the romantic side of, you know, thinking of Jesus as a husband. That's totally (trails off).” It is impossible to say what she was thinking when she trailed off, but her tone and dismissive wave of the hand suggested that this is too difficult or unacceptable to think about. Lynn also suggested that Jesus through a sexual lens is not acceptable to consider, but, as she considered her own experience, she wavered on whether it is not viable for her or whether it is improper for all. This quote came after the formal interview was over, and she was asked if there was anything she wanted to add:

L: Well, this may be too much information, but I have to tell you, my first marriage was based on lust. (laughs) And I'm not sure what my second one was based on, but sex has always been my downfall. I mean it has always been a *very* important part of my life and a *very* controlling part of my life. And has consistently gotten me into trouble (laughs) – where I didn't want to be, but, you know, I went willingly. And that's probably part of the reason I have a total avoidance of thinking of the groom role much at all. Because to me sex and marriage are, you know, just like that [holds up crossed fingers], and I cannot even conceive of a marriage without it, so...

I: Mm-hm. So they're very closely connected, and it also sounds like, often, sexuality didn't work in your favor.

L: (laughs) That's exactly right.

I: O.K. Would it be fair to say then, that there's a possibility of seeing God as a groom in some kinds of sexual metaphors -you just don't do it - or that it really shouldn't be thought of at all?

L: I don't think it should be approached. At least I can't approach it because it's (changes voice to a high "lecturing" tone) it's just too worldly to think of!

Leah also said she does not approach Jesus in the intimate way that a wife might and added that she is aware of the "Jesus is my boyfriend" movement but does not ascribe to this view. She brought up popular Christian music with lyrics that resemble love songs, sung by worshippers about Jesus. Leah did not resonate with these songs, something she shares in common with Jacob. Although Jacob did not express problems with Jesus as a lover, he did talk about the "feminization" of Christian worship music that sounds like love songs. He made the point that these romantic sounding lyrics are not objectionable to him but that he believes they are more appealing to women than men. His concern is that there are fewer things in church that men can relate to and that churches should try to include more anthems and other songs with masculine metaphors and themes. This fits with Jacob's view that the metaphor of Jesus as lover is probably more accessible to women than to men.

John also talked about the inaccessibility of the lover metaphor for him. This inaccessibility is partly due to gender identity as John described here:

I have not, in my mind ever, like had a wedding dress on (laughter) and, (pause) O.K., this is really interesting, because the extent to where I've actually located myself in the role of someone in the church [bride], or someone, as a human personally being pursued, it's been much more "headsly." Talking about, as if, as if I'm just sort of an objective observer between what's happening, between that deity and those humans over there.

Although John shares with Jacob the experience of being less able to access the image of Jesus as lover, John clearly stated that this is likely due to gender socialization when he said:

So, there's a point at which the metaphor stops for me. Whereas there's no hooks for me to be in that position mentally, emotionally. And I think maybe for a woman it would be very easy, growing up in America, to have a whole different realm of imagination there. It could go very much deeper into the metaphor than I, and I think natural is not the right word, but easier to go with the flow of the story, what experiences are available to you to draw from.

Josiah and Terrence showed an interest in relating to Jesus through the husband metaphor, but both expressed that the sex difference poses some problems. Josiah did provide vivid descriptions of Jesus as lover, as cited under those themes, but when asked how he relates to Jesus most at this point in his life, he says, "I guess it would be more towards the, uh, husband-wife relationship. Uh, it's a little strange with the, uh, sex difference. I'm the wife (smiles), but that is the reality of the metaphor." Terrence gave more description of his experience of trying to relate to Jesus in this way and says:

T: Oh, it's different. You know, I think it's, for me, it's a little bit almost like a turmoil, because you have your theological statements, and you have your physical sensations, and it's hard to see that. For a while I just had to just accept it, but I'd say recently I'm starting to see that's the whole reason for creation. (laughs) So, I'm kind of giving in to that, that he will become like a husband to his bride, me being a part of the bride. Somehow, I can't put God in a box there. Uhh, I'm yielding to it and that's what kind of leads me to "O.K." But at first you just go, but it says here "the bride," so we just try to learn that. It just doesn't mix with the physical mind, but Paul says you've got to have the mind of Christ so I want to have that mind of Christ.

I: So there's some awkwardness about it.

T: A little bit. You know, probably unbelief, or immaturity, or carnality. Uhh, I don't want to be like that. I want to be a person that understands it. So, all we have to do is ask. I'm glad you brought it up! I'll start asking more.

I: Do you ever approach God as, God as a husband?

T: I haven't yet, to be honest with you.

Terrence is a person with very fundamentalist beliefs and a literal interpretation of the Bible, as is Josiah. Both are committed to applying the metaphor to their lives, which Josiah has done to a large extent and Terrence hopes to do. Terrence articulated well the disconnection between theology and his own physical and mental resistance to being a bride. He saw this as a weakness to overcome.

While the challenges to relating to Jesus as a lover were shared across many participants, the accompanying meanings of this challenge were quite diverse. Some seemed ambivalent to the fact that they do not relate to Jesus in this way. Some appeared offended that it was being discussed. Others showed a strong interest in making changes in themselves so as to be more open to experiencing Jesus through the lens of intimacy and sexuality.

Despite any limitations to the metaphor of Jesus as husband, many participants described how their marital relationships interact with their experience of Jesus as a husband and vice versa. These descriptions are captured in the following set of themes.

Thinking of Jesus as husband changes (or should change) how I think about marriage. Many participants (nine of eleven) explicitly expressed the belief that thinking of Jesus as a husband ought to impact the marital relationship. Some of them did not claim that it impacts their marriages significantly either because it is not a potent image for them or because of their human weaknesses. Others described ways that they try to apply it; a few provided detailed accounts of how their marriages are impacted by thinking within the Jesus as husband metaphor. This section begins with the more general descriptions of how the Jesus as husband metaphor can or should impact the

marriage relationship and moves progressively into the richer accounts of how participants perceive this happening.

Josiah and Leah, both never married, hold ideals for the marriage relationship and roles based on the structure of Christ as head of the church and on those characteristics of the Christ-groom and church-bride described in the scripture. Each expressed that the husband should lead the family and possess such characteristics as humility, selflessness, and honorable conduct toward the wife (all perceived as being characteristics of Christ in relation to the bride). They also concurred that the wife should respond to her husband according to how the church should respond to Christ – with submission, support, and encouragement. As was previously discussed, Josiah did not express concerns about the viability of this application while Leah referred to her mother’s unhappy experience of following this model and said that she is unsure how it will work in practice. Macy, also never married, talked about marital ideals implied in the Jesus as husband metaphor. But, she expressed a more egalitarian view of marriage and draws from the metaphor by experiencing Jesus as husband more than from traits ascribed to Jesus and the church-bride in scripture than the structure of the relationship. She said that God helps her grow by coming down to her level and said that she wants her and her future husband to be concerned about each other’s growth and their couple relationship, not just about themselves. She overcomes the conflict of God coming down to her level and her egalitarian view by describing God as seeming close and compatible in relation to her, not surpassing her trying to help her. She concluded that couples, as they model Christ as a husband, should be “just kind of moving forward, helping together.”

Jacob and Terrence both ascribe to the traditional family model described by Josiah and Leah. They also expressed difficulty accessing the Jesus as husband image. Even though their image of Jesus as husband lacks potency, they each expressed how it can be applied to their marital relationships. Jacob said that thinking of the kind of husband Jesus is might cause him to stop and wonder if he is showing his wife the kind of love and respect that he should. He continued that he might think about how he needs to love his wife sacrificially and appreciate her various gifts just as Christ appreciates the many diverse gifts within the “body of Christ” or church-bride. Although he explained some specific things that would make him a better husband, he did not give any accounts of how this actually happens, but added, perhaps in way of explanation, that the image is not potent.

Terrence was similar to Jacob in his limited access to the Jesus as husband metaphor and his belief that he could be a better husband by seeing his marriage through this lens. Unlike Jacob, Terrence was very descriptive and fervent about how he needs to incorporate this into his personal growth and marriage relationship. When asked how, if at all, the image of Jesus as bridegroom impacts how he is a husband, Terrence said:

I’m working on it. (laughs) Umm, I have to ask myself, “do I love my wife the way Christ loves the church?” ...I would say that’s an area where Jesus gave his all for, and that I need to go a lot more, too. So there’s a, I would say a vast difference there between us. Although, just as he’s [Jesus] helped me with my children, I do believe he can help me with her. ...We actually had a child before I was called. That plays a big part in this whole thing, but he works all things out for the good, so he’s gonna do that. I want to give my heart to love her the way Christ loves the church. ...Jesus gave everything in that.

Shortly after Terrence gave an example of how he might check himself to see if he is considering his wife as he should, saying, “Do I just talk as one person to others? Do I talk as ‘us’, do I mention her in emails as us, or am I just ‘me, me, me?’ So that kind of honor, yeah, that’s a good word. You know, he died for her.” Terrence took the imagery of Jesus dying for the church a step further by asking himself if he is dying for his wife on a daily basis – a scriptural metaphor for “crucifying the flesh” or the person’s self-centered personal desires so that the spiritual and altruistic motivations can “live” and function in the relationship.

Some women also referenced this metaphor as helping to demonstrate how they can be better wives. When Sharon was asked how she might be different, thinking of Jesus as a husband, she responded, “Probably valuing the relationship a lot more. Instead of taking it for granted, in the daily-ness and busy-ness of life. It’s easy to take for granted the people you’re around.” When asked how thinking about the metaphor would help her not take the relationship for granted, she says:

That’s a good picture. That’s a good picture to remember in the days and weeks ahead. Probably when there’s hard times that come, but I’m thinking of when there’s disagreement. We all disagree. Nobody gets along with everyone perfectly and when things come up that we just see differently. Probably picturing it that way would probably help.

It was at this point that she described an ideal wife as “ready and willing” but then qualified that she should be careful to not be a doormat, which would not happen with Jesus as husband. Valerie said that she only thinks of this metaphor on rare occasions and usually, like Sharon, during the tough times. When asked if thinking of the church as a collective bride (as she describes thinking of it) impacts her as a wife, she says, “to a degree, because I have definitely thought of about, um, (sigh) the

importance of that relationship and the love and adoration and respect, but not on a daily, not even on an annual basis now.” Perhaps because she described her marriage as being challenging, she said that she is more attuned to the metaphor when her husband is not acting how she thinks he should, saying, “especially like with, if something comes up in the marriage I’ll be more keyed into it at that time. He needs to treat me like Jesus treated the church and the whole, yeah (chuckles).” The interviewer asked if the metaphor influences who has authority or power in the home and who should be doing what, to which she responded, after a pause:

Um, yes? (chuckles) Um, I’m not sure if it’s specifically or only through marriage, but, um, I do believe that, you know, if there’s a, if we have to make a decision and we can’t come to an agreement on it as a family or as a couple, that I do submit to my husband’s final say, with kicking and fighting (chuckles). And we eventually come to that point, because someone has to make the decision. So, yeah, I do think that the authority, the final authority I try to keep that submitted.

This relates to the theme “Jesus is perfect, but husbands are not.” While many participants use the metaphor of Jesus as husband to structure marital relationships, it seems important that the marital partners also exhibit the qualities that correspond to the Christ-husband and church-bride. Both Valerie and Sharon talked about this problem: A husband who does not exhibit these qualities makes it very difficult to structure the relationship within the metaphor. There is a lot to be considered between Valerie’s words. She very rarely thinks of the qualities of the bride anymore – love, adoration, and respect – but she does occasionally think of the qualities of the groom: when her husband is not exhibiting them. She chuckles wryly when she talks about her husband’s right to have the final word while she tries to be submissive, though she also refers to

herself as kicking and fighting, again, with a wry chuckle. Reconciling these pieces seems hard for her.

Lynn added some different components to the theme regarding her experience of unconditional love from God and knowledge of the unconditional love of Jesus as a groom. She is the participant who has trouble experiencing Jesus as groom due to the sexual connotations and bad experiences with marriage. Lynn said that she had begun to experience God's love when she was in her second marriage, saying, "I tried. I mean I did at the beginning because I knew, I mean I knew what God's love was, but I was a very immature Christian, and I had, you know I just wasn't strong enough to endure it. So, um (trails off)." When Lynn was asked if the Jesus as husband metaphor would influence what kind of wife she would be if she married again, she said, "Oh, absolutely. I would be a totally different wife than I was (chuckles). Totally different!" Unlike most of the other descriptions, Lynn focused on what she would expect from a marriage partner (as Valerie hinted at) rather than what she would give, perhaps because she was already a giver in her marriages from her point of view. She explained it this way:

For one thing, I mean, again the unconditional love, it just, the biggest difference now is that I deserve to have an equal love that I give. I deserve to *get* an equal love to what I give. And that was never true. They say that in every marriage – somewhere I read this – that there's someone who loves more. You know, if it's cold at night, they're the one who gets up and shuts the window. You know, and I was always that person. I was always, it's of my nature to do things for people. I'm a caregiver. You know, that's within me, and, um, and I deserve that back, and the relationships would evolve, but I never got enough, or felt I got enough of what I felt I was giving, because, then again, it was conditional. If you loved me, you would do that for me because I do it for you all the time, that kind of thing.

Even though Lynn focused on what she would expect from a man in marriage, based on the Jesus as husband metaphor, she also acknowledged that she can learn how to better love a partner, saying, “Yeah, because I deserve to be loved, and I really feel that I was never loved before because people – *none* of us knew how to love.”

Crystal, when asked if this metaphor impacts her as a wife, said, “Well, it definitely influences the kind of wife that you try to be. I guess we would have to ask my husband if it influences the kind of wife that I actually am (laughter)!” While the other participants talked about marital structure, ideal qualities of husbands and wives, and unconditional love, Crystal focused on intimacy. She said that a strong sense of intimacy with God in the husband role transfers over to her relationship with her husband by causing her to desire this level of closeness with her husband. Here is how Crystal described this:

I guess that you could say that it kind of causes me to desire that kind of intimacy in the natural if I’m experiencing it in the spiritual. And so, you know, I might try harder to facilitate that kind of intimacy with my husband when I’m experiencing it in my spiritual life.

She compared her two relationships by describing how each has an ebb and flow of feeling close and, when asked to describe the closest part of this cycle in relation to Jesus as husband, she said:

Well, when I can, when I sense, it’s like my senses are really alerted to God’s presence. I know that God is always with me, but when I’m at the top of that peak, it’s like I can feel him with me all the time. I know I can say something to God anywhere, and he’s right there with me.

She was asked to compare this part of her relationship with Jesus as husband to her relationship with her husband. How does she compare her feeling of closeness and

alertness to God's presence to when things are going well with her husband? She

responded:

Well, obviously we're not together every minute of every day, but when things are going well, sometimes I'll feel like throughout the day, I wonder how Michael is doing? And I know that he is thinking the same thing about me throughout the day, and it's just comforting to know that out of this whole world with billions of people, there's one person that thinks about me at least ten times throughout their work day and wonders how I'm doing. And, because of that, I know that if I need him, I know that he'll answer the phone for one thing, and that he won't be irritated that I called, even if I interrupt something, he won't be irritated. While if we're not at that peak and not as connected, I might think, ah, I don't know if I should call right now. He might be irritated if he's busy. So, I guess in the, that's as close as I might get to feeling that constant presence in the natural sense.

Crystal was able to make concrete comparisons to how she relates to Jesus as husband and her own husband, but she also acknowledged the limitation of the comparison: Jesus as husband can be constantly with her, but her husband cannot. The sense of closeness is comparable, even though the perception of physical proximity or "presence" is different. Aida also compared her relationships very vividly, but her level of marital satisfaction is different than Crystal's, which brings out some new information.

Aida took the metaphor very seriously but had a different approach to applying it. Like Crystal and Lynn, she believes that she learns about relationships via relating to Jesus as husband. This was different from many of the participants who apply the metaphor more cognitively – by replicating the structure of the Christ and church-bride relationship or the ideal qualities of a husband and wife as inferred from Christ and the church. Aida's description was also different from Crystal's and Lynn's because each of them learns from the metaphor by experiencing themselves as a bride in relation to

Jesus and transferring that over to being a wife in relation to a husband. Aida compared herself as an inattentive and dismissive partner to Jesus to her own inattentive and dismissive husband, gaining empathy and grace toward her husband because she is not unlike him as she relates to Jesus.

When asked how relating to God as a bridegroom influences how she tries to relate to her husband she answered in this way:

It should (big smile – both laugh) Um, I know that when I have tried to (cries) initiate intimacy and he pushes me off, or like, “what’s up?” You know? Kind of, uh, I don’t know what’s going on in his mind. I think that we all do need intimacy, and I do want to be conscious of his needs, and at the same time I’m (struggles with tears) that, that kind of vulnerability opens you up to getting hurt (voice breaks).

She continued to talk about putting God off even though God makes efforts and takes risks to be close to her and says, “ if I was treated like I treat God, it would be a slap in the face. ...Which makes me want to be, you know, a better wife, I guess, a better participant in a relationship. And it helps me be patient with Roger, too, because I know he’s going through a lot.” She is going through a lot which results in her being a less than ideal partner in relation to Jesus; she believes this helps her be more understanding toward her husband.

Data from these participants indicate that the concept of Jesus as husband can help to structure relationships and identify ideals for husbands and wives. Relating to Jesus as a husband can provide relationship experiences that offer new ways of relating to marital partners.

My marital relationship impacts how I think about and relate to Jesus. Some participants – like Lynn, Valerie, and Janet – said that their marital relationships project

negative things onto Jesus as a groom. Their marital experiences prevented them from relating to Jesus as a groom in a significant way. Crystal talked about how certain behaviors of her husband that she perceives as negative can be projected onto Jesus and impact how she relates to Jesus as a groom. Aida gave an example of how negative interactions with her husband can prompt her to relate in a better way to Jesus as a husband. There are more descriptions of the Jesus as husband image impacting marriage than vice versa, but Aida and Crystal provide some evidence for a reciprocal influence between their marriages and relating to Jesus as husband. Accounts from Lynn, Valerie, and Janet provide evidence that the experience of marriage can seriously limit or even destroy the possibility of relating to Jesus in this way.

Lynn said that she does relate to Jesus as a groom in a limited way but that her two bad marriages and her memory of her father as a husband make it very hard for her to imagine the husband-Jesus that is described in the Bible, much less to experience it. Once she was able to shift her view of father-God from frightening to caring, she found this image most viable for her, and claims it as her main God image at this time. Janet does not experience Jesus as a husband and processes through this in the interview. She said that her father was not a good example of a husband and her marriage was a disappointment which makes her confused about Jesus in a husband role. Her conclusion is that not thinking of Jesus as a husband keeps Jesus safe from all the negative feelings she has about husbands. Valerie seemed to concur. Husbands are imperfect, and thinking about Jesus as a husband is not only difficult, but laughable.

Others, like Crystal and Aida, do think of Jesus as a husband and can give examples of how their own marital relationships impact how they relate to Jesus in this

way. Crystal talked about how her husband might find some of her concerns insignificant or might be bothered by the pettiness of some of her requests. She thought about times when she had a relatively minor concern that she would like to pray about, but thought:

“...he [Jesus] probably wouldn’t care about that. That’s just a stupid, minor thing. I’ll just take care of it myself.” Yeah, definitely! I know, I do notice a direct, maybe not a direct link between those, but I know they’re connected. And I don’t know why that is, if it’s because, yeah, well, yeah! If I think of God as a husband, it would make sense that those were connected.

Under the last theme, Aida talked about how her inattentiveness to Jesus as husband causes her to empathize better and have more patience with her husband. She continued with how her relationship with her husband influences how she responds back to Jesus as husband. Aida talked about her unfulfilled desires for intimacy in her marriage, and said, “... if I’m desiring more intimacy, to be cherished, than I should be looking for that more in my relationship with God, and, not putting blame, and uh (cries)...so I, I think that’s why I have been seeking or desiring more intimacy with God.” She projects her own hurt and vulnerability with her husband onto Jesus and relates to Jesus’ suffering through her own. This empathic experience of Jesus’ suffering over her inattentiveness inspires her to pray more often and be more consistent with reading her Bible – ways that she shows interest in knowing and communicating with Jesus in relationship.

The last two themes imply parallel relationships between the self and Jesus compared to the self and a spouse. There is another conceptualization of the self, Jesus, and the spouse, and this is that Jesus is the third person in the marriage.

Jesus is the third person in our marriage. Jacquie and Crystal talked about bringing Jesus into their marriages when things are not going well. Jacquie described companionate partner Jesus as being someone that she can get advice from when she thinks she has made a mistake. She does not use this metaphor to structure her relationship or to provide ideas for herself as a wife. Rather, she goes to Jesus, "... when I feel that maybe I screwed up, I'll go to Jesus as my companion. What did I do? Why did I do this?"

Crystal talked about it differently. Similar to Aida, she described going to God as a husband when something is missing in her marriage. Most of her descriptions of her relationship with her husband are positive, but she also added:

On the other hand, I mean, I've had times where things might not be going well with my natural husband, and it's drawn me to God as a husband to try to fill that void. And, as I'm thinking about those times that has happened, it's mostly been if it's been kind of for a long period of time when I've felt not connected to my natural husband, that I just kind of start seeking that from God. Because at times it might feel I don't have the energy to deal with this kind of weak connection from my natural husband, but I know that God is always going to respond the way that I expect him to, because he's just, he's promised me that, that he'll always be there.

This description of triangulating God into the couple relationship prompted the question, "So when that happens, how does that turn out with your natural relationship when you go to God for that role when it's not happening with your natural husband?"

Crystal replied:

Well it always, at least so far has worked out great, because when I do that and turn to God, the annoying way that I was behaving toward my natural husband to suck the intimacy out of him or whatever that might be, it goes away because, when I feel that close connection with God, I'm a more contented person, and I feel at peace. And so, when I stop kind of pursuing my natural husband in that,

you know, dogged way – you need to do this, we need to fix this – and just become peaceful, then he wants to be with me again.

Crystal, who described a pursuing-distancing pattern with her husband, uses Jesus as husband as a way to give her husband some space so that he approaches her again. Presumably, it is safe to pursue Jesus as husband, who does not distance from her or shrink back from her needs for intimacy. This fits with Crystal's descriptions of Jesus as a tender and intimate lover who longs for closeness just as she does.

Discussion

Summary of the Quantitative Study Results

The unexpected results were, perhaps, the most interesting in the quantitative analysis. The first hypothesis – that participants would view God in the roles explicitly expressed in scripture (father and husband) followed by mother (as an extension of the father role) and brother (by extrapolation of the father metaphor) – was supported when looking at the whole sample. Participants most often thought of God as father, followed by husband, then mother, then brother. However, when dividing the sample by gender, this did not hold true for the men who saw God first as father followed by brother, mother, and husband, in that order. This (along with data from the qualitative interviews) led to the addition of the third hypothesis: Gender will predict seeing God as a husband/groom when controlling for age. Both gender and age were significant when predicting seeing God or Jesus as a husband/groom, and gender still predicted seeing God or Jesus as a husband/groom when controlling for age. The two main variables in the second hypothesis: gender and seeing God in the four female family roles (mother,

sister, wife, daughter) were not significantly related when controlling for age, so the full model with the moderating variable of “views of the Bible” was not tested.

Summary of the Qualitative Study Findings

Although the original intent of the study was to recruit and interview Liberal, Mainline, and Conservative Protestants, only one Liberal participant was recruited into the qualitative study and three Mainliners. The Liberal participant did not personify God in the way the other participants did, which resulted in very different kinds of information. She did perceive God as a father and mother, but there was little similarity to human parents as she described more of a God-like “presence” than a metaphorical parent. The Mainliners did provide some data for the study, but their perceptions were also further removed from the more literal personification of God in family roles compared to Conservatives who gave the most experiential and rich personification of God. This resulted in findings that best reflect a Conservative interpretation and experience of God in family metaphors.

The findings from the qualitative study were complex and interrelated across questions and themes. There was a marked difference between how participants describe their conceptual perceptions of God and experiential perceptions of God. Both conceptual and experiential images of God were included in the analysis.

God as a father was quite differentiated into the following three categories: 1) God as a demanding-controlling-distant father, 2) God as a kind-traditional father, and 3) God as a modern-flexible father. God as a demanding-controlling-distant father was described as guilt evoking and fear inspiring. He has extremely high standards, is ready to judge harshly when those standards are not met, and is chronically disappointed in

his children. Participants in relation to this father-God describe trying hard to be good enough to meet his standards. One described giving up. All but one of the participants who saw father-God this way had experienced a modification of this image over time. One of the participants, Jacquie, still experienced God this way, although she expressed that she wishes she could experience God in a more loving and merciful way. This is an excellent example of the difference between concept and experience. Jacquie believes that God is loving and merciful, but she cannot relate to God based on this belief. She relates to and experiences God more like she did her own father. God as a kind, traditional father is unconditionally loving and wise. His primary functions are guiding, disciplining, protecting, and providing. Participants who perceived God in this way go to him when they feel lost or confused, need advice or guidance, if they have a material need, or if they need to feel safe. God as a modern-flexible father can be forgiving or punishing, full of justice or mercy, guiding or letting you make your own decision. The essential point is that he has the best interest of the child in mind and will tailor his parenting to the unique needs of the child. Those needs might change from one person to another or even with the same person, depending on his or her stage of development or situation.

God as mother is much less diverse than God as father. Mother-God is described in very traditional terms of nurturing, supporting, caring, listening, comforting, soothing, reassuring, serving, patient, protective, and emotional. Although mother-God follows descriptions of the traditional mother, she did not turn out to truly be a mother to participants. All of them except one referred to her as “he” and made other masculine references. Participants confided that they do not actually think of God as a mother but

as a father with some mothering characteristics. This leads to the question of whether this is even a distinct category. If participants see God as a kind-traditional father and a traditionally “mothering” father, is that the same as the modern-flexible father who can be instrumental or expressive, harsh or tender, depending on the circumstances? The “mothering” father was left as a distinct category because participants described it in that way. Some even describe going to God for fathering in some situations and for mothering in other situations, but there was not enough clear evidence that this combination of God as a fathering-father and mothering-father is qualitatively the same as those who saw God as a modern-flexible father.

Participants also connected their experiences of their own parents with those of God as a parent. One difference that stood out was in the kind of love and the expression of love from parents. Some participants commented on not feeling very loved by their parents – especially their fathers. They contrasted this to feeling unconditionally loved by God. Some participants made the distinction in how love was expressed. They believed that their fathers loved them, though love was not expressed, and contrasted this to feeling the expressed love of God as a parent.

Relating to God as a parent was also shown to impact how some participants related back to their own parents. Reciprocal influences of natural parents and God as a parent are illuminated in John’s narrative. John had a demanding, controlling, and distant father and related to God as a father that way. Over time, due to a variety of influences, John began to relate to father-God and his natural father in a different way. He expressed certainty that these two changes are related but is unsure of what influenced what. The result was that his experience of feeling forgiven and loved by

God helped him to recognize that he was holding a grudge against his own father. Once he asked his father for forgiveness, he began to recognize in his father some of the kinder, gentler attributes that he had experienced in father-God. These multiple and varied experiences of fatherhood – both natural and spiritual – impact how he fathers his own children.

There are limitations that participants talked about in thinking within the God as parent metaphor. Some participants outright stated that God is God and that the metaphor of God as parent might be useful, but it is inadequate in helping people understand and relate to God. Others express this indirectly in their own struggle to explain God in terms of a parent. They compared God to their own parents and quickly qualified that their parents are imperfect, but God does not make mistakes. The metaphor also becomes limited due to beliefs about gender. Sometimes descriptions of God as a parent most resembled the participants' descriptions of their mothers, but they could not transfer those experiences to a mother-God image. Sometimes they transferred them to a father-God image, but sometimes positive ways of relating to their mother are left out of the God image because they do not or cannot project maternal qualities on a father-God.

Many participants expressed the hope that God as a parent will influence their own parenting. Some gave examples of how it does. There were two ways that this can or does happen, according to participants. The first is that experiencing God as a parent makes them better people which results in them being better parents. The second is that specific experiences of God's parenting have a direct impact on their own parenting. These participants described four ways that God's parenting impacts their own

parenting: 1) providing for needs, 2) showing unconditional love and care, 3) disciplining, and 4) structuring parental roles. Participants connected God's provision for them to how they provide for their own children's needs. Experiencing God's unconditional love and care was very motivating for participants who wished to express this to their own children. Disciplining out of love as opposed to anger and doing it in the best interest of the child was another parenting ideal that participants attribute to experiencing God as a parent. One participant connected God as a father to the family structure – specifically, that the father should be the spiritual leader in the home. She does not think that her husband is taking this role seriously and perceives herself as taking on both the father and mother role. Although she sees God as being a sort of “single parent” with fatherly and motherly characteristics, she does not see this as ideal for her family.

The final theme from the God as a parent category is that becoming parents has changed how some participants think of and experience God. This was not one of the interview questions, but many participants provided insightful descriptions of how becoming parents helped them to see new things about God. These new insights into God included recognizing the more tender attributes of God, being able to finally understand and believe in God's unconditional love, see how adaptable God is in God's treatment of them, and empathy for how God feels when they act in disappointing or pleasing ways. Data on God as a brother was less rich and descriptive and too underdeveloped to create a theme.

God or Jesus in the husband/groom role was full of compelling imagery and tensions. The descriptions were so varied (though they did fit together into themes) that

the very names of the roles had to be changed to reflect the diverse language and images. The words for God or Jesus in these roles are lover, partner, and husband. These terms were used by participants at different times in the interviews, but the researcher took the liberty of using them to label specific themes because each word seemed better suited to some themes than others.

A surprising finding from the data on Jesus in the husband role was that participant descriptions paralleled five of Lee's love languages (1977). One description of lover-Jesus is of a tender and intimate lover characterized by attraction, desire, and a storybook kind of romantic quality. This is an Eros approach to Jesus as lover. The second description of lover-Jesus is similar, except that it takes on a more obsessive quality. Participants see Jesus as relentlessly and obsessively pursuing them with a mad love and passion for them. Unlike the Eros image, this love relationship includes a fear of rejection. Participants suggest that Jesus experiences rejection from them and suffers as a result. One participant expresses her desire for a deeply passionate relationship with her husband and projects her own suffering onto Jesus as a manic lover. In contrast, Jesus is also perceived as a companionate partner. This Storgic love relationship is founded on the stability of constant companionship. Jesus can always be counted on to be there and to express a warm and companionable love. Jesus is also seen as an Agape lover who continually sacrifices and generously gives without asking for anything in return. Even when people fail to respond or reciprocate the love of Jesus, he steadfastly expresses it without a hint of resentment. There are some descriptions of husband-Jesus that are very pragmatic. One participant has specific needs and is attracted to the relationship with husband-Jesus as a way to get those needs provided for. Other

participants talk about how husband-Jesus provides for them and protects them and how the relationship is characterized by exchange of services, although they acknowledge their limitation in reciprocating in a meaningful way.

It is interesting that most of the love styles described are more about how Jesus is a lover, partner, or husband and less about how they are in relationship to Jesus. There is some description of how participants relate to Jesus as a lover, partner, or husband, but most of the descriptions are about the style of love that Jesus has for them. This might be because of the way the question was asked. Participants were asked, "What kind of a husband is Jesus to you." Follow-up questions about how they relate to Jesus in this way were sometimes explored, but the question about Jesus was the primary one.

Participants ran into limitations to the Jesus as husband metaphor. In some ways the limitations are similar to the God as parent metaphor. One is that Jesus is perfect, and husbands are not. This was especially problematic for participants who tried to literally apply the metaphor to their own relationships. As women attempted to respond to their husbands as they do to Jesus, they struggled with it because they believed they could always trust Jesus to know what is best and to have a selfless motivation in asking things of them. They could not be certain of either with human husbands. Sometimes husbands are wrong. Sometimes husbands are thinking of themselves. For some participants, this was a barrier to thinking of Jesus as a husband at all. Other participants think of relationships as equal partnerships which posed a different problem for relating to the metaphor. They do not think of themselves as being equal to Jesus as a husband, but they do think of themselves as equals with their own husbands. The sexual

component of marriage was another barrier for some participants to think of Jesus as a husband. Some women were able to see Jesus through the lens of their sexual relationships with their husbands, but most could not. Some simply could not, although they expressed an interest in being able to. Others were much more closed to even considering thinking of Jesus through the lens of sexuality. Men expressed awkwardness about being cast in the female role of bride. This was a barrier for many men to experience Jesus in this way. Although one participant was able to talk about Jesus as a lover, others expressed an interest in doing so, but were not able to at the time of the interview. The remaining men seemed unconcerned about applying the metaphor in a personal way.

This metaphor shares another similarity with the parent metaphor: participants say that they want their experience of husband-Jesus to impact their marriages and claim that being married impacts how they relate to Jesus in this way. Most participants thought it would be good for their marriages to be impacted by how they relate to Jesus as husband but that the reality might prevent this. They cited a lack of connection with the metaphor or their own weaknesses as reasons that their marriages are not meaningfully impacted by it. Examples some participants describe for how relating to this metaphor impacts their relationships are: valuing the relationship more, giving and receiving unconditional love, creating a desire for more intimacy with the marriage partner, and giving more grace to their marriage partner. Some participants said that their own bad experiences with marriage prevent them from relating to Jesus through the husband metaphor. Others express how their marriages provide a way for them to relate to Jesus through the husband metaphor. One participant talks about developing

empathy for Jesus as a lover through her marriage experience. When her own husband is inattentive to her, she projects her own hurt onto Jesus when she is inattentive to him. This causes her to want to pray and read her Bible more frequently. Another example is how Jesus can compensate for a husband's imperfections. When her husband is disinterested in the small things going on in her life, Crystal is particularly appreciative that she can bring those small things to Jesus as husband because he is always interested in her concerns.

The final theme is "Jesus is the third person in our marriage." Jesus may be seen as a supplement in the marriage relationship. He is someone you can go to when your spouse is not available or not interested in your concern. He is someone who can give relationship advice or provide a context of acceptance and love when things are difficult. In this way, Jesus is like the "secure base" from which participants can explore themselves and their marriage relationships (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Triangulation is generally considered a negative behavior within a "couple relationship" because it prevents the couple from engaging in meaningful confrontations that can bring about positive changes. Participants describe the triangulation of Jesus into their marriages in positive ways and not as a way to avoid communicating with their partners on difficult topics. There may be more to explore within the concept of triangulation – especially with Aida who so desperately seeks intimacy with her husband but talks about trying to find that with Jesus instead because, as she sees it, no single person can fill that need for intimacy.

Study Findings in Light of the Literature

God as gendered in family roles did raise some challenges for participants, but most times when gender seemed like it could pose a problem, participants were able to resolve contradictions in creative ways. Sometimes they were resolved with the simple suggestion that we cannot possibly understand God or God's motivations, so things do not need to fit together perfectly. An example of this is Jacquie talks about the Jesus as husband metaphor and marital roles. She says that there is no point in getting adamant about what is "gray" in the Bible. She and her husband do what works and don't worry about trying to apply the metaphor strictly. Other times the limitation of metaphors was cited as a way to resolve apparent contradictions between beliefs and practice. For example, a woman might say that she cannot and should not relate to her husband as she relates to Jesus because her husband is not perfect like Jesus. She might apply the metaphor more loosely by advocating for mutual sacrifice and consideration. Similarly, a man might feel excused from the awkwardness of applying the metaphor of Jesus as husband because the bride actually refers to the collective church, so it is not necessary for him to try to relate to Jesus in this way. Participants seemed quite able to preserve the literal reference of God as a father while ascribing motherly characteristics to him. Sometimes, when participants were applying a metaphor more literally, they would get stuck with some incongruence. This happened to Crystal who, while comparing Jesus as a husband to her own, says how Jesus expects her worship and adoration. Then she stops abruptly, laughs, and says she would be angry if her husband expected the same. In the end, she doesn't resolve it but simply says that she's never thought of it before, giving the impression that it does not matter very much that she is amenable to Jesus' expectation of worship but not her husband's.

Most of the metaphors described are masculine ones with just a few references to God as a female bird or as having breasts. Still, the interpretations of these masculine metaphors are often flexible and interpreted through the participants' existing gender ideologies. This is not to suggest that gendered metaphors were never interpreted as prescriptive. Aida's struggle with her leadership role and Leah's uncertainty of how the implied hierarchical structure of the Jesus as husband metaphor will work out in her future marriage suggest that gender can and does matter to how some Christians structure their relationships and form their ideals for family roles.

The themes of God as a modern-flexible father or as a father with motherly characteristics show support for Schoenfeld and Mestrovic's (1991) claim that monotheistic religions have incorporated both instrumental and expressive traits into their God images. There were some participants who thought of God as a kind-traditional father and not at all as a mother, which appears to contradict Schoenfeld and Mestrovic's claim, although their claim is not about individuals but about societies. They base their assertion on the assumption that God images are in response to system needs. If we believe that we can consider this concept on an individual level, it would be interesting to examine perceived personal needs and then explore if and how those needs are being projected onto their God image. Wilcox's (2004) concept of soft patriarchy was also supported in the way that many men talk about what it means to be the kind of man God expects them to be. Those who believe in male headship in the home describe it in terms of sacrifice, humility, and consideration which they perceive to be how Christ led the church-bride. Other men, like many of the women, apply the

metaphors more loosely as descriptions of virtues that all should aspire to in their family roles and relationships.

There was a lot of diversity in the sample regarding attitudes about gender and family roles. Specifically among conservatives there were many disparities between public theology (as described in advice manuals or by family gurus such as Dr. Dobson) and practice. Some, like Terrence, did claim a more traditional gender ideology with regard to family and practiced it conscientiously. Leah ascribed to traditional gender ideology in principle but was not sure how it would work in practice. Aida and Valerie also ascribed to it in principle but struggled with the practice because their husbands were not, in their opinions, providing a good image of Christ in their marriages. Participants like Sharon and Jacob loosely ascribed to a complementary view of gender but expressed flexibility in how couples actually work out their roles. Still other participants - like John and Crystal – embrace an egalitarian gender ideology and practice.

Participants talk about how their experiences with their natural parents impact their relationship with God as a parent, providing evidence for both the correspondence and compensation models of attachment (Granqvist, 1998). Some participants directly connect how having such good parents provided a positive context for relating to God as a parent, supporting the correspondence model of attachment. Others provide support for the model by describing how their distant relationships with their own fathers make it hard to have a warm and open relationship with God as a father. The compensation model is also supported in these narratives. Participants, such as Lynn, relate to God as a father in much the way they related to their own fathers. But, over

time, they seek a more close and loving relationship with God that provides what was missing in their relationships with their natural fathers. Many participants describe a shift from relating to God as a distant and emotionally inexpressive father to feeling a sense of trust and intimacy in the relationship. Attachment theory was not one of the theories that guided the study design nor was it a criteria for organizing coded data. Rather, once the data was coded and analyzed, it stood out as relevant to the interpretation of findings.

There is evidence of sanctification throughout the themes – both for God as parent and Jesus as husband. Parents do describe their children in terms of “blessings” and “miracles.” Meredith gives an example of her son, who is not very spiritually expressive, describing his marriage in terms of sanctification. According to Meredith, her son says that he looks at his wife’s face every morning and sees the face of God in his life. This is an example of the more general attribution of divine qualities to natural objects (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). Pargament and Murray-Swank (2005) define sanctification as the perception that something natural is shedding light on the divine realm or that the divine realm is making a mark on the natural world. Both of these are present in this data.

The experience of parenthood is viewed as telling participants something about God’s nature – God adapts to people’s needs, God loves me whether he approves of my behavior or not. Experiences of marriage are also seen as shedding light on what God desires from people, such as intimacy and attentiveness. There is also evidence that participants believe in God marking their family relationships or imbuing them with spiritual significance. Aida’s distress over being the spiritual leader in her family may

be connected to sanctification – the idea that God has placed spiritual favor on the sanctified family structure composed of a spiritual-leading husband and supportive wife. Terrence is another example of being motivated by the idea of sanctification. Because he believes his marriage is an image of Jesus and the church, he is motivated to be humble and sacrificial as Jesus was. Of course, he also is motivated to keep himself and his family within the specific structure that he views as sanctified.

Study Findings in Light of Theory

The results for hypothesis one in the quantitative study demonstrate the hermeneutical interpretations of scripture. The most prominent family role in scripture is father for God and husband for Jesus. Women most frequently thought of God as father and husband, but more men thought of God as a brother and a mother than as a husband. The qualitative interviews further illuminate how heterosexual men's experience does not fit with the scriptural reference of Jesus as a husband. When confronted with this contradiction, men must find a way to accommodate the information that conflicts with their personal experience (heterosexual male) or find a way to reject the information that is responsible for the contradiction (Jesus is a husband). Josiah does find a way to accommodate the Jesus as husband concept, by setting aside the biological sex of Jesus and thinking of how he has related to women in past romantic relationships. Another way Josiah accommodates Jesus as husband is by setting aside the sexual connotations of the relationship and thinking about it in terms of close friendships with other men. Jacob and John make similar accommodations for the information – thinking more in terms of intimate friendship. Terrence wants to find a way to accommodate Jesus as husband, but has not been successful yet. Jacob also

shows a partial rejection of the contradictory information (Jesus as husband) by thinking of the metaphor as being applicable to the church rather than to him personally.

Women and men, who have a schema for sexual relationships, must find a way to work with the information of Jesus as a husband (sexual partner). For some, God and sexuality are not incongruous, so the information (Jesus as sexual partner) adds to their existing sexuality schema. Others think of God and sexuality as incongruous and must decide whether they can alter their sexuality schema enough to accommodate God in some way or if they have to reject the idea of God as a sexual partner.

Tests of the second quantitative hypothesis reveal no relationship between gender and seeing God in female roles. The hypothesis assumes that people will project their experiences of self onto their God images, but, since people relate to father and mothers regardless of their own biological sex, it is possible that they project their relationship experiences onto their God images rather than their experiences of self. The qualitative data show more projection of parental relationship experiences than people's gendered experience of self. For example, no participants say that they think of God in a certain way because that is the way they are. Instead, they say that they think of God in a certain way because that's how their father was to them. The data supported the interpretation of God in a family role in light of participants' experiences in families.

Symbolic Interactionism is useful when looking at the development of relationships over time as is demonstrated by the case of John. John experienced his father as demanding and distant. He acted toward father-God based on this meaning of fatherhood – by constantly striving to meet the perceived demands of father-God so that they could have a close relationship. A new pastor and some friends provided some

alternative meanings of fatherhood for John. He also experienced God as a caring and playful father who “tickled him” and said that, while he might be able to deny a thought, it is hard for him to deny an experience. These contributed to an emerging meaning of fatherhood. Based on these new meanings, John acted differently toward father-God and his own father who responded differently than before (or at least this is how he perceived it). It is important to note, though, how often participants talked about how old meanings for God in family roles do not cease to exist but become less prominent. John says that the old image of father-God is not dead, but it is “de-centered” or “marginalized.” He speaks in the language of Symbolic Interactionism when he says, “And there are days where I respond that way [according to his old meanings] rather than where I really believe. I respond to where I used to believe.”

Study Limitations

The most critical limitation to the quantitative study is the sample which was self-selected. Many biases were introduced into the sample by the way it was recruited. When the first plan for recruitment did not yield enough participants, the recruitment via email lists was initiated. Although this provided the numbers needed for the quantitative analysis, it also lowered the response rate and skewed the demographic characteristics of the sample toward the more educated and more Caucasian. This is likely due, in part, to the email lists that were composed of public directories including Christian colleges and professional organizations that are disproportionately educated and Caucasian. It is not a representative sample, and the results are not generalizable.

Another very interesting threat to the reliability of the quantitative study was revealed in the qualitative interviews. About half of participants in the qualitative

interviews changed their responses, about what roles they see God in, once they were in the interview. The interviewer began by reading their responses from the surveys they took and asking them to verify if those are the roles they perceive God to occupy. About half of the participants either eliminated a role or rearranged the order to indicate that a different role was more primary than the one they had put in the survey. Later in the interviews it was discovered that all of the participants who indicated that they thought of God as a mother changed their response to reflect that they actually see God as a father with some motherly characteristics.

The qualitative study has several limitations. Saturation was not reached, so there are likely more themes to be developed that did not have sufficient justification based on these data. The interviews covered a lot of ground so that, upon analysis of the data, many potentially fruitful areas of inquiry were brought out that need more focused examination. All but one of the participants was Caucasian, and most were middle class. Since family structures, roles, and relationships differ across socio-economic and ethnic groups, important stories and meanings were missed with this sample.

Future Directions

Perhaps one of the most valuable outcomes of this study is how many interesting areas for inquiry that it brought out. Although there is a very solid body of literature on God and attachment, it is almost entirely quantitative, which limits how we can understand the nuances of relationships. It also limits how we can differentiate between attachment theory as it relates to people and how it relates to God. Certainly we cannot assume that God and people are the same as relationship partners, and qualitative descriptions of these relationships are well suited to fleshing out what is similar and

what is different. Longitudinal studies would be especially relevant in studying the correspondence and compensation models since there is some evidence to suggest that people seek to compensate as they relate to God but end up corresponding their previous relationship experiences with how they relate to God. Data from this qualitative study indicate that attachment styles may change via relating to other people and to God, but over a period of time.

There were some surprising findings in this study that warrant further exploration. One of them is the correspondence of relating to Jesus as a lover, partner, or husband to Lee's love styles. The other is further exploration of the God and sex incongruence, how Christians manage this incongruence in their spiritual and sexual lives as well as ways that some Christians perceive them as congruent and mutually enriching.

Fertile ground for inquiry also includes considering if and how God in other monotheistic religions embodies both instrumental and expressive traits and what meanings adherents make of these God-images in relation to family life. Finally, diversifying the sample by ethnicity and socio-economic status will give a broader and richer sense of the ways that God images and family life interconnect.

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