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**Two Become One:**  
Christian Marriage Counseling and Attachment

By  
Kenneth M. Shomo

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2024

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Graduation Date      January 15, 2025

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's practice of attachment-based marriage counseling. Attachment theory has revolutionized marriage counseling through models such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). There is discussion within the literature concerning the compatibility of these models with a Christian worldview, as well as examples of and proposals for integration. This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with nine counselors from various denominations and backgrounds who incorporate their Christian worldview explicitly within their counseling. The interviews focused on gaining data with three research questions: How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's understanding of marriage attachment? How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's process of counseling (including goals, interventions, assignments, and self of the therapist)? How does a counselor with a Christian worldview utilize the Bible in counseling (including specific passages and biblical themes)? The literature review focused on three key areas: Adult attachment and marriage counseling; biblical framework for marriage and attachment; and integrating Christian worldview and attachment-based marriage counseling. This study concluded that there are diverse and dynamic ways the Christian worldview shapes a counselor's approach to attachment-based marriage counseling. They use a range of biblical themes and passages. They find the work deeply personal, but feel resources are limited. Christian counselors as well as pastors have an opportunity to deepen their reflection on the biblical framework for marriage attachment, related themes, and specific biblical passages. The field can benefit from additional research and resources in these areas.

To Cheryl, who has loved me and learned with me for 23 years. I've benefited every day from your wisdom and insight, and I've learned how true it is that "two become one" as we encourage and uphold each other through each season of life together.

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him.” ... Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

— Genesis 2:18, 24-25, English  
Standard Version

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After serving in various ministry and pastoral roles for over 25 years, God directed me toward pastoral counseling. After some remarkable coincidences, I found myself working under the guidance of Cron Gibson at HopeWell Equipping and Counseling Center in Virginia Beach. I'm indebted to Cron and Elizabeth Gibson for making a space for me at HopeWell, and I'm especially thankful for their friendship and mentoring over many years. I'm thankful for the team of counselors I serve alongside to "bring the hope of Jesus to hurt and wounded people in partnership with the local church."

When I chose to pursue a Doctor of Ministry at Covenant Theological Seminary, where I had received a Master of Divinity in 2003, I was the only student who enrolled in a class on Emotionally Focused Therapy. This had to be switched to an independent study, yet it wasn't independent at all. Brad Werner, an EFT supervisor in St. Louis, graciously invested time in me. Conversations with eight EFT therapists as part of this study were pivotal, especially my conversation with Emily Brown Levis who encouraged me to go further down the path of EFT. Through EFT Tampa Bay, and then through the Washington-Baltimore Center for EFT, I completed an Externship and Core Skills I-IV.

For this research project, I was blessed to interview nine more counselors. Each brought something unique to the discussion. Far from seeing these interviews as merely a requirement of research, I cherish the gift I received from each counselor who kindly invested their time. In my mind, there are three unexpected blessings of providence that have informed my research and forever reshaped my ministry: the opportunity to serve at HopeWell, the direction of my studies at Covenant Seminary, and the selection of

participants for this qualitative research. Perhaps it looks like an ordinary process to the outsider, but God's grace and guidance was evident in each step.

The faculty at Covenant Seminary is remarkable. In terms of the present study, I want to highlight Dan Doriani's class on the theology of the body and Brad Matthews' oversight of my studies on biblical anthropology. These studies gave me a context for looking at human emotions and relationality with a biblical lens. Special thanks to Tasha Chapman and Paul Loosemore, who gave direct guidance to the present research, to Jeremy Ruckstaetter who served as a reader, and to Joel Hathaway who directs the D.Min. program: I could not have asked for better, or more gracious, leadership.

As I completed this work at Covenant Seminary, coupled with EFT training, I was strongly supported by friends and family. I am deeply thankful for friends from Covenant Presbyterian Church in New Jersey, New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Virginia Beach, Church of the Messiah in Chesapeake, VA, and lifelong friends who invested to make this journey a reality.

Finally, I want to thank those who are closest to me on this journey: my wife, Cheryl, who knows me better than I know myself (we agree on this). My father-in-law, Jim, who is a source of steady encouragement and insight. My mother, Nancy, who has prayed for me throughout my life. My sisters, brother, and extended family—a remarkably varied, talented, and entertaining bunch. Pastor Marty and Wendy O'Rourke, examples of God's love to me and my family, along with Pastor Nile Gomez, Doris Gomez, Jim Flynn, and the our entire community at Church of the Messiah. Finally, my good friends such as Blair, Jeff, and Brent, who listen to and laugh with me when I'm

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Standing before a gathering of Christian counselors, renowned researcher, author, and therapist Sue Johnson made a promising statement. “The new science of adult love tells us that attachment to a lifelong partner and the wisdom of the Christian faith, which is all about attachment to God, sing the same song,” she declared. “We are created for connection.”<sup>1</sup> Johnson pioneered Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)—an evidence-based couple’s therapy based on attachment theory and practiced by a growing field of therapists worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Johnson was expressing her confidence in the compatibility between Christian teaching and the current research on adult attachment—what she deemed the “new science of love.” For counselors wishing to integrate their Christian faith with respected mainstream psychology, Johnson’s remarks confirmed that these could indeed be harmonized—could sing “the same song.”

This promise provokes inquiry. Exactly how might Christian faith and attachment theory be harmonized, particularly in the arena of marriage counseling? Do they consistently “sing the same song,” or are there areas of discord? In practice, how might a counselor with a Christian worldview faithfully incorporate the insights of attachment theory to serve couples in distress?

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Johnson, “Created for Connection: Plenary by Sue Johnson,” American Association for Christian Counselors World Conference, Opryland TN, January 31, 2018, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVhcbUqxKYI>.

<sup>2</sup> The International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (website), accessed August 2024, <http://iceeft.com>.

Johnson, who passed away in April 2024, did not present herself as a Christian. In the conference talk referenced above she clarified that she is “spiritual but not religious,” although she attended a Roman Catholic elementary and high school. She partnered with a Christian friend and pastor, Kenneth Sanderfer, to adapt her book *Hold Me Tight* for a Christian readership.<sup>3</sup> In the revised book, entitled *Created for Connection*, she stated that her religious views were unsettled and she did not identify as a Christian. She instead deemed the attachment bond itself to be sacred, apart from specific Christian convictions.<sup>4</sup> Yet Johnson saw the resonance between attachment theory and the Christian tradition and desired to serve those who care deeply about their faith.<sup>5</sup>

Johnson and Sanderfer were not alone in their assessment of the compatibility of attachment theory with Christian faith. Author and EFT therapist Sharon May integrated her Christian faith into the counseling model developed by Johnson.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Tim Clinton, president and CEO of the American Association of Christian Counselors, and Dr. Gary Sibcy, a Christian family counselor and professor at Liberty University, utilized attachment theory to help Christians across the spectrum of relationships. Their book is a primer on attachment but also incorporates biblical references and a chapter on

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<sup>3</sup> Susan M. Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Hachette, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Susan M. Johnson with Kenneth Sanderfer, *Created for Connection: The “Hold Me Tight” Guide for Christian Couples: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, rev. ed. (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2016), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson and Sanderfer, *Created for Connection*, pp.7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Archibald D. Hart and Sharon May, *Safe Haven Marriage: A Marriage You Can Come Home To* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

attachment to God.<sup>7</sup> Whether and how “the new science of adult love” harmonizes with a Christian worldview deserves examination. Just what is the new science of attachment, specifically as it is applied to marriage relationships?

### *Marriage and Attachment: A Revolutionary Song?*

The “new science of adult love” is a reference to attachment theory as applied to romantic relationships. This line of research indicates that a romantic bond, such as in marriage, is similar in many ways to the attachment bond children experience with their parents. Across the span of one’s lifetime, there is a need for emotional safety and security found within a bonded relationship.<sup>8</sup> This sense of safety and security is what predicts relational satisfaction and longevity. As Johnson summarized:

Forget about learning how to argue better, analyzing your early childhood, making grand romantic gestures, or experimenting with new sexual positions. Instead, recognize and admit that you are emotionally attached to and dependent on your partner in much the same way that a child is on a parent for nurturing, soothing, and protection.<sup>9</sup>

Many who endorse this attachment model pronounce it revolutionary for adult relationships. Johnson contends that this is perhaps the first time that love has been viewed in scientific terms at all.<sup>10</sup> She also argues that “the attachment view of love was,

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Clinton and Gary Sibcy, *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Susan M. Johnson, *Love Sense: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 40. Referencing John Bowlby, the pioneer of attachment theory, Johnson writes: “Many of us still believe that adolescence ends such dependence [on attachment figures]. Bowlby did not. He maintained that the need to be close to a few precious others, to attach, persists through life and is the force that shapes our adult love relationships.”

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 16-17.

and perhaps still is, radically out of line with our culture's established social and psychological ideas of adulthood: that maturity means being independent and self-sufficient."<sup>11</sup> Marriage counselors and authors Milan and Kay Yerkovich agree that attachment science has revolutionized marriage counseling. They state that the work of attachment researchers, psychologists, and authors "has changed lives—including ours—by transforming relationships and revolutionizing our approach to life and love."<sup>12</sup>

### *Harmony or Disharmony?*

With attachment research "revolutionizing" marriage counseling, an important question for Christian counselors is the compatibility between a Christian worldview and attachment-based marriage counseling. Johnson's statement, cited at the beginning of this chapter, expressed confident optimism in the compatibility between attachment science and Christianity. Her book with co-author Ken Sanderfer, *Created for Connection*, is an example of seeking harmony between attachment theory and the Christian faith.

Others have claimed to "hear" this harmony as well. "It's clear, right from the beginning of the Bible, that God created us to be attached to others," write Clinton and Sibcy in *Attachments*. "But maintaining and nurturing those attachments, those relationships—ah, that's the tricky thing."<sup>13</sup> In their book, they integrate Christian teaching with attachment science across the spectrum of relationships in order to accomplish this "tricky thing." They address marriage specifically in chapter 10, written

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Milan Yerkovich and Kay Yerkovich, *How We Love: Discover Your Love Style, Enhance Your Marriage*, rev. ed. (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2017), 322.

<sup>13</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 6.

with EFT therapist Sharon May. Johnson's EFT model is incorporated substantially, and meanwhile Christian theology provides a basis for hope: "No marriage is beyond God's healing hand," they state.<sup>14</sup> Christian teaching is also incorporated to motivate acceptance, grace and forgiveness.<sup>15</sup> Prayer is recognized as a way couples express vulnerability and strengthen their attachment bond.<sup>16</sup>

Psychologist Mark D. Maxwell proposed a "relationship system" that describes the multiple attachment relationships for a Christian couple. In this model, both husband and wife experience attachment with each other; with God individually; and with God together. Based on interviews with couples who reported secure marriage and spiritual connection, Maxwell and fellow researchers described practices that mutually reinforce the spiritual and marital attachment bonds. The researchers described their findings as foundational for further research; in particular, research concerning therapy interventions and application to different forms of insecure attachment.<sup>17</sup>

Milan and Kate Yerkovich created another attachment-based model for couples. The Yerkovichs' book, *How We Love*, along with website and resources of the same name, use attachment theory to evaluate marriage health and conflict patterns. Like EFT, their model seeks to help couples understand the attachment needs hidden beneath differing conflict strategies; these different strategies are termed "love styles" and are

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<sup>14</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 211.

<sup>15</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 227.

<sup>16</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 229.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Maxwell, Sean D. Davis, Marianne M. Miller, and Scott R. Woolley, "Covenant Attachment: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Christian Couples and God," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 46, no. 1 (January 2020).



based on standard attachment categories.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately these “love styles” describe how individuals address conflict within marriage, such as pleasing or controlling, based on childhood experience. The proposal for healing and sustaining marital health is termed the “comfort circle” and—again, reminiscent of EFT—has emotional attunement as its goal. The *How We Love* materials contain endorsements by Christian psychologists, occasional biblical references, and case studies that fit more comfortably within a Christian subculture; overall, the integration with Christian teaching is rarely explicit.

While these authors have found harmony between attachment and Christian counseling, others have raised concerns. Winston Smith, Christian counselor and instructor with Christian Counseling & Education Foundation (CCEF), describes a “fundamentally godless view of personhood” in mainstream attachment models. These models emphasize parent-child relationships while leaving one’s relationship to God unaddressed, he argues.<sup>19</sup> This is backwards, he contends: “Scripture doesn’t describe the human condition as emerging out of environmental factors that ultimately shape our disposition toward God. Quite the opposite.”<sup>20</sup> Another criticism Smith presents is that attachment theory “permits no doctrine of sin.”<sup>21</sup> This results, Smith believes, in a focus on meeting unchallenged “felt needs” and tolerates self-centered motivations within relationships.<sup>22</sup> This ultimately means that the gospel gets overshadowed: “Redemption,

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<sup>18</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 320-322.

<sup>19</sup> Winston T. Smith, review of *Attachments: Why You Act, Feel, and Love the Way You Do* by Tim Clinton and Gary Sibcy, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Spring 2004), 69.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 70-71.

grace, and the gospel just don't map on as a natural solution to 'attachment injuries.' The gospel is a love that addresses our violations of love; attachment injuries are simply the everyday experience of mammals."<sup>23</sup>

The examples above reveal that some hear harmony while others experience dissonance. Those who can move this conversation forward best are practitioners: those who can provide examples of best practice from their own experience in the counseling room. In this case, counselors whose Christian worldview has shaped their understanding of both attachment and marriage counseling.

### **Purpose Statement**

Attachment theory has revolutionized our understanding of adult relationships and, by extension, the practice of marriage counseling. Some have viewed attachment theory as compatible with a Christian worldview concerning marriage and relationships. Yet others have expressed concerns regarding whether models such as EFT are truly compatible with the Christian worldview. A needed contribution to this discussion is to learn from the experience of counselors whose Christian beliefs shape their understanding of attachment theory and marriage counseling. In other words, how does a Christian worldview actually affect counseling "in the room"? Are there explanations, interventions, or assignments that are distinctly Christian? How, when, and why is the Bible employed? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's practice of attachment-based marriage counseling.

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 72.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's understanding of marriage attachment?
2. How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's process of counseling?
  - a. Goals
  - b. Interventions
  - c. Assignments
  - d. Self of the Therapist
3. How does a counselor with a Christian worldview utilize the Bible in counseling?
  - a. Specific passages
  - b. Biblical themes

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has significance for counselors who wish to incorporate their Christian worldview into their counseling practices. While a sampling of resources are available which address this topic, there remains a gap in the literature concerning how Christian theology shapes or challenges specific aspects of the model. For example, there are limited resources concerning how a couple's attachment to God—which is a developing area of study—is best addressed within the practice of marriage counseling. There is also a gap concerning a distinctly Christian theology of emotions applied to this model, which gives such prominence to a couple's emotional connection. A final example concerns gender differences. Even considering the differing viewpoints among Christians, gender

differences remain embedded in key biblical texts concerning marriage and yet this is not addressed within mainstream attachment models such as EFT.

This study has significance for pastors as well. As noted in the introduction, Sue Johnson—who does not identify as a Christian—recognized pastors as cobelligerents in the promotion of marital health. Even those who do limited counseling will benefit from understanding how a Christian worldview informs attachment theory within marriage, as preaching and teaching often address the marriage relationship. This study will also provide discernment for pastors who recommend counselors, work with couples alongside counselors, or promote specific resources to couples.

For those teaching in Christian colleges or seminaries, the insights gained from this enquiry may inform classroom instruction. There is application for studies related to marriage counseling practices; Christian integration within the field of psychology; and practical theology. This study may also provoke new areas of academic inquiry and future qualitative studies.

Ultimately, those who seek Christian counseling for their marriage struggles will be served by this study. By examining the best practices of counselors who integrate Christian theology with attachment-based marriage counseling, counselors will gain insight to serve Christian couples with an array of spiritual and psychological interventions. Whether in the clinic, church, or academy, those devoted to marital health ultimately wish to uphold two individuals in distress. The task of most faithfully serving such couples is the reason this research was undertaken.

## Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

- *Attachment theory* refers to a field of psychology that understands a person's well-being to be significantly influenced by secure, bonded relationships throughout one's lifetime.
- *Attachment-based marriage counseling* refers to counseling applies the psychological insights of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships.
- *Christian faith* and *Christian worldview* are synonymous terms in this study. These refer to the Christian beliefs and practices that shape one's perspective, and particularly one's perspective on counseling goals and processes.
- *EFT* refers to Emotionally Focused Therapy.
- *ICEEFT* refers to the International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to explore how counselors, who are trained in attachment theory, incorporate a Christian worldview in their marriage counseling. This literature review will survey relevant research and data within three major divisions. A review of literature concerning adult attachment, specifically as it applies to marriage counseling, is provided first. This includes literature directed toward a mainstream audience, and also literature intended for a specifically Christian audience. A review of biblical and theological concepts follows which is organized according to major biblical themes found in present literature. The biblical portrayal of emotions is reviewed as this is closely associated with attachment models of marriage counseling. Third, a review of literature concerning the integration of Christian theology with attachment theory is provided. This incorporates a survey of five different approaches to integration, and divides the literature accordingly.

### **Adult Attachment and Marriage Counseling**

Within the field of psychology, attachment theory understands a person's well-being to be significantly influenced by secure, bonded relationships throughout one's lifetime. Since the concept was first proposed by psychologist John Bowlby in the 1950s, attachment has become an important lens for understanding infant and childhood development. Yet research into attachment has also expanded to include adult relationships. This includes the *effects* of childhood attachment patterns in adult life and

also the *principles* of attachment enacted in adult relationships. This section will outline the foundational concepts of attachment theory, specifically as applied to adult attachment, and then explore the important subcategories of neuroscience and emotion. How this is applied across several marriage counseling modalities will then be described.

### *Attachment Theory: Foundational Categories*

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines attachment theory as that which postulates “an evolutionary advantageous need...to form close emotional bonds with significant others: specifically, a need for the young to maintain close proximity to and form bonds with their caregivers.”<sup>24</sup> The pioneer of attachment theory was British psychoanalyst and researcher John Bowlby, whose career spanned five decades before his death in 1990. Mary Ainsworth, who soon collaborated with Bowlby, researched early childhood development and expanded the categories of attachment theory. Together, Bowlby and Ainsworth published foundational works on attachment in the years spanning 1957 to 1988.<sup>25</sup>

At first, the attachment model was researched primarily with reference to children and their mothers.<sup>26</sup> A particular consideration was the behaviors associated with children who experienced, or did not experience, safety and security in this parent-child

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<sup>24</sup> American Psychological Association, “Attachment Theory,” accessed June 27, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/attachment-theory>.

<sup>25</sup> Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2007), 7-9.

<sup>26</sup> Annie Chen, *The Attachment Theory Workbook: Powerful Tools to Promote Understanding, Increase Stability, and Build Lasting Relationships* (Naperville, IL: Callisto Publishing, 2019), 5.

bond.<sup>27</sup> When experienced in childhood, physical and emotional safety and security—*secure attachment*, as it was termed—was associated with a cascade of other positive life-long results.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, *insecure attachment* was associated with adverse outcomes to an individual’s adult relationships and well-being.

Psychologists have recognized different relational patterns in both children and adults based on whether they experienced secure or insecure attachment in childhood. These patterns are popularly termed “attachment styles” and build in particular on Mary Ainsworth’s research.<sup>29</sup> One common way to organize these attachment styles is into four categories. One category is *secure attachment* and three others are forms of insecure attachment: *anxious*, *avoidant*, and *fearful-avoidant* (or *disorganized*).<sup>30</sup>

*Secure attachment* describes a bond developed with parents who were available, responsive, and emotionally attuned.<sup>31</sup> Those securely attached develop a generally positive view of others as well as themselves,<sup>32</sup> and experience a “cascade” of positive health and relational outcomes in their lives. These include needed ingredients within

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<sup>27</sup> Emotional safety would be such experiences as comfort and care, acceptance, and emotional attunement.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 256. “Those who know and live with a sense of secure connection to special loved ones have been shown to be more able to tune in to and be compassionate toward others, deal with anger constructively, cope with distress, stay open to and forgive others, show more generosity and tolerance, and shape a positive sense of self as one who is worthy of love and care.”

<sup>29</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 8-9, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 40-52. Note that these categories may be termed differently, and some literature offers more than four categories. For example, *anxious* might be termed *anxious-preoccupied* or *avoidant* might be named *dismissive*. See for example Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 321.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 60-61.

<sup>32</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, ch.2.



marriage such as trust, respect, the ability to communicate feelings, and more.<sup>33</sup>

“According to attachment theory, interaction with available and supportive attachment figures impart a sense of safety, assuage distress, and arouse positive emotions,”

Mikulincer and Shaver explain. This helps secure individuals experience relative calm under stress, and “longer periods of positive affectivity, which in turn contribute to sustained emotional well-being and mental health.”<sup>34</sup>

This windfall of positive outcomes differs with those who develop *insecure* attachment. These individuals are at increased risk for adverse outcomes, depending on the specific nature of the attachment rupture. The remaining three attachment styles are variations of insecure attachment. Those *anxiously attached* experienced childhood fear of abandonment, whether physical or emotional, and developed a negative view of self (sometimes subtle) coupled with a positive view of others.<sup>35</sup> The result is relational distress in moments of real or perceived separation, along with coping strategies to persistently initiate and test connection: “*Are we okay?*”

Those *avoidantly attached* were similarly denied physical or emotional availability, but with the result that they learned to resource themselves. Their focus of attention was on their capabilities rather than their vulnerabilities or negative emotions; this shaped a positive view of self, coupled with a (sometimes subtle) critical view of

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<sup>33</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 37-49.

<sup>34</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 38.

<sup>35</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, ch.2.

others.<sup>36</sup> In relational distress those termed avoidant have a greater tendency to pull into themselves rather than reaching out, especially regarding emotionality.

*Anxious-avoidant attachment* is a mixed strategy, sometimes called *disorganized*, and is commonly associated with developmental trauma. Due to trauma, a negative view of self (shame or low self-esteem) *and* a negative view of others results.<sup>37</sup> Without the foundation to trust one's own or another's resources, there remains no clear strategy for alleviating distress. Thus, diverse and even contradictory strategies emerge; for example, a bid for closeness followed by a fearful retreat.

The attachment patterns developed in childhood—whether secure, anxious, avoidant, or anxious-avoidant—influence behavior within adult relationships.<sup>38</sup> Not only that, but the need for a “secure other” remains throughout the entirety of one's life—“from cradle to grave.” Attachment bonds are not only developmental, within childhood, but remain significant in all stages of adulthood. For many adults, romantic partners are those who eclipse parents as their primary attachment figure.<sup>39</sup>

Sue Johnson, researcher and creator of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), has applied the insights of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. Johnson lists four elements of attachment that summarize Bowlby and Ainsworth's work and that

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<sup>36</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, ch.2.

<sup>37</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, ch.2.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Plass and James Cofield, *The Relational Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 25. “The quality and character of the programming we received early in life establishes a pattern of attachment that controls our relationships early in life.”

<sup>39</sup> Mark Maxwell, Sean D. Davis, Marianne M. Miller, and Scott R. Woolley, “Covenant Attachment: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Christian Couples and God,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 46, no. 1 (January 2020): 110–23.

remain significant in bonded adult relationships.<sup>40</sup> The first element is “proximity seeking”—a desire for nearness to secure attachment figures.<sup>41</sup> We seek out, monitor, and try to maintain emotional and physical connection with our loved ones,” Johnson writes. “Throughout life, we rely on them to be emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged with us.”<sup>42</sup> Second, a secure attachment figure is a “safe haven” to whom one may go in times of distress. At such times “we reach out for our loved ones... Contact with them gives us a sense of having a safe haven, where we will find comfort and emotional support.”<sup>43</sup> Third, an attachment figure is also a “secure base” from which to launch into the world.<sup>44</sup> They make us feel stronger and more resourceful as we face life’s challenges. Fourth, physical or emotional separation from attachment figures creates distress.<sup>45</sup> With attachment figures, “any threat of separation induces fear and anxiety”—or “grief and sorrow” if that fear is realized.<sup>46</sup>

Putting these four elements together, the foundation of attachment theory is that all people, of all ages, inherently monitor their most important relationships; find in these relationships a place of safety and security; and experience distress when there is threat of disconnection concerning these relationships. For Johnson and others, this description is

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<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 38. See also Clinton and Sibcy, 149, 213; Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 240.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 38. Johnson emphasizes, “This anxiety can become intense and incapacitating. Isolation is inherently traumatizing for human beings.”

<sup>46</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, 149.

synonymous with *love*. She contends that traditional couples and family therapy has lacked categories for this most basic of human experiences, but attachment theory finally provides “a coherent, relevant, well-researched framework for understanding and intervening in adult love.”<sup>47</sup> Based on the accumulation of research into attachment, Johnson declares, “The new science has given us...a unified field theory of love.”<sup>48</sup>

Attachment, or love, is not viewed as optional. Based on the attachment model, the remedy for life’s pressures is not merely *self*-help but secure relationships; not merely *self*-regulation but *co*-regulation with a secure partner.<sup>49</sup> *Inter*-dependence is hardwired into humanity; it is the way human biology works.<sup>50</sup> It is therefore important to highlight two categories of anthropology—how the human person is understood—that play a vital role in understanding attachment: neuroscience and emotion.

### *Attachment and Neuroscience*

Bowlby understood his research into attachment through the lens of evolutionary psychology. He believed that a child’s attachment system—seeking out a secure other—was rooted in human self-protection and survival, and that the human species self-

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<sup>47</sup> Susan M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 26. See also Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 7, 10; these authors describe attachment theory as an understanding of “how our ability to love is shaped by our earliest experiences” and create different “love styles.”

<sup>49</sup> John H. Coe and Todd W. Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 240-241.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson. *Love Sense*, 41.

selected accordingly.<sup>51</sup> Bowlby, Ainsworth, and other researchers conducted numerous investigations into human behavior, specifically with infants and their mothers, which formed the basis of attachment theory. Yet as research expanded, the neurological basis of those behaviors has become apparent. The limbic system has begun to “yield up some of its secrets,”<sup>52</sup> and those secrets are often unveiled in popular attachment literature.

In *Love Sense*, Sue Johnson devotes an entire chapter—entitled “The Brain”—to outline the neuroscience of attachment. She first describes brain chemicals which are stimulated in positive bonding experiences, and which activate emotional responses.<sup>53</sup> Oxytocin plays a famous role in securing attachment bonds in adults, and has been deemed “the cuddle hormone.”<sup>54</sup> Johnson explains how oxytocin, released in the context of physical closeness (including sexual intercourse) “turns off our threat detector, the amygdala...and turns on the calming, ‘relax, all is fine,’ parasympathetic nervous system.” All of this, she says, provides a neurological basis for Bowlby’s claim that “the bond of love is a safety and survival mechanism...to make life less terrifying.”<sup>55</sup> She proceeds to explain how mirror neurons rapidly link others’ emotional experiences with our own, showing the brain to be a “perfectly honed social device,”<sup>56</sup> and to describe how

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<sup>51</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 10. See also Johnson, *Love Sense*, 19, where she summarizes: “Bowlby proposed that we are designed to love a few precious others who will hold and protect us through the squalls and storms of life. It is nature’s plan for the survival of the species.”

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2001), 76.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 93-99. See also Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, *Receiving Love: Transform Your Relationship by Letting Yourself Be Loved* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 134.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 93-94.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 94-95.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 98.

brain scans reveal neurological responses to the feeling of secure attachment versus relational anxiety or loss.<sup>57</sup> She concludes her chapter with a discussion of neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to “reorganize” by creating new neural pathways. Even in adulthood, Johnson explains, significant bonding experiences can reshape our brain chemistry and, potentially, our overall well-being.<sup>58</sup>

Attachment-based relationship books commonly highlight the scientific underpinnings of attachment. Hendrix and Hunt devote a chapter to “the science of relationships” that describes how powerful relationship experiences—including traumatic ones—alter our brain chemistry. Yet research reveals that the brain can experience “reconstruction and repair” through positive bonding experiences, the authors explain. “Our problems were created through relationship, and only through relationship can they be corrected,” they conclude.<sup>59</sup> Drawing scientific insights into the everyday experience of couples, Hart and May describe the bodily sensations of loving words and touch: “It warms you all over. When you are close to your spouse, you are soothed and comforted. Your heart rate slows down, your blood flow regulates, and your body releases hormones that help you relax.”<sup>60</sup>

The insights from neuroscience provide these books—and indeed, these models of relationship repair—with a scientific underpinning. Close relationships are not optional but fundamental to human well-being. We do not have a choice, we are irreversibly

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<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 100-105.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 105-107.

<sup>59</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 132-135.

<sup>60</sup> Hart and May, *Safe Haven Marriage*, 51.

relational.<sup>61</sup> Whether by God’s design or by the long process of evolution, our attachment needs are now hardwired into humanity.<sup>62</sup> The scientific basis for attachment also provides hope for couples in distress, these authors indicate; there is a verified roadmap for relationship repair rather than anecdotal advice. Authors of books on marriage attachment express enthusiasm that *we now know* how something as mysterious as love works—and how to fix what’s gone wrong.<sup>63</sup>

### *Attachment and Emotion*

Neuroscience has revolutionized how emotion is understood, and its vital role in attachment. “Technology has given the lie to the long-held assumptions about emotion as a random, irrational impulse,” Johnson states in reference to recent research. Studies reveal emotion to be “a sharp, smart force” and “nature’s exquisitely efficient information-processing and signaling system.”<sup>64</sup> Research into emotion, as well as the connections between the thinking and feeling brain, is an evolving field. What is of significance to marriage counseling is the role emotions play in adult attachment.

Emotional connection is supremely consequential for secure attachment. Coe and Hall state, “Sensitivity to emotional signals is the hallmark of secure attachments.” Not

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<sup>61</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 50. Johnson writes: “Think of yourself as a house. On the first floor and reaching into the foundation are your basic needs for comfort, reassurance, connection, closeness, and care as well as your basic emotions, including joy, fear, sadness, and anger. These are wired into us by thousands of years of evolution.”

<sup>63</sup> See for example Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 131: “What is new is our growing knowledge of *why* and *how* relationships are so formative. Every year we learn more about the biochemistry of relationship...” Or Sue Johnson, *Love Sense*, 107: “We now understand key aspects of the chemistry of love.”

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 62, 66.

only in childhood but also as adults “the core of our connection to God and others is a deeper form of emotional communication.”<sup>65</sup> Researcher John Gottman confirms the vital role emotional connection serves for those couples likely to avoid divorce and experience a strong bond.<sup>66</sup> He presents research indicating that individuals have different comfort levels with their various “emotional systems,” and offers marriage advice related to these diverse emotional expressions.<sup>67</sup>

The significance of emotions to adult attachment is the reason Sue Johnson named her model *Emotionally Focused Therapy*. It is now known that “the nature of marital distress...is essentially about being flooded by negative emotions and trapped in narrow, constricting interactions,” she explains.<sup>68</sup> Stated positively: “Learning to love and be loved is, in effect, about learning to tune in to our emotions...and expressing those desires openly, in a way that evokes sympathy and support” from our partner.<sup>69</sup> For Johnson it is the revolutionary understandings of attachment theory and emotions that led to the creation of Emotionally Focused Therapy.

An implication is that negative reactions to relationship distress are not pathological. Reactions which may appear irrational in their intensity are understandable, and even reasonable responses to attachment needs driven by human biology.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> John H. Coe and Todd W. Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 242-243.

<sup>66</sup> John M. Gottman, *The Relationship Cure* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 1-26.

<sup>67</sup> Gottman, *Relationship Cure*, 88-135.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, 65.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 40.



According to the popularly accepted model for the brain's evolutionary development, emotions are created in the limbic system prior to reasoned considerations.<sup>71</sup> Attachment threats produce fear responses, sometimes termed “fight or flight” responses. When small children experience attachment distress—for example, due to a parent's unavailability or even abuse—“fight” or “flight” strategies are utilized. These create lifelong patterns we term attachment styles, which were outlined in a previous section. The person with an *avoidant* attachment style has learned in distress to suppress emotions and self-regulate; the person with an *anxious* attachment style has learned to intensify emotions to gain an attachment figure's support.<sup>72</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the vital role that emotion plays in attachment research, and in models for marriage counseling based on this research. However, its import will be felt in the following section which describes the common processes utilized in attachment-based marriage counseling.

### *Attachment and the Marriage Counseling Process*

Although attachment theory has wide application to different adult relationships, its application to marriage is the focus of the present research. Johnson notes: “A love relationship is now not only the most intimate of adult relationships, it is also often the principal one. And for many it is the only one.”<sup>73</sup> Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT),

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<sup>71</sup> Lewis, et al., *General Theory of Love*, 31-34. This popular view is being challenged by contemporary researchers, however. See Lisa Feldman Barrett, *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain* (New York: Mariner Books, 2021), 13-28.

<sup>72</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 192-194.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson, *Love Sense*, p.15. Johnson proceeds to cite a statistic on the rise of adults who report having only their romantic partner to confide in.

sometimes termed Emotionally Focused *Couples* Therapy, is the product of research on attachment theory's application to couples in committed romantic partnerships.<sup>74</sup>

To explore the connection between attachment theory and marriage counseling, books related to EFT are an important starting point. Johnson outlined the EFT model for practitioners in *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy*,<sup>75</sup> and others have added to such clinical resources.<sup>76</sup> Johnson has written to a popular audience with books such as *Hold Me Tight, Created for Connection*, and *Love Sense*.<sup>77</sup> These provide insight into this attachment-based counseling modality, often with specific application to the counselor's role. There are other books written for a popular audience that are useful when considering the application of attachment theory to marriage counseling. *How We Love* by counselors Milan and Kay Yerkovich,<sup>78</sup> and *Receiving Love* by psychologists Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, outline approaches to marriage repair rooted explicitly in attachment theory.

In what follows, three modalities that claim a basis in attachment research—EFT, *How We Love*, and Imago Relationship Therapy (outlined in *Receiving Love*)—will form the comparative basis for understanding an attachment-based marriage counseling process. One note, however: There are other approaches to marriage counseling which

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<sup>74</sup> Although EFT was developed as couples therapy, the model was also adapted to address individuals and families as well.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> James L. Furrow, Ed, *The Emotionally Focused Casebook: New Directions in Treating Couples* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 2008; Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 2016; Johnson, *Love Sense*, 2013. Johnson has also published workbooks and training courses based on *Hold Me Tight*.

<sup>78</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 2017.

may incorporate particular aspects of attachment research. One example is the Gottman Method. The Gottman Institute’s mission is to “help create and maintain greater health in relationships” through researching interventions for troubled relationships.<sup>79</sup> Books by founder John Gottman validate research related to the vital role of emotional connection which is at the heart of attachment-based marriage counseling (and EFT in particular). However, “attachment” is rarely named and the Gottman Method is often distinguished from EFT.<sup>80</sup> Books and resources from the Gottman Institute therefore may blend in important places with attachment-based marriage counseling, but in a supportive rather than exemplary role.<sup>81</sup> Also, particular therapists associated with the Gottman Institute have even incorporated EFT into their modality.<sup>82</sup>

How then does attachment theory shape marriage counseling, using models that more explicitly incorporate this perspective? As previous sections summarized, attachment theory understands all people—children and adults, married and unmarried—to thrive within safe, secure relationships. The experience of safety and security is understood to yield a couple’s long-term satisfaction and to promote the success of the marriage. The aim of marriage counseling within an attachment framework is to move a couple from an insecure position toward a more secure attachment with each other.

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<sup>79</sup> Gottman Institute, “Our Mission,” accessed March 2024, [www.gottman.com/about/](http://www.gottman.com/about/)

<sup>80</sup> “The 2 Styles of Couples Therapy,” Life Insight Therapy Collective, February 19, 2021, <https://life-insight.com/the-2-styles-of-couples-therapy/>

<sup>81</sup> See especially Gottman, *The Relationship Cure*, 2001.

<sup>82</sup> Vagdevi Meunier, “How I Integrate Gottman Method Couples Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy,” Gottman Institute (blog), accessed March 2024, <https://www.gottman.com/blog/integrate-gottman-method-couples-therapy/>

Johnson states, “The key issue in marital conflict is the security of [the couple’s] bond” to address the “innate need for security, protection, and contact.”<sup>83</sup>

With the goal of a secure attachment bond in view, four processes emerge that these different models hold in common. Each model seeks to help couples 1) reframe their individual behaviors within an attachment framework; 2) identify their negative pattern of interaction, rooted in learned attachment strategies, and replace it with one that is emotionally sensitive; 3) practice emotional communication; and 4) listen to the other with empathy.

### **Reframe Behaviors Within an Attachment Framework**

First, attachment-based marriage counseling seeks to help couples reframe their individual behaviors through an attachment lens. For example, a spouse’s criticism may be rooted in anxious attachment and, thus, the fear of abandonment. This critical spouse, who is carrying hidden anxiety, is attempting through their criticism to secure evidence of love and maintain connection. This fear, and the attachment distress, is named in counseling so that each spouse might understand the deeper emotional dynamic at play. This opens the door, inside and outside of counseling, for renewed compassion and clearer communication.<sup>84</sup>

In EFT, a fundamental reframe is to determine whether each partner is a pursuer or withdrawer. These categories parallel anxious attachment (pursuer) and avoidant

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<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 51.

<sup>84</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 220-221.

attachment (withdrawer).<sup>85</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich's *How We Love* give a wider array of what they deem "love styles." The first love style they discuss is the "Secure Connector," although in most cases this is aspirational.<sup>86</sup> There are five other love styles that "run counter to intimacy" and "arise from damaged imprints" in childhood.<sup>87</sup> These are termed "Avoider," "Pleaser," "Vacillator," "Controller," and "Victim." Each has its basis in a particular form of insecure attachment developed in childhood.<sup>88</sup> By understanding the childhood and attachment basis for these behaviors, each partner may "grow toward a more secure style and, ultimately, toward a deeper knowledge of [each other]."<sup>89</sup>

Imago Relationship Therapy also reframes each partner's behavior through the lens of childhood experiences and attachment injuries. Understanding oneself, and "re-imagining" the other,<sup>90</sup> in terms of childhood experiences is fundamental to the process. In Imago Relationship Therapy, conflict is understood to be rooted in fundamental fears associated with different stages of childhood development.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, each partner is understood to be a "minimizer" or "maximizer."<sup>92</sup> Similar to pursuers in EFT, and

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<sup>85</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 17-21, 30. Here, "blamer" is often used as a synonym for "pursuer."

<sup>86</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 37-51.

<sup>87</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 52.

<sup>88</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 322. The authors list each type along with the attachment style it represents: "Secure connector (secure), avoider (avoidant/dismissing), pleaser (insecure/fearful), vacillator (ambivalent/preoccupied), and chaotic—controller or victim (disorganized/unresolved)."

<sup>89</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 52.

<sup>90</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 189-191.

<sup>91</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 148-157.

<sup>92</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 67-71, 257-258.

associated therefore with anxious attachment, “Maximizers tend to exaggerate their energy, escalate their feelings, express intense emotions, and confuse their feelings with facts,” write Hendrix and Hunt.<sup>93</sup> “Minimizers tend to diminish their energy by holding onto their feelings and showing little emotion,”<sup>94</sup> which corresponds to withdrawers, and therefore avoidant attachment, in EFT.

### **Identify and Replace Negative Patterns of Interaction**

Second, the counselor helps the couple understand how their different attachment styles, and the related strategies, create a repeating pattern.<sup>95</sup> This pattern is often termed the couple’s “negative cycle” or (more colorfully) their “dance.”<sup>96</sup> For example, if one partner is intense in their criticism (as in the example above), the other may withdraw from this strong emotion. The partner who turns inward attempts to self-soothe and self-protect. By attachment style, he may be seeking to preserve the relationship—he may fear being a “bull in the China shop.” Yet the cycle intensifies because when the first partner’s criticism is not engaged, this fear of abandonment (in this case, through disengagement) is reinforced.<sup>97</sup> This may create further criticism, or other forms of “turning up the

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<sup>93</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 257.

<sup>94</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 257.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 9-12.

<sup>97</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 94-95.

emotional thermostat” in order to provoke engagement. Meanwhile, the distress the other partner feels in the face of this emotion is intensified, and the cycle continues.<sup>98</sup>

In *How We Love*, significant space is given to describing what the authors deem as “core patterns” like the one described above. They include charts that show what happens when, for example, an “avoider” marries a “pleaser” or two pleasers marry.<sup>99</sup> The conflict pattern is only the outward expression of the underlying “love style” (their term for attachment style).<sup>100</sup>

Hendrix and Hunt describe such cycles in terms of the “minimizer” and “maximizer.”

One partner pushes or maximizes to get more of what they want and to protect themselves from pain, and the other partner retreats or minimizes to accomplish the same goals. They adopt a separate, and opposing, strategy for maintaining their connection. The result is that they...retreat into opposite corners.

They continue, adding further detail to the common behaviors of each:

The maximizer is almost always the first to approach the other. The maximizer floods his or her partner with high energy, plenty of ideas, lots of suggestions, and some drama. ... The minimizer rarely initiates, is quiet, nonexpressive, low-energy, and avoidant.<sup>101</sup>

Note again that the maximizer corresponds to one who is anxiously attached, and the minimizer corresponds to one who is avoidant. The minimizer/maximizer pattern

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<sup>98</sup> Sharon Mead, “Taming the Cycle: Finding and Changing the Patterns that Keep You Stuck in Relationship,” March 1, 2018, YouTube video, 10:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qt4VhRHsjm8>. Recognizing the negative cycle is a substantial component of EFT, summarized well in this video targeting a popular audience. See also Johnson, *Practice*, 17-21.

<sup>99</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 135-214.

<sup>100</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 131-132.

<sup>101</sup> Hendrix and Hunt, *Receiving Love*, 67.

therefore evokes the pursuer/withdrawer pattern in EFT and similar patterns in *How We Love*.

These reinforcing patterns, rooted in differing attachment styles, do not require labeling spouses as “right” or “wrong.” The pattern is recognized so the couple can understand how their attachment history and styles influence their conflict—how they are missing each other’s signals. It is non-pathologizing and explanatory.<sup>102</sup> The goal of *recognizing* negative patterns is to *replace* these patterns with a new pattern shaped by secure attachment. “We hope and pray,” the Yerkoviches write to their readers, “that once you understand your core pattern, as well as your individual part of your marriage dance, you will be inspired to choose a new path.”<sup>103</sup> The method they propose promises to heal past attachment injuries and move them toward “a state of earned, secure attachment.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Practice Emotional Communication**

This leads to a third process, which is the communication of emotions between partners. In *How We Love*, the pattern for this communication is laid out in what is termed “the Comfort Circle.”<sup>105</sup> It is a series of steps that begins with a partner’s own self-understanding of their emotions and bid to participate in the Comfort Circle exercise. Then, “needs, thoughts, and feelings” are shared in a speaker/listener format where the

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<sup>102</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 38-42.

<sup>103</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 211.

<sup>104</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 221. Likewise, understanding the negative cycle is a vital aspect of a couple’s de-escalation process in EFT.

<sup>105</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 215-232



listener offers clear expressions of understanding, validation, and availability to help. The Comfort Circle is completed when with “negotiation, problem solving, compromising, owning, confessing, and forgiving,” or perhaps “comfort and nurture.”<sup>106</sup>

Likewise, emotional sharing is the heart of EFT: “Change in EFT comes not from a reprocessing of inner emotional experience per se,” Johnson clarifies, “but from new dialogues that arise as a result of this experience.”<sup>107</sup> EFT therapists seek to move clients to a deeper experience of their emotions, in order that the emotional exchange between partners may create a strong emotional bond.<sup>108</sup> They do not wish couples to remain “in their heads”—merely cognitive—but rather to experience meaningful emotional connection within the session. Johnson writes, “The creation of new emotional experience is considered the most important factor in both intrapsychic and interpersonal change.”<sup>109</sup> Again, “Change does not occur primarily through insight, through some kind of catharsis, or through negotiation. It occurs through new emotional experience and new interactional events.”<sup>110</sup> The EFT Tango—a series of five steps therapists use to help couples name, deepen, and share emotion, and to be met with an empathetic response—is utilized precisely for this purpose.

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<sup>106</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 220-221.

<sup>107</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 99. See also Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 60: “The basis of EFT is seven conversations that are aimed at encouraging a special kind of emotional responsiveness that is the key to lasting love for couples.”

<sup>108</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 109, 155-157. This is sometimes termed “deepening” and other times “heightening” emotions.

<sup>109</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 51.

<sup>110</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 52.

The Imago Dialogue serves the same purpose, and is likewise given high priority, within Imago Relationship Therapy. The dialogue “extends...down to the *feelings* that convey the emotional truth of what’s being said.” The goal is to make the speaker “feel safe, heard, and understood.”<sup>111</sup> Hendrix and Hart place significant weight on the listener’s response, which leads to the next process common to these attachment models of marriage counseling.

### **Listen with Empathy**

A fourth process, closely related to the sharing and deepening of emotion, is aiding listening partners to extend empathy. When one partner expresses their emotions, needs, or longings in a vulnerable manner, it is vital that the other meet them with compassion and care.<sup>112</sup> Sensitive counselors ensure that the listening or receiving partner is equipped and ready to provide comfort; otherwise, relational safety will be further hindered and distress deepened.<sup>113</sup>

In the Imago Dialogue, the listener is given the tasks of “mirroring, validating, and empathizing”: “*I am listening so carefully that I can mirror back to you what you’ve just said. ... I affirm you and your right to have these feelings and hold these opinions.... I can enter into your world and feel what you are feeling.*”<sup>114</sup> In EFT, the therapist is the

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<sup>111</sup> Hendrix and Hart, *Receiving Love*, 163.

<sup>112</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 171-175.

<sup>113</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 221. They warn that “if hurtful action or nonaction takes place instead of completing the comfort circle, then the relationship will continue to deteriorate toward a deeper level of distrust and pain.”

<sup>114</sup> Hendrix and Hart, *Receiving Love*, 164, emphasis theirs.

first “listener” to create a safe space for emotional sharing; the therapist in turn equips the listening spouse to extend empathy. Only when this outcome is the speaker invited to share with the other.<sup>115</sup>

With these four processes in mind, it is important to note two things. First, these are broad categories. Each modality offers numerous interventions within these categories which would be beyond the scope of this literature review. Second, the reality of wrongdoing is not overlooked in attachment models; marital conflict is not only reduced to that which needs to be differently understood, reframed, or expressed. *Attachment injury* is a term used to describe those relationship ruptures that have created deep division or long-term insecurity. Examples may include infidelity, deception, or (real or perceived) abandonment in a time of great need. Where such attachment injuries exist, a range of specific pathways and interventions may be incorporated into the counseling process.<sup>116</sup> In general, these place a greater responsibility on the offending party for signaling safety and security, and for fresh expressions of emotional vulnerability. While the counselor’s goal remains growing safety and security within the relationship, some considerations may contraindicate the effectiveness of marriage counseling until a baseline of safety is evident.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 56-63. Here, Johnson describes the role of the counselor to be a temporary attachment figure for each partner. The counselor seeks alliance with each partner, understanding their individual attachment style and how they are experiencing distress in the relationship. By conveying understanding and emotional attunement to each partner, the counselor creates a place of emotional safety not currently present in the marriage. This creates a context for openness and vulnerability that is essential.

<sup>116</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 267-274.

<sup>117</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 114, 206-207.

## **A Biblical Framework for Attachment and Marriage**

Do the Old and New Testament Scriptures affirm the attachment framework provided by psychological research? In Christian explorations of marriage attachment, prominent biblical themes include attachment to God; marriage attachment in the Bible, with an emphasis on the creation narrative; and God's design in light of contemporary neuroscience. Often, Christian authors have presented attachment models as given and added biblical citations or examples. The present survey will seek to let texts—those most often utilized in Christian resources—speak for themselves first. An exploration of Ephesians 5:21-33 will also be presented. This prominent marriage passage deserves consideration yet has been neglected in Christian attachment literature.

### *Attachment to God*

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we see the origin story of three relationships we can understand through an attachment framework: the human's relationship to God; the man's (husband's) relationship to the woman (wife); and the relationship of parents to children. The parent/child and husband/wife relationships are generally the focus of attachment research. Yet human relationships are set, in Genesis and throughout Scripture, within the framework of relationship to God. Christian writers on attachment generally describe this human/divine relationship as “attachment to God” or “God attachment.”

Within mainstream research, the idea of God as an attachment figure has been occasionally considered. “God may function psychologically as an attachment figure,” Rowatt and Kilpatrick argue in a review of psychological research. “People perceive God to be a safe haven in times of crisis and a secure base from which to explore when out of

harm's way.”<sup>118</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, in their compendium of adult attachment research, consider how God may be perceived based on forms of secure and insecure attachment. They cite research indicating that “more secure people are more likely to view God as a loving, approving, and caring figure.” They suggest, “If God is truly used as an attachment figure, secure and insecure people should...relate to God somewhat differently.”<sup>119</sup>

These examples present God as a “perceived” attachment figure; God is “used” as an attachment figure. This is consistent with a view of evolutionary biology that understands human anthropology apart from divine origin, and religion something to be harnessed for survival. Yet in Scripture, God is not just one among many possible secure relationships; he is the only source of ultimate security. The specifically *Christian* literature on attachment offers a rich variety of biblical references which describe God as a safe place and secure base, and how to experience secure attachment to God.<sup>120</sup> Clinton and Sibcy assert:

Our relationship with God satisfies all these conditions [of an attachment figure] if we allow it to happen: We seek closeness to Him in times of trouble. He is our refuge, our place of safety, and we seek proximity to Him. We look to Him to provide us with a felt sense of security; He is our safe haven. He's also our “rock,” our secure base, our foundation from which we can face with world with boldness, strength, and confidence.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Wade C. Rowatt and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, “Two Dimensions of Attachment to God and Their Relation to Affect, Religiosity, and Personality Constructs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2002): 638.

<sup>119</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 247.

<sup>120</sup> The number of specific Scripture references was markedly highest when discussing attachment to God than, for example, attachment within marriage, in Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 2002; Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 2016; Plass and Cofield, *Relational Soul*, 2014; Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 2010.

<sup>121</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 149.

Various biblical passages regarding our engagement with God correspond to these attachment categories: proximity seeking, safe haven; secure base.

Secure attachment includes *proximity seeking*. Just as a child looks for closeness to a parent, God is one with whom the believer seeks connection. Johnson and Sanderfer summarize well that the believer longs for God's nearness; but not only that, the believer wishes for a "felt sense" of that closeness, and feels whole through this connection.<sup>122</sup> The Psalms frequently express desire for God's nearness or delight in it,<sup>123</sup> and the New Testament expands on this theme with a clearer vision of resurrection and the eternal state.<sup>124</sup> Continual prayer, as described in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, means to live conscious of his presence at all times.<sup>125</sup> Although human attachments are important, Scripture presents God himself as the one whose presence is of greatest, and most enduring, value.<sup>126</sup>

Secure attachment entails finding a "safe place"—one who is reliably present for refuge. Proverbs 18:24 states, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe." Psalm 59:16 likewise describes God as a "fortress and a refuge in

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<sup>122</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 251-252.

<sup>123</sup> Psalm 23 is a beloved passage that celebrates God's nearness. Expressions of desire to feel this reality more completely include Psalm 27:4: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." See also Psalm 73:28: "As for me, it is good for me to be near to God."

<sup>124</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:8b: "We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." See also Revelation 21-22 for an expanded picture of flourishing in God's presence in eternity.

<sup>125</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, 172-173. "The admonition [in 1 Thessalonians 5:17] refers to a state of mind where we constantly talk with God about our ideas, thoughts, feelings, and concerns."

<sup>126</sup> For the priority of God's presence see for example Exodus 33:12-15, Psalms 27:4-6, Romans 8:26-35; and Revelation 22:1-5 concerning the eschatological endpoint. Clinton and Sibcy cite "the friend who sticks closer than a brother" in Proverbs 18:24 as a reference to the divine presence: Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 157-158.

the day of my distress,” and Jesus likewise promises safety to those who come to him—or to the Father, through him—in their need.<sup>127</sup> This idea of God as a place of safety is “found everywhere in Christian texts, songs, and prayers” Johnson and Sanderfer rightly assert.<sup>128</sup>

Secure attachment also provides a “secure base.” It is a relationship that “makes us stronger” and allows one to launch confidently into the world.<sup>129</sup> Psalm 23 serves as a familiar example. “The Lord is my shepherd” is not only a comfort (“he makes me lie down in green pastures”) but a source of boldness: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”<sup>130</sup> In the New Testament, the hope of resurrection and the presence of God through the Holy Spirit create boldness in the apostles.<sup>131</sup>

A fourth category often associated with attachment is the experience of grief or loss when the bond is broken (such as through death), or distress when the bond is threatened. On the cross Jesus himself prays, quoting the psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>132</sup> Moses, who spoke to God as a friend, was disturbed at the prospect of leading the Israelites apart from God’s presence.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Matthew 11:28; John 10:28-29;

<sup>128</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 252.

<sup>129</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 253.

<sup>130</sup> Psalm 23:1, 4a.

<sup>131</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 157; Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 255.

<sup>132</sup> Mark 15:34. See Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 257.

<sup>133</sup> Exodus 33:11-19.

Through the lens of these foundational attachment categories, we see that God may be understood as a source of secure attachment. Yet it remains possible to feel insecure in our relationship to God, and these relational insecurities may be further shaped through our childhood attachment experiences.<sup>134</sup> *Attached to God* is a book length application of the four attachment styles to one's relationship with God. This includes the insecure attachment categories he terms *anxious*, *shutdown* (for avoidant), and *shame-filled* (for fearful-avoidant).<sup>135</sup> Other Christian books explore this application of insecure attachment categories to spiritual experience; these characteristically contain few direct biblical references although theological themes emerge.<sup>136</sup> Mayfield, for example, gives special attention to the theme of shame.<sup>137</sup> Clinton and Sibcy posit that the fear of separation from God, and death, lie at the heart of insecure attachment to God.<sup>138</sup> Coe and Hall consider how the different forms of insecure attachment affect one's approach to God in prayer and to involvement with Christian community.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, 156-157, 175.

<sup>135</sup> Krispin Mayfield, *Attached to God: A Practical Guide to Deeper Spiritual Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022). Mayfield terms the four categories Secure, Anxious, Shutdown (for Avoidant), and Shame-Filled (for Fearful-Avoidant).

<sup>136</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 153-157; Clinton and Straub, *God Attachment*, 97-99; Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 248-260; Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 262-263. A discussion of this topic, with biblical categories and key references, would be a welcome addition to what the literature currently provides.

<sup>137</sup> Mayfield, *Attached to God*, 87-109. The author terms the disorganized attachment style as “shame-filled spirituality.”

<sup>138</sup> Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 156-157.

<sup>139</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 250-251, 255-257, 260.



Biblical descriptions of God as “parent, friend, and lover”<sup>140</sup> further move us to conclude that human attachments are predicated on God’s supreme example. This runs counter to the examples stated earlier which see God as merely a “substitute” attachment figure. He is instead the primary, or ultimate, secure bond according to the testimony of Scripture. As this ultimate source of security, God then provides a model for secure attachment in human relationships.<sup>141</sup> The following section considers adult attachment in marriage, specifically, through a biblical lens.

### *Marriage Attachment in the Bible*

Attachment within human relationships, and marriage specifically, returns us to Genesis. In the creation account of Genesis 1, mankind is described as being made “in the image of God...male and female.”<sup>142</sup> Among theologians there is a long tradition of exploring the exact meaning of the image of God. Broadly speaking, the image of God has been understood as relating either to unique capacities humans possess (such as reason), or to unique human functions (such as representing God, or having dominion).<sup>143</sup> Taking this latter view, some have understood the divine image to be especially related to the ability to express love within various relationships.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 250. They cite Isaiah 66:13, Luke 13:34, John 15:5; and secondarily Isaiah 62:5 and 54:5.

<sup>141</sup> These attachment relationships over one’s lifetime are typically understood to include one’s parents in childhood, then close friends in adolescence, and one’s spouse or romantic partner in adulthood. See Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 58.

<sup>142</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>143</sup> Todd W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: 2021), 44-46.

<sup>144</sup> Hall, *Relational Spirituality*, 49.

Christian writers on attachment have sometimes adopted this relational viewpoint on the image of God. Plass and Cofield, for example, relate God's image in humans to the Trinity: just as there is perfect love within the Trinity, humans image God through loving relationships.<sup>145</sup> The image of God is displayed through human love, and "wired" into our humanity, Johnson and Sanderfer write; they posit that romantic relationships are the highest expression of such love.<sup>146</sup> A unique contribution of attachment theory to this relational model of God's image is the inclusion of neuroscience in which human relationality is confirmed by the modern understanding of the attachment system.<sup>147</sup> "We are structured by and for relationships," Plass and Cofield state, and our design as male and female "is the fundamental way we carry our relational design."<sup>148</sup>

Genesis 2 presents an extended narrative of the first man and woman's creation. First, God fashions the man and "breathes into his nostrils the breath of life."<sup>149</sup> Despite the man being set apart by God's "special care,"<sup>150</sup> God deems it "not good that the man should be alone."<sup>151</sup> There is need for companionship and intimacy. The man therefore expresses joyful relief when the woman appears, celebrating the end of his loneliness and

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<sup>145</sup> Plass and Cofield, *Relational Soul*, 13-15.

<sup>146</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 22.

<sup>147</sup> Plass and Cofield, *Relational Soul*, 26. We will explore the connection between the Bible and neuroscience in a subsequent section

<sup>148</sup> Plass and Cofield, *Relational Soul*, 13-14.

<sup>149</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>150</sup> C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2006), 105.

<sup>151</sup> Genesis 2:18.

the strength of their bond: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man.”<sup>152</sup>

A summary statement follows this creation narrative: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed.”<sup>153</sup> Two primary relationships appear here: the parent-child relationship and the husband-wife relationship.<sup>154</sup> The husband-wife relationship is described as a strong bond, translated variously as “hold fast to,” “be united to,” “cleave to,” or “be joined to.”<sup>155</sup> The “one flesh” terminology further underscores the strength and unique nature of this bond, and provides the basis for marriage ethics elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>156</sup> To be “naked and not ashamed” indicates “ease” with one another, undisturbed by “fear of exploitation for evil.”<sup>157</sup>

This passage is complemented by attachment research in several ways. The correspondence between the parental and the marital bond (“therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife”) is noteworthy. With an economy of words, this verse evokes what psychological research since Bowlby has elucidated: the

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<sup>152</sup> Genesis 2:23.

<sup>153</sup> Genesis 2:24-25.

<sup>154</sup> This corresponds to Genesis 1:27-28 which describes the creation of the man and woman, immediately followed by the command to “fill the earth” with offspring.

<sup>155</sup> Genesis 2:24 as translated by ESV, New International Version, King James Version, and the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>156</sup> See Matthew 19:4-6 and Ephesians 5:22-33. These will be examined subsequently.

<sup>157</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 127. See also Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 66.

most formative relationships will be with one's parents in childhood, and with one's spouse or romantic partner in adulthood.<sup>158</sup> Attachment theory recognizes the importance of adult attachments including romantic bonds. Johnson and Sanderfer write that love "drives us to bond emotionally with a precious few others who offer us safe haven from the storms of life," and this highlights the specifically Christian understanding of "union between life partners."<sup>159</sup> They comment on Genesis 2:25 that nakedness without shame indicates vulnerability without fear.<sup>160</sup> In an attachment model, this "vulnerability without fear" is essential for emotional connection and secure attachment.

The importance of the Genesis passage is highlighted by its direct citation by Jesus and the apostles. When debating divorce, Jesus quotes the vital summary phrase: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." He underscores this by adding, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together let not man separate."<sup>161</sup> Paul likewise draws from the imagery and wording of Genesis 2 in Ephesians, where he exhorts husbands to love their wives as they love their very own bodies.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, he instructs the Corinthians that both husband and wife have "authority" over the others' body.<sup>163</sup> Marriage, understood by both Jesus and Paul, was fundamentally about husband and wife

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<sup>158</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 58.

<sup>159</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 22.

<sup>160</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 55.

<sup>161</sup> Matthew 19:5-6; Mark 10:7-9.

<sup>162</sup> Ephesians 5:31.

<sup>163</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:4. "For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." Paul also cites Genesis 2 in 1 Corinthians 6:16.

living out the reality of being “joined together” as one. This could very well be termed secure attachment! Yet as Ephesians indicates, and as we will explore next, the biblical understanding of this concept is even broader in scope.

### *Ephesians 5 and Marriage Attachment*

Despite its connection to Genesis and its theologically rich instruction concerning marriage, Ephesians 5:22-33 receives little treatment in Christian books on attachment. Its gender specific language, and its framework of submission and authority, may feel incompatible to mainstream attachment research.<sup>164</sup> Yet as one of the most prominent marriage passages in the New Testament, Ephesians 5:22-33 merits consideration.

Winston Smith, a biblical counselor, helpfully places this passage in its greater context. It flows from an earlier exhortation to “be filled with the Spirit,” to “address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” and ultimately to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Smith summarizes: “As we live in relationship with each other, guided by the Spirit of Jesus, we should live ‘musical’ lives with each other.”<sup>165</sup> This includes the instructions to wives and husbands in 5:22-33:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as

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<sup>164</sup> As will be detailed in the literature review concerning integration, even Christian books on attachment take their lead from mainstream attachment models.

<sup>165</sup> Smith, *Marriage Matters*, 204.

their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.<sup>166</sup>

If this passage is about living “musical lives together” as Smith states, the music is richly textured. Paul draws on the language of Genesis for his controlling metaphor, while also placing marriage in a Christological and ecclesiological context.

Paul follows the Genesis imagery of the woman being created from the man, and—depending how one understands submission here—as helper to the man. The wife’s submission may be understood in terms of authority, and is related to the unity of husband and wife. The head and body function together. Genesis, cited explicitly in this passage, is in view as Paul enjoins husbands to love their wives “as their own bodies.”<sup>167</sup> According to Paul this oneness corresponds to the mystical union between Christ and the church. “He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.”<sup>168</sup>

Is Paul’s understanding of marital oneness compatible with attachment theory? Paul articulates the closest possible bond between two people, describing them as “one body.” He urges husbands and wives to treat each other according to this bond, and his specific instructions appear compatible with the “safe place and secure base” of attachment theory. For example, he implies holistic care with his concern that husbands

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<sup>166</sup> Ephesians 5:22-33.

<sup>167</sup> Ephesians 5:31 citing Genesis 2:24.

<sup>168</sup> Ephesians 5:28-29.

present their wives “holy and without blemish.” He eliminates harsh behavior by reminding husbands that “no man ever hated his own flesh”; instead husbands are to “nourish” and “cherish” their wives. The entire passage is concerned with the husband’s love for his wife; it is a deeply emotional presentation that is compatible with the priority of emotional connection presented in attachment literature.<sup>169</sup>

Yet this passage goes beyond typical attachment categories, containing distinctly biblical concerns. This includes its assumptions concerning gender. Even assuming an egalitarian view,<sup>170</sup> Paul’s clearly differentiated categories of male and female, husband and wife must be accounted for.<sup>171</sup> On occasion, Johnson references research concerning different ways men and women experience attachment. “When a relationship is in free fall,” she writes, “men typically talk of feeling rejected, inadequate, and a failure, women of feeling abandoned and unconnected.”<sup>172</sup> In *How We Love*, the Yerkoviches address different ways men and women approach sex but assert cultural conditioning as the explanation.<sup>173</sup> These occasional touch points do not significantly engage the biblical categories, theological concerns, or cultural questions associated with gender differentiation.

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<sup>169</sup> The word “love” appears six times in Paul’s exhortation to husbands, including the initial instruction to “love...as Christ loved the church” in Ephesians 5:25.

<sup>170</sup> For example, 1 Peter 3:1-7.

<sup>171</sup> Jesus, likewise, in the passages on divorce began with gender: “Have you not read that he who created them made them male and female...?” (Matthew 19:4; cf. Mark 10:6). This reference to male and female would appear to be superfluous to Jesus’ argument about marriage permanence unless gender distinction was deeply embedded in the nature of marriage attachment.

<sup>172</sup> Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 38.

<sup>173</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 305.

Another way Ephesians 5:22-33 moves beyond typical attachment categories is by assuming a deeply spiritual union between husband and wife. The passage flows from Paul's description of life lived in the Spirit out of reverence for Christ,<sup>174</sup> presents Jesus as the focal point for both husband and wife,<sup>175</sup> and declares the "mystery" that marriage attachment "refers to Christ and the church."<sup>176</sup> Paul is not alone in this marriage perspective; the mysterious, yet significant, spiritual union is referenced in a diversity of other biblical passages.<sup>177</sup> Perhaps the most succinct is Jesus' statement: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."<sup>178</sup>

In summary, Ephesians 5:22-33 is an important biblical passage that directly addresses marriage yet has been missing from the attachment conversation. Examining this passage is fruitful for its compatibility with attachment theory, but also presents distinctly Christian categories which should not be ignored.

### *Attachment, Neuroscience, and Emotions in the Bible*

As discussed previously, neuroscience plays a significant role in discussions of attachment. Within Christian literature, the testimony of neuroscience to human attachment is presented as evidence of God's design. Curt Thompson, a Christian

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<sup>174</sup> Ephesians 5:18-21.

<sup>175</sup> Ephesians 5:21-25, 29-32. The word "Christ" appears seven times in Ephesians 5:20-33 as Paul presents Jesus as the focus for the church generally, for wives, and for husbands.

<sup>176</sup> Ephesians 5:32.

<sup>177</sup> Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9. See also Malachi 2:14-15a; 1 Corinthians 7:14; 1 Peter 3:7. Each of these passages assumes there is a shared relationship with God that bears upon the ethics of marriage and divorce. In 1 Corinthians 6:16-19 there is an argument that weaves together themes related to the "one flesh" relationship from Genesis 2, spiritual union with God, and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

<sup>178</sup> Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9, emphasis mine.



neuroscientist, sees in the creation narrative—“it is not good for the man to be alone”—a nod to the human attachment system. He argues that science is only revealing what Scripture already “makes clear” about human relationships.<sup>179</sup> The science of attachment is regularly celebrated in Christian writings as an expression of God’s creative genius and a reflection of his relational nature. There is a “specific link between your physiology and your relationships,” Hart and May write. This link reveals that, “Without a doubt we are intricately connected and ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Psalm 139:14).”<sup>180</sup> Christian psychologist Todd Hall argues that the conclusions of neuroscience indicate a relational meaning to the image of God.<sup>181</sup>

Although it would be anachronistic to portray the Scriptures as directly addressing modern science, it is noteworthy that bonded relationships are presented in *fully embodied* terminology. This begins in Genesis: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” Adam declares. And the writer of Genesis describes the husband as “holding fast” to his wife such that “the two shall become one flesh.”<sup>182</sup> This embodied experience, in the context of two lovers, is celebrated throughout the Song of Songs. Johnson and Sanderfer weave this together with attachment science:

[T]his science tells us that secure bonding and fully satisfying sexuality go hand in hand; they cue off and enhance each other. Emotional connection creates great sex, and great sex creates deeper emotional connection. ... Secure partners feel free and confident to surrender to sensation in each other’s arms, explore and

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<sup>179</sup> Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 111.

<sup>180</sup> Hart and May, *Safe Haven Marriage*, 52.

<sup>181</sup> Hall, *Relational Spirituality*, 71-72.

<sup>182</sup> Genesis 2:23-24. The phrase “the two shall become one flesh” is associated with sexual union in

fulfill their sexual needs, and share their deepest joys, longings, and vulnerabilities. Then, lovemaking is truly making love.<sup>183</sup>

The biblical portrayal of embodied bonds is not only sexual. Pictures of secure relationships in the Scriptures include a weaned child; a child led by the hand; lovers looking into each other's eyes; a father embracing his adult son; and believers greeting each other with a kiss.<sup>184</sup> This is compatible with the discoveries of neuroscience which offer evidence of our body's involvement in establishing, and maintaining, attachment bonds.

A specific area of neuroscience explored earlier is emotions. Emotions are crucial for connection and part of the brain and body's attachment system. Likewise, Old and New Testaments describe human connection within an emotional framework. Jesus' relationship with his closest friends was marked by expressions of love, whether in word or action.<sup>185</sup> Deep emotions like compassion and grief moved him to heal;<sup>186</sup> even his anger at times expresses his solidarity with the needy.<sup>187</sup> "Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn," Paul writes.<sup>188</sup> Within marriage, husbands are called upon to *love* their wives, in an imitation of Christ's own love for the church.<sup>189</sup> This

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<sup>183</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 201.

<sup>184</sup> Psalm 131:2; Psalm 73:23; Song of Songs 4:1, 9; Luke 15:20; Romans 16:16.

<sup>185</sup> E.g., John 11:5; 13:1.

<sup>186</sup> John 11:33-38 describes Jesus "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," and weeping, at Lazarus' tomb.

<sup>187</sup> Mark 3:5.

<sup>188</sup> Romans 12:15.

<sup>189</sup> Ephesians 5:25.

divine love husbands are to imitate is described at times as rejoicing over one's bride, extending compassion and kindness, or feeling jealous.<sup>190</sup>

## **Integrating Christian Worldview and Attachment-Based Marriage Counseling**

The purpose of this research project was to determine how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's practice of attachment-based marriage counseling. The attempt to harmonize or blend the Christian faith with psychology is termed integration. *Whether or how to* integrate Christianity and psychology has been debated in the Christian community, resulting in different approaches to integration. In the second edition of *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*,<sup>191</sup> five approaches were detailed: Levels of Explanation, Christian Integration, Christian Psychology, Transformation Psychology, and Biblical Counseling.<sup>192</sup> The following survey is organized according to these five viewpoints with literature specifically concerned with integrating the Christian worldview with attachment-based marriage counseling. This includes marriage books from an attachment perspective that are marketed to a Christian readers;<sup>193</sup> and also academic articles that offer insights, proposals, or criticisms of this particular integration

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<sup>190</sup> Isaiah 62:5; Ezekiel 6:6-14; 2 Corinthians 11:2.

<sup>191</sup> Eric L. Johnson, Ed., *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010). The first edition included only four views; Transformational Psychology added in the second edition.

<sup>192</sup> These models are capitalized throughout to avoid their being confused with general terms such as "integration." Also, in the literature what is termed here as Christian Integration may be referred to simply as "integration"; yet this may confuse the reader when specific models are being contrasted.

<sup>193</sup> These include Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 2016; Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 2002; and Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 2018.

effort. Each approach to integration will be defined prior to a discussion of representative resources.

### *Levels of Explanation*

The Levels of Explanation view posits a “sharp distinction between the disciplines (or ‘levels’) of psychology and theology”<sup>194</sup> such that each discipline has its own methodology and should remain distinct from the other. Timothy Keller summarizes this position: “Psychology and theology deal with different dimensions of human life, use different methods of study, ask different questions, and look at two different things.” He clarifies, however, that proponents of this view believe that psychology and theology may “provide insights that are complementary and not contradictory to one another.”<sup>195</sup> One’s Christian faith may influence how one engages in the science of psychology, according to David G. Myers, an advocate for this viewpoint. For example, one’s Christian worldview may motivate particular research projects or “sensitize” the researcher to particular topics;<sup>196</sup> yet the research does not entail theological presuppositions. In fact, Myers believes that while theology and psychology may “fit together nicely” (because all truth is God’s truth), “some discoveries of psychological science do challenge some traditional

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<sup>194</sup> Johnson, *Psychology & Christianity*, 33.

<sup>195</sup> Timothy Keller, “Four Models of Counseling in Pastoral Ministry,” *Gospel in Life*, May 2010, accessed May 2024, <https://gospelinlife.com/manual-paper/four-models-of-counseling-in-pastoral-ministry/>.

<sup>196</sup> David G. Myers, “A Levels-of-Explanation View” in Johnson, *Christianity & Psychology*, 56.

Christian understandings.”<sup>197</sup> Because theology and psychology operate independently, it is not possible to critique psychological conclusions from a theological perspective.<sup>198</sup>

To maintain firm boundaries between theology and psychology appears *prima facie* to eliminate the possibility of integration. Yet psychologists operating within these boundaries have contributed research that Christian counselors may find beneficial, even those who practice a stronger form of integration. Marriage and family therapists Nicole Rizkallah and Erin Hudson, graduates of Fuller Theological Seminary, authored “Circling the Triangle: An EFT Approach to Working with Christian Couples Triangulating God.”<sup>199</sup> Combining Structural Therapy with EFT, Rizkallah and Hudson conclude from their research that attachment is strengthened for Christian couples when God is included in the counseling process.<sup>200</sup> The idea of “circling” the triangle means creating secure attachment for both spouses with spirituality in view. “For Christian couples, who triangulate God, deeper exploration of their spiritual experience is a key intervention,” they write.<sup>201</sup> Yet “triangulating God” can also reinforce insecure attachment, for example when one’s spouse holds another to an impossibly high spiritual standard.<sup>202</sup> To

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<sup>197</sup> Myers, “Levels-of-Explanation,” 50. In his essay, Myers uses as an example of psychology challenging “traditional Christian understanding” the research on same-sex relationships. Myers indicates that his understanding of theology, and his understanding of specific biblical passages, was shaped by this research. Long-term same-sex relationships, such as marriage, are presented as a topic for further psychological research.

<sup>198</sup> Keller, “Four Models.”

<sup>199</sup> Nicole Rizkallah and Erin Hudson, “Circling the Triangle: An EFT Approach to Working with Christian Couples Triangulating God,” *Contemporary Family Therapy* 41 (2019), published online <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10591-019-09496-8>.

<sup>200</sup> Rizkallah and Hudson, “Circling the Triangle,” 220.

<sup>201</sup> Rizkallah and Hudson, “Circling the Triangle,” 221.

<sup>202</sup> Rizkallah and Hudson, “Circling the Triangle,” 222.

this end, the authors propose spiritual conversations that may help couples explore their emotions and negative cycles—common steps with the EFT model—yet with God in view.<sup>203</sup>

In a study conducted by a team of researchers at Alliant International University, the attachment behaviors of nine Christian couples were examined.<sup>204</sup> These couples self-reported a “strong relationship with each other and to God.” The researchers concluded that the “closer individuals and couples draw to God, the closer they draw to each other and the more they view the hand of God blessing their marriage.” This strengthens their bond as they learn to “view their marriage as sacred and worthy of hard work and sacrifice.”<sup>205</sup> They describe a cycle in which actions, cognitions, or felt experiences associated with God help individuals feel stronger concerning their marriage bond; or, where the couples’ shared religious experience (such as prayer or service) provide a context for deepening their bond. This is an ‘attachment relationship process,’ they conclude, in which there is “a shared attachment with God through an attachment cycle of behaviors, emotions, and cognitions that systematically empowers all the relationships in the system.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Rizkallah and Hudson, “Circling the Triangle,” 222-225.

<sup>204</sup> Maxwell, et al., “Covenant Attachment.”

<sup>205</sup> Maxwell, et al., “Covenant Attachment,” 116.

<sup>206</sup> Maxwell, et al., “Covenant Attachment,” 121.

## *Christian Integration*

Christian Integration, as a *model* rather than concept, describes an approach in which psychology and theology meet as equals. The Bible and psychology are understood to address the same concerns— “human nature, what’s gone wrong with it, and how it can be made right”—and the best insights from both are combined.<sup>207</sup> These should agree because “all truth is God’s truth.” In dancing terms, Christian Integration allows either partner to take the lead. What makes this approach distinct from Christian Psychology and Transformational Psychology, two models to be considered subsequently, is that these other models insist Scripture set the agenda. Meanwhile, Christian Integration differs from both the Levels of Explanation and Biblical Counseling approaches because each resists integration altogether; the former keeps psychology and theology sharply distinguished in practice, and the latter devalues psychology based on its perspective concerning the sufficiency of Scripture.<sup>208</sup>

Popular Christian books on attachment-based marriage counseling evidence a Christian Integration approach. *Created for Connection*, by Sue Johnson, is based on the template provided by EFT and its expression in Johnson’s earlier *Hold Me Tight*.<sup>209</sup> With Kenneth Sanderfer’s pastoral wisdom incorporated, additions are made throughout that correlate Scripture and Christian theology to Johnson’s model. A more significant addition is a chapter concerning attachment to God. The overall tone of *Created for*

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<sup>207</sup> Keller, “Four Models.”

<sup>208</sup> Eric Johnson, *Psychology & Christianity*, 36.

<sup>209</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 14.

*Connection* is one of equal respect for the psychologically verified insights of EFT and the time-tested Christian tradition. Johnson writes in the introduction:

In my conversations with Kenny that inspired this book, I was reminded of sharing the new science on the nature of love with one of my dearest friends and mentors, Father Anthony Storey... When, in a long, rambling letter to Father Storey, I shared what I thought to be new and revolutionary insights about love, he wrote back a simple reply: “Of course, Christians have always known that.”

Repaying the compliment, Sanderfer adds:

As a practitioner, I began to see incredible changes in my couples in therapy sessions. This is not surprising—there is a body of sound research to support EFT. But what I wasn’t expecting was the impact EFT would have on me personally. It gave me a new map for guiding me in my relationship with God and others.”<sup>210</sup>

This gracious interchange exemplifies the spirit of mutual respect for both psychology and theology within Christian Integration.

Several other books embody this approach as well. Milan and Kay Yerkovich, authors of *How We Love*, claim their insights originated from attachment research and clinical experience.<sup>211</sup> Yet this marriage guide contains occasional references to Scripture and biblical concepts such as the soul, assumes a traditional marriage model, and concludes with a prayer.<sup>212</sup> *Safe Haven Marriage*, by Psychologist Archibald Hart and therapist Sharon Hart May, presents a model that is described as “faith-based EFT.”<sup>213</sup> The EFT model is dominant, with occasional biblical references and discussions of topics

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<sup>210</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 14.

<sup>211</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 322. “We offer our heartfelt thanks to the researchers, psychologists, and authors who have helped make this book possible. Their work has changed lives—including ours—by transforming relationships and revolutionizing our approach to life and love.”

<sup>212</sup> Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*, 221, 310-317.

<sup>213</sup> Hart and May, *Safe Haven Marriage*, 201. The term “faith-based EFT” is used in a description of May’s counseling practice, Safe Haven Relationship Center.



that concern Christians such as pornography.<sup>214</sup> *Safe Haven Marriage* does not incorporate attachment to God within its model for marriage health or repair.<sup>215</sup>

These books, based on the Christian Integrationist approach, have provided influential resources to the Christian community. All were written to a popular audience, and are the only book-length treatments of attachment-based marriage counseling from a Christian perspective.

### *Christian Psychology*

Christian Psychology grew out of the broader integration movement yet was “designed to enlarge the theological and philosophical bases, theoretical and clinical bases, spiritual formation bases, and finally a call for solid empirical bases for a Christian clinical psychology.”<sup>216</sup> It may be viewed as an attempt to correct the broader integrationist movement by creating more distinctly Christian models while still valuing the contributions of mainstream psychology. Proponents of Christian Psychology insist that biblical and theological categories “lead the dance.” A Christian worldview is prioritized and is permitted to correct psychological models.<sup>217</sup>

In an article advocating for different ways to provide a “Christian Psychology translation of Emotion-Focused Therapy,” McFee and Monroe propose five stages for

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<sup>214</sup> Hart and May, *Safe Haven Marriage*, 176-180.

<sup>215</sup> Sharon May also contributes to Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*, 207-229. While this book incorporates Scripture and attachment to God in a variety of sections, May’s chapter on marriage attachment is organized almost entirely by the categories of attachment theory. However, prayer is presented as a form of shared vulnerability on p.229.

<sup>216</sup> Michael R. McFee and Philip G. Monroe, “A Christian Psychology Translation of Emotion-Focused Therapy: Clinical Implications.” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*: 30 no. 4 (2011), 317.

<sup>217</sup> McFee and Monroe, “Christian Psychology Translation,” 319.

reconstructing a model (such as EFT) according to a Christian worldview. These are to first understand the psychological language, evaluate its foundations critically, utilize Christian terminology, add specifically Christian material, and ultimately correct the original psychological model where it is seen to be “wrongheaded.”<sup>218</sup> Despite presenting such a thoroughgoing project, the contributions of this article are preliminary. The authors discuss different ways of “translating” EFT into the Christian vernacular, such as trading the terminology of “attachment bonds” for “covenant bonds.”<sup>219</sup> Such adjustments to language, they note, will be the primary way EFT is translated for a Christian population.<sup>220</sup> The main criticism they offer, although it is stated with expressions of clear appreciation and even deference to EFT, is that its purely humanistic lens needs to be replaced with a spiritual one. They provide an example of how a typical EFT process may be interrupted for more traditional pastoral care related to repairing a spouse’s relationship with God. This is described as a “shift” away from the traditional EFT pathway to directly explore the spouse’s Christian experience. This versatility offered by the Christian therapist, they conclude, may ultimately aid the marriage repair process.<sup>221</sup>

Todd Hardin, building on the earlier article by McFee and Monroe, offers further proposals for a Christian Emotion-Focused Therapy. Hardin expresses appreciation for

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<sup>218</sup> McFee and Monroe, “Christian Psychology Translation,” 319.

<sup>219</sup> McFee and Monroe, “Christian Psychology Translation,” 323.

<sup>220</sup> McFee and Monroe, “Christian Psychology Translation,” 323. Much of this article advocated for such mild adjustments, and even cautioned against making more significant theological changes without spending more time learning from attachment researchers. In the view of this researcher, this approach felt more at home with a broader Christian Integration view.

<sup>221</sup> McFee and Monroe, “Christian Psychology Translation,” 324-325.

EFT as a “good gift” that therefore may be “redeemed” by “evaluating and translating the non-Christian presuppositions underlying its worldview, epistemology, and emphasis with Christian presuppositions and utilizing it along with Christian content.”<sup>222</sup> The humanistic worldview beneath EFT is a “mixed blessing” because it honors the “dignity and special nature of the human being, echoing God’s view of the person as an image bearer.” Yet a Christian EFT “cannot ignore the ethical and spiritual components of life and must incorporate them into its overall telos.”<sup>223</sup> Addressing each spouse’s relationship with God, and not merely temporal issues between spouses, must remain a priority for Christians.<sup>224</sup>

In a section concerning the *emphasis* of EFT, Hardin addresses the important category of emotion. Hardin finds correspondence between the bodily understanding of emotions within an attachment framework and the Biblical portrayal of emotions. “EFT’s ‘bodily-expressive’ element of an emotion scheme seems to resonate with David’s contention that there are bodily responses to troubles of the soul,” he writes with reference to the psalms.<sup>225</sup> Hardin goes further, comparing EFT’s process of discovering “primary” emotion and “modifying emotional schemes” to themes in Christian theology. Here, Hardin cites the prophet Jeremiah who described “the complex and mysterious nature” of the heart and asked, “Who can know it?”<sup>226</sup> He draws on twentieth century

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<sup>222</sup> Todd Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Christian Analysis of Its Worldview, Epistemology, and Emphasis,” *Religions*, 5 (2014), 323-325.

<sup>223</sup> Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy,” 328.

<sup>224</sup> Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy,” 329-330.

<sup>225</sup> Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy,” 330. Hardin cites Psalm 31:10 and 32:1-5.

<sup>226</sup> Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy,” 330. Hardin cites Jeremiah 17:9.

apologists Cornelius Van Til and Francis Schaeffer, who portrayed the human unconscious as “the battleground where humanity experienced intra-personal alienation and stored interpersonal conflict.” With a variety of biblical citations, Hardin contends that EFT is in line with biblical injunctions to self-examination, confession, and surrender, and offers initial proposals for incorporating this into counseling.<sup>227</sup> Hardin’s discussion is a noteworthy example of wrestling biblically and theologically with the importance of emotion, and with the actual counseling process that works with emotion.

### *Transformational Psychology*

Transformational Psychology arose from within Christian Psychology as another model that insists the Christian worldview “leads the dance.” Its primary proponents, John Coe and Todd Hall, state that their model may be just what Christian Psychology “wanted all along.”<sup>228</sup> As an extension of Christian Psychology, what is distinct about Transformation Psychology is twofold. First, there is special concern for the spiritual formation of the counselor—that “*how* Christians live out their Christianity in the field of psychology and counseling is at least as important as seeking to understand human beings Christianly.”<sup>229</sup> The article by Todd Hardin provides this emphasis when he states that a Christian EFT should encourage “counselor spiritual formation so that the content of the counseling is self-aware, committed to the love of God and neighbor, and interpreted

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<sup>227</sup> Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy,” 330-332.

<sup>228</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 73.

<sup>229</sup> Johnson, *Five Views*, 17.

through the lens of the Christian ground motive.”<sup>230</sup> The second and related priority of Transformational Psychology is that the *process* by which psychological models are developed is just as important as the end result. Coe and Hall assert that psychology should begin and proceed with specifically Christian presuppositions and categories, even though mainstream psychological discoveries may be incorporated along the way.<sup>231</sup>

To the knowledge of the present researcher, there is not yet published literature concerning a Transformational Psychology approach to attachment-based marriage counseling, or a critique of an existing model such as EFT. However, Coe and Hall’s *Psychology in the Spirit* incorporates attachment theory more generally. In a chapter written by Hall, the foundational discoveries of attachment research are understood as reflections of the image of God—which for Hall is fundamentally about being “relational creatures” made by a relational God.<sup>232</sup> Hall uses the term “radically relational” to describe both God and mankind, and describes mankind’s end goal (“the Christian Final-End Thesis”) as union with God.<sup>233</sup> After an overview of human relationality based explicitly on attachment theory, Coe extends the discussion from human relationality to *union* with God. Humans as “embodied spirits” ultimately need to experience union with God. This is seen in Jesus’ union with the Father and is promised to believers through the

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<sup>230</sup> Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy,” 332. This article was nevertheless including the earlier section because this point is not fully developed, and Hardin’s methodology seems to better exemplify the broader category of Christian Psychology.

<sup>231</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 71.

<sup>232</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 234.

<sup>233</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 235. This embraces what is commonly called The Greatest Commandments recorded in Matthew 22:37-39, Hall argues. To love God and others “with all your heart” refers to a “biblical term that...goes much deeper than just our behavior, our will, or our conscious head knowledge. We were designed by God to connect relationally through love and to grow in this capacity throughout our life.”

Holy Spirit.<sup>234</sup> The “radical relationality” that involves eternal union with God is in contrast with mainstream psychology and, for Coe and Hall, “represents the most holistic and personal of all the psychological traditions for understanding and resolving the journey of being a person.”<sup>235</sup>

In two recent books, Hall outlines what he terms “relational spirituality.”<sup>236</sup> He incorporates attachment theory and neuroscience to advance the ideas outlined above. These book-length discussions terminate in proposals for growing in love across the spectrum of divine and human relationships, and how Christian communities may foster such growth. Further application of Hall’s proposals to marriage, as well as additional insights from the Transformational Psychology perspective, could benefit Christian marriage counselors.

### *Biblical Counseling*

Biblical Counseling is the term applied to a counseling approach that endorses a strong view of Scripture’s sufficiency; posits an entirely Christian and biblical vision for addressing human difficulties; and views psychology as encroaching upon matters more appropriately and wisely addressed by Scripture. This approach arose in the 1970s especially under Jay Adams, who asserted sharp distinctions between humanistic psychology and the Bible; his was often a prophetic, combative tone. As the Biblical

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<sup>234</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 263-267.

<sup>235</sup> Coe and Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit*, 270.

<sup>236</sup> Hall, *Relational Spirituality*, 3-6; and Todd Hall, *The Connected Life: The Art and Science of Relational Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 128. Marriage is only considered briefly as one of several close relationships in *The Connected Life*.

Counseling movement matured, many interacted with mainstream psychology on friendlier terms.<sup>237</sup> Yet across the spectrum, the uniting factor remains the conviction that Scripture is the proper guide for all things deemed “psychological.” As David Powlison, the late standard bearer for a friendlier form of Biblical Counseling, stated: “Christian faith *is* psychology.”<sup>238</sup>

From this perspective, Winston Smith of the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF) criticized an early attempt at integrating Christian faith and attachment. In his 2004 review of *Attachments* by Clinton and Sibcy, Smith first states that attachment theory is “not a threat” to Christian beliefs to the degree it elucidates the shaping influences in one’s life.<sup>239</sup> Yet he criticized the “fundamentally godless view of personhood” in attachment models that emphasize parent-child relationships while leaving one’s relationship to God unaddressed. Smith contends that the reverse approach is more appropriate: “Scripture doesn’t describe the human condition as emerging out of environmental factors that ultimately shape our disposition toward God. Quite the opposite.”<sup>240</sup> Another criticism Smith presents is that attachment theory “permits no doctrine of sin.”<sup>241</sup> Smith believes this leaves “felt needs” unchallenged and tolerates self-centered motivations within relationships.<sup>242</sup> This ultimately means that the gospel

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<sup>237</sup> Johnson, *Psychology and Christianity*, 31-32.

<sup>238</sup> David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling Approach,” in Johnson, *Psychology and Christianity*, 245.

<sup>239</sup> Winston Smith, review of *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do* by Tim Clinton and Gary Sibcy, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Spring 2004): 67, 72

<sup>240</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 70.

<sup>241</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 70.

<sup>242</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 70-71.

gets overshadowed: “Redemption, grace, and the gospel just don’t map on as a natural solution to ‘attachment injuries.’ The gospel is a love that addresses our violations of love; [whereas] attachment injuries are simply the everyday experience of mammals.”<sup>243</sup> For these reasons, Smith sees the model presented by Clinton and Sibcy as a failure of integration; the attachment model undermines rather than strengthens the biblical vision.

While Smith’s review does not address the application to marriage specifically, he does offer insight in his book *Marriage Matters*. This book does not present itself as a work of integration, yet key concepts are compatible with an attachment-based approach. For example, Smith describes the importance of emotional connection within a marriage: “The bottom line is this: if you’re unwilling to share in your spouse’s emotions, your spouse isn’t likely to feel loved.”<sup>244</sup> He encourages honesty concerning one’s deeper emotions, and expressing these emotions rather than using self-protecting strategies.<sup>245</sup> In another book, co-authored with Alistair Groves, emotions are considered in depth. Written to a popular audience, *Untangling Emotions* includes a chapter on the neuroscience of emotions and proceeds to describe the importance of emotions for relationships and relational repair.<sup>246</sup> Groves and Smith seem comfortable with mainstream terminology such as *vulnerability* and *empathy*, and offer advice reminiscent of the attachment-based models discussed previously. “Vulnerability is important because only people willing to stop attacking and accusing and instead to open their hearts to each

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<sup>243</sup> Smith, Review of *Attachments*, 72.

<sup>244</sup> Winston Smith, *Marriage Matters* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), 111.

<sup>245</sup> Smith, *Marriage Matters*, 115-120.

<sup>246</sup> J. Alistair Groves and Winston T. Smith, *Untangling Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).



other will be able to overcome conflicts and grow closer. ... Your vulnerable disclosure should be followed with a genuine invitation for the other person to do the same and your willingness to empathize.”<sup>247</sup>

Smith’s work reveals that even from a Biblical Counseling perspective, there are subtle forms of integration. If nothing else, discussions within mainstream psychology—such as the crucial role of emotion—seem to provide direction. This “hidden integration” is also apparent in a booklet put out by the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* entitled *JBC Must Reads: On Marriage Counseling*. Along with Winston Smith, two other CCEF faculty—Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman—provide guidance strongly reminiscent of Emotionally Focused Therapy. At one point the following outline is given for helping those deemed (as in EFT) “withdrawers”:

Help a couple to identify and own their specific conflict patterns.  
Lead withdrawers to grow in self-understanding and humble self-expression.  
Cultivate a new way of doing counseling together in the counseling room.<sup>248</sup>

These steps are in line with EFT although only Scriptures are cited up to this point. Much later, in a footnote, EFT therapists Scott Woolley and Veronica Kallos-Lilly are credited for a particular way of illustrating a conflict pattern.<sup>249</sup> This lone citation does not sufficiently account many similarities to EFT displayed in the authors’ terminology and process.

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<sup>247</sup> Groves and Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, 114-115.

<sup>248</sup> Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman, “Helping a Spouse Who Withdraws during Conflict,” in *JBC Must Reads: On Marriage Counseling* (Glenside, PA: Christian Counseling & Education Foundation, 2022), 37.

<sup>249</sup> Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman, “Helping a Spouse who Moves Against during Marital Conflict,” in *JBC Must Reads* (Glenside, PA: Christian Counseling & Education Foundation, 2022), 69.

While Biblical Counselors may appear removed from the task of integration, a closer look indicates otherwise. When engaging topics crucial to attachment models, such as emotion, or acknowledging indebtedness to an attachment model such as EFT, Biblical Counselors are engaged in integration. Their works may offer valuable insights for those doing integration more explicitly. For example, Smith's *Marriage Matters* contains emotionally sensitive perspectives on the roles of husbands and wives in Ephesians 5.<sup>250</sup> Sironi and Whitman apply a range of biblical passages concerning unity, love, tenderheartedness, humility, and blessing to marriage conflict within their EFT-indebted approach.<sup>251</sup> These insights from Scripture help to further the work of integration.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

This literature review summarized the application of attachment theory to marriage counseling, a biblical framework for attachment and marriage, and perspectives on integrating the Christian worldview with attachment-based marriage counseling. The application of attachment theory to adults is rooted in psychological research as well as contemporary neuroscience. Within an attachment framework, individuals may have experiences that make them *securely* or *insecurely* attached to others, which shapes the experience of their marriage. The goal of marriage counseling is to move spouses toward secure attachment with each other and, in a Christian framework, with God as well. Attachment-based models for marriage counseling hold in common four key processes

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<sup>250</sup> Smith, *Marriage Matters*, 200-201.

<sup>251</sup> Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman, "Helping Spouses Move Toward Each Other in Conflict," in *JBC Must Reads* (Glenside, PA: Christian Counseling & Education Foundation, 2022), 92-102.

which are: reframing behaviors within an attachment framework; identifying and replacing negative patterns of interaction; practicing emotional communication; and listening with empathy.

In Christian explorations of marriage attachment, prominent biblical themes include attachment to God; the biblical basis for marriage attachment; and God's design for relationships in light of contemporary neuroscience. These themes and key biblical references were explored, as well as a recognition that a prominent passage concerning marriage—Ephesians 5:22-33—is almost entirely missing from the conversation.

A discussion of integration explored five models to integrate Christian faith and psychology: Levels-of-Explanation, Christian Integration, Christian Psychology, Transformational Psychology, and Biblical Counseling. While these approaches differ in their relationships to the respective weight given to Scripture and psychological research, literature from each perspective provided positive examples of integration.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to determine how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's practice of attachment-based marriage counseling. The assumption of this study was that counselors who explicitly incorporate their Christian perspective with clients of shared faith have gained valuable experience in helping clients meet their counseling goals. In order to gain this rich description of counseling practices, the research identified three main areas of focus: how a Christian worldview shapes the counselor's understanding of marriage attachment; how a Christian worldview shapes the counseling process itself; and how the Bible is used by such counselors with a Christian worldview. To examine these areas, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's understanding of marriage attachment?
2. How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's process of counseling?
  - a. Goals
  - b. Self as Therapist
  - c. Interventions
  - d. Assignments
3. How does a counselor with a Christian worldview utilize the Bible in counseling?
  - a. Specific passages
  - b. Biblical themes

## **Design of the Study**

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines a general, basic qualitative study as one that explores how individuals “interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to these experiences.”<sup>252</sup> Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: there is a “focus on meaning and understanding,” within a constructivist framework<sup>253</sup>; the “researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis”<sup>254</sup>; the process is inductive rather than deductive<sup>255</sup>; and the study is “richly descriptive,” using “words and pictures [from participants] rather than numbers...to convey what the researcher has learned.”<sup>256</sup>

This study employed a qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives in the specific areas of counseling addressed in this study.

## **Participant Sample Selection**

This research required participants who are able to communicate in depth about how a Christian worldview informs attachment-based marriage counseling. To gain data

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<sup>252</sup> Sharan B Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2016), 15, 24.

<sup>253</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

<sup>254</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

<sup>255</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

<sup>256</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

towards best practices, participants were selected who practiced attachment-based marriage counseling, including but not limited to Emotionally-Focused Therapy; had over three years clinical experience in marriage counseling; had a word-of-mouth reputation for incorporating their Christian worldview into their counseling practices; and self-reported an explicit Christian integration into their counseling process. Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of people from the population of counselors who had received counseling training at a Masters level or higher, and who were additionally trained in an attachment model of marriage counseling.<sup>257</sup>

Participants were chosen for a unique type of sample in order to discover “unique, atypical, or perhaps rare attributes” in the data collected<sup>258</sup>--in this case, rare but effective counseling strategies within a Christian framework. Participants were purposefully chosen to provide variation in age and gender. They also varied in the geographical location of their counseling practice and client demographics, which provides a wide spectrum of regional diversity for the study. The initial selection of participants represented counselors in the Eastern, Southeastern, Southern, Midwestern, and Western United States. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with nine counselors. They were invited to participate via an introductory email, followed by either a personal phone call or more detailed correspondence depending on their preference. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is “minimal”

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<sup>257</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

<sup>258</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 95-96. A *unique* sample is a form of purposeful sample that aims

to “no risk” according to the Seminary IRB Guidelines. The following is a sample of this consent form.

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Ken Shomo to investigate how a Christian worldview informs attachment models of marriage counseling for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor’s practice of attachment-based marriage counseling.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include reports by counselors of confidence in the alignment of their faith with their counseling practices; reports of positive outcomes by couples receiving marriage counseling in a Christian context; and a research basis for incorporating a Christian worldview into the training of marriage counselors. Although there are no direct benefits for participants in this study, it is hoped that counselors will be encouraged by sharing their counseling strategies and outcomes, and—when the study is completed—by the opportunity to compare their practices with others.
- 3) The research process will include six to eight participants who are each interviewed for ninety minutes. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed.
- 4) Participants in this research will meet in person or virtually for a ninety minute interview, with consent to record and transcribe. Each participant will be asked a range of questions concerning their counseling philosophy, practices, and outcomes.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: In remembering previous experiences, there might be slight discomfort concerning past challenges the counselor had to navigate.
- 6) Potential risks: Risks are minimal. Participants will reveal their beliefs, and at times the subject matter may be emotionally sensitive. Participants will also engage in self-reflection concerning their own counseling practices, which may bring feelings of uncertainty or regret. There is also a time commitment of 75-90 minutes that will affect participants’ schedule.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audio or video recordings of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.

- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

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Printed Name and Signature of Researcher Date

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Printed Name and Signature of Participant Date

*Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.*

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

## Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.<sup>259</sup> Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.<sup>260</sup>

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing

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<sup>259</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 110.

<sup>260</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 110-111.



process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.<sup>261</sup>

The researcher interviewed nine counselors within a scheduled ninety minute timeframe. Prior to the interview, the participants signed the consent form. In order to accommodate participant schedules, honor regional diversity, and provide for a quality recording environment, meetings were conducted virtually. The researcher recorded the interviews digitally and, immediately following the interview, the interview was transcribed by a transcription service. This service was chosen for accuracy and was field tested prior to the interviews. The interviewer also reviewed each transcript thoroughly to confirm accuracy. The researcher completed the data gathering in the course of three weeks. After each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. From your standpoint as a Christian marriage counselor, what characterizes a successful outcome for your clients?
2. What are specific ways your Christian worldview informs your counseling model?
3. What specific Scriptures do you regularly discuss with clients?
4. What specific biblical themes do you regularly explore with clients?
5. What resources do you provide clients, whether within a counseling session or as homework?

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<sup>261</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 197-199.

6. What challenge have you experienced as you seek to integrate a Christian worldview into your counseling model?

### **Data Analysis**

As soon as possible and always within five days following each interview, the researcher transcribed each interview by the transcription service Temi. This service was chosen for accuracy and had been field tested prior to the interviews. The researcher personally reviewed each transcription and made corrections, with the result that an accurate transcription was preserved in a document file.

This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.<sup>262</sup>

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis.<sup>263</sup> The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes and patterns across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence between the different participants.

### **Researcher Position**

The researcher is a pastoral counselor whose background includes theological training and ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and a non-denominational church with Reformed convictions. These churches hold to teachings on

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<sup>262</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 197-199.

<sup>263</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 201-202.

marriage that could be described as historical, evangelical, and complementarian. While there are a range of beliefs under these umbrella terms, the researcher would affirm marriage as a covenant between a man and woman, and would affirm biological distinctions between male and female. In addition, the researcher would affirm personal faith as a significant indicator of personal and marital health.

In addition to theological and pastoral training, the researcher currently serves full-time as a counselor. His counseling credentials include advanced training in Emotionally-Focused Therapy (EFT), which is described in this dissertation's introduction and in the literature review as an evidence-based therapy based on attachment theory. The researcher has a high degree of confidence in the compatibility of a Christian worldview with attachment theory; he also practices his own forms of Christian integration in his role as a counselor. Because the researcher has direct experience in counseling that integrates Christian worldview with attachment-based marriage counseling, he was able to push beyond rudimentary discussions of compatibility and engage participants in more nuanced discussions of application.

### **Study Limitations**

As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this study were limited to those serving in counseling environments that allow for explicit integration of Christian worldview with counseling models. Therefore, the scope of potential application strongly favors such environments. Nevertheless, some of the study's findings may be generalized to other faith-based counseling environments, or to counselors of any background seeking to serve clients who self-identify as Christian. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions to a broader clientele

should test those aspects in their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Interview Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's practice of attachment-based marriage counseling. This chapter provides the findings of nine interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. These questions and their subcategories were:

1. How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's understanding of marriage attachment?
2. How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's process of counseling?
  - a. Goals
  - b. Interventions
  - c. Assignments
  - d. Self of the Therapist
3. How does a counselor with a Christian worldview utilize the Bible in counseling?
  - a. Specific passages
  - b. Biblical themes

### **Introductions to Participants and Context**

Nine counselors participated in this study. In the following introductions, all names and identifiable information have been changed to protect identity. To avoid sharing identifiable information, specific churches and denominations are also not named.

- **Kelson** has served as a professional counselor for over 25 years. He is a pastor, counselor, and the executive director of a Christian counseling organization in the Southeastern United States. His training includes a Master of Divinity and a Doctor of Marriage and Family Therapy. He describes himself as “a pastor who happens to be clinically trained” and serves ministry leaders nationwide within his denomination. Ninety percent of his clients are Christian; ten percent are low income or receive financial assistance; and ten percent are ethnic minorities.
- **Allen** has served as a professional counselor for 26 years in the Midwestern and Southeastern United States. He directs a counseling center and also directs care ministry within his church. He describes himself as a pastor and counselor, with Masters level education in both. Eighty-five percent of his clients are Christian; fifteen percent are low income or receive financial assistance; and twenty percent are ethnic minorities.
- **Kerri** has served as a professional counselor for 10 years in the Western United States. She is an ordained minister within her denomination. She has been trained in Emotionally Focused Therapy as a supervisor. Ninety percent of her clients are Christian; forty percent are low income or receive financial assistance; and thirty percent are ethnic minorities.
- **Melody** has served as a professional counselor for 14 years in the Northeastern United States. She has certified training as a biblical counselor and is a member of a nationwide Christian counseling

organization. She has been trained in Emotionally Focused Therapy through ICEEFT. She is a committed member of her church, with longstanding family ties to the Christian community in her city. Thirty-nine percent of her clients are Christian; eight percent are low income or receive financial assistance; and forty-six percent are ethnic minorities.

- **Julie** has served as a professional counselor for nine years in the Midwestern United States. She has been trained in Emotionally Focused Therapy through ICEEFT and also has specialized training for counseling military families. She is an active member in her church and denomination. Sixty percent of her clients are Christian; zero percent are low income or receiving financial assistance; five percent are ethnic minorities.
- **Jeff** has served as a professional counselor for fifteen years. He holds Masters degrees in counseling as well as theology, and a Doctor of Education in Community Care and Counseling. He holds a ministerial license in his non-denominational church and serves on its board of directors. Eighty percent of his clients are Christian; no clients are low income or receiving financial assistance; and fifteen percent are ethnic minorities.
- **Brent** has served as a professional counselor for 11 years in the Midwestern United States, and has served in Christian ministry roles for over 30 years. He trained for counseling in a seminary setting, and is trained in Emotionally Focused Therapy through ICEEFT. Sixty-five

percent of his clients are Christian; one percent are low income or receive financial assistance; no clients are ethnic minorities.

- **Aubrey** has served as a professional counselor for 20 years in the Western United States. She is trained in Emotionally Focused Therapy through ICEEFT as a supervisor. She attends a non-denominational church. Ten percent of her clients are Christian; five percent are low income or receiving financial assistance; and thirty percent are ethnic minorities.
- **Corinne** has served as a professional counselor for four years in the Midwestern United States. She is trained in Emotionally Focused Therapy through ICEEFT, is a certified mentor through the CatholicPsych Institute, and has been trained in spiritual direction. Seventy-five percent of her clients are Christian; zero percent are low income or receive financial assistance; and ten percent are ethnic minorities.

Each participant is a licensed counselor, and many have additional credentials not reported in this summary. Each has a reputation for incorporating their Christian worldview into their marriage counseling practices, and self-reported the same in an initial consult. There are three ministers represented, and others active in their churches and denominations. Each participant counsels from an attachment perspective, though modalities differ. Seven were trained in EFT, including one certified supervisor. Two seasoned counselors operate within a more general attachment framework; they cited influences including Sue Johnson and Dan Allender. One extensively utilizes the *Hold Me Tight* framework discussed in the literature review.



The nine participants are racially homogenous, as all are white; yet there are other areas of diversity. Five are women and four are men. Their ages ranged from 31 to 63 at the time the interviews were conducted. Geographically, they represent the Western, Midwestern, Northeastern, and Southeastern regions of the United States. Several see out of state clients which expands the geographical diversity of the clientele. There are eight Protestants, representing non-denominational, evangelical, and mainline denominations, and also one Roman Catholic participant. Most see a large majority of Christian clients, but not all; there is also ethnic diversity within the clientele.

### **Understanding of Marriage Attachment**

The first research question sought to determine “How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor’s understanding of marriage attachment?” This question helped explore how counselors integrated their Christian faith and attachment, as a foundation for how this may be expressed in counseling practices. Participants expressed an overall resonance that attachment models had with their Christian faith. They saw attachment as God’s design and as an expression of God’s image. Gaining secure attachment was closely connected to redemption—becoming “free” and “more fully human.” Participants understood God to be the ultimate source of secure attachment.

#### *“Attachment Resonates with My Faith”*

Numerous participants embraced an attachment model of counseling because it resonated strongly with their faith. Aubrey, a seasoned EFT therapist, was impacted by one of Sue Johnson’s earliest articles. “This makes so much sense,” she thought at the time. “God really made us this way...this feels consistent with what I think I know about

how I'm created...in terms of emotion, in terms of needing community" and in terms of "the gift of marriage." Kelson, another seasoned therapist, resonated with attachment theory based on his own life story. He reported that significant trauma in his own life made God's promises a lifeline: "Do not fear," "I am with you," "I hold you by your right hand," "See how great a love I've bestowed upon you." Internalizing the hope of God's presence through such verses made attachment theory, including Johnson's early work, resonate.

The attention given to emotions in attachment theory was especially significant for some. Melody's father was a pastor in a conservative tradition and "very suspect of emotion." Yet this seemed to miss "an entire important piece of human experience." Her study of adult attachment helped her value the emotional aspect of her faith and, particularly, worship. The emotional emphasis within attachment theory also helped Aubrey to understand "that my faith is not just a cognitive faith... There's an emotional element. Like when you think of worship and music...that's sort of an emotionally evocative experience, a way to experience God."

Brent is an EFT therapist with theological training. He found that Sue Johnson's *Hold Me Tight*, assigned in his counseling program, "resonated more with the biblical understanding of anthropology" than other models he studied. His initial curiosity concerning EFT grew over the years to "a resounding confidence" in the correspondence between this model and his understanding of the Bible. Kerri evaluated numerous marriage counseling models, but found that EFT and Sue Johnson's work resonated with her beliefs. Kerri noted that Sue Johnson was not a professed Christian, then said,

However, she was passionate about figuring out love. And God is love. So my Christian worldview is "God is love," and, "Everyone who loves is

born of God and knows God.” And if you don’t act loving, then you really don’t know God. ... That’s kind of my Christian worldview summed up in a nutshell.

So whether the entry point was expressed in more personal, theological, or biblical terms, participants were moved to consider an attachment model because they felt an encouraging resonance with their faith.

Nevertheless, several participants also noted the limits of models such as EFT apart from a Christian worldview. Melody said EFT “felt at home” with her faith and helped her better appreciate the emotional aspects of worship. “But there was a problem for me,” she added: “EFT didn’t mention sin.” She said of the EFT model, “It’s beautiful, just beautiful. ... But ultimately, spiritually, it’s bankrupt because it doesn’t...point us to the Lord.” Corinne, a licensed therapist who also received counseling training from a Roman Catholic perspective, went a step further. She distinguishes between “relationship therapy” and “marriage therapy.” She believes EFT is a wonderful model yet falls short of honoring what makes marriage unique within a Christian worldview:

EFT obviously is like, you can do it with anybody, you can do it with a mom and a dad, or a mom and a child, you know, you can do it with friends, you can do it with, um, dating couples, you can do it, you know, coworkers, anything, right? It's, it's good for anybody in any relationship. And so I don't knock it by any means, and it's great for marriages. Um, I just don't think it touches on what the nature of a marriage is. And also like within marriage, there's the responsibility of parenting and bringing children into the world. Um, and...of course the sexual nature...the sexual component of marriage as well is makes the relationship very different than, than any other relationship. So I think by not having that as an integral part of the model itself, um, we're not really doing marriage therapy.

So for participants in this study, attachment models such as EFT feel very compatible with the Christian worldview. Nevertheless, the Christian worldview adds important categories lacking within mainstream attachment models.

### *“We are Made for Relationships”*

Participants understood attachment in marriage to be an aspect of God’s intentional design. There was general agreement that we are “made for relationships,” as Allen stated. The basic elements of attachment theory are “true for all human beings,” Julie said. Frequently, participants said God’s own relational nature was reflected in his design for human attachment. Carrie said, “We are designed to be empathetic” which reflects the love of God. “My Christian worldview is that God is love, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” This reflects “the image of God,” she added. Allen likewise said, “We’re image bearers...made in God’s image. That means that we’re made for relationships.” Allen connected this relational image back to the Trinity, as did Melody. She referred to Genesis 1—“let us make man in our image”—and said the Trinity is “a basis for our attachment” because God is intrinsically relational. Attachment-based counseling, for these counselors, is compatible with God’s design and supports couples in expressing the very image of God.

Allen and Kelson both used the language of brain science when discussing God’s design for attachment. Allen, for example, said he has grown to understand what happens on a “physiological level to our brains when those things are not there that God has designed for us...to be fully human.” Kelson spoke of an “amygdala hijack” in Genesis 3, where mankind’s shame, fear, and hiding first take place. Melody also referenced brain science. Emotion is “God-given,” she said, “Our brains are wired with emotion.” When discussing couples experiencing conflict, she referenced the brain’s “fight, flight, flee response” as part of how God designed our brains.

Because these counselors believe God has fundamentally designed humans to flourish in relationships, broken relationships were often framed as a result of sin's entry into the world. Restoring secure attachment was understood as a redemptive process which reverses the adverse effects of the Fall. Genesis 3 was often explicitly in view. Kerri sees sin as creating the first "blame and shame and criticize cycle," and Aubrey said the "destructive force" in marriages corresponds to "*the* Enemy" or Satan. Both Kelson and Allen described vulnerability as a way couples come "out of hiding" (a reference to Genesis 3). "Being able to tap into God's redemption story" and to remind couples of their "freedom in Jesus," Julie said, "is a really, really powerful way to break bonds." In Allen's words, the work of creating secure attachment is a redemptive work that moves couples to be more "fully human."

### *"God is our Ultimate Secure Attachment"*

Participants stated that marriage attachment reflects our relationship to God, and that God is the primary source of secure attachment. Our "only truly secure attachment base is God himself," Kelson stated. God is the "great attachment figure" and "the ultimate safe haven" according to Melody. In very personal terms, Allen stated how his own life experience led him to see God as the source of secure attachment:

As a child of divorce where there wasn't really secure attachment, the first verse that...the Lord impressed on my heart was Psalm 34, that God is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. And...as a five year old, I wasn't thinking in terms of attachment theory, but even just that in that passage, something that I was deeply longing and famished and thirsty for, like God's word saying that he was responsive, that he was near, that he was engaged, that I was not alone, that the way things were...is not the way things are supposed to be, and that, like, repair and healing is possible.

Allen's story, rooted in God as his most secure attachment figure, gives him hope that he passes along to his couples that are struggling to bond with God and with each other.

Julie also finds hope in understanding God to be the source of secure attachment. She says it "adds a different layer to the counseling process" when the clients are Christians because she can help them "recognize the way that God pursues them. I can use different elements of that in helping them relate to and pursue one another." Kerri framed this in terms of the vulnerability required in marriage. "[E]ven though God doesn't depend on us, God's love for us makes God vulnerable to us. And so there is a beautiful interconnection between us and God, and a husband and wife. That dependency is a healthy dependency." Melody shares an example of giving hope to a wife whose husband had been unfaithful, based on the security found in God:

[E]very time we'd hit a wall, that's when I'd go to the Lord. Because once she'd say, "I, how will I ever trust him again?" Well, ultimately, ultimately, there is only one place to put your trust. ... We have the Lord helping us in his word, his Holy Spirit. But ultimately, if you're looking to put your ultimate trust in another human being, God warns us against doing that."

Melody reports that this marriage was, in fact, reunified. Specific interventions will be detailed subsequently, yet this provides an example of the common conviction that human attachment is less reliable the supreme attachment found in God.

We have explored three important beliefs for participants' understanding of attachment. First, that attachment theory and the related marriage counseling models resonates with the Christian worldview despite shortcomings. Second, God is fundamentally relational (in fact, "God is love") and humans are likewise designed for relationship. Third, God is the source of secure attachment, which provides hope for relationships broken by sin.

## **Counseling Process**

The second research question sought to determine how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's process of counseling. In particular, participants were interviewed concerning how their faith influenced their counseling goals, interventions, assignments, and their self-understanding as a therapist ("self of the therapist"). Of the four categories, participants had the fewest examples of assignments offered to clients. In the three remaining categories, participants indicated a range of ways their Christian worldview influenced their counseling process.

## *Counseling Goals*

How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's goals in marriage counseling? When asked about goals, participants expressed that their counseling goals are largely determined by the specific needs of the clients. For those who practice EFT, the general pathway associated with this modality was sometimes outlined. Corinne, for example, referenced "the goal of creating clarity and safety and connection and intimacy"—all familiar categories for EFT therapists like herself. In direct report, it did not at first appear that participants' Christian worldview significantly differentiated their goals from peers, yet certain counseling concerns unique to the Christian worldview emerged. The most prominent was the goal of creating secure attachment not only with each other, but with God.

Kerri provided a helpful example. She followed a more typical EFT path with a particular couple for nine months, and celebrated the progress they made. Then she said to them: "We've worked on your family of origin stuff, we've worked on your relational stuff. I'm curious, would you like to go into more depth working on your relationship

with Jesus?” She also said, “If I can get people to relate to Christ and feel his empathy for them, then they can give that empathy to themselves and to others.” She even says this is her “underlying goal.” Melody also said, “Ultimately the goal is that God is our real attachment figure” because “human beings can always let us down because they’re sinners and imperfect.” Julie said there is a “redemptive narrative” that “adds a different layer to the counseling process with believers.” In a specific case involving a husband who had been ensnared by pornography, she described the marriage counseling process as “deconstructing that shame, helping him remember his freedom and identity in Christ, helping him to be honest with his wife,” and then “helping her have grace for him.” In fact, the priority of attachment to God was expressed throughout the nine interviews. This aligns with how participants expressed their understanding of attachment, as detailed in the previous section.

Aligning marriages more closely with biblical priorities was another goal present in various interviews. This presented itself specifically in concerns regarding divorce. Every marriage counselor works to save marriages. Yet as Brent noted, many clients seek out a Christian marriage counselor because “they want someone who supports marriage and is not going to encourage divorce.” Corinne also said that her “hope is always, if they’re married...to salvage the marriage,” and adds that this is especially true if their Christian belief takes divorce “off the table.” Julie framed this in terms of religious vows: “When people come in with a Christian lens on marriage, it often gives them...an extra layer of tenacity to sort of hang in there with the process because they’re very committed to the sacred nature of their vows.” Melody admitted, “I feel like a failure when the couples divorce, unless I really feel that...there were [biblical] grounds.” She even



expressed a willingness to “put my view forth” and engage in discussions concerning biblical directives on divorce, seeing this to be an urgent spiritual matter.<sup>264</sup> Thus, the goal to avoid divorce took on religious implications for couples and counselors alike.

Roles of husbands and wives was another area that some participants sought to align with biblical guidance. As discussed in the literature review, gender distinction is generally unaddressed in mainstream attachment-based marriage counseling models. The topic did not come up with most participants, but for several it was given a place of importance. Melody noted more than once that as she reviewed her Christian clients over the past two years “not one husband in that marriage was walking with the Lord.” She noted that both husband and wife displayed sinful patterns, but helping men was vital.

And the, the encouragement of men's groups and classes for husbands and, uh, modeling. Good, biblical lay leaders who are modeling what it looks like to be a Christian man, role model, father, husband. Right? And, and many churches do that well, but I just see that when couples get into trouble, oh, do I long for a man of God to be walking with the Lord. In the word praying, attending church in, in studying, worshiping.

Melody proceeded to discuss the biblical guidance concerning wives, using the language of submission from Ephesians 5. “Submission is very hard,” she acknowledged, but laments that “feminism...for all the good that it’s done it’s also done a disservice for Christian women because, um, you know, submission is not even a concept that’s on the radar.” Melody then lamented the way headship is abused by men “being overly controlling and even oppressing their wives spiritually and sexually.” These are topics

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<sup>264</sup> Melody held to the perspective that divorce is permitted in cases of adultery and abandonment. It was unclear in the interview whether she would include abuse as a legitimate reason for divorce versus separation, although she spoke strongly against abuse and her willingness to confront this in session.

she addresses with Christian couples from Scripture, even if she and the couple have to “agree to disagree.”

Corinne also addressed gender distinction explicitly. She stated that “marriage as God intended, it is between a man and a woman, male and female.” She sees marriage as “complimentary,” which she explained this way:

[E]ach of us has a masculine nature and a feminine nature, and we need...to become as holy as we're meant to be. We need somebody to help us strengthen the part that's not our primary, you know, what we're primarily acting out of. And so when we're married together, then we have our partner that's helping build up our masculinity, like as a female, and then for the male, like build up that masculinity.

Corinne noted that she sees same-sex couples as well, a topic that was not expanded upon in the interview. However, her understanding of the biblical importance of the male and female natures within marriage creates a priority for Christian couples she feels she must add to her attachment model. For Corinne, parenting and sexual intimacy make “the relationship very different than...any other relationship,” and true marriage therapy must address these.

### *Interventions*

The term “interventions” refers to specific strategies a counselor may use within a session to accomplish counseling goals. This is at the heart of the counseling process. While different counseling modalities have associated interventions, this study sought to isolate those that were unique to the Christian worldview—as practiced by counselors operating within an attachment framework. The specifically Christian interventions described by participants may be categorized generally as “Scripture” and “prayer.” Prior

to using these spiritual interventions, participants laid a foundation within the intake process.

### **Intake Process**

The intake process was important for each participant, as this establishes expectations and presents an opportunity to explore the role of Christian faith in the counseling process. Each participant wished to be sensitive to their clients' desires for incorporating Christian faith and practices into the counseling sessions, yet there was a variety of approaches. Corinne includes questions about faith in an attachment questionnaire she reviews with clients in their second appointment: "Do you have a faith practice? Who is God to you? How do you live out your faith practice?" Aubrey, whose clientele is only ten percent Christian, includes a question in the intake paperwork concerning any "diverse identities." These might be "cultural, ethnic, geographic, age, religion, spirituality." Julie includes questions about faith in her intake documents, and follows up in session "about the role of faith in their lives and how they desire to have that integrated in the therapy process." Based on how they answer, she "sets the stage" for how she might bring up spiritual topics or incorporate prayer.

Kelson is one of several participants who holds both ministry and counseling credentials. He said, "As part of my self-disclosure...I would tell you, I understand myself as a pastor who happens to be clinically trained." Before a couple leaves, he asks if he can pray for them, and reports that universally his clients desire prayer. He even tells the story of a non-religious client who wouldn't leave the office until he received his prayer. Kerri, also a minister, relayed the story of a couple that had been out of church for a long time due to multiple experiences of judgmentalism. After hearing their stories she

said, “Wow, no wonder you haven’t been in church for a long time.” And she said, “I’m very much in favor of bringing the love of Jesus into our sessions, not the judgmentalism that happens in religiosity. ... Would you guys be open to that?” She reports that they responded, “To tell you the truth, we haven’t been in church for eleven years. We miss Jesus.” Kerri completed the story:

And so my counseling with them first was helping them identify the negative cycle in their relationship. Then I started working with them to identify negative patterns from their families of origin that are affecting them and their self, their view of self, and view of other. And then...after they got to a really good place, I said, “You guys are at such a good place in your relationship now. ... Now that you guys have, we’ve worked on your family of origin stuff, we’ve worked on your relational stuff. I’m curious, would you like to go into more depth working on your relationship with Jesus?” And they said “Yes.” So I’ve been doing that with them now, and they’ve been able to encounter Jesus...”

In this example, Kerri’s intake approach laid important groundwork for addressing spirituality. Yet she proceeded with sensitivity to their primary counseling goals, and to the hurt they had experienced.

Melody also models sensitivity as she seeks to discern how to best work with clients in a religious context. Depending on how clients receive a referral to her, she is able to know whether they are likely to expect a Christian perspective; she also makes the initial appointment by phone and is able to gain discernment in this interaction as well. During her first appointments, she enquires concerning church background. Having lived in the town her whole life, she says, she is knowledgeable concerning differing church communities. All this is in addition to her intake paperwork which includes questions about whether clients consider themselves “spiritual” or “religious.” As she gains discernment about clients’ faith and practices, if any, she adjusts her counseling according to what seems to serve them best. This is similar to Jeff, who seeks clarity

early concerning church background and expectations for counseling. Jeff's primary concern is to not disappoint those who may expect a "biblical counseling" model that is very different than the EFT model he utilizes. "Because I know Christian counseling has many different definitions and flavors and...so I kind of see what they're hoping, what they're expecting, and then kind of clarify my approaching concerning that."

## **Scripture**

The use of the Bible in counseling was a significant intervention that flowed from participant's Christian worldview. This was anticipated by the third research question, "How does a counselor utilize the Bible in counseling?" These findings will be detailed in its turn. Presently, it is important to recognize how a counselor's use of the Bible functions as an intervention. The answers that emerged in the interviews were that using the Bible helped counselors attune to their clients and educate their clients.

First, using the Bible helps counselors attune to their clients. For example, Aubrey gives an example of using Scripture to validate a couple's progress:

I can think of one other example that was really powerful, this is quite a ways ago, but it was an attachment injury where there had been an affair. And when there was this really full forgiveness, um, and repentance that had happened in that marriage, I think I referenced something about, "This is the mirror that we see in dimly right now of God restoring the two of you completely. And it mirrors what...God's gonna do when he restores us. And you just did it. You just did it right here."

Aubrey showed attunement to this couple, entering into their experience as she spoke the shared language of restoration and hope from 1 Corinthians 13. Jeff tells the story of a wife who found herself in a "really toxic work environment and...she was so worried she was failing God." Jeff said she was "having such a physical, visceral reaction to the job"

and yet she wasn't sure if God wanted her to quit. The husband didn't know how to help her because he was waiting for "a direct word from God." Jeff asked the wife,

What do you think God would, if God's loving, if God is compassionate, what do you think he would tell you? ... Do you think he would really want you to be, you know, stressed out, sick...every day, having borderline anxiety attacks when you're going to work?

This line of conversation was very helpful for both the husband and wife. They were able to see their situation differently in light of God's love and compassion—hallmarks of a secure attachment bond. Jeff continued:

So it was really good because we were able to then also plug in the attachment to each other. 'Cause he didn't know what to do. Uh, you know, he is trying to honor God, but he is trying, he's worried about his wife. And so we talked about, um, you know, meeting her needs. How...can he help her during this time because he's...scared, but then we just kind of work through, "What are...the needs right now for both of you?"

Jeff was able to engage his clients' struggle through understanding its spiritual dimension. He was able to attune to their real struggle, and also to speak most meaningfully into it. He not only provided a helpful perspective from within their Christian worldview, he moves them toward secure attachment—with God and with each other.

Second, using the Bible also helps counselors educate clients. The way participants in this study used the Bible was often similar to psychological education but may be termed "spiritual and psychological education." For Christian clients, a biblical or spiritual explanation of attachment—or specific counseling goals—provides credibility and instills confidence in the counseling process. For example, Kelson uses Jesus' example to help clients name their difficult emotions: "But then you can go to Gethsemane and you watch Jesus who was, who is God, and is man who knows that it is not good to be alone. He names his difficult, his painful feelings." Participants referenced

their use of the Bible on a range of other topics such as God's design for relationships, mutual submission, grounds for divorce, and sexual intimacy. In a subsequent section, the most common biblical themes and Scriptures referenced by participants will be detailed.

## **Prayer**

Prayer was discussed frequently by the participants, and in a variety of forms. Kerri said that "with all of the couples that come to me, I ask them if they want prayer to be a part of their healing. And, and most, so far, every Christian couple has said, yes, we want prayer to be a part of our healing." Kelson always asks, "May I pray for you?" He reports having only one person decline prayer out of 22,000 counseling hours, and that was not an atheist but "a Christian who was mad at God."

Prayer can play an important role in attachment, participants noted. Kelson described prayer as an "attachment movement. I'm letting you in and... in a sense I've opened my arms." Jeff assigns couples to pray together with this in mind. He says that even "a simple three sentence prayer" together is helpful for "joining from a spiritual level with each other." Kerri concurs; she assigns prayer as one of three practices to help couples connect and says, "It doesn't have to happen every day to be beneficial. And the more often you do it when you have time and you're not feeling like it's a duty, when you do it out of a loving heart to connect, that's when it is beneficial."

Praying with couples in session may also have a significant formative component. Kerri utilizes an approach termed "Safe Place Prayer" which she describes this way:

I have them each sitting on a different couch in the office and they've got their paper so that they're not distracted by each other. And I say, so ask the Holy Spirit to sanctify your imagination and create a place in your mind for you to meet with Jesus. And when that place shows up, just write down on your paper what it's, and then, um, what's it feel like to be there? What do you notice? What emotions do

you feel as you're in that place? And then invite Jesus to come. How does he show up? Is he, is it just a, a warm presence? Is there a, a light? Does he show up as a Good Shepherd? Um, just invite him to come and write down what, how he shows up. And then what emotion do you feel coming from Jesus toward you? And write that down. And then is there anything you'd like to say to Jesus? Just write that down. Is there anything Jesus says to you? Write that down. And then I have them share it with each other.

Sharing with each other builds a connection, but Kerri describes her deeper purpose.

“Empathy is just key, and Christ is the most empathic person there is. So if I can get people to relate to Christ and feel his empathy for them, then they can give that empathy [to] themselves *and* to others.” She says with a laugh that creating and sharing empathy is “kind of like my underlying goal.” Another underlying goal for Kerri, as couples engage in Safe Place Prayer, is that they would grow their relationship with each other and with God.

Prayer helps couples grow together spiritually and emotionally. Prayer was also referenced as a means of breakthrough. Julie reported multiple experiences where a “powerful de-escalation” between spouses occurred in the context of prayer. One occasion involved a husband who had experienced childhood sexual trauma. He had become “very steeped in pornography, and it was eroding his marriage.” In fact, this had evolved into “other destructive behaviors” and his wife was ready to leave. Julie reported that “you could see the oppression on him, almost like it was a visible weight on his body.” She sensed the Lord leading her to name this oppression and to pray.

And I was like, “I’m telling you, like right now, I can almost physically see how much this is weighing you down and the shame that you are carrying with regard to this. And I’m wondering if we can just take a moment and just pray over this.” And it was such a powerful session. He began just, like, sobbing, um, and it was, it was the start of what became a really critical part of the healing process, which was deconstructing that shame, helping him remember his freedom and identity in Christ, helping him be honest with his wife, um, helping her have grace for him.



Kerri took a similar approach when helping a couple that was experiencing tremendous guilt, shame, and remorse after they had engaged in orgies with other members of a church-based small group. Kerri said there were “several times where I definitely sensed the Holy Spirit leading to pray that a demon of lust would be cast out and pray that these oppressive images would be cleansed by the Holy Spirit.” She believes it requires “an extra measure of the Holy Spirit’s presence to bring healing into that brokenness.”

These are examples that underscore what Allen said, quoting the Apostle Paul: “Our battle is not against flesh and blood.” Whatever view the counselors’ had of supernatural forces, there was alignment around the crucial role of prayer. In many cases, participants engaged in private prayer whether outside of, or during, session. This will be explored further in a section concerning “Self of the Therapist.”

### *Assignments*

This research explored what assignments counselors might give to couples, which reflect the Christian worldview. Examples may include educational resources or practices for the couple. The interviews determined that few assignments are given, however. Aubrey says, “I’m not a big homework person or resource person,” and Corinne says, “I definitely tend toward less homework.” Additionally, participants reported a lack of helpful Christian marriage resources from an attachment framework. Jeff explained that “a lot of marriage ministry books are opinion-based” and “not necessarily empirically proven research.” Julie admitted, “I think a lot of Christian books on marriage are terrible. ... I think they way over-generalize things and tend to...trap people in shame if their narrative doesn't look like what they think it's supposed to from reading those materials.” Early in her marriage, Julie herself felt shame when she didn’t match the

ideals described in Christian marriage books. As a result, she prefers to recommend mainstream books on attachment. This was a common theme.

One exception was *Created for Connection* by Sue Johnson, which Julie and Jeff both recommend to couples. Jeff calls this his “number one resource,” and keeps copies on hand for couples. Brent and Corinne also speak well of this book as a Christian framework for attachment, though it is not their practice to assign it to couples. Participants noted other book recommendations, sometimes from a Christian perspective, but with little overlap. Brent admits he ultimately recommends “whatever I’m currently reading,” but he rejoices in the way “the Lord brings that into alignment” with clients’ needs. Other participants took a similar approach, recommending books or media according to the particular need—or the Holy Spirit’s “nudge” as Jeff put it.

Most participants seemed more likely to recommend podcasts or other digital media. Kelson and Allen both mentioned *The Place We Find Ourselves* which is hosted by Adam Young, a professing Christian who addresses a range of issues through an attachment framework.<sup>265</sup> Julie and Corinne, in conversations about the importance of biblical sexuality, mentioned the *Foreplay Radio* podcast.<sup>266</sup> One of the hosts is an EFT trainer and they trust the podcast to align with their Christian values concerning sex. Corinne says, “I think in therapy, couples therapy in general and especially Christian circles, that’s been an area that has been too long neglected.” One unique media recommendation came from Jeff, who has asked couples to watch *The Chosen* series

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<sup>265</sup> Adam Young, host, *The Place We Find Ourselves* (podcast), 2018-present, last accessed August 2024, <https://adamyoungcounseling.com/>.

<sup>266</sup> George Faller and Laurie Watson, hosts, *Foreplay Radio* (podcast), 2016-present, last accessed August 2024, <https://www.foreplayrst.com/>.

together. This series is a dramatization of the life of Jesus and is, he says, “Probably one of the best interventions that I give couples.” He says “couples watching them together actually grew closer” to each other and to God. The series shows “a side of Christ that up to this point a lot of multimedia has failed to capture.”

Aside from books and media, few counselors referenced specific homework. There were some exceptions, however. Jeff will assign specific Scriptures to think about over the week. He says, “I don't have a set agenda. That part I kind of rely on the Holy Spirit...” For couples making progress he will assign “rituals of connection” which may include praying together. It “doesn’t have to be long,” he tells them. “It could just be a simple three sentence prayer but just the aspect of joining from a spiritual level with each other.” Kerri takes a similar approach, assigning couples what she calls “the three dailies.” The three daily practices involve exploring feelings together; offering words of encouragement to each other, which she calls “praise and nurture”; and praying together. She clarifies that “daily” is aspirational and never legalistic:

I try to avoid—even though I call them the “three dailies” and I say, I'd like you to do these every day—I know that life in our culture is extremely stressful and busy and...it's not gonna happen every day. So I don't want to set you up for failure. So even though I call these the three dailies, that's the goal, um, but it's a goal that it doesn't have to happen every day to be beneficial. And the more often you do it when you have time and you're not feeling like it's a duty, when you do it out of a loving heart to connect, that's when it is beneficial.

She says her goal is to help people learn that “in their relationship with God and with each other, [it] is when things flow from the heart, they have a good ending. If they flow from legalism or duty, they become a shaming thing.”

### *Self of the Therapist*

The category “self of the therapist” was included in this research to discover how the therapist’s understanding of their own Christian identity shapes the counseling process. Themes that arose related to participants’ Christian identity included reframing counseling as a ministry calling; expressing humility and non-judgmental attitudes; and awareness of God’s presence. These areas of Christian self-understanding provided encouragement for the counselor and guidance in the counseling process.

Participants understood their role within a ministerial context. Kelson, who is an ordained minister as well as a licensed counselor, describes himself as “a pastor who is clinically trained.” He describes counseling as an “application of the gospel” or “highly skilled discipleship.” He says, “I tell my team and I tell myself: I don’t see problems, I don’t see diagnoses. I see people who are deeply wounded. And within that, and with good psychological research, good interventions as simply applicational material...for the gospel.” This dual identity—pastor and counselor—combine in his counseling. This shapes his clients’ expectations, for example, concerning how the Bible might be used during counseling. It also creates a deeper investment in his own heart. Because he views his clients with a pastor’s sensibility he says, “I’m not a traditional therapist, like, ‘I need to write a note, I’m done with this case.’”

Kerri, who is also an ordained minister, was led into counseling because of her concern for divorce rates within the church. Several other counselors—Julie, Melody, Corinne, and Allen—expressed the same concern. Julie therefore views her counseling work as “sacred,” and also “weighty.” Melody admits, “I feel like a failure when the couples divorce, unless I really feel that...there were [biblical] grounds.” In a vulnerable

moment she adds, “You know, when...couples divorce for unbiblical grounds, or they're non-Christians, oh, you know, I am, I'm so, uh, blue about it for a little bit. And I, and I think if they'd gone to a better therapist, they might have had a better chance of, uh, you know, making the marriage work.” Ultimately, she says, “I’m not gonna linger there because there’s too much work to be done.”

Kelson finds relief in knowing the pressure is not on him as a counselor. “I get to walk with my Father and invite people into fellowship with him. And I’m not the great counselor, He is,” he says. Allen, who is also a pastor and counselor, reflects the same encouragement. The pressure to “perfectly land the plane” with couples is tempered by knowing God is at work apart from him. “Hey, let me be faithful in this moment, but Lord, you’re...over this person’s story,” he says. “What a gift it has been,” he says, to know “that for those who are followers of Christ...the story isn’t over. And so when in one sense it’s like, ‘Goodbye for now,’ and just like the excitement of...[the] new heavens and new earth, like just how exciting that is to think about that.”

God’s presence in the counseling process came up frequently. “I’m very cognizant of the fact that it is the Spirit who drives and leads me,” Julie said. She tells a story of how she learned this lesson early in her counseling career.

Early on in my couples therapy work, I, one of my first couples that really dealt with some pretty extreme escalation, um, they were strong believers and they wanted spiritual integration and therapy. And there were two distinct times where I just really remember feeling the Spirit prodding me that like, this was the time to speak in and just quiet that space down and ask the Lord to, like, enter in. And, um, and he did. And it was really powerful in deescalating both of them and sort of getting us focused back in that space together. Um, and both of the times that I remember that happening, really constructive work happened following that. So it was really fruitful.

Aubrey finds the Holy Spirit helps her bear the weight of counseling in a way that training cannot replace. She says, “I just think there’s so much we cannot do, you know, on our own. I think experience after experience has made me more reliant on the Holy Spirit.” She says that she views counseling couples as “me, the two members of the couple, and then God in the room.” In the counseling process she believes “the only part I can really do is the ‘me’ part, and then there’s the ‘them’ part, and then there’s the Holy Spirit part. And all of them have to be working.”

Our second research question was “How does a Christian worldview shape a counselor’s process of counseling?” The interviews revealed that counselors are driven by a concern to see couples connect to God and to each other. While not a stated goal, this was evident throughout the interviews. Participants used the intake process to lay groundwork for spiritual conversations, and described numerous ways Scripture and prayer were incorporated into their process. Participants sometimes assign books or media to couples, but report a lack of quality Christian resources related to attachment. Throughout the counseling process, each participant’s Christian identity provided encouragement and guidance.

### **Using the Bible in Counseling**

How does a counselor with a Christian worldview use the Bible in attachment-based marriage counseling? The Christian worldview is shaped by engagement with Scripture, and this third research question involved how the Bible is utilized in the counseling process. The interviews revealed that participants demonstrate both sensitivity and skillfulness. Participants are sensitive concerning whether and how biblical

conversations are initiated within the counseling process. Yet in the appropriate counseling context, an array of Scriptures and themes were drawn into the counseling process. Participants most frequently referenced creation and design, with special reference to Genesis 1-2; sin, shame, and redemption with reference to Genesis 3; the example of Jesus from the gospels; instructions from Ephesians 4-5; divorce; and sexuality.

### **Sensitivity Concerning Biblical Conversations**

Participants consistently expressed sensitivity to their clients' needs when discussing how they use the Bible in sessions. Kerri noted, "A lot of the people I work with have...been beat down by the Scriptures. Scriptures were used as weapons." This same language was echoed by Jeff, who said, "I'm not gonna beat you upside the head with the Scriptures, but I'll, uh, at your comfort level, I'll bring in Scriptures, I'll bring in spiritual principles." Finding clients' comfort level includes what Jeff calls "getting buy in" to more explicit discussions. Even so, he is sensitive to his clients' specific religious background and does not wish to usurp closely held beliefs: "I, my job, I don't want to persuade somebody out of their faith. ... I don't wanna lose the therapeutic relationship if they feel like I'm challenging their faith." Similarly, Melody notes that even Christian couples "glaze over" if she pulls out her Bible and begins to do "exegesis." One of her creative solutions is to pray for couples privately using Scripture, and then "drop [that Scripture] into their lives" if the moment feels right.

As noted earlier concerning the intake process, most participants get "buy in," as Jeff says, during initial assessment. Some—like Kelson, Allen, and Kerri—make known their pastoral credentials yet remain sensitive to the potential discomforts couples may

have. These same three counselors, who each work with a largely religious clientele, expressed particular concern for clients with backgrounds of spiritual abuse or legalism. Kerri said to one couple, “I’m very much in favor of bringing the love of Jesus into our sessions, not the judgmentalism that happens in religiosity.... Would you guys be open to that?” Melody seeks “not to proselytize” non-believing clients, but even in these cases, “If there’s ever crack, I speak a word for Jesus.” In fact, there are many words to speak! The counselors interviewed for this research referenced numerous biblical passages and themes that have informed their counseling sessions explicitly.

### **Creation and Design**

The first several chapters of Genesis are frequently utilized in conversation with clients. Genesis 1-2 describes God’s creation of the world, mankind, and marriage. This passage is of special importance to Brent, who believes many couples need to be reminded that they are not defined by their problems. In his words, for many, “Their view of life begins with Genesis 3” which describes sin, instead of Genesis 1-2.

They begin with their view of experiences: “*I’m so broken.*” Oftentimes there’s a sense of helplessness or hopelessness that they express, but there’s a, a distinct lack of understanding that the dignity afforded to us as God did in Genesis 1 and 2. They don’t begin with Creation, they begin with the Fall. And I, that ends up being probably one of the more foundational passages that I’ll bring in. With couples that don’t have an, an explicit kind of desire to bring faith and Scriptures into the session, I will often just casually referred to, “We have been designed this way,” and I leave it at that.

Similarly, Kerri explained her counseling approach to a couple with an implicit reference to Genesis 1:27: “It’s not about finding a bad guy. Um, I see both of you as created in the



image of God. And for me, that image is that you have a core self inside of you that bears the image of God's love.”

Emotions in particular were cited as part of God’s good creation. Kerri believes we are “designed to be empathetic” and that this reflects God’s character which is “profoundly love.” She tells the story of helping a “Stoic” couple embrace their emotions:

I do have a couple who comes from German ancestry and they say, “Well, we're just Stoic. We don't share emotion.” And, and I let them know, what I usually do is, I let my stoic couples know, “God created us in his image. Have you ever wondered what that means? I've wondered what that means. And as I read through scripture, I notice that there's something unique about, about God that is also unique about humans. ... it's this ability to have emotion and to reason from our emotion. So in the Bible, you see where God says, um, he loves us. You read where God has joy, where you read where Jesus wept, you read where God felt betrayed and felt that Israel was playing the prostitute. And God longed to pull his bride back to him, but she wouldn't have him. And so you see all these, you see God expressing all these range of emotions. So part of being made in the image of God is having emotion. So one of the things I want to help you do, even though you're Stoic Germans and don't show emotion, I don't want to make it awkward or uncomfortable, but I want you to know God shows emotion in the Bible and displays it.”

Melody also references creation when speaking to couples about emotion. She is attentive to how different faith traditions approach emotion, placing Charismatics and Anglicans at opposite ends of a spectrum. Yet she tells clients, no matter their background, “[Emotion] is in you, it’s...part of the way he made you, and we’re gonna celebrate that.”

Some participants reference God’s design to explain the science of attachment to clients. Julie explains how God designed the brain “for secure relationship,” and to be “resilient” even in overcoming trauma. Explaining how God has designed us for relationship “resonates to much” with her religious clients, she says. She also uses the language of design when speaking about sex, to help clients “lean into understanding that God designed that...purpose in marriage and...that’s something to be celebrated.” God’s

design for sexuality was also a significant theme for other participants such as Kerri and Corinne. Kerri lamented the many ways she saw sexual brokenness affecting Christian couples—even a couple she counseled, filled with shame, whose entire church group had involved itself in indiscriminate sexual activities. Yet she rejoiced in how monogamy was celebrated and given a research basis within Sue Johnson’s early writing, which helps provide resources for moving couples back toward God’s design. Corinne believes God uses marriage to bring healing through the “perfect love we’re able to cultivate through a lifetime of being together”—with sexuality and childbearing being fundamental to the very “nature” of God’s design.

### **Sin, Shame, and Redemption**

Participants commonly discuss biblical themes of sin and shame with clients, tied to the hope of redemption. Often, discussions of shame are sourced in the language of Genesis 3. Kelson uses this chapter in his first meeting with clients to describe the pattern of sin, shame, and hiding that takes place between couples. Similarly, Allen explains from Genesis 3 how sin creates “immediate reactivity and...lack of security, this lack of...secure attachment...” Like Adam and Eve hiding from God when they hear him walking in the garden, spouses also “hear footsteps that are actually loving” as if they were “a home invader.” He says, with some humor, that marriage counseling “in many ways...goes back to Genesis 3, that it’s kind of hard to see someone accurately from behind a shrub.”

Kerri provided a particularly rich description of how the theme of shame informs many counseling conversations. She also draws frequently from Genesis 3.

I often use the Garden of Eden story to emphasize EFT because in the Garden of Eden man and woman are here and they're...pure. They're perfect. They haven't done anything wrong yet. And yet, because God insists on free choice—because love can't be real love if you don't have a choice of it. If you're just a robot wired to love, then it's not true love 'cause love must have a choice to be love. And so God gave choice. And so when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God's one instruction, safeguard, to protect them, all of a sudden sin enters and, and the blame and shame and criticize cycle entered their relationship.

Kerri next described how both the man and woman refused to take responsibility for their actions. They chose to criticize and blame others “because it’s so hard to bear that shame.” Kerri then detailed how the love of God provided redemption for Adam and Eve—and for all of us, through Jesus. For Kerri, this is not simply one conversation point among many but provides an overarching framework:

I'm always talking with people about the beauty of redemption, the beauty of walking with Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit and the growth in learning how to come to God anytime we feel ashamed of something we've done and to receive love. And that's what I like to help you as a couple do. When you get stuck in the blame, shame, criticize, defensiveness. That's that reactive cycle that keeps you from feeling loved and valued. And that reactive cycle is what I wanna help you identify in your relationship and then be able to move towards a care cycle, um, a loving cycle where you can feel the humble part of each other and feel the gratitude and the compassion and the empathy. So those things are hard qualities to develop, but we'll develop them carefully. And even though you've been caught in this very shameful experience, and I'm so grateful, the fact that you came to me for counseling and you're saying, help us, we are both filled with so much shame and, and self-hatred and we don't even know if God can still love us and we don't know how to move back toward each other 'cause we've hurt each other so much by this.

Kerri was speaking both generally and specifically here. She is “always talking about” these themes. In this case, she was speaking to a couple that sought help after each spouse had been ensnared in sexual promiscuity.

It was clear throughout the interviews that using the Bible to detail the reality of shame, and the universality of shame, was tied to hopeful discussions of redemption *from*

shame. Julie gave an example of a husband dealing the shame of pornography addiction. “I think that being able to tap into God's redemption story for each of them was a way that really helped combat his shame...so that he could, um, remember his forgiveness in Christ.” This hope of redemption allowed him to “face her and...hold her pain. Um, and I think that that helped to equip them to begin to heal together.” For the wife, recognizing that “God was continuing to pursue her heart in different ways, even in the midst of the betrayal, gave her hope that he wasn't done with her or with their story together.”

### **The Example of Jesus**

Participants noted their use of the Gospels in counseling, especially concerning Jesus' example. Kelson, for example, helps couples understand Jesus' priority of doing deep attachment work versus addressing merely outward issues. He named a variety of passages, beginning with Jesus' interaction with a woman with chronic bleeding in Luke 8. Jesus was in a crowd yet recognized that someone touched him, resulting in this woman discovering she had been noticed by Jesus. Kelson notes, “The only way in a crowd that she would know she was seen is Jesus must have tilted his head and stared right at her.” The same dynamic is at work, Kelson adds, with “the woman at the well, the man born blind, the cripple at the pool of Bethesda that Jesus sees.” In these stories Jesus heals but also addresses a heart issue. Kelson draws from this a lesson for counseling: “People want to fix the outside...but it's in knowing that they are seen, that their shame is broken, and the safety of his gaze, who knows all things without judgment, that movement happens.”

Kerri, cited earlier for her detailed discussions of sin, shame, and redemption, also utilizes Jesus' example when speaking with couples.

Because Jesus, his ministry is about redemption. That even the thief on the cross could be redeemed right then and there. And, and even the woman at the well who was currently living with a man, had had four husbands before. And Jesus was totally there to offer her redemption. And the woman caught in adultery, Jesus is, “Go and sin no more.” There's a redeeming nature in God's love for us that when we move toward him to receive that redemption, his love sets us free from shame.

Kerri, like Kelson, references a variety of Gospel passages to communicate Jesus' example to couples who need hope. She speaks freely to couples about Jesus providing a “safe place,” and helps couples prayerfully envision this safety in very personal ways. The goal is not only individual; as a couple, this sense of security in Jesus helps them to more freely confess and forgive.

Allen and others also use the Gospels to show Jesus' example of true humanity. Allen mentioned multiple times that the church often has a misguided view of what it means to be human. He points clients to Jesus as “a finite, real human being,” and he shows from Luke 2 how Jesus grew and developed. He also wants couples to know it's not unusual to struggle. Especially when there has been a spiritually abusive environment, he says, “We feel like we have to either over-function or we have to be more Christ-like than Christ.” He points to Jesus who was “without sin” yet failed to tell his mother where he was for several days. And immediately after this story, Allen points out, Luke reports that Jesus “grew in wisdom and stature.” He explains to couples, “If it was okay for Jesus to grow, can it be okay for us to grow and [do] story work, understanding our story, and understanding our spouse's story? Is it okay for...for it to be difficult where we miss each other in conflict?” His hope is that couples will give each other grace to grow, to be less reactive, and to not despair in the process. “That's one theme that we talk about a good amount,” he notes.

Kelson frequently uses the Gethsemane narrative to show how Jesus was fully human in his emotions, and how these emotions drove him to his closest relationships. Like Allen, Kelson believes Jesus' example is a corrective to common Christian assumptions about emotions.

But then you can go to Gethsemane and you watch Jesus who was, who is God, and is man, who knows it is not good to be alone. He names his difficult, his painful feelings. "I'm, I am overwhelmed with sorrow, grieved unto death," and he sweats blood. But in that moment, the first thing he does is he moves toward his closest friends, Peter, James and John. "I need you to be with me. Watch over. And then he prays. And so you watch that threefold attachment underway. He's not hidden from himself. He doesn't have that reactive cycle. He knows what those feelings mean: "I need to not be alone." And so he names and asks for and behaviorally and moves toward what he needs, connection with the closest people to him and then with the Father.

Jesus, Kelson demonstrates to clients, did not deny his painful feelings. Instead, he lives out his humanity as God intended—he moves presses into his relationships. Notice Kelson's reference to the original garden, Eden, when he says that Jesus, both God and man, "knows it is not good to be alone."

Kerri uses Jesus' example to speak about another misunderstood emotion: anger. She reports, "I grew up thinking anger was a sin. So, I grew up in a Christian culture where we didn't show anger, we would stuff it. I didn't even know I had anger until I started exploring that tightness in my stomach." When speaking to a Christian couple that struggled to express emotion, Kerri explained the possibility of being angry without sin. "But how, how do you not sin when you feel anger?" she asked the couple. "Jesus is our role model for that," she answered, and detailed the story of Jesus' own expression of "righteous anger" when confronting the money changers in the temple in John 2. She explained from a careful reading of the text how Jesus was angry yet acted with wisdom.

“Jesus knew that the degree of this egregious sin needed to be a shocking revelation to the people who were doing it. But he didn't hurt anyone physically.”

#### **Instructions Concerning Anger in Ephesians 4**

Ephesians was frequently referenced by participants, and in particular the instructions in chapters four and five. The phrase “in your anger, do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26) was noted by several counselors. Kerri referenced this principle and moved into a discussion of Jesus’ anger. Kelson also uses this passage to explain how couples should express feelings in a vulnerable manner. He gives the example of a husband who is triggered by his wife’s anger. The husband doesn’t like his wife’s anger, and she admits, “I need to deal with that, with how I get angry.” Kelson surprises them with his response:

And I'm like, “Well, God tells you to die to each other, but he also commands you to be angry, right? In Ephesians 4, right? And he doesn't say it's okay if the husband is angry. He commands you both to be angry. But in doing that, we have to learn to tell the truth. And it's the context about what's happening about ourselves. It's not just, “I'm angry, you suck,” right? Truth is much more full-orbed in Pauline theology there.

Kelson is here combining Ephesians 4:25 (“speak the truth”) with 4:26 (“be angry and do not sin”). The call to be truthful “about ourselves” creates the context for expressing anger with vulnerability.

Melody also cites Ephesians 4:26 as one she frequently discusses with couples, with a special concern for understanding the sinful side of anger. “I just see the devastating effect of anger,” she reports. Her training in EFT has taught her “not to pathologize anger” but to “look at anger as...someone fighting for the relationship.” Yet for a Christian, she says, there is an understanding that anger is often an expression of pride based on selfish drives. “So, do people have a righteous anger sometimes? Mm-

hmm, sometimes. Yes. But the way we are behaving in our negative cycle is sinful. Ultimately, it, it's not what the Lord wants for us either to withdraw and...stonewall and, and punish in a passive aggressive way. Or to be poking and poking and or critical.”

### **Marriage Instructions in Ephesians 5**

Paul’s most detailed instructions concerning marriage are found in Ephesians 5. This is an important passage, yet neglected in the literature surveyed previously. Participants recognize the passage has been mishandled. Kerri says that the language of submission in Ephesians 5:22 “has been used...to make women feel that they’re the only ones who have to submit in the love relationship of a husband and wife.” She notes the original Greek clarifies the instruction to “submit to one another,” as Ephesians 5:21 says, and Kerri this means “husbands to wives, wives to husbands.” In fact, framing Ephesians 5:22-33 within the context of mutual submission was a concern for numerous participants.

Multiple participants indicated a willingness to discuss misunderstandings of headship and submission in session. Melody says she cannot “skirt” the issue, especially if there is abusive behavior involved in the name of headship. She is concerned to be “faithful to what we see in God’s word” and she trusts that, in the worst case, fellow Christians should be able to “agree to disagree.” Brent is also willing to have challenging conversations about this text. When he explains mutual submission, going back to Ephesians 5:21, he says “that often brings up a lot of consternation, sometimes conflict, ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’” He says couples will often cite a popular teaching that he needs to correct:



Like, “women need to be loved and men need to be respected, and if he can do that, everything’s fine.” Well, that works great until you run into a man who’s really acutely aware of needing to be loved, and his sense of needing respect is very small. What is he left to do?

Brent sees negative cycles enacted when couples are “off kilter” concerning this teaching.

Understanding mutual submission is a vital corrective. “Do you see the other as a person, as a human being deserving equal respect and equal importance about their own experience of life and experience of being in relationship with you?” he says. Ephesians 5 fits within the attachment framework precisely because of the overarching context of mutual love.

Jeff’s understanding of mutual submission also comports with, rather than competes with, his understanding of attachment. He describes how he discusses this text with couples, beginning with Ephesians 5:21:

I always go to the verse before that, where they're supposed to mutually submit to one another ... And then I'm able to...bring in attachment theory because, you know, when you're, you know, submitting to one to one another, you're looking at their needs. You're looking at how to take care of them, how to help them. And so what are those practical ways? And then I talk about how those things often can increase the emotional connection because you're feeling loved, you're feeling seen, you're... feeling soothed.

For Jeff, Ephesians 5 is a basis for mutual care and emotional connection. Corresponding to this, Kerri reports that the sacrificial love prescribed for the husband in Ephesians 5 “just yields a deep respect in a wife for a husband.”

Participants found that some popular views of headship and submission actually create emotional disengagement, or a negative cycle, for couples. Kerri says that if a wife only shows respect out of obligation, and to a husband who is not displaying sacrificial love, “Then it’s just legalism again.” This legalistic approach keeps a couple trapped in

their “reactive cycle.” she says. Julie illustrated this with a particular couple’s story. She begins by describing the husband as a “classic withdrawer.”

And he worries continually about her perception of him as...the leader in their home. He worries about her faith in him, um, to make wise decisions, to be self-controlled, like all these different things. And so, where that plays in attachment-wise is when she presses in with concerns or worries, he would retreat and shut down. And for a while he was using alcohol as a coping mechanism to do that. And that really spiked her fear. And so she would lean in even more. And what she didn't realize was that that was turning it into a dynamic where she was talking to him like she was his mom. And it was so overt, like I could watch it play out in the session, and I finally had to call their attention to it.

When she did, she found that the wife didn’t realize how demoralized the husband had become and “had, like, lost connection to the man that God wanted him to be in that dynamic.” As Julie helped them see this negative cycle, the dynamic began to shift. “It was amazing,” she said, “because he, like, started to rise to the occasion more.” She also speaks about this moment of breakthrough:

It was really powerful, because I said to him...something like...‘I see in you that you deeply desire to be a godly husband in this relationship,’and he just started crying. ... By addressing it in that way, it allowed him to sort of remember his identity and who he was. And so, yeah, so they’re doing really well. It’s exciting. We still got a ways to go, but it’s been a shifting dynamic for sure.”

Melody expressed a similar compassion for both husband and wife. “As they say,” she says, “It’s harder for men to love their wives. And it probably is. ‘As Christ loved the church’—wow. Uh, but submission is very hard.” She laments that there is not better teaching and modeling for both men and women, and is willing to give time in session to educate couples on the biblical instructions from Ephesians 5.

Despite a lack of resources from an attachment perspective, participants incorporated Ephesians 5 and its associated themes into their counseling. For many, like

Melody, this was for the sake of faithfulness to Scripture. This also benefited clients whose identity was shaped by Christian language concerning headship and submission.

## **Summary of Interview Findings**

This chapter examined the responses from Christian counselors, who operate within an attachment framework, to three research questions. First, how does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's understanding of marriage attachment? Second, how does a Christian worldview shape a counselor's process of counseling? And third, how does a counselor with a Christian worldview utilize the Bible in counseling? Each question yielded a variety of helpful perspectives from the nine participants.

The participants in this research understood attachment within the context of God's creation. Neuroscience reveals that we are designed for relationships, they believe, and this is an important aspect God's image. Just as God exists in eternal relationship as Trinity, he designed humans to reflect this in our attachment bonds. Furthermore, participants found that attachment theory resonated with their faith more broadly, as it gives priority to relationships, love, and emotions. Therefore, gaining secure attachment was closely connected to redemption—becoming “free” and “more fully human.” Finally, participants understood God to be the ultimate source of secure attachment.

The interviews explored how a Christian worldview shaped counselors' counseling process. Participants had varied models and pathways for their clients, yet their faith informed their counseling in four major areas we explored: goals, interventions, assignments, and self of the therapist. Their Christian worldview informed their goals by creating a twofold concern to help couples connect to God and to each other. They also possessed a desire to align marriages more closely with biblical

priorities, which was seen in conversations about divorce and gender distinctions.

Participants' Christian worldview informed their intake process, by establishing a context for religious interventions. Scripture and prayer provided two broad categories for the religious interventions discussed. Utilizing Scripture provides attunement between counselor and client, and is also a means of "spiritual and psychological education."

Participants discussed various prayer practices that aided the counselor; fostered safety with God that aided vulnerability with at least one spouse; or served as a means for couples to bond outside of the counseling session. In terms of other assignments, participants sometimes assign books or media but reported a lack of quality Christian resources related to attachment. The counselor's understanding of their own Christian identity was explored as an aspect of "self of the therapist." The interviews revealed that participants see their work as a ministry calling which gives encouragement, hope, and a sense of God's presence in the process of marriage counseling.

The interviews gave special attention to how the Bible is used in attachment-based marriage counseling. Participants demonstrate sensitivity when using the Bible. They nevertheless shared many examples of using the Bible effectively in session. The most common themes and passages were detailed and discussed: creation and design, with Genesis 1-2 as a key reference; sin, shame, and redemption, with Genesis 3 as a key reference; the example of Jesus in the gospels; instructions concerning anger in Ephesians 4; and instructions concerning marriage in Ephesians 5. Participants understood Ephesians 5:21-33 in the context of mutual submission, and this approach to the text proved helpful for fostering secure attachment for Christian couples.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to determine how a Christian worldview shapes a counselor's practice of attachment-based marriage counseling. As I set out on this journey, I surveyed the literature related to adult attachment, specifically as it is applied to marriage counseling. I explored the biblical and theological concepts concerning marriage and attachment that appear in both popular and academic literature. Finally, I examined literature concerning the integration of a Christian worldview with attachment-based marriage counseling. The specific contribution of this qualitative research emerged through inductive method, revealing insights from counselors' experiences. Counselors were chosen with a reputation for, and self-report of, an explicit integration of their Christian worldview with their counseling process. The interviews, analyzed in chapter four, illuminated the way Christian counselors understand attachment, practice marriage counseling within an attachment framework, and incorporate the Bible into their counseling. A discussion of this research follows, as well as recommendations for counselors, pastors, and for further research.

### **Research Findings**

Sue Johnson's provocative claim that "the new science of love" harmonizes with the Christian faith opened this study. Her book with pastor Kenneth Sanderfer, *Created for Connection*, and other books surveyed in this study seek to tune the reader's ear to

this harmony.<sup>267</sup> Johnson and Sanderfer lead with psychological research and incorporate Christian beliefs and may be described, in the categories utilized in this study, as Christian Integration. Those who participated in the present research went further in their integration. The Christian worldview shaped participants' goals, intake process, and interventions, and also their self-understanding as counselors. Scripture and prayer were widely incorporated into the counseling process to serve the goal of secure attachments. At times, the typical counseling process—for example, an EFT pathway—was interrupted to address spiritual concerns.

Although participants were not asked to categorize their approach to integration, the findings align with the concerns of Christian Psychology. As described in the literature review, McFee and Monroe proposed “translating” EFT (in particular) into Christian Psychology in five stages: understand the psychological language, evaluate its foundations critically, utilize Christian language, add specifically Christian material, and correct the original model where necessary.<sup>268</sup> Without proposing such a formal project, participants in this study engaged broadly in these pursuits. Furthermore, the participants' concern for their own formation, and their frequent emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work within the counseling process, aligned with the emphasis of Transformational Psychology.

Biblical themes participants incorporated into their counseling included creation, that is, God's design for attachment relationships; the related theme of the image of God;

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<sup>267</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*. Others include Clinton and Sibcy, *Attachments*; Hart and May, *Safe Haven Marriage*; and Yerkovich and Yerkovich, *How We Love*.

<sup>268</sup> McFee and Monroe, “Christian Psychology Translation,” 319.

and God as the source of secure attachment. These particular themes were present to varying degrees within Christian attachment literature. The interviews demonstrated how these emerged within the counseling process, and clarified how these beliefs may serve the goal of secure attachment.

Going further, participants helped couples understand their marriage struggles within the framework of sin, shame, and the hope of redemption. They understood Jesus to be the perfect expression of humanity: one who displayed secure attachment with God the Father, and who offered secure attachment to those who believe. The reality of the spiritual battle was noted frequently by participants, and shaped their process—such as when Julie felt “prodded” to pray and saw a significant breakthrough. Indeed, the present help of the Holy Spirit was underscored frequently, and was a personal encouragement for participants. They discerned attachment themes present in the Bible’s marriage instructions, such as those found in Ephesians 4 and 5. They also exhibited Christian perspectives in their concern for biblical grounds for divorce, Christian sexual ethics, and gender distinction.

A noteworthy example was how participants utilized Ephesians 5:21-33 within counseling sessions. This begins to address a gap within the literature, as this prominent marriage passage is currently overlooked in Christian attachment literature. Participants regularly cited this passage and applied it within an attachment framework. From this passage they presented mutual submission as an expression of secure attachment. They directed couples toward emotional connection based on the instructions to “love” and “cherish,” and toward spiritual intimacy through shared faith in Christ. They affirmed clients’ aspirations to conform to this passage’s instructions, and they validated the

difficulties of doing so. Their understanding of this passage also helped them correct misunderstandings of submission and headship, and to challenge abuse behavior. They did this without dismissing the Bible or their couple's values. In biblical terms, these counselors were able to adapt their use of the Bible as needs arose for the varied purposes of "teaching, reproof, correction, and training."<sup>269</sup>

It is important to highlight that participants expressed tremendous appreciation for attachment research, and for attachment-based counseling models such as EFT. They felt that attachment theory resonated with their Christian faith, and believed it represented an important corrective for the church. This came up repeatedly concerning the nature and importance of emotions, and when correcting rigid views of marriage dynamics. Toward the church, these counselors offered a needed emphasis—even a corrective—concerning emotional connection and relational priorities. Within the counseling community, they affirmed a spiritual dimension that is sometimes neglected, and they provided a valuable skillset for Christian couples. It is illustrative that the same participant who said EFT on its own was "bankrupt" spiritually also called it "beautiful." Across interviews there was a recognition that mainstream psychology may lack something important—yet the same is generally true of the Christian community. Therefore, attempts to be more faithful to Scripture in attachment-based marriage counseling was seen as a joyful duty, carried out with heartfelt respect for attachment researchers and pioneers in the field.

Sue Johnson claimed that the Christian faith and attachment science "sing the same song." Participants in this study, in many cases influenced by her insights, have added their voices to the song. Through this qualitative study, those voices and

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<sup>269</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16.



perspectives were heard. The findings suggest the possibility for a counseling approach that more fully integrates the Christian worldview with attachment-based marriage counseling. This would incorporate Scripture, and apply the gospel, more thoroughly within the counseling process. The interviews did not reveal a uniform model; for example, participants had varied approaches to help couples attach to God. Instead, the insights of these nine participants combine to provide a valuable starting point for this work. In keeping with Sue Johnson's musical metaphor, they "set the tone." In what follows, specific recommendations will be offered to build upon, and to expand, this research.

### **Recommendations for Counselors and Pastors**

Christian counselors have a wonderful opportunity to build on the insights provided through this study. This includes internalizing the insights of Scripture and attachment theory, wrestling further with Scripture, incorporating fresh insights into the counseling process, practicing "counseling in the Spirit," and creating new resources.

#### *Internalizing and Wrestling with Scripture*

Participants in this research demonstrated that they had reflected deeply on the Christian framework for attachment. In fact, for most participants the subject was quite personal and connected to their own journey of faith. As a result, spiritual themes were woven into their counseling conversations with fluidity and and versatility. Christian counselors will therefore serve couples best by first internalizing the truths of Scripture that pertain to attachment—integrating their faith and attachment in their own understanding, and in their own hearts. The Scriptures referenced in this study are a

starting point, especially for those in the early stages of considering this particular area of integration. Others may wish to move beyond the examples given in this study, and are invited to consider the research recommendations that conclude this study. In either case, the priority of personal ownership serves the counselor as well as clients. As ministers of gospel truth, this follows Paul's instruction to Timothy, "Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching...for by doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers."<sup>270</sup>

As Christian counselors deepen their understanding of attachment, it is also important to wrestle with areas of Scripture that seem incompatible with attachment theory. Fresh insights may emerge which may complement or critique existing approaches. The participants' use of Ephesians 5:21-33 demonstrates the fruit of this kind of labor. As participants' stories reveal, this passage is at times misapplied or even abused. As a result, the instructions concerning submission on the one hand, and headship on the other, can diminish emotional attachment in favor of rigid rule keeping. Yet for skilled counselors this passage's guidance proved beneficial for attachment-based counseling. At the same time, this passage also introduced biblical categories foreign to mainstream models but important to Christian couples. What other passages have been neglected, and what wisdom and guidance might they offer counselors and clients?

### *Incorporating Fresh Insights*

As Christian counselors deepen their own understanding of Scripture and attachment as discussed above, fresh insights can be incorporated into their counseling

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<sup>270</sup> 1 Timothy 4:16.

practices. The interviews contain numerous examples, which may be categorized according to *intake process*, *goals*, and *interventions*.

*Intake process.* The intake process is an opportunity to learn a client's faith background and whether they wish to incorporate spirituality into their counseling goals. It is also an opportunity for counselors to introduce themselves, which may include religious education or ministry credentials. Some counselors use the intake process to present attachment generally, or their counseling model specifically, within a biblical framework. Christian counselors are wise to determine what opportunities exist within their context to establish an integrated counseling approach at the outset of the counseling relationship.

*Goals.* Participants in this study were concerned for the spouses' bonds with each other as well as their secure attachment to God. Rizkallah and Hudson term this "triangulating God."<sup>271</sup> This counseling goal aligns with the biblical emphasis on spiritual union noted in the biblical portion of the literature review. Sometimes the couple's connection to God was addressed subsequent to their marriage repair; sometimes, this was addressed early; and in many cases, this element appeared in succinct ways throughout the process. As Julie said in her interview, "The redemption narrative...adds a different layer to the counseling process with believers." Counselors may wish to explore the possibilities presented in the interviews, even as the opportunity remains for additional research.

*Interventions.* Counseling models such as EFT have well-established interventions, as well as ongoing research and conversation around best practices. The

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<sup>271</sup> Rizkallah and Hudson, "Circling the Triangle," 222.

present research revealed how the Christian worldview opened possibilities for new or supporting interventions, which generally involved prayer or Scripture. Praying *with* couples created breakthroughs and assigning prayer helped couples connect spiritually. Meanwhile, participants' private prayer for couples helped maintain the counselor's own secure attachment to God within the pressures of counseling. Scripture was used at times for "spiritual and psychological education," which helped Christian couples understand attachment within a biblical framework. The Bible was also foundational for other interventions; once again, the variety of ways participants utilized Ephesians 5:21-33 is a helpful example.

### *Counseling in the Spirit*

An encouraging finding of this study was participants' frequent references to God's active engagement in counseling sessions. They referenced breakthroughs that came through prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit. They at times helped clients to engage with God through forms of prayer designed to aid safety and connection, and were aware of a spiritual struggle that required God's own activity. Aubrey's words are worth repeating. She described counseling as "me, the two members of the couple, and then God in the room." She said, "The only part I can really do is the 'me' part, and then there's the 'them' part, and then there's the Holy Spirit part. And all of them have to be working." This is an explicitly Christian understanding of the counseling dynamic. It honors the biblical teaching that God is a participant in the marriage union, and recognizes the counselor's own need for secure attachment to God in the challenges of marriage work.

“Counseling in the Spirit” is ultimately Trinitarian. Marriage counseling honors creation, often ascribed to the Father, by aligning with God’s design. Thus, attachment research and neuroscience provide valuable data alongside biblical injunctions. Christian marriage counseling presents Jesus the Son, who perfectly embodied God’s design, as both *example of* and as *invitation to* ultimate secure attachment. And Christian marriage counseling that anticipates the activity of God ultimately honors the work of the Holy Spirit, inside and outside the counseling office. A Trinitarian approach is vital to faithfully integrate the Christian worldview and attachment-based counseling.

### *Creating New Resources*

New resources that examine marriage attachment from a Christian framework would benefit counselors and churches. Currently these are limited in number, and popular Christian marriage books do not generally incorporate attachment research. As a result, few were included in the literature review or mentioned in interviews. Participants in this study even described some Christian marriage books as more harmful than helpful. Yet those resources deemed genuinely helpful were often distributed by counselors enthusiastically. Therefore, pursuing new ways to resource the church is a valuable endeavor. This may include creating new written or digital resources or forming creative partnerships with churches and denominations. If counselors have done the work of biblical reflection and application described above, they will be well positioned to provide guidance for the church in language average Christians understand. New resources—books, articles, or digital media—would serve Christian counselors specifically and the church more broadly.

### *A word to pastors*

This qualitative study highlighted the work of counselors, and yet the task of integration at the heart of this study requires contributions from trained ministers as well. In fact, several participants in this research were ordained pastors, and all participants had meaningful ties to the Christian community. The opportunity for counselors detailed above has a counterpart for church leaders: an opportunity to explore attachment from within the Christian framework, incorporate these insights into pastoral ministry, offer perspectives and correctives, and form mutually beneficial partnerships with attachment-based marriage counselors. It was a partnership like this that led Sue Johnson and pastor Kenneth Sanderfer to write *Created for Connection*, which became an influential resource for integration.<sup>272</sup> Biblically knowledgeable pastors have much to offer Christian counselors, especially if Sue Johnson's claim is correct—that in terms of adult attachment, the Christian faith and psychology “sing the same song.”

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The need for an expanded conversation concerning the relationship between Christian faith and attachment-based marriage counseling has been noted throughout this study. Several topics emerged in the interviews to explore in greater detail from an attachment perspective, including additional qualitative studies. This approach seems well suited to study in greater detail how counselors use particular interventions associated with prayer and Scripture. The literature review noted one qualitative study that examined how shared attachment to God affected a couple's own attachment. The

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<sup>272</sup> Johnson, *Created for Connection*, 2016.

researchers concluded that spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible study, as well as spiritual perspectives on the marriage, correspond to a greater sense of secure attachment.<sup>273</sup> This study was based on interviews with Christian couples. Additional research might examine the best strategies Christian counselors use to move couples toward these spiritual perspectives and practices, within an attachment framework. Future qualitative research could also focus on counselors with a shared theological background, such as charismatic, Reformed, or Roman Catholic.

There is a need for additional biblical research as well. Priority may be given to topics underrepresented in the literature, such as marital oneness. As noted in the literature review, the biblical texts on marriage highlight the theme of “two becoming one.” The survey of biblical texts indicated that the “one flesh” terminology inferred both spiritual and sexual union. This important biblical theme deserves investigation for application to attachment-based marriage counseling. Husband and wife “joined together” and declared to be “one flesh” certainly speaks to human attachment! The biblical portrayal of emotions, and the relationship to emotional intimacy and attachment, is another area for additional study. The literature review noted the recent interest in biblical teaching concerning emotion; however, the quickly evolving field of psychological research deserves to be matched with more robust biblical and theological inquiry. Christian counselors have an opportunity to help couples honor God’s gift of emotions and the importance of emotional intimacy, rooted in the riches of biblical wisdom.

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<sup>273</sup> Maxwell, et al., “Covenant Attachment,” 116.

The findings of this study also indicated the need to further examine specific biblical texts from an attachment perspective. The present literature revisits a handful of key texts such as Genesis 1-2. There are riches waiting for those who investigate texts that have so far been neglected in the discussion of attachment and marriage counseling. In the Old Testament, examples include the Song of Songs; marriage examples in the historical narratives (such as Abraham and Sarah); and the portrayal of marriage in Proverbs. Surprisingly, nearly all the marriage passages have been underrepresented in attachment literature. Ephesians 5:21-33 should continue to be explored for its contributions to attachment-based marriage counseling.<sup>274</sup> Other marriage passages in the New Testament await exploration with an attachment lens, including Jesus' references to marriage and divorce (e.g., Matthew 19:1-12) and marriage instructions in the epistles (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3:1-7). Surely, if the Bible is about the twin themes of love for God and neighbor, and if attachment is indeed "the new science of love," the opportunities for further biblical study are abundant indeed.

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<sup>274</sup> One starting point is the discussion of this passage by Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters* noted in the literature review. Smith, writing within a Biblical Counseling framework, explores this passage in terms of mutual submission and emotional connection. Smith, *Marriage Matters*, 193-216.



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