FOUR PRACTICES CORRELATED TO A SENSE OF

BELONGING IN A CHURCH

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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December 2023

APPROVAL SHEET

FOUR PRACTICES CORRELATED TO A SENSE OF

BELONGING IN A CHURCH

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For the church

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BECNT   Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

CCT   Contours of Christian Theology

CEJ   *Christian Education Journal*

JPSP   *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

NAC   New American Commentary

NICNT   New International Commentary on the New Testament

NPNF[1] *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1. 14 vols. Edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886–1889

NPNF[2] *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2. 14 vols. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1890–1900

PNTC   Pillar New Testament Commentary

TDNT   *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976

TNTC   Tyndale New Testament Commentaries

TOTC   Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

WJW   *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984–2018

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PREFACE

This work is the accumulated combined efforts of many people for many years. I am particularly grateful for my supervisor, Dr. Timothy K. Beougher, who has guided me through this entire process from start to finish and consistently went the extra mile in order to help me. To my other committee members, Dr. Keith McKinley and Dr. Kyle Claunch, thank you for your oversight and input as I proposed this research and brought it to completion. Your contributions significantly improved mine.

Thank you to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for approving this research and providing the needed structures to bring it to formal completion. Without the required coursework and tutelage of the seminars, I would not be equipped to execute the task of the dissertation.

I am in debt to my wife, Beth, who has shown and modeled the need for rich community to me. Without her example and passion to connect people, I may not have noticed the need for such research. I certainly would not have experienced the sense of belonging I now enjoy.

I also thank Dr. Richard Lee of the University of Minnesota for developing and allowing me to use his social connectedness and campus connectedness scales to evaluate the sense of belonging in a local church. These scales allowed for a credible empirical evaluation.

To Daniel Watts, PhD candidate at Georgia State University, thank you for helping me analyze and understand the statistical data needed to conduct the empirical case study. I believe God providentially brought us together, and I hope we can work together on future projects.

To Jennifer Stec, who provided tremendous editing services in the completion of this dissertation, thank you for improving the quality of this work, for your patience with me, and for making it possible for me to finish on time. I will remain grateful and amazed.

To Bridges Community Church, who has supported my studies and jointly sought to create a sense of belonging in our congregation, thank you.

To Dave Gudgel, who championed the benefit of me pursuing this degree to our congregation and elders, I am grateful. Without your leadership, the years of study required for this degree would not have been possible.

Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to God for promising to complete the work He began in me. May His will be done, always.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Thesis

Given that new believers must become integrated into the communal life of a

church as part of their continuing faithfulness to Christ and spiritual growth,

understanding how individuals develop feelings of attachment to a group such as a

church is vital for evangelistic church growth. While a number of movements throughout

church history have emphasized communal relationships and many have studied the

biblical instructions for koinonia as well as Trinitarian perichoresis, there remains a need

for a unified examination of what practices contribute to individuals developing a sense

of belonging to a group. Additionally, modern psychological research has identified

various benefits of feeling included and the detrimental effects of feeling rejected, but it

has yet to determine the practices that aid individuals' understanding of their belonging.

The question remains then, how does an individual transition from feeling like an

outsider to feeling like an insider? This dissertation argues that the communal practices of

mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are correlated with the

sense of belonging that members feel in regard to a church community. It draws from

Trinitarian, biblical, historical, and psychological fields in order to present a consistent

rubric for developing a sense of belonging. An empirical case study supports the findings

of the text-based research.

Methodology

This dissertation utilizes Trinitarian scholarship, biblical imperatives, historical

observations, modern psychological studies, and empirical research to identify practices

correlated with a sense of belonging in a church. First, Trinitarian scholarship focusing on perichoresis reveals relational qualities within God. Second, an analysis of biblical imperatives, which command numerous communal behaviors, defines essential practices for church member relationships. Third, historical observations of groups known for stressing the importance of Christian fellowship bears witness to the importance of the biblical commands. Fourth, modern psychological studies researching the benefits of inclusion, the consequences of rejection, and how individuals emotionally attach to others, reinforces the necessity of obedience to biblical imperatives. Fifth, an empirical case study performed at a local church demonstrates that the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are correlated with a sense of belonging at that church.[1]

To evaluate the sense of belonging within the church for the empirical case study, validated testing instruments developed by Richard Lee at the University of Minnesota were used. His Revised Social Connectedness Scale and Campus Connectedness Scale served as pretest and posttest tools to quantify the sense of belonging within the congregation. In between pretest and posttest, an intervention emphasizing the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability was performed. The intervention included large-group teaching sessions, smaller breakout discussion groups, and feedback from the breakout groups to church leadership to inform what practices could be institutionalized churchwide. Following a period for new practices to be adopted and become habitual, the posttest was performed. The results show that the sense of belonging among those who participated in the intervention increased.

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[1] All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use.

Summary of Research

Trinitarian Perichoresis

        Study of Trinitarian perichoresis or its foundational concepts dates back to the time of the patristic era.[2] Therefore, for the purpose of this dissertation, perichoresis will be further delimited to the dynamics within the Trinity that can inform the behavior of the church. For instance, as Robert Letham explains, "Human persons do not exist in one another as the divine persons do."[3] However, human persons can surrender themselves in love to others, shadowing the "ceaseless movement of perichoresis" of the Trinity.[4] Donald Macleod contends that perichoresis produces a model for the ideal human community, although he is careful to distance himself from liberation theology, which makes the same observation.[5] Macleod's claim must be qualified even further because the term "community" in regard to human relationships involves multiple wills and minds working together. Within God, there is only one will and one mind as will be shown in this dissertation. Nevertheless, Jesus, of course, prays that His followers would be one as He and the Father are one (John 17:23). When doing so, He is not suggesting that His followers possess only one mind or "occupy the same divine space" as He and the Father, but rather that they relate to one another in ways comparable to the Trinity.[6]

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    [2] Perichoresis is the term used by Greek Fathers to describe both the oneness and the distinctiveness of the three persons of the Trinity. While all the members indwell one another and coexist with one essence, each maintains a distinct eternal relation of origin and from those relations of origin, has distinct appropriations of the one divine will. The ways in which all of these dynamics work together is perichoresis. See Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 79, 129, 297, 309.

    [3] Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture History, Theology, and Worship*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 192.

    [4] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 397.

    [5] Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, CCT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 255.

    [6] Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, CCT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 158.

Biblical Imperatives

   The study of biblical community, or koinonia, has generated journal articles, books, and even conferences. Numerous authors have noted the idea of an individual Christian runs counter to the New Testament witness. To be a Christian is to be in a community, and living in close connection to others is a prerequisite to the various relational imperatives in Scripture.[7] Gene Getz writes of the evangelistic importance of these imperatives, explaining, "Evangelism begins with Christians who love one another as Christ loved them."[8] In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis contends that the alternative to living intertwined with others is comparable to being locked up in a casket or coffin.[9] In a *Christian Education Journal* article, Robert Banks shows the new kind of community that formed in the New Testament broke the existing boundaries between men, women, children, orphans, and widows.[10] Those who previously had no value were now included as part of an extended family structure. Therefore, to live faithfully as a Christian is not only to live in community with other Christians, but to do so in specific biblically mandated ways. The various commands for communal life in Scripture can be categorized into the headings of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. In other words, the practices under investigation in this dissertation arose from a survey of the communal commands in Scripture and an effort to summarize them faithfully.[11]

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   [7] Margaret Jenkins, "Towards Koinonia in Life," *Ecumenical Review* 45, no. 1 (January 1993): 93-98; Darin Kennedy, "A Theology of Small Groups," *Restoration Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1996): 175-83; Stephen A. Hong, "Reversing a Downward Spiral: Strengthening the Church's Community, Holiness, and Unity through Intentional Discipleship," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2012): 89-125.

   [8] Gene Getz, *Loving One Another* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997), 6.

   [9] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960), 169-70.

   [10] Robert Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," *CEJ* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 18-28.

   [11] Commands not specifically covered include singing to one another (Eph 5:19) and waiting on one another before the communion meal (1 Cor 11:33).

Historical Groups

While certainly not the only exemplars in church history, the Moravians, John Wesley, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer all placed a particular emphasis on the importance of Christian community. Beginning in the 1400s, the Moravians began to develop standards for communal living from the Sermon on the Mount.[12] Later, the Moravian community at Herrnhut founded by Count Zinzendorf developed specific guidelines for living in peaceful harmony with each other and differing denominations.[13] Because of their efforts to connect with others, they had a particularly effective ministry to slave communities.[14]

Additionally, the Moravians had a dramatic influence on John Wesley. He encountered them on a voyage across the Atlantic and later had a conversion experience at one of their meetings.[15] Eventually, he would travel to Germany to study their methods, though he had experimented with various groups of his own before doing so.[16] Wesley's groups aimed to produce holiness rather than a sense of belonging, but he appears to have achieved both.[17] His rules for groups included confession, forgiveness, and purity in word, thought, and deed.[18]

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[12] J. M. van der Linde, "The Moravian Church in the World, 1457-1957," *International Review of Mission* 46, no. 184 (October 1957): 418.

[13] Paul Martin Peucker, "The 1727 Statutes of Herrnhut," *Journal of Moravian History* 20, no. 1 (2020): 79.

[14] Helen Richards, "Distant Garden: Moravian Missions and the Culture of Slavery in the Danish West Indies, 1732-1848," *Journal of Moravian History* 2 (Spring 2007): 55-74; Heike Raphael-Hernandez, "Black Caribbean Empowerment and Early Eighteenth-Century Moravian Missions Documents," *Slavery and Abolition* 36, no. 2 (2015): 325.

[15] Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 59.

[16] Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, vol. 9 of *WJW* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 8; Ian M. Randall, "A Missional Spirituality: Moravian Brethren and Eighteenth-Century English Evangelicalism," *Transformation* 23, no. 4 (October 2006): 206.

[17] John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:257.

[18] John Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:70-73; John Wesley, "Rules of the Band Societies," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:77-78.

Following historically after both the Moravians and Wesley, Dietrich

Bonhoeffer intently sought to establish and experience Christ existing as community. He

wrote, "The church is only the church when it is there for others"[19] and that God is bound

to human beings through community.[20] Bonhoeffer realized that a purely academic

pursuit of God left a void that could only be filled by living in community with the

church. After communal experiences in the United States, he visited other churches,

monasteries, and colleges across England seeking to understand how to develop a

community "based entirely on the Sermon on the Mount."[21] Eventually, his vision was

realized in the short-lived Finkenwalde community with his seminary students.

Modern Psychology

Recent psychological research has shown that a sense of social belonging

prolongs life expectancy, reduces the amount of physical pain a person experiences,

increases task performance, and improves goal accomplishment. In a 2017 report, social

disconnection was found to create a larger health risk than "smoking 15 cigarettes a day,

obesity, physical inactivity or air pollution."[22] Separately, researchers from UCLA used

fMRI neural scans to prove that the brain interprets the pain of rejection in the same way

it interprets physical pain.[23] A different team from UCLA showed that Tylenol can

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[19] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *DBW*, ed. John W. DeGruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 503.

[20] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 of *DBW*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 112.

[21] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933-1935*, vol. 13 of *DBW*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 158-59.

[22] Julianne Holt-Lunstad, "The Potential Public Health Relevance of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Prevalence, Epidemiology, and Risk Factors," *Public Policy & Aging Report* 27, no. 4 (2017): 127-30.

[23] Naomi I. Eisenberger, Matthew D. Lieberman, and Kipling D. Williams, "Does Rejection Hurt? An fMRI Study of Social Exclusion," *Science* 302, no. 5643 (October 2003): 290-92.

reduce the pain of rejection in a similar way to how it can help reduce physical pain.[24] A clinical psychologist from the University of British Columbia found that if test subjects were given a light shock on their ankles, their brain would register much less pain from the shock if someone with whom they felt an emotional bond held their hand while they received the shocks.[25] Finally, it was quantitatively demonstrated both in romantic couples and in team dynamics among Israeli Defense Forces during training missions that those with secure relationships performed at a higher level in both short and long-term goals.[26] In a secure relationship, one person feels accepted by the other person or the other team members and reports a confidence that when an emotional need is expressed, support will be given from the other member(s). An anxious relationship, conversely, lacks the confidence that emotional support will be available when requested and results in lower performance.

Significance

Seemingly endless numbers of Christian voices share how church leaders can help guests assimilate into groups, service teams, or membership.[27] As important as those goals are, they do not address how a group of people can develop a sense of biblical community with one another. Every group, including Bible studies, service teams, elder

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[24] George M. Slavich et al., "Alleviating Social Pain: A Double-Blind, Randomized, Placebo-Controlled Trial of Forgiveness and Acetaminophen," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 53, no. 12 (2019): 1045-54.

[25] Sue Johnson, "The New Era of Couple Therapy—Innovation Indeed," *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies* 16, no. 1 (March 2017): 39–49.

[26] Brooke C. Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships: Accepting Dependence Promotes Independence," *JPSP* 92, no. 2 (February 2007): 268-85; Eldad Rom and Mario Mikulincer, "Attachment Theory and Group Processes: The Association Between Attachment Style and Group-Related Representations, Goals, Memories, and Functioning," *JPSP* 84, no. 6 (June 2003): 1220-35.

[27] Rick Warren, "How to Assimilate People into Church Membership," Pastors.com, March 21, 2016, https://pastors.com/assimilate-people-church-membership/; Paul Chappell, "A Four-Step Process to Assimilate People in Church," last modified June 30, 2017, https://paulchappell.com/2017/06/30/a-four-step-process-to-assimilate-people-in-a-church/; Thom Rainer, *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes a Difference* (Nashville: B&H, 2013); Nelson Searcy with Jennifer Dykes Henson, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

boards, or entire churches, is made up of people. However, just because people are officially part of the group does not mean the group has a sense of biblical community. Even longstanding members can still feel like outsiders in the community. Therefore, the question remains, how can people who do not currently experience a sense of belonging begin to experience one?

Investigation into previously conducted research has revealed no effort to integrate theological, biblical, historical, and psychological concepts of belonging into a unified approach for creating a sense of biblical community within a church. Similarly, while modern psychological research has empirically identified the holistic benefits of perceived belonging and the detrimental effects of perceived exclusion, it has yet to identify empirically how individuals attain a sense of belonging to a group when such a sense of belonging does not already exist. An empirical case study of implementing the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability addresses the current void in the academic literature. Most importantly, if the church is to fulfill its mission of discipling the nations and integrating new believers into its fold, it would benefit from understanding how individuals gain a sense of belonging to a group.

Argument

Trinitarian Perichoresis

Within the Trinity, there is a unity unknown anywhere in creation, and yet Jesus prays for believers to experience such a sense of togetherness.[28] Therefore, certain aspects of Trinitarian dynamics must be paradigmatic of human relationships. In this dissertation, it will be argued that the Trinity teaches the importance of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability even when Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are

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[28] In "The Happiest Family of All: How Father and Son Glorify Each Other," David Mathis connects the other centered nature of the Trinity to Paul's command for Christians to outdo one another in showing honor (Rom 12:10). As the Trinity functions as a "happy family," so too can believers. See David Mathis, "The Happiest Family of All: How Father and Son Glorify Each Other," Desiring God (blog), May 22, 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-happiest-family-of-all.

not participating in those practices. Specifically, mutual support is seen in the other-centered posture of members of the Trinity when the members love and glorify one another (John 8:54; 17:4; 1 Pet 1:21).[29] In terms of vulnerability, one member does not choose to reveal Himself to another, but all members are fully known by one another (Matt 11:27). Additionally, Scripture describes how God reveals Himself to His creation. In terms of forgiveness, no member ever has occasion to forgive another member, but the result of forgiveness, which is all members relating to one another in perfect harmony, can be observed. Further, Scripture describes how God forgives creatures. In terms of accountability, no member submits His will to another member because there is only one will within God. However, the result of accountability, which is acting in accordance with the will of God, is always seen in regard to the Trinity. Applying these traits to Christian community will show how church members can work toward a similar unity to what the Trinity experiences. Rather than being an unrealistic aspiration, church members can be certain that it will be achieved by the time of the eschaton, if not before, because of Jesus's petitionary prayer (John 17:23).

Biblical Imperatives

Biblical imperatives concerning how Christians interact with fellow believers will provide a detailed blueprint for how community forms around the gospel. These commands, which foster oneness within the body, are colloquially referred to as the "one-another commands" and range from encouragement to confession and from rebuke to forgiveness. While all fall under the broad command of "love one another," most can be subcategorized into mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.[30] Each

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[29] Donald MacLeod suggests the members of the Trinity "vie with one another for the privilege of serving." Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 88.

[30] Douglas Moo observes that love is more of the motivation of the various acts of service than the act itself. In other words, love must be manifested through some means. See Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 345. In terms of subcategorizing, mutual support commands include bearing burdens (Rom 15:1; Gal 6:1-2), providing hospitality (Rom 12:13; Heb

individual person will likely find some of the commands more intuitive than others. Which commands feel burdensome versus natural will vary from person to person and culture to culture. However, regardless of personal disposition or societal norms, Christians do not have the option to disobey them. To do so would be to sin.[31] As is the case with any sin, failure to follow the one-another commands will result in pain and suffering for both the individual committing the sin and in the community at large. In direct relevance to this dissertation, disobedience to the one-another commands will diminish the quality of relationships in the church.

Historical Groups

Throughout the history of the church, the emphasis on communal life in the body of Christ has varied in prominence. At times, certain groups, such as the Moravians, John Wesley's Methodist movement, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's community focused intensely on the bond shared by Christians.[32] At other points in church history, such a focus faded into the background. However, whenever the focus rose in prominence, certain group traits repeatedly appeared. Examining the three aforementioned leaders' practices will show a consistent effort to instill mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness,

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13:1-2; 1 Pet 4:9), greeting one another (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20), honoring one another (Rom 12:10), valuing one another (Phil 2:3-4), empathizing (Rom 12:15), encouraging (1 Thess 5:11; Heb 10:24-25), and praying (Eph 6:18, Jas 5:16). Vulnerability commands include confessing sin (Jas 5:16) and even accepting one another (Rom 15:7) because a person can only be accepted to the extent that he or she is known. Forgiveness is commanded both by direct imperatives to forgive (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13) and by forbidding the alternatives to forgiveness such as judgment (Matt 7:1; Rom 14:4; Jas 4:11-12) and wrath/bitterness (Eph 4:31). Accountability commands include admonishing (Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:14; Heb 3:13), warning (2 Thess 3:13), instructing (Rom 15:14), watching over (Heb 12:15), and disciplining (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:2-5). See Mark Dever, "The Doctrine of the Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Nelson, and Peter Schemm Jr. (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 793-94.

[31] Marshall Segal writes, "Whenever someone leaves or avoids the community he needs, he has been lured away by sinful desires." Marshall Segal, "Me, Myself, and Lies: The Spiritual Dangers of Isolation," Desiring God (blog), April 26, 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/me-myself-and-lies.

[32] For Bonhoeffer, see Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, Christian Foundations 6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 106. For the Moravians and Wesley, see Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688–1791* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). For a precursor to the Moravians, see Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,1964).

and accountability into group life. Not surprisingly, these groups experienced both a strong sense of belonging among members and evangelistic growth. If the modern church wishes to have similar results, it should listen to the correlation history demonstrates between building a sense of community and evangelistic influence.

Modern Psychology

Modern psychology has begun to study the importance of individuals feeling connected to others and how individuals connect and attach to each other. From how the human brain codes pleasure and pain to the physical deterioration of multiple health metrics of a person in isolation, secular researchers are learning the benefits of living in community with others.[33] Additionally, attachment science, which began with John Bowlby in the 1940s, has shown how people become emotionally attached to others in various relationships (parents/children, leader/follower).[34] Various researchers have demonstrated that an individual who feels attached to others reports higher levels of contentment, greater ability to handle difficulty, and more success completing tasks.[35]

While these types of findings add no additional urgency to the biblical mandates, the clinical nature of the observations provides empirical data (not available in the biblical witness), which informs how the church fosters community.[36] Specifically in relation to this dissertation, modern psychological research has empirically shown

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[33] Louise C. Hawkley, "Loneliness and Health," *Nature Reviews Disease Primers* 8, no. 1 (April 2022): 1-2; Louise C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness and Pathways to Disease," supplement, *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* 17, no. 1 (February 2003): 98-105; Kerstin Gerst-Emerson and Jayani Jayawardhana, "Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: The Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization among Older Adults," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 5 (May 2015): 1013-19.

[34] Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 16-22.

[35] Christopher M. Masi et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Reduce Loneliness," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 3 (August 2011): 219-66.

[36] Sylvia A. Morelli et al., "Emotional and Instrumental Support Provision Interact to Predict Well-Being," *Emotion* 15, no. 4 (August 2015): 484; Lara B. Aknin et al., "Does Spending Money on Others Promote Happiness? A Registered Replication Report," *JPSP* 119, no. 2 (August 2020): 15-26.

correlations between mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability with attachment and/or a sense of belonging.

Empirical Research

While current research has shown correlations between one individual feeling attachment to another individual and the practices proposed in this dissertation, there is a gap in the research describing how such practices correlate to an individual's sense of belonging to a group (with accountability as an exception).[37] Therefore, this dissertation includes a case study in which the sense of belonging in a church is measured both before and after the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are emphasized through the methods previously described in this document. If the lessons from Trinitarian scholarship, biblical imperatives, church history, and modern psychological research are accurate, emphasizing these practices in a local church setting will increase the sense of belonging in that local congregation.

Taken together, the intersection of observations from Trinitarian scholarship, biblical imperatives, historical research, modern psychological studies, and empirical data gathered from a local church body will provide a robust prescription for a church to progress from a group of individuals to a biblical community.

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[37] Michael P. Haines, "A Social Norms Approach to Preventing Binge Drinking at Colleges and Universities," The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, publication no. ED/OPE/96-18; Katherine J. Reynolds, Emina Subašić, and Karen Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change: From Social Norms to an Ingroup Focus," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9, no. 1 (January 2015): 45-56; Linda Fried et al., "A Unified Approach to Loneliness," *Lancet* 395, no. 10218 (January 2020): 114.

CHAPTER 2

TRINITARIAN PERICHORESIS

Introduction

In John 17, Jesus prays to the Father that His followers would be one as He and

the Father are one. Specifically, John records Jesus praying,

> I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their
> word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they
> also may in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that
> you have given me I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one, I
> in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may
> know that you sent me and loved them even as you love me. (John 20:20-23)

Therefore, certain aspects of intra-Trinitarian dynamics must be paradigmatic of ideal

relationships within the church. James Montgomery Boice comments that Jesus prays for

church members to have a unity which is "parallel to the unity that exists in the

Godhead."[1] Robert Letham writes, "The relation between the Son and the Father is the

basis for understanding how even human relationships should be."[2] Dumitru Stăniloae

agrees, writing, "The mode in which the Holy Trinity is united is thus the origin and the

eternal helper in creating unity between created things."[3]

In fact, Jesus not only petitions for the church to experience a Trinitarian type

of oneness, but He also claims that He has given the church the glory that the Father gave

Him that they could be one as He and the Father are one (John 17:22). John Calvin notes

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[1] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 4, *Peace in Storm (John 13-17)*, An
Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 1329.

[2] Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture History, Theology, and Worship*, rev. ed.
(Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 557.

[3] Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*, trans. Roland Clark
(Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 27.

that this glory can be understood as the power of the unity between Father and Son and comments that it flows to all believers—enabling them to be restored with God and each other.[4]

What remains unclarified from these statements, however, is in what ways church relationships can replicate those within the Trinity and in what ways they cannot.[5] Certainly, there remains a mystery regarding how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are both one and three, and no set of creatures can ever fully exist together as does the Trinity. However, the fact that mystery will always remain does not mean that Scripture is void of analogous language to describe dynamics within the Trinity. Kyle Claunch contends for the use of such analogous over and against either univocal language (descriptions of God that fully and exhaustively portray Him accurately) or equivocal language (descriptions of God that do not disclose any truth about Him).[6] Analogous language, as will be used in this dissertation, uses descriptions of God that can also be used for creation but qualifies those descriptions to show how God is not fully explained by them.

Historically, the word that captures both the distinctiveness of each person in the Trinity and their oneness is perichoresis. The seventh-century church father, John of Damascus, explained the uniqueness of perichoresis in the following formulation:

> The subsistences dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For

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[4] John Calvin, *John*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 401.

[5] Matthew Barrett disagrees with referring to a "loving relationship" within the Trinity because he believes it necessitates three different wills that separately decide to join together in love. He instead frames love within the Trinity to be appropriations of the "eternal relations of origin," which is the only distinction between members. See Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 83-84. Barrett is correct to defend against the tritheism of separate wills within God—a point that will be made repeatedly in the coming sections. However, arguing against the use of "loving relationship" in favor of "members appropriating love from eternal relations of origin" is unnecessary. If "loving relationship" is properly defined between persons who share one will, orthodoxy can be maintained.

[6] Kyle D. Claunch, "On the Improper Use of Proper Speech: A Response to Ronald W. Pierce and Erin M. Heim, 'Biblical Images of God as Mother and Spiritual Formation,'" *Eikon* 5, no. 1 (2023): 72.

the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature.[7]

While this explanation is a helpful framework to begin an understanding of perichoresis, it leaves much unsaid. Specifically related to this dissertation is whether intra-Trinitarian perichoresis can provide instruction for the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.

This chapter will examine how the Trinity teaches the necessity of each of these practices for the church even if not performing them as a model. It will show the only practice that can be observed between the members of the Trinity is mutual support. However, the Trinity still displays the importance of other three practices in two ways: (1) by possessing the intended results of those practices, and (2) by revealing the practice as consistent with His character in reference to creation. For instance, there is no true vulnerability in the Trinity, but the intended result of vulnerability, which is complete knowledge of one another, can been seen between the members. Additionally, Scripture reveals that God choses to be known by humanity—thus showing the importance of self-revelation. Such self-revelation can only be achieved by humans through vulnerability. Similarly, there is no forgiveness in the Trinity, but the result of forgiveness, which is complete harmony, can be seen between the members. Additionally, Scripture reveals it is consistent with God's character to be forgiving toward humanity—thus showing the importance of forgiveness. Finally, there is no accountability within the Godhead, but the result of accountability, which is total alignment with God's will, can be seen between the members. Each of these will be examined individually, and then implications for relationships among church members will be drawn.

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[7] John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.14 (*NPNF*[2], 9:582)

Mutual Support

In the Trinity

Before contending that mutual support can be seen within the Trinity, first the term "support" must be further defined. As will always be the case with analogous language, there are aspects of the term support which accurately describe God and aspects that do not. By using the term support, it is not meant that Father, Son, or Holy Spirit require any type of assistance from the other members. None are propped up. None could collapse. However, when humans speak of supporting one another, they include in their meaning behaviors such as love, affirmation, and esteem. This section will show that this type of "support" is clearly evident within God.

While Scripture does not describe every detail of how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love and glorify one another, it leaves no doubt that each of the members receive love and glory from the others. Even the names "Father, Son, and Spirit" imply love between the members. Matthew Barrett (following Augustine) contends, "The Son is the only begotten Son, the one whom the Father loves, which means the Father is Lover and the Son is his Beloved. . . . The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as Love itself proceeds from the Lover and the Beloved."[8] In other words, God does not name Himself non-relational terms such as creator, savior, or sustainer, but uses names that reveal the love within Himself.

Further, those names, which are historically referred to as relations of origin, are eternal. Simply, the Father is the Father from all eternity (unbegotten), as the Son is the Son from all eternity (begotten), and the Spirit is the Spirit from all eternity (spirated from Father and Son).[9] Since these relations of origin are eternal, that means there never was a time that God was not Father, Son, and Spirit, and that means there was never a

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[8] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 282.

[9] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 24-25.

time that love did not exist.[10] Stăniloae agrees, writing that the Trinity "is love without beginning."[11] For instance, the Son did not become the beloved of the Father at the time of His baptism when the Father announced His love from heaven. He already was. As Barrett comments, "Jesus is not beloved because he became incarnate, he became incarnate because he is beloved."[12] Therefore, if the loving aspect of the Trinity is removed or minimized, God becomes something else entirely. Love cannot be undone in the Godhead without altering the eternal relations of origin (names) that define who God is—a fact agreed upon by a wide spectrum of theologians.[13]

As would be expected with such centrality of love within the members of the Trinity, evidence of it can be found throughout Scripture. Jesus declares that the Father loves Him (John 15:9) and glorifies Him (John 17:24). Additionally, the Father announces His affirmation and love for the Son at Jesus's baptism (Matt 3:17). Gerald Bray comments that the Father's love for the Son can be seen at every point in the Son's earthy ministry because the Father continually "guided, sustained, and ultimately vindicated his Son."[14] The Father's love for the Spirit is less detailed in Scripture but can be assumed because of the Spirit's intimate knowledge of the Father—a topic that will be

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[10] Barrett explicitly defines that the love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit does not stem from three separate centers of consciousness within the Trinity, but rather originates from one divine will. Each member, therefore, appropriates love for the others from the same will in a manner that displays His particular eternal relation of origin (Father, Son, Spirit). If each member had His own love for the others, then the various loves would be another means to differentiate between the persons. However, that would violate the historical understanding that the eternal relations of origin alone distinguish the persons of the Trinity. The Trinity is not the union of three loves but the union of three persons who appropriate love to one another as evidence of their eternal relations of origins. See Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 83-84, 281-83, 297-98.

[11] Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity*, xi.

[12] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 160.

[13] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 458.

[14] Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 117.

explored in more depth as it relates to the practice of vulnerability (1 Cor 2:10-11; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21).[15]

As the Father loves the Son and the Spirt, so the Son loves the Father and the Spirit. Not only does Jesus express His love for the Father (John 14:31) and intentions to glorify Him (John 17:1), but Jesus even refers to doing the will of the Father as His food—meaning the very provision that sustains Him (John 4:34). Most clearly, of course, Jesus's love for the Father is seen in His obedience to the point of death on the cross.[16] Notably, the Son's obedience through the sacrificial acts of incarnation and crucifixion were not begrudgingly performed, but rather were done so voluntarily by the Son out love for the Father.[17]

Of course, Jesus's admiration is not for the Father alone, but also the Spirit. Jesus tells His disciples that He must leave so that the Comforter may come, and when He does, the disciples will do even greater things than they have done with Jesus (John 14:12; 16:7). Bray comments that such lofty praise of His successor "even to the point of calling him another Comforter, is surely an act of love, as well as one of humility."[18]

Likewise, the Spirit loves and glorifies both the Father and the Son. With regard to the Son, Jesus tells His disciples that the Spirit bears witness to Him (John 15:16) and glorifies Him (John 16:14). Charles Spurgeon wisely comments, "The Holy

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[15] Bray, *God Is Love*, 118.

[16] Bray, *God Is Love*, 118.

[17] Lest this voluntary act be seen as evidence that the Son has a separate will from the Father, both Bray and Barrett clarify that it does not. Bray states the works of the Son are "a voluntary act—not his alone, but that of all three persons, since they have a single will that is common to them all." Bray, *God Is Love*, 116. Barrett similarly states that while the Son "voluntarily accepts the stipulations of the covenant," the covenant of redemption is "timelessly eternal" and "did not originate in the cradle nor was it prolonged until the cross." Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 305-7.

[18] Bray, *God Is Love*, 118.

Spirit's object is to make Christ to appear to be great and glorious" to those who would be saved.[19]

While the Spirit's relationship to the Son may be more overt in Scripture, His relationship to the Father is visible as well. The works of the Son to glorify the Father are always performed by the Spirit and never done in isolation from Him. For instance, when every tongue confesses Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father (Phil 2:11), it is only possible by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Further, when the Son purchases salvation on the cross, it is applied to those predestined to receive it by the Spirit who seals believers for redemption (Eph 1:13-14).[20] Additionally, believers pray to the Father by the Spirit in accordance with the will of God (Rom 8:15, 26-27; Gal 4:6).[21] All of these acts are intra-Trinitarian, bringing glory to God the Father and displaying love for Him. Without the Spirit's involvement, believers would never glorify God the Father or participate in the love shared within the Godhead.

In each of these instances, no member of the Trinity glorifies or brings attention to Himself, but rather each member gives and receives glory from the others. Letham writes, "God is undivided Trinity, in which the three indwell one another in love, seeking the interests of the others."[22] Similarly, Bray notes that to do otherwise would be more akin to self-esteem than love because the biblical concept of love is not "a self-centered kind of preening in the mirror, but a concern for others."[23] Jesus even declares, if He glorifies Himself, it means nothing, and the reason He is glorified is because the Father has glorified Him (John 8:54). Thus, the support (love and glory) each member

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[19] Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Holy Spirit Glorifying Christ," sermon manuscript, April 12, 1891, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Collection, vol. 50, The Spurgeon Center for Biblical Preaching at Midwestern Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri.

[20] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 304, 307.

[21] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 105; Bray, *God Is Love*, 118.

[22] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 507.

[23] Bray, *God Is Love*, 107.

receives within the Godhead is wholly dependent on the other members, and each member is able to maintain total selflessness while simultaneously being completely glorified. Letham refers to this others-centered attitude as "loving self-abasement."[24]

Implications for the Church

Jesus reveals the type of love that members of the church must have for one another when He commands His followers to love one another as He has loved them (John 15:12). He further reveals the love He has for His followers is the same love that the Father has for Him (John 15:9) and has always had for Him since before the creation of the world (John 17:24). Therefore, Jesus simultaneously utters a tremendous hope and an equally tremendous challenge. On the one hand, believers are loved by God with the same love that has always existed within the Trinity. Boice writes, "Jesus says that he has loved us, not with an imperfect or even a 'perfect' human love, but rather with the greatest love there is; namely the love which has existed within the being of the Godhead from all eternity and which will exist to all eternity."[25] Truly, there is no deeper, more wonderful, or more sacrificial love than the love that believers experience from God. It is a profound hope and joy in every circumstance. Jesus even makes the same observation Himself. He explains to His disciples the reason He has told them of His love for them is so that they may have joy and that their joy may be full (John 15:11).[26]

On the other hand, Jesus levies a tremendous challenge.[27] He calls His followers to love one another with that exact same love by which they have been loved. Without the comfort of being loved by such an extraordinary love, believers would lack the power to obey Jesus's command. However, seeing Him tortured, executed, and

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[24] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 34.

[25] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1174.

[26] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1175.

[27] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1174.

bearing the wrath of God in their place, believers can share the same type of sacrificial love to others that they have received themselves. In other words, Jesus not only set the pattern, but He also gives the "strength to do as he requires."[28]

While the various ways in which Jesus's followers are required to love one another are specified by other New Testament authors and will be explored in a following chapter of this dissertation, a general observation can be made now. As the members of the Trinity do not glorify themselves but rather glorify the other members in self-abasement, so must members of the church. The outward-facing, others-oriented, self-forgetful love and glorification seen in the Trinity is the standard for which human relationships, especially those within the church, must follow.[29] To the extent that church members prioritize their own attention, recognition, or needs over those of their fellow members, they abandon the type of love and support seen within the Trinity.

Vulnerability

In the Trinity

Unlike mutual support expressing itself through love and glorification of another, the term vulnerability cannot describe perichoresis within the Trinity. Vulnerability, by definition, requires one member to have the ability to conceal personal aspects from other members, and yet still choose to reveal those aspects to another. With human relationships, that choice is often seen as risky, and therefore, the term vulnerability is appropriate because it captures the potential negative outcomes resulting from being known by another. However, simply, within the omniscient Godhead, no amount of concealing information between members could ever occur, and therefore, there could never be any choice to reveal it to another. Additionally, given that all three

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[28] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1175.

[29] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 557, 572-73.

members share one divine nature and will, none of them ever perform any action without the total involvement of the other members. Barrett, referencing the church fathers, states that since the Trinity is "singular in nature and will, the persons perform a single action."[30] Therefore, one member could never be secretly involved with something without the full knowledge and participation of the other members. Simply, Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot be vulnerable with each other.

Given these realities within the Trinity, the conclusion might be drawn, therefore, that intra-Trinitarian relationships have nothing to teach the church about the practice of vulnerability. That would be a mistake for two reasons. First, the intended outcome of vulnerability is being known by another, and the persons of the Trinity know one another with infinite and perfect understanding. Second, God has chosen to make Himself known to humanity, and therefore has displayed the goodness of self-revelation to another. Each of these will be examined individually.

Trinitarian members' knowledge of one another. Within the Trinity, each member is fully known by the other members, which means the outcome of vulnerability—being known—is essential to describing intra-Trinitarian relationships. Scripture describes one person of the Trinity knowing the others in various ways. Jesus, of course, explicitly states numerous times that He and the Father have complete knowledge of one another. For instance, Jesus declares:

> I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me. (John 7:29)
>
> I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. (John 8:55)
>
> The Father knows me and I know the Father. (John 10:15)
>
> O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. (John 17:25)

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[30] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 57.

> All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the
> Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to
> whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt 11:27)[31]

Additionally, there is a sense in which knowing God is required for and even synonymous with life eternal (John 17:3). Augustine takes this definition of eternal life (knowing God) and connects it to Paul's statement that Christ is life for believers (Col 3:4).[32] By doing so, Augustine shows that Christ could not be life for believers or reveal the Father to them unless He possessed the total knowledge of God.[33] In other words, Christ does not dimly look at God through glass but sees Him as He is—face to face, as it were.

Further, total knowledge of one another would be expected by three persons who share one nature, essence, substance, being, and will. In other words, to know the mind of the Father is to know the mind of the Son and the mind of the Spirit because there is only one mind to know. Therefore, knowledge of "the other" is, in reality, a knowledge of self. To say otherwise would require separate minds between the members and degrade the Trinity into tritheism. Barrett specifically condemns such attempts made by "social trinitarians" who claim that Father, Son, and Spirit have "distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action" because it is a departure from orthodoxy and the ancient creeds.[34]

Notably, and in potential contradiction to these statements, Jesus also reveals that the Father alone knows the dates and times of the coming of the Son of Man (Matt 24:36). Surprisingly, even the Son does not know the times of His own coming. However, dating back centuries and continuing to modern theologians, this limitation has consistently been understood only to have manifested during the incarnation and is not

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[31] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *English Standard Version*.

[32] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* 1.8.16–17 (*NPNF*[1] 3:25–26).

[33] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* 1.8.16–17 (*NPNF*[1] 3:25–26).

[34] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 90, 92-93.

indicative of the immanent Trinity.[35] Augustine contended on the basis of Christ's two natures, God and servant, that there are times when Scripture depicts Christ speaking from His servant nature and other times from His God nature.[36]

Calvin agrees, contending that Jesus's knowledge was only limited within His human nature in obedience to the divine will. He sees no contradiction, for instance, between Jesus saying the Son does not know the time of His own coming and Peter declaring that Christ knows all things (John 21:17) or Jesus declaring that power over all things has been given to Him (Matt 28:18). Again, Jesus's limited knowledge only occurred "whenever it was necessary that the human nature should act separately, according to what was peculiar to itself, in discharging the office of Mediator."[37] Letham summarizes this long historical understanding, writing that Jesus was referring to the "voluntary restrictions" He adopted during His incarnate state when He stated the Son does not know the time of His coming.[38]

Correctly isolating the Son's limited knowledge of His return to His human nature is crucial because expanding it to the immanent Trinity would necessitate labeling the Son as a lesser god. Barrett writes, "Any and every time Scripture reflects the *immanent* Trinity . . . Scripture always emphasizes the Son's equality with the Father without any qualification. And when I say always, I mean *always*."[39] Truly, when Jesus claims to be one with the Father (John 10:30), or John declares the Word was God (John

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[35] Historically, the term referring to how the triune God "acts in relation to creation and the economy of salvation" is the economic Trinity. The term referring to "who the triune God is in himself, apart from creation or the economy of salvation" is the immanent Trinity. Distinguishing between the two is necessary because, for instance, not everything about the Son in His human nature is identical to how the Trinity has always been from eternity past. Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 75.

[36] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* 1.12.24 (*NPNF*[1] 3:31).

[37] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 3, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847–1850), 154.

[38] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 30.

[39] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 235 (emphasis original).

1:1), or the author of Hebrews describes the Son as being the exact imprint of God's nature (Heb 1:3), or Paul describes Jesus as being the power of God (1 Cor 1:24), never are any exceptions or limitations included.[40] No biblical author ever says, "The Son has God's glory and radiance, except for this one piece of information" because the Son is just as fully God as the Father with the same knowledge. Letham concurs, writing that "Jesus shares fully in the comprehensive knowledge of the Father."[41] In fact, Jesus claims to know the special revelation that was previously hidden by the Father, and not only small parts of it, but "all things" of it (Matt 11:25-27). Further, the Son alone can reveal the Father because He alone knows the Father fully (Matt 11:27). Both Father and Son possess a sovereign knowledge of each other and all things.[42] Simply, if there is something the Son does not know, He would cease to be omniscient and, therefore, cease to be God.

As Father and Son fully know one another, so too the Spirit has full knowledge of both the Father and the Son. Paul leaves no doubt of the Spirit's knowledge when he writes, "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:10-11). As no scriptural author added a qualifier to the Son's divinity in the immanent Trinity, Paul adds no qualifier when describing the omniscient range of the Spirit. On these verses, Charles Hodge comments that "the Spirit knows all that God knows," which includes "the inmost recesses, as it were, of his being, perfections and purposes."[43] Similarly,

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[40] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 235-36.

[41] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 30.

[42] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 30.

[43] Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 39.

when Calvin contemplates the meaning of the depths of the Spirit's knowledge, he writes, "Nothing that is in God escapes the notice of the Spirit of God."[44]

Jesus, of course, sheds light on the Spirit's knowledge when He tells His disciples that the Spirit will teach them "all things" and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had taught them (John 14:26). Only if the Spirit knew all things could He teach all things. Later, Jesus reiterates the message by telling the disciples the Spirit will take what is His and declare it to them—clarifying that He has all that belongs to the Father (John 16:14-16). In other words, there is nothing the Father has that does not also belong to the Son and will be taken by the Spirit to Jesus's followers. Similarly, Peter writes to the early church that prophets do not speak from their own knowledge but speak from the Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). Bray comments that the Spirit must be aware of the Father and His intentions in order to be able to share them with the prophets.[45] If the Spirit were not privy to the depths of God, He would be unable to communicate about God to the prophets or testify about Christ to the world.

In conclusion, there is zero knowledge gap between the members of the Trinity. Each fully know and are known by the others. None of them chose to or even could chose to reveal aspects of themselves to the others, which means none of them were ever vulnerable, so to speak. However, the result of complete vulnerability is complete knowledge of one another, and such knowledge is an undeniable aspect of the Trinity.

God's revelation of Himself. In addition to the members of the Trinity possessing complete knowledge, God has chosen to make Himself known to humanity, thus showing the goodness of self-revelation. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul states

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[44] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848), 111.

[45] Bray, *God Is Love*, 118.

that what can be known about God is plain to mankind because God has made it known (Rom 1:19). The problem for humans, therefore, is not that God hides parts of Himself, but that humans have chosen to suppress the truth of what God has revealed. As F. F. Bruce comments, "The knowledge of the true God was accessible to men, but they closed their minds to it."[46] Charles Hodge similarly observes, "God has never left himself without a witness."[47] Tim Keller adds that "all human beings, everywhere and in all times . . . knew God because God made Himself plain to them."[48] Humans know God precisely because God has made Himself known through revelation. Of course, when Paul describes what God has revealed of Himself to each and every human, he does not mean that God has disclosed everything about Himself to everyone but has revealed His character, justice, power, and "unimaginable greatness."[49]

However, God, in the incarnation, goes further. John declares when Jesus came into the world, He came as the light that gives light to every man (John 1:9). Boice comments that John was conveying that the revelation through Jesus Christ was not only for Jews, but for Greeks and Romans as well.[50] Additionally, John states that Jesus came to make God known (John 1:18). Boice explains that "in Christ God came to men in a way that enabled men to know him."[51] Scripture continually portrays God as self-revelatory. In short, He wants to be known and makes it possible for mankind to know Him. Jesus even concludes His earthly ministry in the book of Matthew by instructing

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[46] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 82.

[47] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 37.

[48] Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, God's Word for You (Lucknow, India: Good Book Company, 2016), 26.

[49] Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 36; Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 26.

[50] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, *The Coming of the Light (John 1-4)*, An Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 59.

[51] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 1:101.

His disciples to go out into the world and make knowledge of the triune God available to all (Matt 28:19).

In conclusion, while God has no need to reveal Himself to Himself, He does, undeniably, choose to reveal Himself to His creation. Further, if God chooses to be self-revelatory toward creation, then such actions are, by definition, good, holy, and godly. For humans to participate in this godly work of self-revelation, they must practice vulnerability. Therefore, while the Trinity does not teach the importance of vulnerability through modeling the practice, God does teach the importance of vulnerability through His complete knowledge of Himself and how He relates to creation.

Implications for the Church

While church members will fall short of the total knowledge each member of the Trinity possesses of the others, being known by one another is crucial for the oneness Jesus prays for His followers to have. As the Spirit knows even the depths of the God, so too must church members know the depths of one another if they are to achieve a oneness comparable to the Son's bond with the Father. With church members, however, such depths of knowledge can only occur through voluntary disclosure. Church members do not have the luxury of being united in one essence, mind, and will, and therefore must choose to reveal hidden aspects of themselves to others. To the extent church members keep corners of their lives concealed from others, there will be a gap in the bond that they can share. The reason is obvious. What is not known about a person cannot be welcomed, loved, or unified with someone else. There is simply no way two people can be united without knowing to whom and to what they are uniting.

At the same time, the Trinity provides a framework to understand there can be instances when one member should not disclose all of his or her depths to another. The reasons that church members should not know details of one another's lives are different than the reasons the Son, in His human nature, did not know the time of His return.

However, the principle of a temporary gap in knowledge for a specific purpose is helpful and applicable to interpersonal church relationships. While trust is developing or situations are delicate, church members, for a time, could withhold aspects of themselves from others. However, they must not do so indefinitely. They must work toward the goal of oneness for which Jesus prayed. To do otherwise would fall short of Jesus's vision for the oneness comparable to the oneness in the Godhead.

Forgiveness

In the Trinity

Out of the four practices identified as correlated to a sense of belonging, forgiveness least describes perichoresis within the Trinity. Each member is fully divine, fully perfect, and fully sinless and therefore, incapable of ever needing forgiveness from other members (Titus 1:2; Heb 4:15; 6:18; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5). Further, as was the case with vulnerability, the shared will between members of the Trinity precludes the need for forgiveness between them. As each member does exactly what the one divine perfect will determines at all times, one member would never be out of step from other members and in need of any sort of reconciliation with the others.

Given these realities within the Trinity, the conclusion might therefore be drawn that Trinitarian perichoresis has nothing to teach the church about the practice of forgiveness. That would be a mistake for two reasons. First, the intended outcome of forgiveness is restoration of unity between persons, and there exists no greater unity between persons than what exists in the Trinity. Second, God reveals Himself to be forgiving toward repentant creation throughout Scripture, and therefore, teaches the goodness of forgiveness. Each of these will be examined individually.

Trinitarian members' unity with one another. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share an unbreakable union. Theirs is one that is eternal, indivisible, inseverable.[52] As Letham writes, "The three are one identical being."[53] Nothing ever can or ever will cause any division between the three persons of the Trinity. As previously discussed, they share a reciprocal love and glorify one another.[54] The love and glory that they enjoy between one another is, as Letham writes, "the goal of our salvation" and "our ultimate destiny" as believers in Christ.[55] In other words, partaking of their union is what lies on the other side of redemption for Christians. Believers become united to God with the same "indivisible union" that binds together Father and Son.[56] Believers experience the same love that the Father has for the Son because they have been reborn as children of God. It is a union that far surpasses any relationship that humans have ever experienced apart from God.[57] It is the result believers experience after being forgiven through Christ's substitutionary work.[58] Meaning, believers experience the same union with God that Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy with each other precisely because of forgiveness through Christ's redemptive work. As would be expected, therefore, God's willingness to forgive sinners is evident throughout Scripture, and it is to that evidence that attention will now be given.

God's forgiveness of sinners. Both the Old and New Testament bear witness to God's willingness to forgive. For instance, various authors confirm:

> But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Neh 9:17)

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[52] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 562.

[53] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 562.

[54] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 572-73.

[55] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 560.

[56] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 563.

[57] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 565.

[58] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 565-66.

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. (Ps 86:5)

As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Ps 103:12)

I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. (Isa 43:5)

To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him. (Dan 9:9)

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Mic 7:18-19)

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. (Acts 13:38)

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. (Eph 1:7)

Importantly, the God referenced in these verses is Trinity. The Son is not forgiving without the Father and the Spirit, and neither is the Father forgiving without the Son and the Spirit. If God is willing to forgive, then each member of the Trinity shares the same willingness because all members share one will.

The Trinity is, in fact, so willing to forgive that the triune God chose to buy the pardon of sinful humanity as part of the display of His glory.[59] When the Son of God, in His human nature, bore the penalty for sin, He did it for the glory of the Father. Daniel Gurtner comments that it was on the cross, paying for the sins of the church, "where Jesus's 'Son of God-ness' is displayed in all its fullness and glory."[60] Similarly, when God the Father sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice, He did so for the glory of the Son. Jesus prayed, "Father, the hour (of my death) has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). Therefore, forgiveness is not something the Trinity

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[59] John Piper, "Did Christ Die for Us or God?" Desiring God (blog), January 1, 1995, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/did-christ-die-for-us-or-for-god.

[60] Daniel M. Gurtner, "The Veil Was Torn in Two: What Happened on Good Friday?" Desiring God (blog), April 19, 2019, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-veil-was-torn-in-two.

performs in spite of being perfectly glorious but is something God performs as part of the display of His glory. The fact that God never displays forgiveness between Father, Son, and Spirit does not lessen the extent to which He displays the goodness of forgiveness because He consistently offers it to sinful creatures.[61]

Implications for the Church

If church members are to be one as the Father, Son, and Spirit are one, forgiving one another is essential. Intra-church relationships are often far from the unity for which Jesus petitioned and therefore must be restored through forgiveness. Church members simply cannot achieve such unity without it. They do not have the benefit of a perfect, sinless nature or one unified will between persons, which means they will continue to have conflict and division as long as the Lord tarries. Jesus, of course, knew the challenge awaiting His followers for them to be one as He and the Father are one, yet He also knew they could move toward unity if they practiced forgiveness.

As church members grow in godliness, their instincts will conform in increasing measure to God's abounding mercy and forgiveness. (Rom 12:1-2). There is simply no way for the seed of the Holy Spirit to remain and grow in a believer without the believer being moved from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 3:9).

Specifically, believers will adopt the sacrificial posture of the triune God. Only through sacrifice is forgiveness possible because forgiveness can only occur if the offended pays the debt that the offender owes. In the case of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all participated in the sacrifice required for redemption of humanity. The Father was willing to sacrifice His Son, the Son was willing to become a servant and carry the cost, and the Spirit was willing to apply the redemption the Son accomplished and the

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[61] Of course, forgiveness is not the only way in which God relates to creation, nor does it overrule other godly actions such as justice. As the LORD declared to Moses, He is God "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod 34:7).

Father planned to the heart of the believer.[62] Calvin writes that it is by the Spirit that believers are washed in Christ's blood and His resurrection becomes effective in reforming them to newness of life.[63] The involvement of each person of the Trinity through various appropriations of the same one act of forgiveness shows the totality of the sacrificial heart of God to forgive. Similarly, believers, at cost to themselves, will forgive those who have offended them. They will see the plight of the offender in need of forgiveness, plan to provide forgiveness no matter the cost, sacrifice whatever is necessary to achieve forgiveness, and apply the forgiveness to the offender's record.

Jesus illustrates the motivation believers will have to forgive one another through His parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:21-35). Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive his brother when his brother had sinned against him. In response, Jesus tells a parable of a man who was forgiven of a large financial debt, but the forgiven man would not similarly release a debtor who owed him a smaller amount. Stanley Hauerwas observes that Peter assumed he was the one who had been sinned against and was looking to justify himself for withholding forgiveness. Jesus turns the situation around so that Peter can see that no matter how much he has been sinned against, he is always in a greater position of debt before God.[64] Rather than seeing himself as the offended, Peter must first realize he is primarily the offender and remember how God had forgiven him. The parable chillingly ends with the unforgiving man being thrown in prison for not forgiving as he had been forgiven. Jesus tells Peter, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt 18:35).

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[62] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 290.

[63] Calvin, *John*, 377-78.

[64] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 298.

The message is clear: as believers have been forgiven by a merciful God, they must model the same heart and forgive those who have sinned against them. The key, however, is not to forgive only because God says so, but rather because God has done so. As God has forgiven His church, so must those in the church forgive one another. Further, as believers move further into the heart and image of God, they will grow in their willingness and practice of forgiveness.

Accountability

In the Trinity

As with vulnerability and forgiveness, the Trinity does not and cannot practice accountability. First, the term itself implies one person being under the authority of another, and such an arrangement is not descriptive of the persons in the Trinity. Each of the persons in the immanent Trinity is equally divine, powerful, and authoritative. No person is under the authority of any other person. Each one is fully God! As Gregory of Nazianzus wrote in the late sixth century, "For one is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; nor are They divided in will or parted in power."[65] Second, the goal of accountability is to conform one person's will to that of another (or to that of a group). Therefore, for the term accountability to apply, the persons involved must have separate wills from one another, which is not the case within the Trinity. As already discussed at various points, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one divine will. There exists no second or third will within God to which any of the persons could conform. Each person acts in complete alignment with the one divine will and would never submit Himself to some other will outside of God. Therefore, in the strictest sense, the term accountability can hold no meaning within the Godhead.

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[65] Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit* 14(*NPNF*[2] 7:322).

However, the concept of always acting in complete alignment with the one divine will reveals what the Trinity can teach the church about accountability. In the church, the goal of accountability is to conform the wills of members to God's one divine will. Church discipline is, at its best, spurring one another on to greater and greater degrees of alignment with God's will that is revealed in Scripture. While none of the divine persons require any amount of spurring, each of them always acts in complete alignment with God's will. Barrett writes the divine persons are "singular in nature and will" and they "perform a single action."[66] Similarly, John Owen writes of the Trinity, "Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations."[67] In other words, God will never perform an activity or operation without each of the three persons participating in it. All of the Trinity does all of God's will all of the time. As Letham writes, "All of God's acts are acts of all three persons inseparably."[68] Therefore, as was seen with vulnerability and forgiveness, the Trinity cannot participate in the practice of accountability (one will under the authority of another), however, the Trinity always exhibits the result of accountability—alignment with God's will.

Jesus, of course, describes the alignment of Father and Son on numerous occasions. For instance, Jesus tells the crowds, "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19). Boice comments that Jesus was not only making a claim about His earthly ministry but was, in fact, claiming that He had been doing exactly what

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[66] Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 57.

[67] John Owen, *Pneumatologia; Or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: William Woodward, 1810), 27.

[68] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 472.

the Father had done since eternity past.[69] Additionally, Jesus claims His actions are one in the same with the Father's into the future when He claims that He will be the one to judge the earth (John 5:22, 27, 30) and even raise the dead back to life (John 5:25). Old Testament Scriptures made clear that God alone would perform those actions (Deut 1:17; 32:39), and, therefore, Jesus is claiming that He participates in all the divine activity.[70]

Jesus later tells the scoffers that He will "always do the things that are pleasing" to the Father (John 8:29). Calvin comments that by choosing the word "always," Jesus intends for His hearers to understand that He is "without exception" devoted to God's will throughout His entire being.[71] For Calvin, the issue is obedience, and Jesus boldly claims there has never been a time when He was not obedient to God's will. Jesus goes even further when He describes that the Father does His works in Jesus (John 14:10). With this statement, Jesus clarifies that the Son's obedience to the Father is not best described as receiving orders and then complying. Instead, both the Son's words and actions are in perfect alignment with the Father because it is the power of God working through the Son to complete them.[72] In summary, the Son only does what the Father does; the Son never does anything on His own; the Son always does what pleases the Father; and the Father Himself participates in the works of the Son. Simply, there is no separation between the Father and the actions of the Son because they share one and the same will.

The obvious point of rebuttal to Son and Father sharing one will comes when Jesus prays to the Father, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). However, it would be incorrect to reflect this moment in Jesus's earthly life back onto the immanent

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[69] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, *Christ and Judaism (John 5-8)*, An Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 387.

[70] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 2:389.

[71] Calvin, *John*, 216.

[72] Calvin, *John*, 340.

Trinity.[73] When Jesus prays for the Father's will to be done instead of His own, He is only praying for His human will to be subordinate to the Father's divine will.[74] Jesus was not praying for the Son's divine will to be subordinate to the Father's divine will because they share one and the same divine will.

Jesus, having two natures, also has two wills.[75] In His divine nature, Jesus is equal to the Father in every way; however, in His human nature, Jesus was "derivative and dependent" on the divine.[76] As such, Jesus can simultaneously claim that He and the Father are one (John 10:30) and that the Father is greater than Him (John 14:28) without any contradiction.[77] Letham writes that only "according to his humanity, Christ needed to learn, and to align his will with the divine plan."[78] Therefore, the concepts of obedience, submission, or subordination only have meaning according to Jesus's human nature by virtue of the hypostatic union.[79] Jesus's divine will, on the other hand, never needed to be brought in alignment because again, there exists no other divine will to which it could align.

Similarly, the Spirit only acts in accord with the Father and the Son. Jesus explains that the Spirit will convict the world in regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment, and He will "not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will

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[73] There are a number of theologians who make this exact mistake. In fact, a prominent vein within Trinitarian scholarship is the idea of eternal functional subordination or EFS. EFS claims the Son is subordinate to the Father, not only in His human nature, but within the immanent Trinity as well. For instance, Wayne Grudem writes, "If the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally 'Father' and the Son is not eternally 'Son.' This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 251.

[74] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 479.

[75] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 478.

[76] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 479.

[77] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 481.

[78] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 479.

[79] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 477.

speak" (John 16:13). Commenting on the verse, Boice proposes that for the Spirit to convict the world in such a way, He must direct people to the righteousness of Christ because no other righteousness exists.[80] In other words, the Spirit's work is to point to the need for and sufficiency of the work of the Son.

Further confirming this interpretation of Jesus's general description of the Spirit's work, the apostle John specifies in his first letter the content that the Spirit will speak: "Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2-3). Combing John's two statements reveals there will never be a time that the Spirit confesses something contrary to Jesus and His incarnation. As John Stott comments, the Spirit "always honours the Son of God."[81] There are other spirits in the world that could utter various falsehoods, but the Spirit of God can always be trusted to deliver the precise message of the truth of God and nothing else. William Tyndale contends it is only by the Spirit that believers can know truth from lie, Christ from antichrist.[82] The Spirit simply cannot confess anything contrary to the Son.

Building on the Spirit's ongoing confession of the Son, Stott observes that in the second chapter of John's letter, John indicates that confessing or the denying the Son solely determines whether or not one has the Father (1 John 2:23).[83] Therefore, the Spirit is not only in congruence with the Son but the Father as well since He continually utters the confession that would grant possession of the Father. John, like Jesus, leaves zero doubt that the alignment of the Spirit to both the Father and the Son is total.

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[80] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1212.

[81] John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 155.

[82] William Tyndale, *The Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas Russell (London: Ebenezer Palmer, 1831), 435.

[83] Stott, *The Letters of John*, 155-56.

Implications for the Church

When Jesus prays for the church to be one as He and the Father are one, it would naturally include alignment to God's will. Boice writes, "The church is to have a spiritual unity involving the basic orientation, desires, and will of those participating."[84] Without aligning their wills in unity around the will of God, church members would, by definition, participate in sin because any action outside of God's will is sin. Certainly, Jesus was not envisioning some type of unity that would include the presence of sin. Such a so-called unity would be no unity at all. John explains, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:7). I. Howard Marshall comments, "Those who practice sin demonstrate that they do not belong to God; in other words, they do not have fellowship with God."[85] Therefore, Jesus's prayer for perfect unity among church members and with God obviously could not include sin. However, only when the church is living in eternity with God will it truly be totally without sin and in complete unity with one another and Him. At that time, all of the redeemed will be rid of anything that is false (Rev 21:27), and Jesus's prayer for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven will come to fruition (Matt 6:10).

Until that time, church members are in the process of sanctification, which could be defined as moving ever closer to perfect alignment with God's will (Rom 12:2). While God promises to complete this process (Phil 1:6) and to present believers before His throne without stain, wrinkle, or blemish (Eph 5:27; 1 Thess 5:24; Jude 24), God has also ordained certain means by which to accomplish His work. One of those means of sanctification is church discipline or believers holding one another accountable. For instance, Paul instructs the Corinthian church to expel one of her members "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:5). Therefore, the goal of church

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[84] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1329.

[85] I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 111.

discipline is not punitive, but restorative—and specifically restorative to the will of God for the purpose of salvation. As Boice comments, in order for Christians "to be good," they need help from other Christians.[86] There will come a day when such effort is no longer required, but for now, church members must engage with the process to further conform one another to the will of God.

Conclusion

In many ways, the oneness of the Trinity prevents it from modeling behaviors that human relationships require in order to thrive within the church. However, the oneness among the three members within the Trinity (perichoresis) can serve to inform the church of the importance of certain behaviors even when the Trinity does not specifically participate in those practices. Indeed, Jesus even prayed for the church to be one as He and the Father are one. In particular, the Trinity teaches the necessity for church members to mutually support one another, to be vulnerable with one another, to forgive one another, and to hold one another accountable.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all love and glorify one another, showing the importance of mutual support. Additionally, the members of the Trinity demonstrate the importance of vulnerability in two ways. First, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit possess one total and comprehensive knowledge between them, and each member fully knows all that all the members know. Therefore, they display the importance of vulnerability because only with vulnerability could church members hope to be known by each other as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit know one another. Second, throughout Scripture, God chooses to reveal Himself to humanity and, in particular, the church. His self-revelation thus teaches the goodness of self-revelation, and therefore teaches church members to do the same, namely through the practice of vulnerability.

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[86] Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 4:1330.

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Further, while no member of the Trinity has a need to forgive any of the other members, the Trinity teaches the importance of forgiveness in two ways. First, the result of forgiveness—total loving unity—is evident within the Trinity. Second, the forgiveness of the triune God toward creation is evident throughout Scripture. Therefore, if church members are to achieve the type of oneness seen in the Trinity, or if they are to conform to the image of God as part of their ongoing spiritual growth, they must develop the practice of forgiveness.

Finally, while no member of the Trinity holds any other member accountable, the Trinity teaches the importance for church members to hold one another accountable because the members of the Trinity all manifest the goal of accountability—conforming to the will of God. In the case of the Trinity, there is only one divine will by which each of the members appropriate action, therefore none can have a need to align His will to the will of the others. However, in the church, there are many wills, and only through accountability will those various wills align with God's one divine will.

Thus, the Trinity teaches the need for church members to mutually support one another, to be vulnerable with one another, to forgive one another, and to hold one another accountable—whether it be by modeling the practice, displaying the result of the practice, or by relating to creation through the practice. Having begun with internal dynamics and practice of God Himself, the focus of this dissertation will now shift to what God commands the church in regard to mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL IMPERATIVES

Introduction

From the opening pages of Scripture, the human need to be in community with other humans is undeniable. Even in the Garden of Eden, God declared that it is "not good" for man to be alone (Gen 2:18). In stark contrast to God's "it was good" refrain throughout the rest of the creation narrative, God sees one aspect in His creation that is not good. It is not good for man to be alone. Robert Banks writes that Genesis makes "clear that community is not an extra" for human beings—it is essential.[1]

Astoundingly, God declared that Adam's isolation was not good before sin entered the world and before man had been separated from God. While Adam still had unrestricted access to God and an exalted position in creation, something was not good. Therefore, according to God Himself, when man had a relationship with God and harmony with creation, He was still missing something.[2] Man needed fellowship with another human in order to experience full goodness. Derek Kidner writes that Adam was "a social being, made for fellowship" and that "he will not live until he loves, giving himself away to another on his own level."[3] In other words, Adam needed another human or his situation would remain "not good."

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[1] Robert Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," *CEJ* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 20.

[2] David Ferguson, *Relational Foundations: Experiencing Relevance in Life and Ministry* (Austin, TX: Relationship Press, 2004), 106.

[3] Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 70.

True, God's statement is typically understood in the context of creating a wife for Adam, and with good reason. God instructs that man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife (Gen 2:24). However, the goodness and necessity of human companionship must be broader than simply marital relations. Banks observes that even in the Genesis narrative, the creation of woman was in tandem with the command to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth.[4] Therefore, the designed community man was meant to experience is already more expansive than only a spouse.

As the rest of Scripture unfolds, particularly in the New Testament, the relational needs for humans are met through many means other than marriage. Widows are adopted as mothers and sisters. Orphans are given a family. Paul refers to other leaders in the church with familiar terms.[5] Further, if the declaration in Genesis was not speaking of a larger human need for companionship than simply marriage, then Paul could not have said that it is "good" for the unmarried to remain single (1 Cor 7:9). Indeed, when God declared that is not good for man to be alone, He looked forward to all the varied types relationships that would fill a person's need for companionship.[6] Jerry Bridges states that Genesis "speaks not only to the marriage relationship but also to the necessity of spiritual friendship among all believers."[7] John Stott agrees, writing that whether a person is married or single, "Aloneness is not the will of God either in the ordinary life or the Christian life."[8] Similarly, John Calvin regards God's statement in

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[4] Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," 20.

[5] Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," 20.

[6] Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," 20.

[7] Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia*, exp. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 8.

[8] John R. W. Stott, *One People: Helping Your Church Become a Caring Community* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1982), 80.

Genesis as "a common law of man's vocation, so that every one [*sic*] ought to receive it as said to himself, that solitude is not good."[9]

Jesus introduces the church to cure the problem of human isolation when He says that whoever should leave father and mother for His sake will receive back a one-hundred-fold family (Matt 19:29; Mark 10:29-30).[10] Jesus repeats the "leaving father and mother" terminology from Genesis, but notably, He leaves out the reference to a wife. His omission is especially striking because He had just quoted the same Genesis passage earlier in the same chapter of Mark when teaching on divorce. There, Jesus chastised the Pharisees and drew attention to the enormity of the unbreakable nature of the husband-wife relationship.[11] Now, Jesus makes reference to the same distancing from father and mother, but there is no mention of a new relationship with wife.[12] Instead, those who leave father and mother for His sake will get an entirely new family—the church.[13] In other words, the church can provide for the need of companionship that first arose in the Garden.

Indeed, the New Testament depicts Christians assembling as a new type of community from all different families, nationalities, and languages.[14] In many cases, believers left their fathers and mothers to be united to another, namely, the church. There in the church, believers experienced a shared life with others and were protected from the isolation that was "not good" in the Garden. New Testament authors use the word

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[9] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1860), 79.

[10] Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," 20.

[11] R. A. Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 234.

[12] Cole, *Mark*, 243.

[13] William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 372.

[14] Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," 22-23.

koinonia to describe this shared life of church members.[15] Darrell Bock comments that in the wider culture, the term koinonia could be used to describe "the type of mutuality that takes place in a marriage," giving further proof that the companionship God had in mind in the Garden included the church.[16]

However, rather than some romantic feeling of unity, koinonia was marked by specific practices, and believers were not left to guess what they were. John R. W. Stott observes that the various epistle writers took Jesus's rather general command to love one another and applied it to specific situations and relationships—thus creating the one-another commands.[17] In the New Testament, there are over fifty commands referring to how believers must treat one another, many of them repeating and overlapping with each other. This dissertation will categorize those many commands into the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. While those categories will not comprehensively cover every one-another command in the New Testament, they will be shown as undeniably evident.

Before that investigation, however, an important note must be made. For Christians, these commands, like all other biblical imperatives, are not optional. Disobedience is not only a sin against one's brother, but a sin against God. New Testament authors make no accommodation for any believer to neglect these practices for any reason. Personality type, fear of social environments, particular giftings, or lack thereof are not valid excuses to ignore the Word of God and its commands for how to live in koinonia with each other. The church clearly holds obligations from God to meet the relational needs of the members so that no believer is "alone."

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[15] Bridges, *True Community*, 8.

[16] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

[17] Stott, *One People*, 90.

Mutual Support

Mutual support is likely what first comes to mind when Jesus commands His followers to love one another. Even modern authors often define love as various forms of support. Gary Chapman, for instance, describes love in terms of five different languages: acts of service, words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, and gifts.[18] Each one of Chapman's languages could be understood under the heading of mutual support because each one involves elevating, promoting, or helping another person.

In the New Testament, mutual support is described as serving (John 13:14-15; Gal 5:13), bearing burdens (Rom 15:1; Gal 6:1-2), providing hospitality (Rom 12:13; Heb 13:1-2; 1 Pet 4:9), greeting one another (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20), honoring one another (Rom 12:10), valuing one another (Phil 2:3-4), empathizing with one another (Rom 12:15), encouraging one another (1 Thess 5:11; Heb 10:24-25), and praying for one another (Eph 6:18; Jas 5:16). By its nature, mutual support is more multifaceted than vulnerability, forgiveness, or accountability, and therefore it will require the most lengthy description out of the four practices in this dissertation. In order to categorize and simplify these many commands under a manageable number of subheadings, Chapman's five love languages will be used as a guide.

Acts of Service

Servanthood. Jerry Bridges writes, "The concept of servanthood is basic to the biblical practice of koinonia."[19] Servanthood, of course, requires lowering oneself (to the position of servant) in order to fulfill the needs of another, and Paul specifically commands the church in Galatia to serve one another in this way (Gal 5:13). If there were any doubt to what extent Paul intended for his readers to serve one another, they would

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[18] Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago: Northfield, 2004), 193.

[19] Bridges, *True Community*, 122.

have needed to look no further than Jesus. Jesus provides a model for how His disciples

must serve each other when He washes their feet (John 13:14-15). John records,

> Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come
> from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer
> clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a
> basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was
> wrapped around him. (John 13:3-5)

The text is remarkable. Knowing that He had all power (v. 3), Jesus's first action was to

become a slave for His disciples (v. 4). John ties together the seemingly opposing

concepts of power and service. Possessing unlimited power might typically result in

being served, but Jesus does the exact opposite—using those resources to serve others in

the lowly role of a foot washer.

In the first century, people often washed their own feet, but on the occasions

when someone else performed the task, it would have been considered among the most

menial duties of a servant because of the unsavory condition of the feet.[20] People in the

first century walked long distances with sandaled feet on dusty roads littered with bits of

rock, pottery, and animal filth.[21] Their feet would have been dirty, scabbed, and covered

in debris, but Jesus, knowing that He possessed supreme and unlimited power, gets on

His knees and uses His power to clean feet like those.

John Dickson and Brian Rosner note the utter uniqueness of such an action in

the ancient Greco-Roman world: "Lowering oneself before an equal was not regarded as

morally advisable or sound."[22] The term for such an action was ταπεινός. In English,

ταπεινός is translated as "humility," but Dickson and Rosner contend that before

Christians began teaching about Christ's humility, the term never carried a positive

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[20] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 903.

[21] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 903.

[22] John Dickson and Brian Rosner, "Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible?" *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 4 (October 2004): 459.

connotation in Greco-Roman literature.[23] In other words, Jesus introduced something brand new. While the Greco-Roman world and the Israelites before them sometimes celebrated leaders who practiced "moderation of their power for the sake of others. . . . Humility, on the other hand, involves not a moderation of power and status but a deliberate foregoing of such valuable ancient commodities."[24] Joseph Hellerman concurs that first-century Rome was "a highly stratified honor culture, with distinct classes defined by law."[25] He continues, "Public indicators of social status guaranteed that everyone would know 'who was who' in a public setting."[26] Yet, Jesus defied all of those cultural norms and gave up all of His status for others.

For church members today, the application of foregoing power and status might seem as unthinkable as it was in the first century. However, this is the way of Jesus. He gave others life through laying down His own power, status, and life. Eric Geiger and Kevin Peck attest to this principle: "We were never meant to be power grabbers, but power givers. As God-appointed leaders, Christians are not just called to have power and authority; we are called to use it to serve others."[27] Similarly, Tim and Kathy Keller note,

> In our world, we are accustomed to seeking the perks and the privileges accrue to those who have higher status—Platinum mileage flyers receive free upgrades to first class, and along with that, free food and drink and free baggage checking. Those with bigger bank accounts than the rest of us are ushered in the (shorter and faster) premium banking line at the bank. But in the dance of the Trinity, the greatest is the one who is most self-effacing, most sacrificial, most devoted to the good of the Other. Jesus redefined—or, more truly, defined properly—headship and authority,

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[23] Dickson and Rosner, "Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible?," 459n.

[24] Dickson and Rosner, "Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible?," 459n.

[25] Joseph H. Hellerman, "Power in the Service of Others: Leadership in Pauline Theology," in *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest and Chet Roden, Biblical Theology for the Church (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 408.

[26] Hellerman, "Power in the Service of Others: Leadership in Pauline Theology," 408.

[27] Eric Geiger and Kevin Peck, *Designed to Lead: The Church and Leadership Development* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 57.

thus taking the toxicity of it away, at least for those who live by his definition rather than by the world's understanding.[28]

More than performing simple chores for one another (although perfectly acceptable), modern Christians should continually look to pass their recognition, power, and status to others—particularly those in the church. They must look for opportunities to use their resources to advantage others, even if it disadvantages themselves. They must help others get where they are going more than they try to get somewhere themselves. They must serve rather than be served!

Perhaps the extent to which church members must serve one another becomes most clear in Paul's letter to the Philippians. He writes,

> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:3-8)

The text is remarkable as well and contains far more implications than can be discussed here. However, a number of observations rise to the surface in relation to how church members must emulate Christ's service. First, Jesus shares the same nature with God. Ralph Martin comments that "*Being in very nature God* looks back to our Lord's pre-temporal existence as the second person of the Trinity."[29] In other words, Christ is not low in the pecking order of beings. He has unlimited power and knowledge and has always existed. He is the True Alpha—worthy of all allegiance, loyalty, and submission simply because of who He is. If title ever determined the authority to wield influence over others, Jesus had it. His absolute sovereignty cannot be overstated. He is God.

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[28] Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 168.

[29] Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 105 (emphasis original).

Yet, amazingly, Jesus did not consider His power, worth, or authority something to be used for His own advantage. Instead, He considered others above Himself and made Himself nothing. Gordon Fee comments, "Christ's being God was not for him a matter of 'selfish ambition,' or grasping or seizing; rather it expressed itself in the very opposite. Thus, in a single sentence Paul goes from Christ's 'being equal with God' to his having taken the role of 'a slave,' defined in terms of incarnation."[30] Unlike the typical inclination of humans, Jesus did not use His power for Himself—He used it for others. He lifted them; He valued them. In fact, He turned His focus so completely to others that He could be described as a slave. By the extent to which Jesus served others, He shows the extent to which church members must serve one another.

Prayer. Alongside providing various types of physical service to one another, Christians serve one another through prayer. In fact, given that God Himself moves in response to prayer (Jas 4:2), and He can open doors no man can shut (Rev 3:7), there may be no more crucial service that Christians can provide for one another than to pray. Stott refers to intercession as "common service" and believes it is a vital aspect of how Christians support one another.[31] Both Paul and James command church members to pray for one another (Eph 6:18; 1 Tim 2:1; Jas 5:16), and by all indications the early church obeyed.

Even with a cursory reading of the book of Acts, the emphasis the early church placed on prayer is striking. Luke records that they all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14); the church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship and the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42); the apostles gave their attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4); the church was

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[30] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 121.

[31] Stott, *One People*, 95.

earnestly praying to God for Peter while he was in prison (Acts 12:5); the church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3); Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted when appointing elders (Acts 14:23); Paul and Silas prayed in prison (Acts 16:25); and Paul prayed with believers in Tyre as he left (Acts 21:5). They truly seemed to pray continually as Paul instructed the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:17). Thom Rainer comments, "Prayer was the very source of power for the early church."[32] Similarly, Rainer observes in modern churches, "The only sure foundation for a church is intercessory prayer."[33] Henry Reeder concurs, writing, "Prayer is the spiritual element that corresponds to oxygen in a fire."[34] Therefore, not only must church members pray for one another, but they must do so continually.

Words of Affirmation

Paul almost appears excessive in his affirmation and praise of various churches. He tells the Ephesians, "I do not cease to give thanks for you" (Eph 1:16). He tells the Philippians, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy" (Phil 1:3-4). He tells the Colossians, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you" (Col 1:3). Paul is lavish with his thankfulness, and he outwardly expresses his affinity, leaving little doubt of the high status these churches hold in his heart.[35]

However, Paul's affirmation is not peculiar only to him—as if it was an aspect of his unique personality or wiring. Rather, he, in fact, commands all followers of Christ

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[32] Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: B&H, 1993), 175.

[33] Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works and What Doesn't* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), chap. 4, "Churches That Pray," para. 1, Kindle.

[34] Harry L. Reeder III and Dave Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), Revitalization Strategy 5: The Priority of Intercessory Prayer, "The Ministry of Prayer," para. 3, Kindle.

[35] Gerald Bray, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 264-65.

to praise one another in similar ways. He instructs the Thessalonians to "encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thess 5:11). With the tense Paul uses in his commands, he intends that his readers should encourage and build up "habitually."[36] Further, he includes no qualifier that would allow these Christians to withhold encouragement or thanksgiving from one another.

Similarly, Paul urges Timothy that "thanksgivings be made for all people" (1 Tim 2:1). Surprisingly, the context of his command includes government leaders and even some heretics in the church of Ephesus—the very type of people for whom it might be difficult to offer thanksgiving.[37] Nevertheless, Paul's command remains, and Timothy must pray with a spirit of thanksgiving for all people.

However, Paul's couching of thanksgiving in the context of individuals who need correction illuminates the principle that encouragement and correction are not mutually exclusive. A later section in the dissertation will show how church members must hold one another accountable. To neglect holding one another accountable would be an act of hate, rather than love, and would fail to build others up as Paul instructed the Thessalonians to do in conjunction with encouragement.[38]

Therefore, the question is not whether Christians should choose between affirmation or correction, but instead how best to do both at the same time. Paul shows there is a way to give thanksgiving for all people and simultaneously to reprove and admonish. In other words, Christians must never justify their lack of encouragement of one another or thanksgiving for one another because a brother needs correction.

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[36] Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 162-63.

[37] Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC, vol. 34 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 84-85.

[38] Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 164.

Christians must give thanks for and encourage the very same brother who needs correction, or they are also in need of correction.

Quality Time

Paul commands the church in Rome to mourn with those who mourn and weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15). Essentially, Paul instructs the church to express empathy for one another. Additionally, Paul instructs the church in Galatia to carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:1-2). Neither of these commands would be possible to obey while only spending time alone. As Stott writes, "Membership of one another and mutual caring can be expressed only when members meet in fellowship."[39] Followers of Christ simply must spend quality together in order to be faithful. Quality time does not necessarily refer to large amounts of time, but rather, it refers to time in which people experience emotional connection with one another. While this type of emotional connection could feel unnatural for some, especially men, Christians do not have the option to disobey. Empathy and carrying one another's burdens are imperatives to the same degree of any other biblical imperative. They are not mandated only for those of a certain personality type but for all followers of Jesus.

While Scripture does not give specifics for how church members must comply with these commands and there could be variances between cultures, a few general guidelines can be established. There must be types of church gatherings in which people can share the emotions and burdens they experience. If church members only sit in a pew, listen to a sermon, and sing, no one will have the opportunity to connect emotionally with another. Stott advocates for smaller groups where people can "share their thoughts and problems, their doubts and fears, together with the blessings received and lessons

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[39] Stott, *One People*, 90.

learned."[40] Therefore, the gatherings must be long enough that people can fully express what is happening in their lives and be supported or celebrated. Taking five minutes at the end of a Bible study for fifteen people to share prayer requests does not constitute quality time. So important is this quality time with one another that Stott warned these types of groups not to "degenerate into being merely Bible reading groups or prayer groups or study groups."[41] Stott's point is that such quality times together are for the purpose of investing into one another, and that will likely not be accomplished if there is a competing purpose for the gathering.

Further, those gatherings must be frequent enough that members can be informed of current events in one another's lives. Burdens and emotions are experienced on a daily basis, not a monthly or yearly basis. In other words, a monthly social gathering or a yearly retreat is insufficient to know enough about another person to share life together. Stott recommends such groups should have frequent meals together because "the addition of the social to the spiritual tends to deepen the fellowship."[42]

Lastly, these groups must be spontaneous enough to respond to the unpredictability of life. If group members are truly spending quality time together, then they will be present with one another in the significant moments of life, and those moments cannot always be scheduled at a regular rhythm. For instance, members must be prepared to visit one another in times of bereavement or loneliness, which do not always occur at preset group times.[43]

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[40] Stott, *One People*, 98.

[41] Stott, *One People*, 99.

[42] Stott, *One People*, 94.

[43] Stott, *One People*, 98.

Physical Touch

Paul commands church members to greet one another four different times in the New Testament (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26). More specifically, he commands Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss. Evidently to Paul, expressing affection through physical contact is important enough that he commanded it to be done. The "holy kiss" was a greeting of both submission to one another and mutual affection. Charles Hodge comments that people of the time period would kiss statues of their gods as well as the hands of nobility.[44] To kiss another church member was to show them the type of honor that one would show royalty. As believers in Christ understood themselves to be coheirs with Him, it would have been natural to greet one another in a manner that reflected their high status.

Secondly, of course, a kiss is a sign of affection.[45] It was akin to how family members would greet one another and is reminiscent of how some cultures still greet one another with a kiss on each cheek. Often, the church would greet one another in this way in association with prayer and communion in order to display the unbroken brotherhood they shared with one another.[46] Since they not only had communion and forgiveness with Christ but also with one another, it was important to signify their unity. In this case, they expressed it with a kiss. That unity was all the more unique because, as Tim Keller observes, the greeting in Romans is in association with a long list of names that shows the extensive diversity of race, class, and gender of the early church.[47] Nowhere else in the Greco-Roman world would such a diverse group display such unity with one another. F. F. Bruce comments that the practice of kissing to display unity, greeting, and honor

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[44] Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 372.

[45] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974)*, 450.

[46] Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 372.

[47] Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You* (Charlotte, NC: Good Book Company, 2015), 178.

was continued in the Western church past the time of the apostles, finding mentions in the works of Justin Martyr, and is still practiced in the Eastern church to this day.[48]

While the need for a literal kiss between church members is not advocated by any of the aforementioned commentators, modern churches must convey the same meaning in their greetings with one another in order to be faithful to Paul's commands. They cannot ignore the importance of greeting one another in a manner that expresses mutual submission, mutual affection, and relational unity even across demographic lines. In other words, common modern greetings such as a simple wave or a begrudged handshake do not satisfy the demands of Paul's command. The greeting must show a significant level of meaningfulness in the relationship, a great deal of warmth, and not a shred of division. In today's church, a nonromantic hug probably comes closest to Paul's prescribed greeting, though individual churches may find a more suitable or appropriate display of affection.

Gifts

Hospitality is commanded by various New Testament authors. Peter instructs the church to "show hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet 4:9), and Paul writes to the church in Rome that they must "contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Rom 12:13). The author of the book of Hebrews writes, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers" (Heb 13:2). In addition to commands, and perhaps even more convicting, Luke records numerous instances of how the early church provided hospitality for one another and welcomed new people into their fellowship.

For instance, Luke writes that the early church had all things in common, provided for anyone who had a need, and met in each other's homes (Acts 2:42-46). Bock comments that Luke's description shows a community that had "intimate

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[48] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 275.

interaction and mutual acceptance" from all its to all its members.[49] It was characterized by welcome and warmth as they shared their belongings and tables with joy.[50]

Further they must have had favorable relations with outsiders because the Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2:47). Bock proposes that the intimacy of their fellowship was extended to the community at large, which impacted their witness.[51] Therefore, even new people to the fellowship were treated with this same generous openness as longer standing members.

The same principle of caring for one another even if they were recent acquaintances can be seen throughout the book of Acts, as Paul travels to new cities and is immediately welcomed by local believers who provided for his needs (Acts 16:15; 18:3; 21:17; 28:14). In other words, trust and support did not need to be earned over a period of time. Instead, new people and new believers were granted the full status of a family member from day one.

This type of hospitality is not often seen in the modern American church. Bock writes, "Much in the Western culture drives us to an individualism that undercuts this development of community."[52] Today, hospitality is most often given to close relationships rather than strangers. First-century believers, on the other hand, would not "get to know someone" before inviting that person into home or providing for a physical need. Instead, even the stranger was given full acceptance and assistance by the community.[53]

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[49] Bock, *Acts*, 151.

[50] Bock, *Acts*, 152.

[51] Bock, *Acts*, 153-54.

[52] Bock, *Acts*, 155.

[53] The practice of providing for one another's needs was not without regulation. See 2 Thessalonians 3:10-15, in which those who refused to work were refused assistance.

Vulnerability

Bridges writes that koinonia requires "the sharing of our sins, failures, and discouragements, as well as our blessings and joys."[54] In short, it requires vulnerability. Numerous biblical authors command the practice of vulnerability either by explicitly giving instructions to confess sin (Jas 5:16; 1 John 1:9) or by implicitly giving instructions to accept one another as Christ has accepted them (Rom 15:7) and to carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:1-2). Neither confession, acceptance, nor burden sharing can take place without revealing oneself to others. Each of these practices and its connection to vulnerability will be discussed below.

Confession

James instructs believers to confess their sins to one another (Jas 5:16). Rather than believers simply confessing their sins to God in private, James draws out the need for believers to make their sins more public. Douglas Moo observes that while the passage identifies the unique responsibility of elders to anoint the afflicted with oil, the responsibility of members to confess to one another and to pray for one another is not limited to the elders.[55] Instead, it expands more generally for all members to be involved, and given the present tense of the verb, Moo states it should be a habitual, ongoing, never-ending practice.[56] In other words, the instruction is not to confess to church leadership only, but rather for members to confess to one another. Such a distinction likely makes the practice more public than the Catholic practice of only confessing to a priest in private.

Interestingly for modern ears, James makes a connection between confession and healing. Moo grants that the healing James references as a result of confession could

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[54] Bridges, *True Community*, 58.

[55] Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., TNTC 16 (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 229-30.

[56] Moo, *James*, 229.

include spiritual healing similar to the relief the psalmist expresses in Psalm 32. However, he believes James is more likely referring to physical healing as a result of confession.[57] The obvious instance in which confession might have prevented physical death was when believers ate of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner and literally died (1 Cor 11:29-30).[58]

For the purpose of this dissertation, however, the result of confession is less at issue than the practice itself. Regardless of what benefit believers may experience from confessing (physical, spiritual, or both), there is no question that confession is commanded. In other words, believers should never reason that confession is unnecessary for them if they happen to be physically healthy or emotionally guilt free. Regardless of the presence of an ailment and regardless of the sense of shame, believers must confess their sins to one another. Therefore, the need for believers to be vulnerable with one another is undeniable. Believers must reveal the sin in their lives to each other and be known for who they truly are.

Similar to James's command for believers to confess to one another, John instructs his readers that they will receive forgiveness from God when they confess their sins (1 John 1:9). Often, John's instruction is understood to mean that believers receive forgiveness when they confess their sins to God.[59] While that understanding is certainly true, it is not the only meaning in the verse. Colin Kruse observes that John's instruction for the reader to confess was in response to certain people who claimed they did not have sin (1 John 1:8, 10).[60] These people who denied they had sin were not doing so only in their private prayer lives. Instead, they were telling the community they were without sin.

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[57] Moo, *James*, 230.

[58] Moo, *James*, 229.

[59] Matthew Henry, *Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 988.

[60] Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 68.

Having no sympathy for their errant theology, John demands they perform an about-face and confess their sin. Therefore, given the context of John's imperative, it would make little sense if John's instruction were, "The people who have been publicly claiming they are without sin, should go home and privately confess their sins to God without telling anyone else about it." Far more likely, John means for the reader to understand that instead of publicly claiming one is without sin, a person should do the exact opposite and publicly confess sin.

Further, the very term John and others used for confession (ὁμολογέω) implies speaking with one's voice. In arguably every instance in the New Testament (outside of 1 John 1:9) when the term is used, it involves speaking with one's voice.[61] For instance, Paul states, "For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:9). Here, confession is directly tied to speaking and is distinctively different than internally believing with the heart.[62] Similarly, Jesus explains, "Everyone who acknowledges (confesses) me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father in who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 10:32-33). Jesus explicitly means the confession of Him must be public, not private.[63] Indeed, His entire point is that if the confession is only private, He will deny the person before the Father. Therefore, when John uses the term "confess" in 1 John 1:9, it is unlikely he has in mind an exclusively private confession of sin. To do so would be a departure from the common usage of the term in the New Testament.

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[61] Otto Michel, "ομολογεω, εξομολογεω, ανθομολογεομαι, ομολογια, ομολογουμενως," in *TDNT*, 5:207-20.

[62] Michel, "ομολογεω, εξομολογεω, ανθομολογεομαι, ομολογια, ομολογουμενως," in *TDNT*, 5:209.

[63] Michel, "ομολογεω, εξομολογεω, ανθομολογεομαι, ομολογια, ομολογουμενως," in *TDNT*, 5:211.

Because of the vocal element to the term, one possible application of John's instruction would be for churches to recite a corporate confession of sin as part of their services.[64] While this practice certainly has value, Stott does not believe it is what John has in mind. Stott comments, "What is required is not a general confession of sin but a particular confession of *our sins*, as we deliberately call them to mind, confess and forsake them."[65]

Therefore, John, like James, leaves no room to conceal sin privately. For believers to be faithful to the instruction of Scripture, they must expose their deeds to one another. To do so requires an ongoing vulnerability, regardless of whether such actions feel comfortable.

Acceptance

Paul qualifies his instruction regarding acceptance to the church in Rome that they must accept one another precisely as Christ has accepted them (Rom 15:7). The immediate question, therefore, is how has Christ accepted them? Only with that key can the Roman church hope to faithfully obey Paul's command. Bruce observes that Paul's instruction comes immediately on the heels of his discussion on bearing with the weaker brother.[66] Christ's way, says Bruce, "is to consider others first, to consult their interests and to help them in every possible way."[67] Additionally, it would involve being "unreserved" in welcoming others, regardless of whether they were Jews or Gentiles.[68] While the majority of application for this instruction surely presses the stronger believer

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[64] Michel, "ομολογεω, εξομολογεω, ανθομολογεομαι, ομολογια, ομολογουμενως," in TDNT, 5:215.

[65] John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 83 (emphasis original)

[66] Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 254-55.

[67] Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 254.

[68] Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 256.

to accommodate the weaker, there is an implicit application for the weaker brother as well. The weaker must reveal and therefore be vulnerable about his conscience in order to be accommodated. What is unknown by the stronger believer cannot be welcomed or accepted.

While Christ's acceptance of believers certainly includes strong and weak consciences, it is not limited to that. In Romans 15, Paul takes the broad idea of Christ's acceptance and applies it to the narrow circumstance of how believers must bear with each other's differences. However, the broader scope of Christ's acceptance is also commanded through Paul's instruction in verse 7. Keller applies the instruction for Christians to accept one another in such a way, writing, "If we grasp our justification, that we are accepted in spite of our deficiencies and flaws, we will be able to accept others in spite of their deficiencies and flaws."[69] For Keller, the application goes far beyond accepting a believer who has a weak conscience and expands to deficiencies and flaws in general.[70] Once again, while the majority of application presses the believer to accept other believers with their flaws, there is an implicit application that believers must reveal their flaws in order to be accepted.

Keller's wider application is appropriate because Paul spent the majority of his letter to the Romans explaining how Christ had accepted them, and he did not limit acceptance to strong and weak faith. In fact, perhaps the most concise summary of Christ's acceptance of believers is found in Romans 8:1. Paul writes, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). Keller notes that Paul is not expressing freedom from condemnation only when a believer avoids sin but rather freedom from condemnation at all times. For the believer, Keller writes, "There is

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[69] Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 165.

[70] Keller is careful to hedge that this acceptance still requires believers to confront one another about sin. See Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 165.

nothing but acceptance and welcome."[71] Similarly, Hodge expresses that believers are not free from condemnation because there is nothing in them worthy of condemnation. Indeed, there always is! Rather, believers are free from condemnation because they are in Christ, as the verse explains.[72] His work on the cross has freed them from the condemnation they deserve and continue to deserve. In other words, believers never become worthy enough in themselves to escape judgment, but are rather always liberated from judgment on the basis of Christ's work alone.

While this news is unquestionably an immense comfort, it is also a tremendous responsibility for believers. If this type of unrestrained and unearned welcome is how believers are accepted by Christ, then they must turn and accept one another in the same way. This acceptance means no condemnation of one another, even with ups and downs in faithfulness, even with betrayal, and even with heartbreak. The call is to accept one another just as Christ has accepted them. The call is not to accept one another when they become worthy of acceptance.[73]

Perhaps even more weighty than the explicit command for believers to accept one another is the implicit need for believers to reveal their flaws and deficiencies to others because without doing so, it would be impossible for others to receive them as Christ receives. As has been shown, Christ welcomes believers with their warts and stains. If believers hide their failures from one another and present a spotless version of themselves to the church, the church may accept this false version, but they will not accept as Christ does. In fact, the real person will never be accepted at all because he was never known.

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[71] Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 13.

[72] Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 248-49.

[73] Of course, Christians must never confuse accepting one another with accepting the sin of one another. Where there is sin, there must be accountability, which will be defined in an upcoming section.

Burden Sharing

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul instructs the church, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). While the immediately preceding context describes believers helping one another overcome sin, carrying the burden of another expands beyond motivating each other forward in sanctification.[74] Bruce notes that burden bearing (and thus fulfilling the law of Christ) "is not essentially different from the command to love one's neighbour" and can include practical needs such as financial needs.[75] Keller agrees, suggesting that burden bearing includes any difficulty or problem such as raising a child or renovating a living space.[76]

The connection to vulnerability, however, has less to do with what kind of burden is carried and more to do with expressing the burden that needs carrying. Similar to acceptance, one person will never be able to assist in carrying a burden unless the person with the burden chooses to share it. The command "bear" has implications for both the helper and the one in need of help. Those with burdens are not meant to attempt to carry them alone.[77] Instead, the one with the burden must share the burden with another so that help can be given.

In other words, Christianity has no practice of lone wolves trying to survive without others. Christians living in proper community with one another must not hide from others the difficulties they face out of ego or pride. Similarly, Christians must never conceal their difficulties in an effort to protect others by saying, "I don't want to be a burden to anyone." Paul's command precisely opposes that kind of logic. Instead, of "not being a burden," Paul instructs Christians to share burdens with one another. Keller notes

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[74] Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You*, God's Word for You (Charlotte, NC: Good Book Company, 2015), 167.

[75] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 261.

[76] Keller, *Galatians for You*, 168.

[77] Keller, *Galatians for You*, 168.

this type of burden sharing will require believers to be very close to one another, "standing virtually in their shoes, and putting your own strength under the burden so its weight is distributed on both of you, lightening the load of the other."[78] Similarly, Martin Luther commented that "Christians must have strong shoulders, and mighty bones, that they may bear flesh, that is, the weakness of their brethren."[79] In other words, Christians are not meant to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They are meant to have a community around them helping to share the load—a community that intimately knows all the burdens that need to be shared. Therefore, the prerequisite to burden sharing is vulnerability.

Forgiveness

There are numerous New Testament imperatives for church members to forgive one another. Jesus, of course, commands His followers to forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times (Matt 18:21-22).[80] Additionally, when He teaches His disciples to pray, He instructs them to confess that they forgive those who have sinned against them as part of their prayer (Matt 6:12). Further, Paul instructs both the Ephesian and Colossian churches that they must forgive as the Lord had forgiven them (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). At the same time, both Jesus and Paul forbid Christians from acting in non-forgiving ways such as judging others or carrying feelings of bitterness and wrath (Matt 7:1; Eph 4:31). Combining both the command to forgive and the restrictions on bitterness and judgment begins to paint a picture of what biblical forgiveness entails. Keller explains the comprehensive nature of forgiveness:

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[78] Keller, *Galatians for You*, 168.

[79] Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1979), 360.

[80] The phrase is also accurately translated as "seventy times seven" in the KJV, NASB, NLT and RSV. However, the point is not whether forgiveness must be granted 77 times or 490 times, but that it must be unending. See David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 449.

To forgive, then, is first to name the trespass truthfully as wrong and punishable, rather than merely excusing it. Second it is to identify with the perpetrator as a fellow sinner rather than thinking how different from you he or she is. It is to will their good. Third, it is to release the wrongdoer from liability by absorbing the debt oneself rather than seeking revenge and paying them back. Finally, it is to aim for reconciliation rather than breaking off the relationship forever.[81]

Each of Keller's four marks of forgiveness can be gleaned from Jesus and Paul's instructions as will be shown below.

Jesus's Instruction

Jesus repeats the call for His followers to forgive others in several ways. During His instruction on prayer, He implies that if His followers do not forgive others, they will not be forgiven (Matt 6:12).[82] Lest there be any doubt that He was implying such a qualification related to receiving forgiveness from God, Jesus quickly adds, "If you do not forgive others of their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:15). Jonathan Pennington refers to this warning as "disturbing" because of the weight it adds to the need to forgive.[83] However, at the same time, Pennington explains Jesus's comments do not contradict salvation by grace alone, but instead, they show that a heart which is unwilling to forgive and seeks revenge has not been transformed by God's forgiveness.[84] The idea is that believers must forgive as they have been forgiven. Not to do so exposes a heart which is unconverted.

Believers granting forgiveness akin to the forgiveness that was extended to them by God aligns with all of Keller's markers of forgiveness. First, by applying the forgiveness they received, believers are already empathizing with the offender (marker two). The reason is because in order to do so, they must acknowledge they are not

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[81] Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (New York: Viking, 2022), 9.

[82] Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 189.

[83] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 189.

[84] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 191.

without sin and are in need of forgiveness from God themselves. Second, by using the term "forgiveness" toward the offender, the offended articulates the offense created a real debt (marker one). Forgiveness, by definition, in no way approves of or excuses sin. At the same time, of course, forgiveness declarers the offender is released from the just penalty that is due (marker three).

However, as Keller articulates as part of marker two, forgiveness is more than simply canceling a debt. It actively seeks the good of the offender. Pennington observes this same extra step in the Lord's Prayer by understanding the prayer in the larger context of the definition of righteous seen in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus's followers must exhibit a righteousness that far outpaces any righteousness seen elsewhere in the world, and part of that elevated righteousness is not only being quick to forgive even those who have committed treacherous acts but also actively seeking their welfare.[85]

Not surprisingly therefore, Jesus adds later in the sermon the prohibition of sitting in judgement of others. Indeed, sitting in judgment is the direct opposite of forgiveness! Jesus states, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matt 7:1-2). However, the point is not that Jesus's followers should never make evaluations of other people (in fact He instructs them to do so). Instead, the point is that they cannot make unfair judgements.[86] For example, it would be unfair for a follower who was spared from judgment to turn and sit in judgment of others.[87] Such a behavior would be a bold contradiction. However, Pennington adds the nuance that Jesus's followers can label an action as unacceptable without damning the person who committed

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[85] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 191.

[86] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 216.

[87] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 217.

it—just like God does.[88] Instead of damning, Jesus's followers must always aim for reconciliation, which is, of course, the fourth and final marker of Keller's definition.

To further express the limitless reconciliation His followers must pursue, Jesus tells Peter that instead of forgiving someone only seven times, he must forgive the person seventy seven times (Matt 18:21-22). Therefore, not only must Jesus's followers forgive, they must forgive over and over again—even of the same person committing the same offense. Augustine comments that Jesus's reference to forgiving seventy seven times parallels Luke's genealogy from Adam to Jesus—which is seventy seven generations. His point is that since in Christ, "no generation was omitted, there is no exemption of any trespass that ought not to be forgiven."[89] Again, Christ's followers have no option but to forgive.

Paul's Instruction

Building from what Jesus commanded, Paul specifically instructs the churches in Ephesus and Colossae to forgive one another as they have been forgiven by the Lord (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Paul makes the same argument as Jesus, tying the expected behavior of the believer to what the believer has received from God. Therefore, Paul ties all of Keller's marks into his instruction. Believers must empathize with the offender acknowledging they are offenders themselves. They must release the owed debt as their debt has been released. Further, by labeling the debt as owed but forgiven, they declare the offense was true wrongdoing and deserving of penalty. Finally, they must seek the good of the offender and work toward reconciliation because that is exactly how they have been forgiven. Stott comments that believers should be like children copying the

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[88] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 218-19.

[89] Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 14-28*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 1b (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 83.

behavior of their parents. As God has forgiven, so should Christians as children of God.[90] Paul makes Stott's exact point, of course, in the next chapter writing, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph 5:1).

Unfortunately, Christians often fail to look like their Father in heaven. R. C. Sproul comments that if God had the same hesitancy to forgive as church members often do, all of humanity would be doomed.[91] The implications for that type of behavior are grim. Sproul comments, "An unwillingness to forgive clearly has no place in the kingdom, and may in fact signal that such a one has not experienced the initial forgiveness of God in his or her life."[92] Again, however, obedience to the requirement of forgiving others is not a means to earn salvation from God, but evidence that salvation has already taken place.

As Jesus approached the necessity of forgiveness both by positively commanding for His followers to forgive and negatively forbidding His followers from unfairly judging, Paul does the same. Paul instructs, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Eph 4:31). Again, those types of behaviors would indicate an unforgiving heart. Stott notes that sins like those flow from an "embittered and resentful spirit which refuses to be reconciled."[93] In other words, a person cannot at the same time hold onto bitterness and simultaneously forgive—the two are mutually exclusive.

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[90] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 191.

[91] R. C. Sproul, *Ephesians*, Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1994), 122.

[92] Sproul, *Ephesians,* 122.

[93] Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 190.

Accountability

Bridges writes that koinonia "involves more than openness with one another, it also calls for mutual accountability."[94] Before examining the role that church members play in holding other church members accountable, a helpful introduction to the subject is to examine the role of God's discipline over His children. The writer of the book of Hebrews references Proverbs, commenting,

> And have you forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. . . . Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. (Heb 12:5-6, 10)

If believers do not feel encouraged by God's discipline, they have missed perhaps the most important point. The writer of Hebrews explicitly shows God's children are meant to feel encouraged when disciplined because God is working for their good, and He always disciplines out of love. Mark Dever writes, "We should notice that discipline is often positive, or as it is traditionally called, 'formative.' It is the stake that helps the tree grow in the right direction, the braces on the teeth, the extra set of wheels on the bicycle."[95] Discipline is an act of grace in order to bring the believer into deeper holiness and alignment with His will.

In other words, God's discipline is never punitive, but rather restorative. If it were punitive in the sense that believers must pay God to compensate for their wrongdoing, then Christ's sacrifice did not purchase their full pardon, and His death was insufficient to cover their debt. However, since Christ fully secured complete forgiveness for believers, there is no amount of retribution for believers to pay themselves. The punishment was paid. The debt was covered. Believers are accepted by God and are now

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[94] Bridges, *True Community*, 59.

[95] Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church,* 3rd ed., 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 182.

invited to approach God without fear, even in times of weakness (Heb 4:16). Further,

believers are never excluded from God for they have been elevated to the heavenly

realms through grace (Eph 2:8).

Therefore, when God exercises discipline on believers, it is not because they

have been cast out and must measure up in order to regain entry. He disciplines precisely

because they are already included. As these verses teach, God disciplines those He

accepts as sons, meaning, He does not discipline everyone. He only disciplines those who

are already included for the purpose of making them more like Him. Like parents who do

not discipline all the children in the world but only their own, when God disciplines

believers, it is because they are already part of His family.

The church plays an important role in this refining process. In fact, the church

is one of the means God uses to enact discipline upon His children. Naturally, the

church's involvement in such discipline is referred to as "church discipline."[96] Church

members provide discipline to one another by confronting other members with their sin,

urging repentance, and when necessary, barring unrepentant members from fellowship

with the body. When members are barred from the body, the church is instructed even not

to eat with them (1 Cor 5:8). Similarly, Jesus instructs that unrepentant members are to be

treated as pagans or tax collectors (Matt 18:17). However, even in these extreme

measures, the goal is not to punish (in a punitive sense) but to restore.

For instance, when Paul instructs the church in Corinth to hand a horrifically

errant member over to Satan, the purpose is not for retribution or that the man would be

destroyed for his heinous acts. Instead, the purpose for handing him over to Satan is "so

that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor

5:5). Surprisingly, Paul hopes that Satan's role in this man's life will be to participate in

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[96] John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 114-15.

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his salvation. Similarly, when Paul writes to the Galatians, he instructs them, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1). Again, the goal of discipline is restoration, and the attitude is gentleness. Dever writes, "Corrective church discipline is never to be done out of meanness of spirit but only out of love for the offending party and the members of the church individually, and ultimately out of love for God himself."[97] Similarly, John Hammett writes that "discipline is not an excuse to take revenge for personal offenses" but instead is intended to be "restoration for the one who is disciplined and protection for the church and its corporate witness in the community."[98]

Discipline, then, is given to bring life. The church confronts a believer who is wandering from the fold of God for the purpose of restoring the member to alignment with God's will and ultimately salvation. Discipline is a picture of rescue and redemption. It is levied upon the believer as an act of grace, and the believer responds in repentance and faith. Therefore, discipline displays the gospel. The church plays the role of God by making the first move and taking action in the sinner's life. The sinner, in turn, is expected to respond to the loving-kindness of the church, trust the gospel once more, and surrender to Christ.

As with God's discipline, the church does not take this action in order to make the sinner belong to the church but rather because the sinner already belongs to the church. The church only disciplines members (who are professing believers by definition). When Paul instructs the church not even to eat with those who call themselves brothers but are actively engaged in sin, he specifies that the church can continue to interact with nonbelievers who participate in the same sin (1 Cor 5:10). Again, the church does not discipline people in order for them to belong, but instead, the

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[97] Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church,* 199.

[98] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 135.

church disciplines members because they already belong. Therefore, members should feel encouraged when disciplined by the church as they are when disciplined by God. The church has named them as their own, expressed its desire to see them develop in godliness, and has upheld that desire by taking action. Because of the church's involvement, the believer's spirit could be saved on the day of the Lord.

If the church fails in the important work of discipline, the result will be disastrous. Perhaps more accurately stated, since the church has failed in the important work of discipline, the results are disastrous. Dever indicts, "Imagine Christians, knee-deep in recovery groups and sermons on brokenness and grace, being comforted in their sin but never confronted. Imagine those people, made in the image of God, being lost to sin because no one corrects them. Can you imagine such a church? Have I not described many of our American churches?"[99]

As Dever reasons, the person is lost because the church did not confront. Since God has ordained that the church serve as part of His redemptive means to sanctify His people, by failing to discipline its members, the church has contributed to the damnation of untold numbers of image bearers. Persistence in sin means a person is not saved. If believers persist in sin, they prove the Spirit of God never regenerated them—thus they were never believers. John writes, "The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God" (1 John 3:8-9). If the church cares for the believer, it must intervene when he or she is continuing in sin.

The individual is not the only party that suffers when a church neglects discipline. The church itself will spiral into dysfunction. Tragically, by filling its ranks

[99] Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church,* 196.

with unrebuked sinners, the church becomes what it should have prevented in the lives of its members. Gregg Allison writes the church will grow in "unholy characteristics" if it neglects to discipline its members.[100] Paul writes in reference to the spread of sin by neglecting discipline that "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:6). Dever comments on Paul's instruction that rather than tolerate sin, "They were to have no leaven of sin in them."[101] Clearly, for church members to be faithful to biblical imperatives, they must exercise church discipline.

Conclusion

The New Testament contains many imperatives for how followers of Christ are to interact with one another. While not an exhaustive list, the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are undeniably evident. To neglect these practices would disintegrate any resemblance of the type of koinonia painted in the New Testament.

In terms of mutual support, Jesus's followers are commanded to love one another as He loved them. While the generic term of "love" could be misunderstood to mean a variety of practices contrary to biblical relationships, the New Testament authors detail what is required of Jesus's followers. They must serve and pray for one another. They must encourage, honor, and value one another more than they value themselves. They must place themselves in each other's emotions with empathy—rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. They must greet one another and provide a level of hospitality that likely seems extreme to modern churchgoers. In short, they must mimic the sacrificial attitude of Jesus to one another and by doing so will show Him to the world.

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[100] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 179.

[101] Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church,* 201-2.

In terms of vulnerability, the New Testament mandates the practice both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, followers of Jesus are commanded to confess their sins to one another and share the burdens they are carrying with others in the community as opposed to concealing them. Implicitly, Christians are called to accept one another as Christ has accepted them—a practice that would be impossible unless church members vulnerably shared their own darkness with others.

In terms of forgiveness, both Jesus and Paul remind believers they cannot receive forgiveness from God while simultaneously denying forgiveness to others. Neither the size of the offense nor the frequency of the offense can justify withholding forgiveness. Believers must forgive as they have been forgiven. However, the practice of forgiveness does not negate the need to pursue justice, which leads into the practice of accountability.

In terms of accountability, believers cannot overlook or excuse the sin of others. For the benefit of the individual and the benefit of the community at large, believers must be confronted when they are in error. Therefore, accountability, often referred to as church discipline, is not punishment in the sense that offenders pay for the errors. Instead, it is always restorative. It follows God's pattern of discipline—working toward repentance and transformation rather than condemnation.

For followers of Jesus, the communal imperatives of the New Testament are binding. There is no choice, so to speak, of whether to obey them. Christians either obey or they sin, and prolonged practice of sin without repentance is evidence a person was never converted. Therefore, ignoring these practices not only hurts individuals and communities but is an offense to God. Simply, for a local church to practice biblical koinonia, it must participate in mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. Having examined these practices in regard to the Trinity and God's commands for the church, the focus of this dissertation will now shift to how mutual

support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability were prevalent within various historical groups.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORICAL GROUPS

Introduction

Throughout church history, a number of groups have emphasized communal practices in their fellowships. While not an exhaustive list, the Moravians, John Wesley, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are among those who made specific efforts to align with biblical obligations for Christian communities. This chapter will explore the efforts of the Moravians, Wesley, and Bonhoeffer and show how all three designed their groups to practice mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.

Moravians

Moravian history reaches back to the earliest hints of the Protestant Reformation with a fraternal order named "Brethren of the Law of Christ" founded in Bohemia by Brother Gregory.[1] For the most part, they were not remarkably different from other mission orders at the time who sent out preachers two-by-two as described in Matthew 10, held to poverty and chastity, cared for the poor and sick, and sang hymns. However, in contrast to those other orders, the Brethren sought to loosen ties with the Church and appoint their own priests.[2] While they interacted with the Reformation as it happened, they remained relatively small compared to the movement at large and never rose to the forefront of those who were challenging the Roman Catholic Church.

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[1] J. M. van der Linde, "The Moravian Church in the World, 1457-1957," *International Review of Mission* 46, no. 184 (October 1957): 418.

[2] van der Linde, "The Moravian Church in the World, 1457-1957," 418-19.

However small they were, they still caught enough attention to face severe persecution from the Counter Reformation in Czechoslovakia and were forced to flee to Germany.[3]

The small contingent of remaining Moravians fleeing from persecution was permitted refuge on the estate of Count Nicolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf in 1722.[4] There, along with other refugees, they formed a congregation named Herrnhut, meaning "under the Lord's care."[5] The little band of refugees was quickly joined by many others in similar circumstances, and by 1727, Herrnhut had grown to 220 residents.[6] With Zinzendorf, the Herrnhut congregation would become radically missional and interact with nearly every continent in the world.[7] Their past history of participating in a movement without losing their own identity would repeat itself as they worked alongside various Protestant groups and under various local government restrictions in their mission efforts. Rather than dividing over doctrinal differences or becoming involved in the politics of a particular region, the Moravians acquiesced on theology, conformed politically, and focused primarily on community and evangelism.[8]

However, their flexibility with theology should not be understood to mean they had no theology. Instead, they had a focused theology on a single point: justification.[9] Zinzendorf stressed the Moravians should only be witnesses to what was necessary for salvation—the suffering and death of Jesus that paid the sinner's ransom and provided

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[3] J. M. van der Linde, "Community and Mission: The Moravian Model," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 2 (April 1978), 90.

[4] van der Linde, "The Moravian Church in the World, 1457-1957," 419.

[5] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 90.

[6] Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)*, 6.

[7] Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 99.

[8] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 102.

[9] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 90.

reconciliation with God.[10] Armed with the focus on justification, Zinzendorf saw the Moravians as messengers who would go to all denominations and awaken them from their sleep.[11] He considered the entire world as one "parish of the risen Lord, without geographical, ethnical or confessional limitations."[12] Therefore, wherever the Moravians found success in Zinzendorf's vision, they essentially became a para-church type movement in which awakened people from various denominations could participate in mission and service without abandoning affiliation with their native church home.[13]

The diverse spectrum of revived souls would live in harmony with one another as they continued on their mission to take Christ and His justification to the world. They focused more on the community than the individual and emphasized activities that added festivity and celebration.[14] So strong was the sense of community and togetherness that members would grieve when they were apart and weep with joy upon being reunited, describing their relationships as "heaven on earth."[15] Additionally, Moravians' bonds with each other were tight enough that they often chose to be buried with their Moravian brothers and sisters rather than their biological family.[16] Zinzendorf himself believed in the concept of living in community to such an extent that he was "not willing" to see Christianity without it.[17] This Moravian sense of community was accomplished in part by

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[10] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 92.

[11] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 94.

[12] van der Linde, "The Moravian Church in the World, 1457-1957," 417.

[13] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 90; Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 164-65.

[14] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 17.

[15] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 143.

[16] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 149.

[17] van der Linde, "The Moravian Church in the World, 1457-1957," 422.

the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. A study of these communal efforts will follow.

Mutual Support

The amount of support Moravian communities offered their members is rather astounding. They prayed, gave financially, acted as caregivers for each other's children, and bestowed unusual honor and status upon all members. Each of these will be examined individually, but first, in order to properly understand the Moravians, their focus on missions must be highlighted. For the Moravians under Zinzendorf, it is not an overstatement to say that missions was everything for them. Ruth Tucker describes that their "all-consuming purpose was to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth."[18] That mission was prioritized over family, personal ambition, and certainly personal finances.[19] Moravians were either going or sending—there was no exception. Jon Hinkson estimates, "Theirs was a missionary congregation in which each and every person was mobilized for ministry, with perhaps one in every twelve members of the Moravian community becoming a foreign missionary."[20] Therefore, the proper way to understand their various types of support of one another is through the lens of their overall missional purpose.

In terms of prayer, the Moravians dedicated themselves to a nearly unimaginable 24 hours per day, 7 days per week vigil that lasted in excess of 100 years without interruption.[21] The impetus for this fervency in prayer was a spiritual revival at Herrnhut, which Zinzendorf described as the Moravian Pentecost.[22] The experience was

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[18] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 99.

[19] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 102.

[20] Jon Hinkson, "Missions among Puritans and Pietists," in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, ed. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 43.

[21] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 101.

[22] Robert L. Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology and Practice: Zinzendorf and the Early Moravians," *Mission Studies* 25, no. 2 (January 2008): 187.

so profound that men and women from Herrnhut felt compelled to travel to nearby villages and settlements to share the incredible joy they had found.[23] For both those who went and those who stayed, Zinzendorf instructed that prayer must be offered asking the Holy Spirit to go before them, prepare people to hear the message, and lead the messengers to receptive hearts. He believed the Holy Spirit was the "only true missionary," and without Him, nothing would be possible.[24]

As the Moravian mission efforts expanded around the globe, missionaries wrote regular and detailed accounts of their activities, which were sent back to Herrnhut. From there, they were condensed, edited, and copied in a weekly circular letter that was sent to every Moravian community in the world where it was read aloud in the presence of the entire community. These readings would take place once per month and last an entire day, usually Saturday.[25] Peter Vogt writes, "Thus all members of the Moravian movement, whether in Herrnhut, London, or Lititz, Pennsylvania, were at all times informed about what going in in other parts of the Moravian world."[26] Children even participated by hearing all of the missionary efforts and praying for other children.[27] What confidence it must have given the missionaries that their efforts were supported by the prayers of an army of Moravians deeply desiring that the revival at Herrnhut would explode everywhere.

In terms of financial support, Moravian communities provided a stark contrast to the surrounding settlements. Rather than expecting each person to fend for himself,

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[23] Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology and Practice," 187-88.

[24] Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology and Practice," 191.

[25] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 44.

[26] Peter Vogt, "'Everywhere at Home': The Eighteenth-Century Moravian Movement as a Transatlantic Religious Community," *Journal of Moravian History* 1 (Fall 2006): 24.

[27] Amy C. Schutt, "Complex Connections: Communication, Mobility, and Relationships in Moravian Children's Lives," *Journal of Moravian History* 12, no. 1 (2012): 40-41.

Moravians would create work for anyone who did not have it.[28] While this social safety

net provided "security from birth to death," it was not simple charity.[29] Work was

important and required, but it was not primarily for the individual performing the work or

even the immediate community. Instead, the primary focus was to produce a profit that

could be used to further missionary work around the world.[30] So committed was

Zinzendorf to using all available financial means for missions that he over leveraged

himself into debt.[31] He therefore conceded his need for assistance and turned to a

Herrnhut resident named Abraham Durninger to guide the financial strategy of the

Moravian movement. Durninger arguably invented the idea of reserving some profits to

reinvest into an endeavor so that it could grow even larger and produce more profits for

missions in the long run.[32] However, whether direction came from Zinzendorf or

Durninger, the purpose of work remained the same—to support others, not self.

Specifically, the purpose of work was to support the efforts of taking the goodness of

God experienced at Herrnhut to people who did not know Him.

Even the missionaries themselves were expected to work in various trades,

such as artisans and laborers, in order to earn a living both to support the larger purpose.

For instance, what would typically be considered as "private property" was not, in fact,

private, but was devoted to missionary efforts.[33] Additionally, missionaries did not

receive ongoing financial support from Moravian headquarters at Herrnhut, but rather

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[28] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 94.

[29] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 94.

[30] William J. Danker, *Profit for the Lord: Economic Activities in Moravian Missions and the Basel Mission Trading Company* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1971), 22.

[31] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 104.

[32] Danker, *Profit for the Lord,* 23.

[33] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 90.

gave to it.[34] Again, the focus on supporting others over self is obvious, but rather than support others exclusively for the sake of others, they supported others for the sake of taking the gospel around the world.

One of the uses for the profits earned at Moravian communities was boarding houses for the children of missionaries. In order to increase the mobility of missionaries, the responsibility of raising children was often passed to the community rather than remaining with the parents.[35] These boarding houses were far more than simply schools; they were seen as choirs for children where they could also live in community with one another. The Moravians believed this approach to rearing children was the best way to nurture salvation and protect the children from "harmful influences, including their parents."[36] While this practice was questionable at best, it again shows the willingness of the Moravians to support even the youngest of themselves.

In contrast to their strategy for raising children, the Moravians were quite admirable in how they interacted with slaves. Unique for their time, the Moravians showed slaves immense honor and respect by referring to them as brothers and sisters— the same term used for anyone else in the community.[37] Additionally, while they could not change the politics in given location, they could plant free churches where slaves and non-slaves could feast, worship, and live with one another in close community.[38] Slaves would also receive education in reading and writing in these settings, which caused frequent friction with slave owners and other European authorities.[39] In places where

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[34] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 99, 102.

[35] Schutt, "Complex Connections," 29.

[36] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 142-43.

[37] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 100.

[38] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 100.

[39] Helen Richards, "Distant Garden: Moravian Missions and the Culture of Slavery in the Danish West Indies, 1732-1848," *Journal of Moravian History* 2 (Spring 2007): 63.

slaves could not leave plantations to attend these church gatherings, the Moravians went to them. They would work alongside slaves as carpenters, doctors, or general laymen in order to be in near proximity.[40] Simply, the Moravians lived out Paul's instruction for Christians to love another and outdo each other in showing honor in how they interacted with slaves (Rom 12:10).

Vulnerability

Most visibly, vulnerability can be observed in the small group system designed by Zinzendorf himself. The idea occurred to him after hearing a sermon about the close relationship of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John.[41] In order to achieve such relational intimacy, Zinzendorf believed his communities should be divided into small groups referred to as choirs and smaller groups, which were bands.[42] For single members, groups segregated by gender would often live together, and there were even some groups composed of married couples that would live in the same house.[43] The groups would meet daily, and Zinzendorf described that members would be able to reveal "the whole state of their hearts and conceal nothing from each other."[44] Members would exhibit "total frankness" regarding their own spiritual state, and others in the group were expected to respond with unrestrained candor.[45] Without such vulnerability, Zinzendorf could not see how members could truly "commit themselves to each other's care in the Lord."[46]

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[40] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 100.

[41] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 91.

[42] The terminology is identical to Wesley's groups, which will be explored below.

[43] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 137, 142.

[44] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 91.

[45] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 31.

[46] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 91.

Therefore, the groups were not only about confession, but more so about what confession could provide—intimacy and care. Because members knew each other so well, pastoral guidance could be personalized.[47] As can be the case in modern small towns where everyone knows what is happening with everyone else, individual problems become communal problems, and solutions are attained publicly rather than privately.[48] However, the difference between Moravian communities and small towns is that instead of vulnerability occurring organically or even invasively, Moravian vulnerability was intentionally designed.

For instance, Moravian communities would counsel newlywed couples on all matters at length, including the wedding night. In fact, the couple would even receive prayer through the laying on of hands immediately before retiring to a bedchamber to consummate their marriage. Counsel from the community did not end at the point when intimacy began, however. The couple would debrief with their married band group members the day following their wedding night and continue to receive bedroom guidance as they progressed in their marriage.[49]

Singles also "freely and openly" shared their sexual struggles and victories with those in their gender specific band.[50] The goal was to offer guidance in how to navigate these struggles and provide support for one another. Often, young men would join these bands and move into the band house specifically out of concern for their soul because of sexual temptation.[51] Thus, Zinzendorf's belief that members could not support

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[47] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 91.

[48] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 99.

[49] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 131.

[50] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 131.

[51] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 142.

one another without vulnerability comes to light. Without knowing of a struggle, no guidance or pastoral care could be provided.

Forgiveness

One of the primary applications of pastoral care was for members to assure one another of forgiveness after confession of sin.[52] Moravian theology was strongly focused around grace and the sufficiency of Christ to pardon the sinner apart from any work or amount of holiness the sinner could produce[53] and believing sinners could "immediately claim Christ's perfection" before manifesting progress in sanctification.[54] Therefore, when members confessed to one another, they received prayers for healing, reminders of Christ's forgiveness, and even celebration of what Christ had accomplished on their behalf.[55] This confidence in Christ was precisely what Wesley would later admire when he encountered the Moravians on a ship in the Atlantic.

Accountability

Moravian accountability began by regulating and keeping a close watch over who became a member. Only if someone manifested a sincere "turn of heart" toward Christ and an "inextinguishable flame" could they join a Moravian community, choir, and band.[56] There were occasions when the same applicant would be denied again and again over the course of multiple years before gaining admission—if then.[57]

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[52] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 41.

[53] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 31.

[54] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 74.

[55] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 31.

[56] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 122.

[57] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 122.

Additionally, potential members needed to consent to Moravian supervision in writing.[58] The supervision included authority not only over spiritual matters but personal ones as well, such as when to travel and who to marry.[59] Those who were young and unmarried were generally discouraged from becoming married as it would distract from the mission—reminiscent of Paul's preference (1 Cor 7:32-34). When they were permitted to marry, spouses were often chosen by casting lots.[60] Church discipline for disobedience of such directives was strict and frequent.[61] In fact, rather than discipline for sinful behavior, most often discipline occurred in a Moravian community because someone disobeyed a decision from the community supervision.[62]

Conclusion

The Moravian approach to communal life was certainly innovative in its day. It included people of all ages, socio-economic statuses, and races and bound them together such that those barriers truly disappeared. By practicing mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability, members experienced a sense of belonging that begs the envy of the modern world. From that cradle of community, they took the transformative doctrine of justification by faith alone to the nations, and the nations listened.

John Wesley

John Wesley's influence on the landscape of Christianity can scarcely be overstated. His methodical approach to both his own faith and the organizational efficiency of his movement created an army of self-replicating disciples. At the center of

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[58] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 104.

[59] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 132.

[60] Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 102.

[61] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 90.

[62] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England,* 132.

it all was Wesley's drive to follow God commands with absolute perfection and to provide a means for others to do the same. His means included an elaborate system of small groups, which he saw as necessary for anyone who wanted to press forward in holiness. In fact, Wesley believed that without them, new converts would quickly wither from their newfound faith. He wrote, "Without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer."[63] So passionately did he believe in the importance of these groups that he forbid himself or any of his itinerates from preaching in a new area unless a follow up group could be formed afterward.[64] As spiritually awakened individuals progressed through his system of groups, he believed they would inch ever closer to the all-important destination of perfection.

Therefore, Wesley's solidified theology of perfection is essential to understanding the structure of his groups and what they practiced. Wesley believed if the Spirit of God truly inhabited a believer, that person could live a life completely free from sin, both inward and outward. Wesley, referring to a Christian, explained, "As he loves God, so he 'keeps his commandments;' not only some, or most of them, but all, from the least to the greatest."[65] To Wesley, this perfect behavior would give a believer "boldness on the day of judgement" because love proves that it has been perfected by its fruits.[66] Conversely, without obedience, love has not yet been made perfect and there is no assurance. Further, Wesley explained, "If any unrighteousness remain in the soul, it (the

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[63] John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), 169.

[64] "The London Conference of June 2-6, 1748," in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, vol. 10 of *WJW*, ed. Henry D. Rack (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 210-11.

[65] John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *WJW*, vol. 11, *Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters*, ed. Thomas King (1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2014), 8. Note that Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" has been excerpted from the original volume and repaginated.

[66] Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 12.

soul) is not cleansed from 'all, unrighteousness.'"[67] Wesley believed this perfection, which equated to sanctification, could happen instantaneously, but he observed it usually occurred gradually over time.[68]

Against anyone who accused him of teaching salvation by works, Wesley passionately defended himself: "Perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith," and "the whole of salvation" is accomplished by God's grace.[69] However, at the same time, Wesley taught even those who reached perfection could fall from it.[70] Further, he stressed that faith is lost through disobedience and that if a believer willfully sinned, he forfeited his present pardon. Such people lost their justification and any assurance of future salvation.[71] Lastly, Wesley declared not every believer is a new creation in the "full sense," and that in "the proper sense," whoever is filled with the Holy Spirit cannot sin, either inwardly or outwardly.[72] The point is clear. If a Christian is not pressing on toward perfection, that person is not saved from sin and remains under the wrath of God. As previously mentioned, Wesley institutionalized a system of groups that aimed to facilitate perfection in believers.

Likely, Wesley's first exposure to groups outside of the formal Sunday morning church gathering came at a young age through his mother, Susanna, who held the role of the primary spiritual influence in the Wesley household. She instituted the regime of prayer, memorization, and Sabbath observance for her children, and began using the family devotional times to read stories of foreign missionaries to her children.

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[67] Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 12.

[68] Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 50.

[69] Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 68.

[70] Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 52.

[71] "The London Conference of June 25-29, 1744," in Rack, *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, in *WJW*, 10:128.

[72] "The London Conference of June 25-29, 1744," in *WJW*, 10:131-32.

When others in their town heard of these devotions, they began coming to the Wesley home to hear them alongside the children. Eventually, more people were attending Susanna's devotional time than church on Sunday mornings.[73] Susanna reportedly called these gatherings a "society," which planted a seed in Wesley's mind that would bear much fruit in the future.[74]

Wesley's own efforts at organizing groups began at his first fulltime position at Oxford where he was tasked with lecturing "in logic, Greek, and philosophy."[75] In addition to teaching, he had the responsibility to tutor eleven students and serve in a local parish. Oxford administrators planned to increase the number of such tutors because they were concerned both by "the small but growing number (of students) who were being seduced by the fashionable heresies for Arianism and Deism" as well as students who had fallen into an immoral lifestyle.[76] Increasing the number of tutors aimed to correct these errors, and Wesley began in November of 1729 ready for the challenge.[77]

Wesley's Oxford group called themselves, "The Holy Club," while others labeled them methodists because of their rigid religious and scholastic practices.[78] The term fit because compared to other students, Wesley's group certainly appeared fanatical. One of Wesley's later pupils, Benjamin Ingram, recorded his routine as waking at 4:00 a.m. for prayer, followed by meditation and more prayer, keeping and confessing a

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[73] Mark Williamson, *A Blueprint for Revival: A New Biography—Lessons from the Life of John Wesley* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2011), 11-12.

[74] Frank Baker, "The People Called Methodists—3. Polity," in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, ed. Rupert E. Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 215.

[75] Williamson, *A Blueprint for Revival*, 21.

[76] Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 31.

[77] John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 89.

[78] John Wesley, "A Short History of Methodism," in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, vol. 9 of *WJW*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 368.

journal of sins, and "hourly examination" of his soul.[79] The types of practices were not

unique to Wesley but rather had been brewing in England and elsewhere for some time.

For instance, The Holy Club read *The Country Parson's Advice to Parishioners*, which

insisted the "most effectual means" for revitalizing holiness into the church was to unite

into societies and "be helpful to each other in all good Christian ways."[80] Similarly, the

Church of England had long commissioned societies for the purpose of helping members

"resolve upon a holy and serious life."[81] Those societies conformed to regulations

stipulated by the Anglican Church that were published in *Orders Belonging to a

Religious Society* in 1724.[82] Membership in these societies required paying a

subscription, belonging to the Church of England, and submitting to the society director

who was ordained and appointed by the church.[83]

The groups Wesley formed after The Holy Club would carry numerous

additional requirements and allow membership to non-Anglicans.[84] Wesley's

determination to make his groups accessible to all likely came from his interactions with

the Moravians and their ecumenical spirit. Wesley first encountered the Moravians on a

missionary journey to Georgia and was attracted to the assurance they felt for their own

salvation.[85] Then, during his first year in Georgia, Wesley lived in a Moravian house.[86]

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[79] Benjamin Ingham, *Diary of an Oxford Methodist: Benjamin Ingham, 1733-1734*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 131-34.

[80] Baker, "The People Called Methodists," 215.

[81] Rupert E. Davies, ed., introduction to *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, vol. 9 of *WJW* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 6.

[82] Henry D. Rack, ed., introduction to *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, vol. 10 of *WJW* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 3.

[83] Davies, introduction to *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:6.

[84] Davies, introduction to *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:6.

[85] Tomkins, *John Wesley*, 59.

[86] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England*, 32.

Upon returning to England, he partnered with them for a society at Fetter Lane, and it was at a Moravian gathering on Aldersgate Street on May 24, 1738, where Wesley found his heart "strangely warmed."[87] He wrote of the experience, "An assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."[88] Three months later, he even traveled to Herrnhut to study the Moravians and their methods.[89] There he observed their small group communities consisting of five to ten people, called "choirs" or "bands."[90] He was impressed by the frequency of the meetings and how members would freely confess their sins to one another for healing.[91]

In fact, Wesley was so taken with the Moravians that he applied for formal membership in their fellowship but was denied.[92] Ultimately, the gap between his perfectionism and the Moravian assurance of salvation was too great, and they separated. Zinzendorf attempted reconciliation, but even he accused Wesley of rejecting the Moravian teaching on salvation that Wesley had originally accepted during his Aldersgate experience in 1738.[93] From a distance, Wesley continued to pine for the fellowship he once shared with the Moravians, but he believed if he succumbed to his heart's longings, it would mean his doom.[94]

Thus, the seemingly small but rather foundational difference in Wesley's groups and the Moravian groups becomes evident. Both wanted to pursue Christ and His holiness, but the Moravians did so from a place of assurance in Christ's work on their

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[87] Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, 36.

[88] Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, 36.

[89] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 92.

[90] Davies, introduction to *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:8.

[91] van der Linde, "Community and Mission," 92.

[92] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England*, 32-33.

[93] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England*, 74.

[94] Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England*, 75.

behalf while Wesley did so from a desperate search for perfection in order to attain such assurance.

Therefore, while Wesley's groups share certain similarities to the Moravian gatherings and the Anglican societies from which they sprang, they were also completely different. As people progressed from one type of gathering to another, they were expected to inch ever closer to perfection as if descending ever more deeply into a funnel.[95] The Moravians, of course, had no such expectation. A study of Wesley's various groups will show how Wesley utilized the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability to foster progression toward perfection.

Mutual Support

The primary function of Wesley's groups, like many of their predecessors, was to help participants grow in holiness. In fact, the only requirement Wesley initially instituted for membership was a "desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins."[96] Therefore, the primary type of support offered by Wesley's groups was spiritual exhortation and accountability to live a holy life. Since that type of support will be extensively covered under the heading of accountability, little needs to be said now. However, it is worth noting that all of the activities of the various groups spring from this one desire. In essence, every measure of a support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability ultimately stem from Wesley's unyielding pursuit of perfection.

Even though spiritual growth was always at the forefront, other types of tangible support were offered and received by Wesley's membership. They would give freely of their possessions to one another, pray for one another, and honor one another— even those who were not often honored by the culture at large. For instance, Wesley's

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[95] "The London Conference of June 25-29, 1744," in *WJW*, 10:136-37.

[96] John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:257.

groups collected a subscription fee from the members following the pattern of previous Anglican societies. In particular, Wesley needed the income from the fees to pay for the room where the society met. Therefore, he divided his society into "little companies or classes" of eleven to twelve people, with a designated leader who collected the subscription from members.[97] Because they were in smaller groups, if one person could not pay because of financial hardship, others in the group were familiar enough with the circumstances that a financially able person could provide for the one in need.[98] Commendably, Wesley practiced what he expected from others and participated in meeting the financial needs of those in his groups. By the end of his life, he had given away thirty thousand pounds.[99]

In addition to providing for financial needs, the smaller groups provided a means for individualized prayer support. A leader would be able to meet regularly with each member—something not possible with larger groups. This "closer union" helped members "pour out of their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to the sin which did still 'easily beset them.'"[100] Some of these "bands" (smaller groups) were segregated by gender and met weekly. At both these small group and individual meetings, members would receive instruction and prayer specific to their circumstances.

Finally, once a quarter, all the men from bands gathered for a communal meal called a love feast. Women would do the same, and both genders met together at the same interval. Unlike the other meetings, the purpose for love feasts was celebration, fellowship, encouragement, and honor of one another instead of examination. For instance, rich and poor were included, and neither was favored over the other as everyone

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[97] Davies, introduction to *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:12.

[98] John Wesley, "Thoughts upon Methodism," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:528.

[99] Tomkins, *John Wesley,* 199.

[100] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:266.

came together in "gladness and singleness of heart."[101] Wesley, himself, boasts of the encouragement he received from others through these meetings even though they only ate a plain cake and water.[102]

Vulnerability

Wesley believed that whoever wanted to make an honest attempt to flee from the wrath to come would willingly perform regular and serious examination of their spiritual state. That examination was not only to be a private affair but done publicly in a group setting. Members needed to come together and answer questions such as, "Have you the forgiveness of sins? Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you? Is your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?"[103] Members would continue to ask each other these types of questions at every meeting to ensure sanctification was actually taking place. Additionally, Wesley required members to answer what sins they committed since the last meeting, what temptations they experienced, how they were delivered, if they had any thought, word, or deed they were uncertain if "it to be sin or not," and if they had any desire to keep any secret.[104]

For those who displayed significant progress out of sin and manifested a holy pursuit of God, Wesley directed them to participate in his select society. Wesley began meeting with these holy of holies one hour each week to "press after perfection."[105]

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[101] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:267.

[102] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:268.

[103] John Wesley, "Rules of the Band Societies," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:77-78.

[104] Wesley, "Rules of the Band Societies," in *WJW*, 9:78.

[105] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:270.

Again, Wesley wrote up rules and procedures for group to follow. However, within these rules lies one notable uniqueness not seen in the other groups: whatever a member of a select society shared during the meeting must remain in the strictest confidence and not be repeated to outsiders.[106] Since other groups required members to share secret temptations of their hearts with no provision to keep anyone's confession private, the nuance of this secrecy rule for the most holy group stands out. Wesley revealed that by participating in this group, he could "unbosom" himself "on all occasions, without reserve."[107]

Thus, the level of vulnerability increased the further someone progressed in Wesley's system. At this deepest place in the funnel, nothing remained hidden—even for Wesley himself.

Forgiveness

Of course, not everyone who entered the society progressed linearly through the various groups. Some slid back into the sinful trough from whence they came but eventually repented with a genuine heart to improve. For these individuals, Wesley decided to form yet another group instead of simply readmitting them into a regular band. In this penitent group, as it was called, they could share specific pitfalls and triggers that were perhaps common to all of them. By doing so, they found the help they needed to return to a regular band. In other words, rather than banishing someone forever, even for grievous sins, Wesley "endeavored to bring them back to the great Shepherd and Bishop of their souls."[108] Graciously, during this time of return, penitents were not viewed as lepers by the other groups but were "received gladly" and still allowed to participate in

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[106] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:270.

[107] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:270.

[108] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:269.

the larger society meetings and love feasts.[109] Wesley happily reports that many did

return from their backsliding as a result of being part of this special band.[110]

This freely given forgiveness is crucial to understand in union with the severity

of the previously discussed vulnerability and the accountability yet to be examined. Only

with such grace could the strictness of other practices be endured. Presumably without

this type of glad forgiveness, Wesley's movement would have crumbled under the weight

of straining for unobtainable perfection.

Accountability

Perhaps the most known feature of Wesley's groups involves their measures

for accountability. The smaller groups not only allowed opportunity for members to share

their struggles, but they afforded leaders and members proximity to notice if anyone had

fallen into sin and was not revealing it. Wesley described, "Evil men were detected and

reproved. . . . If they forsook their sin, we received them gladly; if they obstinately

persisted therein, it was openly declared that they were not of us."[111]

Practically, they would be removed from participation by not receiving the

required "ticket" for admission to society meetings. As Wesley's movement grew, he

could not personally know the lives of everyone, and, therefore, he developed the ticket

system. Handwritten tickets would be disturbed to worthy members on a quarterly basis

when Wesley visited each town.[112] Every small band from a town would meet together as

a large society when Wesley visited and remove anyone who had succumbed to

unrepentant sin. If former members did not possess a ticket from Wesley, they would not

be allowed into the next meeting and could not travel to a nearby town to participate in a

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[109] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:261.

[110] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:269.

[111] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:261.

[112] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:265.

different society meeting.[113] Only when the sinners demonstrated remorse and turned from their disobedient behavior would they be allowed another ticket. On one occasion when Wesley returned to Newcastle, he learned of widespread disobedience to the societal rules, and after reading the names of the eight hundred members, he interviewed them and banished fifty from the group.[114] Similar discipline was necessary in London, Bristol, and Kingswood.[115]

The rules for maintaining membership were extensive. In addition to the general confession of sin, Wesley pronounced positive ordinances including prayer, worship, communion, fasts, and Scripture reading. His negative ordinances included abstaining from the buying, selling, or drinking of liquor, from fighting, from "singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God," and from "putting on of gold or costly apparel." Wesley believed that the Spirit would write these rules on "every truly awakened heart," meaning that any disagreement over them was not simply disagreement with Wesley, but with God himself.[116]

Anyone who disobeyed these rules without repentance was excluded from participation in the society. Wesley wrote that the group would "admonish him of the error of his ways," but if he showed no repentance, then he would have "no more place among us."[117]

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[113] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," in *WJW*, 9:265.

[114] Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:67.

[115] Davies, introduction to *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:11.

[116] John Wesley, "The Nature Design and General Rules, of the United Societies," in Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, in *WJW*, 9:70-73.

[117] Wesley, "The Nature Design and General Rules, of the United Societies," in *WJW*, 9:73.

Conclusion

Wesley's systematized approach to group life has no rival in church history. The number of groups, number of rules, and extent of their enforcement is simply unparalleled. W. L. Doughty quotes George Whitefield admitting, "My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class and thus preserved the fruit of his labours. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand."[118] The preservation that Whitefield observed was not accomplished simply by meeting together but by meeting together and participating in very specific practices. In particular, Wesley's groups exemplified mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In comparison to Zinzendorf's Moravians and Wesley's Methodists, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's efforts to create a biblically-centered community involved far fewer people and existed for far fewer years. His seminary for those in the Confessing Church during Hitler's attempts to silence all voices of opposition lasted only from April 1935 to September 1937 before it was closed by the Gestapo.[119] In total, there were only 112 students who participated in communal learning at Zingst and then Finkenwalde during those years—some of whom continued to be involved with the seminary after completing their courses.[120]

Perhaps surprisingly, Bonhoeffer debated whether to take the position at the seminary or expend his time and energy on other efforts. He had a keen eye for what was in error in the world, and the 1930s certainly had much that required attention. He rightly

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[118] W. L. Doughty, *John Wesley: Preacher* (London: Epworth Press, 1955), 57.

[119] Donald Murdoch Fergus, "Finkenwalde: An Experiment to Restore a Failing Ecclesiology?," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69, no. 2 (2016): 208.

[120] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, vol. 14 of *DBW*, ed. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1022-26.

believed the German church had been largely duped by Hitler. In fact, many of his future pupils at Finkenwalde had never considered there might be something amiss with the new political power structure or with being drafted into the military for the growing war efforts.[121] Additionally, Bonhoeffer believed German seminaries were stale and academic. They needed to focus on dying to self in the service of others as mandated by the Sermon on the Mount.[122]

American seminaries at least displayed signs of life and passion, but Bonhoeffer believed they lacked rigorous study of Scripture or contemplation of the person of Christ.[123] Additionally, while Bonhoeffer appreciated the camaraderie in American dormitories, he also claimed that they lacked truth because no one would speak a word against another.[124] Further, he was appalled by the plight of African Americans who were denied so many rights in a country that posted slogans about brotherhood and peace.[125]

Nowhere had Bonhoeffer found serious coursework alongside of Christ existing as community. In the end, Bonhoeffer felt called to serve the German church by striving to maintain its integrity in the face of the evil that currently threatened it. While the task would be difficult and risky, he believed training pastors who would serve in the confessing movement could preserve the church, and he believed he had a vision for how to do it. In 1935, he wrote to his brother, "The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the

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[121] Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2020), 265.

[122] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 248.

[123] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 99.

[124] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, vol. 10 of *DBW*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott (New York: Fortress Press, 2008), 306.

[125] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 114.

Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people and do this."[126] His experiment at Zingst and then Finkenwalde would be an effort to do exactly that.

Before launching into his endeavor with the young pastoral pupils, Bonhoeffer stipulated to the Confessing Church that he must visit "colleges and communities throughout England to learn about these various communities and their spiritual disciplines."[127] Among the congregations visited were low and high church Anglicans, Quakers, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists.[128] Through these visits, his theological view of church community was largely confirmed. For some time, Bonhoeffer had a vision brewing in his soul for what church should be and in fact, in reality, is.

The seeds for this vision reached all the way back to his childhood and the first real time he was away from home. After growing up in a tight knit family, Bonhoeffer was given the opportunity to study abroad in Rome with his brother in 1924.[129] Away from his normal structures of comfort, he witnessed the transcendent bedrock that was the church. Attending a Catholic Mass, he observed the reality of Christ existing among the gathered community. It dawned on him for the first time that the reality of the church not only existed in Rome or Germany or any other specific place, but at all places.[130] The question of what precisely the reality of church involved would drive his doctoral thesis (*Sanctorum Communio*) and his post-doctoral work (*Act and Being*).

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[126] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933-1935*, vol. 13 of *DBW*, ed. Keith W. Clements, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 284-85.

[127] Donald Fergus, "Forgiveness: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Search for the Beating Heart of Christian Community," *Bonhoeffer Journal* 4, no. 1 (2016): 4.

[128] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 261.

[129] Fergus, "Finkenwalde," 209.

[130] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 114.

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer noted the church is the space where social acts of the community of love are demonstrated.[131] By doing such acts, Christ would be present among the people. For Bonhoeffer,

> The marks of the church, if understood comprehensively, always imply the sociality of the church-community. The proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments make Christ's vicarious representative action present for us; and this vicarious representative action in turn finds expression in the church's social form. The social dimension of the concept of the church is, thus, not an external addition to this concept, but an original, constitutive element.[132]

Thus, Bonhoeffer's signature phrase, "Christ existing as church community," was birthed, and now, with a group of students, his idealized vision could become a reality.[133]

He intended for the community to be a haven where brothers could experience how pleasant is it to dwell in unity with each other (Ps 133:1).[134] Community could be experienced "as the grace that it is, the 'roses and lilies' of the Christian life."[135] While his protocols for community involved more than the practices under examination in this dissertation, the short-lived seminary of the Confessing Church practiced mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. An investigation of those practices and their place at Zingst and Finkenwalde will follow.[136]

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[131] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, vol. 1 of *DBW,* ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 178.

[132] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 294.

[133] Fergus, "Forgiveness," 6.

[134] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. by John W. Doberstein (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954), 6.

[135] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 9.

[136] The reason for two different seminary locations was purely logistical. When Bonhoeffer accepted the invitation to lead the effort, no building had been identified to house the students. The Zingst location was quickly found, but it would only be available for less than two months. Once Zingst needed to be vacated, they found the von Katte estate, which had formerly been a private school in Finkenwalde. See: Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 262, 266.

Mutual Support

In Bonhoeffer's mind, the primary method of mutual support believers could offer one another was the gift of confessing sins to one another and offering the absolution of Christ. In fact, Bonhoeffer believed confession was "the essential focus for all of spiritual care."[137] He believed the Reformers who had moved confession and absolution to a private practice as a reaction to the Catholic Church's indulgences had overcorrected. Instead, confession and absolution needed to be "at the very core" of the sacramental life of the church—though obviously void from the practice of indulgences.[138] While this dissertation will examine the confession and absolution practices at Finkenwalde in detail under the headings of vulnerability and forgiveness, it first must be understood as the centerpiece of all practices at the seminary, including mutual support.

For now, within the vein of mutual support, confession provided a means to carry one another's burdens. In confession, one believer takes on the burden of another's sin. As one confesses weakness, another stands in the strength of Christ to bear and shoulder the weight of it.[139] Thus, the distress of the sin and its shame is not carried by the offender alone, but rather by the community who hears the confession. Bonhoeffer writes of bearing one another's sin, "Here the Christian suffers the rupture of his fellowship with the other person that had its basis in Jesus Christ. But here, too, it is only in the bearing with him that the great grace of God becomes wholly plain."[140] Therefore, with Bonhoeffer, bearing another's sin in confession was never a means to excuse the sin, but rather expose its full weight and then help to carry it.

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[137] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, trans. Jay C. Rochelle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 60.

[138] Fergus, "Forgiveness," 15.

[139] Nicola J. Wilkes, "Life and Health: Bonhoeffer's Normative and Divergent Accounts of Private Confession of Sin," *Theology Today* 71, no. 1 (April 2014): 62.

[140] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 80.

Bonhoeffer viewed this type of burden sharing as the fellowship of the cross, writing, "As Christ bore and received us as sinners so we in his fellowship may bear and receive sinners into the fellowship of Jesus through the forgiving of sins."[141] In other words, as carrying the sinful burdens of believers was the very means through which Jesus brought Christians into fellowship, Christians by definition had no fellowship with each other unless they participated in the same practice.[142] Not one to speak in vague generalities, Bonhoeffer writes, "If any member refuses to bear that burden, he denies the law of Christ."[143]

While bearing the weight of one another's sins through confession was the primary means of mutual support that members of the Finkenwalde community provided one another, it was not the only means. Bonhoeffer believed bearing burdens included appreciating one another's "oddities" and accepting the parts of another that would normally cause friction in a non-Christian community.[144] To be clear, these would not be sinful behaviors, but simply different behaviors. Whatever was particular to the other person that would be more comfortable to avoid or stamp out, the Christian should bear it instead.

Bonhoeffer likely at least had in mind people with disabilities who were targeted by Hitler's Germany. Prior to Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer visited the Bethel Community, an entire village for people with all kinds of disabilities. More than a hospital, it had "schools, churches, farms, factories, shops, and housing for nurses."[145] Bonhoeffer was more than impressed. The community was "the gospel made visible, a

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[141] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 80.

[142] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

[143] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

[144] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

[145] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 184.

fairy-tale landscape of grace, where the weak and helpless were cared for in a palpably Christian atmosphere."[146] As a total rebuttal and counterstatement to the Führer, Bonhoeffer believed bearing such burdens must not simply involve accepting and affirming the difference but bearing it long enough that the burden would break through to joy. Not to practice this type of burden-sharing would be to stamp out or defy the particular image in which God had created the person.[147]

Additionally, Bonhoeffer understood implications of the communion table included supporting one another with physical needs. He wrote, "The table fellowship of Christians implies obligation. . . . Now no one goes hungry as long as another has bread, and he who breaks this fellowship of the physical life also breaks the fellowship of the Spirit."[148] However, for Bonhoeffer, sharing from one's abundance was not only in regard to food; it extended to all areas of life. For example, on his thirtieth birthday, Bonhoeffer paid for a trip to Sweden for the students at Finkenwalde rather than receiving a gift from them.[149] Later, when one of the students was in the hospital, Bonhoeffer bore the cost of arranging a private room in the ward.[150] Similarly, Bonhoeffer bought train tickets back to the seminary for everyone after an evening in Berlin.[151] Over and over again, Bonhoeffer lived out the ideals he found in Scripture of serving one another.

Another type of service for one another was, of course, prayer. Bonhoeffer instructed that each member must be aware enough of "the cares, the needs, the joys and

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[146] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 184.

[147] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

[148] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 50.

[149] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 283.

[150] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 283-84.

[151] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 284.

thanksgivings, the petitions and hopes of the others" that he lift them up in prayer.[152] Such prayers were part of the daily routine at Finkenwalde because in Bonhoeffer's words, "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses."[153]

Bonhoeffer admitted that the daily routine of prayer could become monotonous or burdensome, but here too, the answer was prayer. The community must pray for the prayers of those in the community. In fact, only if the community interceded on the behalf of those praying for the needs of community would the needs of the community be able to be lifted in prayer.[154] In other words, everything, including prayer, needed to be bathed in prayer confessing a dependence on Christ. Bonhoeffer instructed, "Spiritual love will speak to Christ about a brother more than to a brother about Christ," even in how that brother prayed.[155]

Vulnerability

Bonhoeffer's insistence for vulnerability at Finkenwalde can scarcely be overstated. As the Moravians cannot be understood apart from mission and Wesley cannot be understood apart from his theology of perfectionism, so Bonhoeffer cannot be understood apart from confession. So central to Bonhoeffer was mutual confession that he claimed it was "the most important task for the church today."[156] As such, confession became "a controlling idea decisively shaping other theological concepts."[157]

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[152] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 46.

[153] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 66.

[154] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 45, 47.

[155] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 22.

[156] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 248n117.

[157] Wilkes, "Life and Health," 61.

Bonhoeffer first witnessed the power of confession on his adventure studying in Rome with his brother in 1924. In fact, the practice of confession was the specific impetus for his aforementioned defining question: What is the nature of the reality of church? At the time, while watching congregants at Maria Maggiore enter and leave a confessional booth, he concluded, "The concretization of the idea of the church is fulfilled in confession and absolution."[158]

Bonhoeffer would later detail that confession and absolution were the concretization of the church because in them, the penitent meets the forgiveness of Christ: "Our brother stands before us as the sign of the truth and grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. . . . When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God."[159] Therefore, without confession, there would be no realization of the forgiveness Christ offers, and without Christ's absolution of sin, there would be no church. In Bonhoeffer's words, "There is no longer a church community where there is no confession of sin."[160]

Notably, the confession of sin could not only be a generic corporate recitation of sin in general, but confession of specific sins to another individual. He writes that confession "takes place not only in the setting of public worship, but amidst the distress and anguish of a concrete encounter between two persons."[161] The issue with only practicing corporate confession without specific confession was that sin would remain

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[158] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927*, vol. 9 of *DBW*, ed. Clifford J. Green, Marshall D. Johnson, Paul Duane Matheny, trans. Mary C. Nebelsick and Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 89.

[159] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 89.

[160] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*, vol. 11 of *DBW*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker, and Michael B. Lukens, trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 326.

[161] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 248n117.

concealed. In generic corporate confession, the specific offense would only be known to God and therefore hidden from the community.

As a result, multiple issues would ensue. First, Bonhoeffer speculated that without the community knowing the specific sin, the penitent had deceived himself and only confessed to himself—not God.[162] Again, Bonhoeffer's axiom, "Christ existing as church community," comes to mind. Without the community being told, the believer had no means to encounter the judging and pardoning Word of God Himself because Christ exists as the church community.[163] In such a case, the believer would never experience freedom from that sin or have assurance of its pardon.

Second, Bonhoeffer hinted at a connection between revealing hidden sin to another brother and physical health. While he certainly did not believe that every sickness was the result of unconfessed sin, he did propose that "a good many physical ailments simply fall away when people's hearts are made free and glad again" through confessing one to another.[164]

Third, Bonhoeffer observed if a brother did not confess to the community, he would be separated from the community because he would not be truly known. Bonhoeffer warns any community that does not practice open confession to one another:

> The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy.[165]

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[162] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 92.

[163] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 92-93.

[164] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945*, vol. 16 of *DBW*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans Lisa E. Dahill (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 501.

[165] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 88.

Only when a brother's sin was known by the community could he enjoy true fellowship with the community for the first time.[166]

Surprisingly, however, with his insistence on the community being involved in the confession, Bonhoeffer did not advocate (or practice) confessing specific sins to everyone in the community. He believed by confessing to one person of the community, he was confessing to the entire community. He stated, "I meet the whole congregation in the one brother to whom I confess my sins."[167] For Bonhoeffer, the one brother was Eberhard Bethge, a student at Finkenwalde who had quickly become closer to Bonhoeffer than anyone else ever had.[168] The openness of their relationship likely aided Bonhoeffer's insistence that confession must be practiced one to another rather than exclusively corporately. However, regardless of whether the other students had someone as intimately close as Bethge was to Bonhoeffer, they were all expected to participate in the practice.

From Bethge's account, the students at Finkenwalde were less than anxious to participate in confession. One Saturday evening, Bonhoeffer announced the expectation to confess sins one to another as part of participating in communion the next day.[169] The students felt that "hardly anyone" would be able to do it, "and the atmosphere was somewhat embarrassed and resentful."[170] However, Bethge also records that as time went by, students slowly warmed to the idea, and little by little the practice of confession took root. Happily, the seminarians never become "inquisitorial" with each other; rather, they

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[166] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 90.

[167] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 90-91.

[168] Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 264, 273.

[169] Fergus, "Forgiveness," 14.

[170] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 465.

were listening to each other's confessions in the spirit Bonhoeffer hoped.[171] Among the breakthroughs the students experienced as a result of confession were freedom from the power of pride, a new sense of life, and assurance of their salvation.[172]

Forgiveness

Vulnerability would have had no purpose on its own without pairing it with forgiveness. Confession was meant to expose sin where it could be absolved. If that absolution never took place, the exposing of sin would only lead to shame before God and brokenness within the community. Here, we see the dual forgiveness that must take place after confession of sin. One is assurance of forgiveness from God, and the other is reconciliation within the community that was damaged by the sin. Each of these will be examined individually.

With regard to assurance of forgiveness from God, Bonhoeffer believed one reason that God gave Christians to each other was to speak in the place of Christ offering forgiveness to the sinner. He wrote, "Mutual, brotherly confession is given to us by God in order that we may be sure of divine forgiveness."[173] He took a rather Catholic view of John's account when Jesus told His disciples if they forgive anyone of their sins, they are forgiven (John 20:23).[174] Again, Christ existed in the communion of saints and would speak forgiveness to the members through the members.

Armed with forgiveness from Christ, Bonhoeffer envisioned that believers would eagerly forgive one another. In his typical style of stressing a point to its full extent, Bonhoeffer posited that believers "will want but one thing . . . to forgive without measure, without qualification, without end" to the extent that offenders are loved all the

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[171] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 465-66.

[172] Fergus, "Finkenwalde," 215.

[173] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 93.

[174] Fergus, "Forgiveness," 7.

more.[175] Anything less would fall short of forgiving one another as Christ had forgiven them.[176] Therefore, at Finkenwalde, nightly reconciliation between members took place as part of the evening worship services.[177] Bonhoeffer, like Paul, warned that Christians must not let the sun go down on their anger (Eph 4:26). "Every dissension that the day has brought must be healed in the evening."[178] Only then would the fellowship be established anew and the community experience true harmony—fully known, yet fully forgiven, and therefore, fully accepted.

Accountability

Bonhoeffer believed the poisoning effects of sin would never remain isolated to the individual committing the sin but would rather contaminate the entire community.[179] He averred, "There is no sin in thought, word, or deed, no matter how personal or secret, that does not inflict injury upon the whole fellowship."[180] Therefore, for both the sake of the brother caught in a sin and for the sake of the community at large, other members of the fellowship were required to confront the offender with his sin.

Bonhoeffer referred to this confrontation as "The Ministry of Proclaiming" God's convicting Word to one another.[181] Never should a brother offer another reproof that was not thoroughly grounded in God's Word to the community. Bonhoeffer stated, "We speak to one another on the basis of help that we both need. We admonish one another to go the way that Christ bids us to go. We warn one another against the

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[175] Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, 899.

[176] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 81.

[177] Fergus, "Finkenwalde," 210.

[178] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 55.

[179] Wilkes, "Life and Health," 61.

[180] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 69.

[181] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 81.

disobedience that is our common destruction. We are gentle and we are severe with one another for we know both God's kindness and God's severity."[182] By offering nothing other than the Word of God, the offender is confronted by Christ Himself rather than by flawed brother.[183] As a result, both the offender and the confronter would be more fully conformed to Christ. If the Word of God were not used, the confronter would be imposing his own vision of goodness upon the offending brother.[184] Such a confrontation would spell disaster for the Christian community because it would fail to establish Christ at the center of all relationships.[185]

Equally disastrous would be to fail to confront all together. Neglecting to confront a brother about his sin proves there was never really selfless love for the brother in the first place. Bonhoeffer proposed such neglect might arise out of placing a higher value on a brother's "human dignity" than on helping with his "greatest need."[186] In an effort to maintain one brother's self-esteem or self-image, another brother might abandon his duty to press the Word of God upon the offending brother. Ironically, this misplaced value on the brother's dignity leads to his doom because it does not lead him to Christ.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer long developed his view of Christian community before being able to put it into practice with the seminary of the Confessing Church. There, his thoughts on "Christ existing as church community" were able to take form. At Finkenwalde, and

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[182] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 83.

[183] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 85.

[184] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 22.

[185] Fergus, "Finkenwalde," 217.

[186] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 82.

Zingst before it, students were bound together by Christ and Christ alone rather than some romantic notion of enjoying one another's company or being kindred spirits.[187]

Students with different backgrounds, preferences, and personalities pushed one another to Christ through mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability—and experienced community. At the heart of each practice, was Bonhoeffer's focus on confession, which he believed "lay at the heart of all true community building."[188] Confession drove the other practices because only when others in the community knew the intimate details of a brother's life, failings, and needs (vulnerability through confession) could they provide mutual support, offer forgiveness, and speak correction as accountability.

Conclusion

Each of the historical groups surveyed utilized the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. Though each group had a different core emphasis, all created a sense of belonging among their members.

Having examined the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability in reference to the Trinity, God's commands for the church, and the historical groups of the Moravians, Wesley, and Bonhoeffer, the focus of this dissertation now shifts to modern psychology's investigation of how the practices are related to a sense of belonging.

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[187] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 281.

[188] Fergus, "Finkenwalde," 214.

CHAPTER 5

MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction

Modern psychological and social psychological research has investigated the importance and means by which individuals feel connected to one another, and the results are extensive. Christians should neither be surprised by their findings nor consider them authoritative. Since God created humans and defined appropriate relational interactions between them, thorough research should be able to observe a certain amount and health and wholeness when people follow God's design. Similarly, with enough effort, researchers should be able to observe a certain amount of pain or deterioration when people act contrary to God's design.

However, Christians must never make the mistake of complying with God's Word because it is supported by modern research. To do so would give higher authority to the research than Scripture itself and set the expectation that if research ever contradicted God's Word, obedience would no longer be required. Scripture stands on its own, and it validates itself. Wherever research does not support biblical mandates, the research needs to be corrected—not Scripture. Therefore, each contribution of modern psychological research must be filtered through the lens of Scripture, as will be done in this dissertation. With the proper posture to research in place, Christians can enjoy the efforts of secular studies knowing that eventually every effort will conform and bow to Christ (1 Cor 15:27).

Regarding a sense of belonging and its benefits, the academic community has certainly discovered the importance of connecting with one another as Scripture commands. For instance, secular research contends, "Social isolation predicts morbidity

and mortality from cancer, cardiovascular disease."[1] Conversely, connection with others reduces stress, worry, and even PTSD symptoms, and simultaneously maintains or restores a positive mood, boosts self-esteem, and even aids in the development of personal knowledge and skills.[2] As one researcher notes, "Our reliance on others–our absolute, primary need for connection–has shaped our brain, our nervous system and our emotional realities."[3]

Long before anyone theorized about the need for a relationally supportive community, a group in Roseto, Pennsylvania, was practicing it and experiencing results. The small town, "which had been settled by immigrants from a town in southern Italy in 1882, still displayed a high level of ethnic and social homogeneity, close family ties, and cohesive community relationships."[4] Amazingly, Roseto was found to have significantly lower death rates from myocardial infarction than the surrounding area, which shared a similar diet, identical water supply, and access to the exact same doctors and medical facilities.[5]

The only documentable difference between Roseto and the surrounding area that researchers have found in over sixty years of investigations is the community dynamics of the Italian immigrant town. Those in Roseto placed a higher emphasis on family and community cohesion through practices like three-generation households, strong commitment to religion and religious gatherings, flattened social structures even

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[1] Louise C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness and Pathways to Disease," supplement, *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* 17, no. 1 (February 2003): 98.

[2] Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver, "Boosting Attachment Security to Promote Mental Health, Prosocial Values, and Inter-group Tolerance," *Psychological Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (2007): 143-44, 146-47.

[3] Sue Johnson, "The New Era of Couple Therapy—Innovation Indeed," *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies* 16, no. 1 (March 2017): 42.

[4] Brenda Egolf et al., "The Roseto Effect: A 50-Year Comparison of Mortality Rates," *American Journal of Public Health* 82, no. 8 (September 1992): 1089.

[5] Egolf et al., "The Roseto Effect," 1089.

between wealthy and poor, and fierce loyalty to locally-owned business.[6] Additionally, marriages were limited to those within the Roseto community and were marked by high approval of the involved families and even the town at large. In summary, everyone was there for everyone else, and they knew it.

However, as Roseto modernized and younger generations conformed to the practices and habits of the surrounding area, death rates due to myocardial infarction rose and became more aligned to other nearby towns.[7] Again, the only observable difference between the old Roseto and the new Roseto was the communal behavior of the people. As their families and society became less cohesive, their health declined. The conclusion drawn by a number of studies is that the community cohesion exhibited in Roseto before it modernized had a dramatic effect on wellbeing.[8]

As a result of the consistently demonstrated benefits of belonging, the United Kingdom created the government role of a Loneliness Minister in 2018, and Australia launched the Ending Loneliness Together initiative.[9] Similarly, in 2023, the United States Surgeon General released an advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and the healing effects of social connection.[10] Interventions to help the crisis include, "Increasing social support through community activities, organizing buddy programs, increasing transportation options for homebound elders, increasing social groups targeting older

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[6] Egolf et al., "The Roseto Effect," 1089, 1090.

[7] Egolf et al., "The Roseto Effect," 1089.

[8] Egolf et al., "The Roseto Effect," 1091.

[9] Louise C. Hawkley, "Loneliness and Health," *Nature Reviews Disease Primers* 8, no. 1 (April 2022): 1.

[10] United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the US Surgeon General, 2023).

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adults,"[11] and "teleconferencing, support groups, and friendship enrichment training, which were also designed to improve social interaction and social skills."[12] Additionally, researchers have found links between altruism and feeling connected to others or happiness.[13] In short, experiencing a sense of belonging with others and offering assistance to those others when needed leads to a measurably longer life with better quality. One of the common terms used in the research to refer to a sense of belonging is "attachment."

Attachment theory began when John Bowlby researched the importance of infants emotionally attaching to their parents.[14] Newborns separated from their parents and denied physical touch and affirming words were far more likely to exhibit destructive behaviors than their counterparts with engaged, loving, and affectionate parents.[15] This data paved the way for a host of parenting applications around attachment theory. Later, psychologists began researching the ongoing human need for attachment past infancy and into adulthood. M. D. S. Ainsworth categorized three distinct attachment styles, "secure, ambivalent, and avoidant."[16] Adults with secure attachments "do not worry about failure, and feel well liked."[17] Adults with ambivalent attachment "reported lack of appreciation

[11] Kerstin Gerst-Emerson and Jayani Jayawardhana, "Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: The Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization among Older Adults," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 5 (May 2015): 1018.

[12] Christopher M. Masi et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Reduce Loneliness," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 3 (August 2011): 226.

[13] Lara B. Aknin et al., "Does Spending Money on Others Promote Happiness? A Registered Replication Report," *JPSP* 119, no. 2 (August 2020):15; Masi et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Reduce Loneliness," 225.

[14] Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 17.

[15] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 19.

[16] Micha Popper, Ofra Mayseless, and Omri Castelnovo, "Transformational Leadership and Attachment," *Leadership Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (June 2000): 271.

[17] Tiffany Keller, "Parental Images as a Guide to Leadership Sensemaking: An Attachment Perspective on Implicit Leadership Theories," *Leadership Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 2003): 148.

and recognition," not receiving desirable or deserved outcomes, and expectations of being devalued.[18] Adults with avoidant attachment "generally do not trust others and prefer not to rely on others for emotional support."[19] In other words, whether or not people feel attached to others has a significant influence in the overall quality of (and even success in) their lives.

Given the benefit of experiencing belonging or attachment, researchers in various fields have become attuned to the need to develop belonging. For instance, clinical psychologist Sue Johnson developed specific therapeutic practices that can improve the connection between romantic partners.[20] Johnson writes,

> This is the promise of attachment science that we can pinpoint the blocks to healthy functioning, such as the anxious blaming or avoidant numbing that reflects the emotional pain of disconnection and typifies distressed relationships, and set up in-session change events that target the exact shifts necessary to move clients into a healthy sense of relatedness and emotional equilibrium.[21]

However, it is not only couples who can utilize the principles found in attachment theory. Neuroscientists and even business leaders testify to the importance of developing secure relationships with others in order to remain stable in the chaotic world.[22] James Kouzes and Barry Posner write, "Humans are social animals, and trust and collaboration are essential to dealing with challenge and adversity. . . . People have to become more involved with one another, not less."[23] Similarly, Brooke Feeney writes,

> Individuals come into the world predisposed to form strong emotional bonds with particular individuals…These bonds exist because they reduce the risk of the individual coming to harm. In times of adversity, individuals seek proximity to

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[18] Keller, "Parental Images as a Guide to Leadership Sensemaking," 148.

[19] Keller, "Parental Images as a Guide to Leadership Sensemaking," 148.

[20] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 40-59.

[21] Johnson, "The New Era of Couple Therapy—Innovation Indeed," 46.

[22] James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Turning Adversity into Opportunity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 29-33.

[23] Kouzes and Posner, *Turning Adversity into Opportunity*, 29.

known and trusted others, and they derive a sense of protection, safety, and security by doing so.[24]

This chapter investigates how the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are related to a person's sense of belonging and attachment. Modern research has discovered, and in some cases quantified, the importance of the practices at issue in this dissertation in relation to a sense of belonging. While the current literature has not thoroughly explored these practices in reference to an individual attaching to a group (the exception is with accountability), studies have shown how these practices relate to individuals attaching to one another. The assumption of this chapter is that practices related to individuals attaching to each other can be applied to individuals attaching to a group.

Mutual Support

One of the central tenets of attachment theory is that the need for emotional support does not end in infancy. Instead, adults continue to look to others to provide them a sense of stability and security through certain cues—similar to infants. Feeney writes, "The desire for comfort and support in adversity should not be regarded as unhealthy or childish, unlike what may be implied by the word dependency," later adding that this need for others will continue to "apply across the life span."[25] Therefore, emotional support is the primary means of mutual support identified by attachment research and will be the focus of this section.

When a person has confidence of another person's emotional availability (i.e., experiences secure attachment), various benefits, including performance and health, can be observed. In other words, if one person believes he or she can count on another person to be supportive, the health and success of the dependent person will increase. Feeney

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[24] Brooke C. Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships: Accepting Dependence Promotes Independence," *JPSP* 92, no. 2 (February 2007): 269.

[25] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 269.

coined this phenomenon the "dependency paradox." She conducted a study in which she observed the difference between couples who reported varying degrees of one partner accepting the dependency of the other partner and how that acceptance correlated to the dependent partner performing both on short-term challenges (solving a puzzle) and longer-term self-stated goals.[26] In both cases, dependent partners acted more independently when their dependency needs were accepted rather than resisted. Feeney writes,

> Recipients were more likely to confidently explore their independent goals and less likely to avoid independent goal pursuit when their partners exhibited an acceptance of their dependency needs (by not avoiding the discussion of goal related concerns and by providing sensitive and responsive support). Recipients were also less likely to avoid independent goal pursuit when their partners communicated future availability to them during the discussion.[27]

In other words, because the dependent partners were assured they could emotionally rely on the other partner, they acted more independently. Additionally, with respect to the self-stated longer-term goal, after six months, "Individuals whose partners were more accepting of dependence were more likely to have accomplished the independent goal."[28] Therefore, not only does the dependent partner act more independently, but he or she has more success achieving personal goals when assured that another person will respond positively with emotional availability and empathy.

Notably, the achievements of the dependent person are linked to the supporting person's emotional availability and are not linked to direct assistance to complete the goal. In fact, when the supporting person gave specific advice on how to solve the puzzle, the dependent person tended to resist or reject it.[29] The factor identified in this study that aided a dependent person's move toward more independence and goal achievement was

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[26] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 271-72, 276.

[27] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 273.

[28] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 283.

[29] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 273.

not for the supporting person to provide the right answers or complete tasks on behalf of the dependent person, but rather to display emotional availability, understanding, and "sensitivity to distress cues."[30] In other words, again, "support" in attachment terms is not necessarily doing something for another person, but being there for another person.

As attachment theory states, "Individuals whose dependency needs are truly accepted by an attachment figure are more likely to feel more confident about going out into the world to engage in independent exploration, knowing their home base will be waiting for them should difficulties arise."[31] The goal of attachment, therefore, is not directly to make a dependent person less dependent, but to give that person assurance that he or she can always rely upon the support figure. This assurance then gives the dependent person the needed security to take risks confidently and pursue goals that might otherwise be too intimidating.

Eldad Rom and Mario Mikulincer observed a similar pattern with regard to group performance dynamics, with a study of the task execution success of Israeli Defense Forces teams as they completed training missions.[32] Teams who reported a strong sense of "attachment security" and "high group cohesion" performed the missions with greater success than teams who reported lower levels of these markers.[33] They found that team members who would normally experience relational anxiety were aided by the sense of attachment to the team and were therefore enabled to focus on completing group tasks.[34] This study quantitatively shows the difference in performance between groups

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[30] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 270.

[31] Feeney, "The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships," 270.

[32] Eldad Rom and Mario Mikulincer, "Attachment Theory and Group Processes: The Association between Attachment Style and Group-Related Representations, Goals, Memories, and Functioning," *JPSP* 84, no. 6 (June 2003): 1225.

[33] Rom and Mikulincer, "Attachment Theory and Group Processes," 1232.

[34] Rom and Mikulincer, "Attachment Theory and Group Processes," 1232.

that have a strong sense of attachment and those that do not.[35] In the groups that do not,

group members exhibit more anxiety and avoidance to the group, which is correlated with

less success reaching group goals.[36] As with the Feeney study, attachment is linked with

higher performance, not lower, whereas avoidance and isolation were shown to be

detrimental to successful task completion.

Denying or ignoring attachment cues consistently heightens anxiety and even

causes a reaction similar to physical pain. Johnson writes, "The emotional pain of

rejection is coded in the same part of the brain and in the same way as physical pain.

Rejection is a danger cue for our species, just as is stepping on a nail."[37] Researchers

from UCLA confirm Johnson's claim by using fMRI neural scans to prove that the brain

interprets the pain of rejection in the same way it interprets physical pain.[38] As with

physical pain, the negative sensation of rejection can be mitigated through taking

Tylenol.[39]

Similarly, Johnson found that if test subjects were given a light shock on their

ankles, their brain would register much less pain from the shock if someone with whom

they felt an emotional bond held their hand while they received the shocks. Johnson

writes, "When told they were likely to be shocked on their ankles [we] watched their

brains light up in alarm when they were alone in the scanner. . . . But after EFT, when

their partner held their hand, their brain looked like a calm resting brain–no alarm–and

[35] The study does not identify how a team can move from low cohesion to high cohesion. It simply measures the performance of teams with or without secure attachment.

[36] Rom and Mikulincer, "Attachment Theory and Group Processes," 1232.

[37] Johnson, "The New Era of Couple Therapy—Innovation Indeed," 45.

[38] Naomi I. Eisenberger, Matthew D. Lieberman, and Kipling D. Williams, "Does Rejection Hurt? An fMRI Study of Social Exclusion," *Science* 302, no. 5643 (October 2003): 290-92.

[39] George M. Slavich et al., "Alleviating Social Pain: A Double-Blind, Randomized, Placebo-Controlled Trial of Forgiveness and Acetaminophen," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 53, no. 12 (November 2019): 1045-54.

they described the shock as simply uncomfortable."[40] EFT is an acronym for Emotionally

Focused Therapy developed by Johnson and involves more than simple hand holding.[41] It

includes identifying certain distress cues from the person seeking support and responding

to those cues with emotional availability. Those practices will be summarized below.

Method of Support

   First, Johnson gives examples of the cues people commonly manifest when

asking for attachment. Her cues can be summaries under the headings blaming,

protesting, and freezing/fleeing.[42] While Johnson has observed these cues in clinical

therapy with couples, each of these could transfer to any other type of relationship, even

those within the church. In blaming, one party—or sometimes each party—accuses the

other for something that has gone wrong.[43] In this cue, at least one person feels the need

to defend him or herself and could articulate that feeling by saying, "It's not my fault. I

did everything I was supposed to do. It's because of them or because the situation that I

failed. How am I supposed to succeed given these factors in the environment?" The

person manifesting the cue believes relief will come if he or she is not held responsible

for the negative outcome even though the real need is for emotional support from the

person hearing the defense.[44]

    In protesting, instead of shifting the blame of a negative situation to another

party, the affected party complains.[45] This person might articulate this cue by saying, "I

feel unappreciated. I feel like I'm doing too much and carrying the whole load. I have to

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[40] Johnson, "The New Era of Couple Therapy—Innovation Indeed," 42.

[41] Johnson, "The New Era of Couple Therapy—Innovation Indeed," 46.

[42] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 66-96.

[43] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 68.

[44] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 68-73.

[45] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 75.

do everything around here. Nothing ever gets accomplished. No one knows all that I do. My questions are never answered." In this cue, the protesting parties will sound like victims. The focus is on their pain, their misfortune, or their burden. The person manifesting this cue believes relief will come from removing the cause of their perceived hardship even though the real need is, again, receiving emotional support.[46]

In freezing/fleeing, the parties manifesting the cue have given up fighting and blaming. They are either beginning to detach from the situation or have done so already. If they freeze, they will move toward isolation and silence because they believe closing themselves off emotionally and relationally will bring them relief. In the freeze version of this cue, they might not say anything, but their behaviors will display avoidance and depression. If instead of freezing, they flee, the affected parties will remove themselves from the situation. [47] They might say, "I'm not going to try any longer. Who even cares? It is not worth the effort. They can figure it out for themselves without me. I'm done." They believe they will find relief by putting distance between themselves and the situation, which of course prevents the possibility of receiving their real need—emotional support.[48]

Attachment proposes that these cues signal a deeper underlying need for the person hearing the cues to respond with availability and care. Even though there truly might be a wrongdoer who needs to be blamed, or a complaint could be valid and need correction, or fleeing might be necessary, attachment states that underneath those issues, the person manifesting the cue is also asking for something else. When someone is blaming, protesting, or freezing/fleeing, Johnson states the speaker is actually asking one or more of the following questions: "A: Accessibility? Can I reach you? R:

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[46] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 74-89.

[47] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 89-90.

[48] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 89-96.

Responsiveness: Can I rely on you to respond to me emotionally? E: Engagement: Do I know you value me and will stay close?"[49]

If these questions are addressed and the needs they express are met, the person manifesting the cue can recover and experience relief from the presenting situation. In other words, instead of directly solving the problem that a blamer, protester, freezer, or fleer states, attachment responds to the emotional need underneath. As seen in the ankle shock test, instead of removing the shock, attachment researchers added a supportive figure. In its own way, adding a supportive figure (instead of removing the pain) solved the problem because the test subject no longer complained about the shock.

While attachment admits there are certainly situations in which blamers, complainers, freezers, or fleers must be corrected or confronted in addition to receiving emotional responsiveness, correction cannot happen in isolation from support. If someone is playing the victim or not accepting responsibility by shifting blame, attachment argues that if correction is attempted without providing emotional support, the situation will only worsen.

For instance, if person A dismisses person B's complaint or blame by turning the blame around on person B, person B will likely escalate the blaming, protesting, freezing, or fleeing behavior. Attachment argues such an approach will accomplish nothing. Further, attachment contends that people in the position of person A typically do not provide support because they hear blaming and protests as personal attacks on themselves or their own performance.[50] Their response of turning blame around on person B is their own distress cue asking for support from the one who originally complained. The result is that person B feels even more unsupported, which will accelerate the downward spiral of conflict and discord. Johnson writes,

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[49] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 49.

[50] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 46-48.

> When safe connection seems lost, partners go into fight-or-flight mode. They blame and get aggressive to get a response, any response, or they close down and try not to care. Both are terrified; they are just dealing with it differently. Trouble is, once they start this blame-distance loop; it confirms all their fears and adds to their sense of isolation.[51]

The proper response, according to attachment, is instead of becoming angry or defensive, the person hearing the cue must understand the need to express support and move in empathy toward the person needing attachment. The one hearing the complaint knows that behind insecurities, laziness, or anger is a deeper need for the person to feel like he or she is not alone and that someone is there who cares and understands. The person who is blaming, complaining, freezing, or fleeing is really asking, "Are you there for me? Do I matter to you? Will you come when I need you, when I call?"[52] If those questions are unequivocally answered with support, the situation can deescalate. At that time, correction is much more likely to be received.

On an organizational level, Kouzes and Posner advocate for a similar approach. They provide a list of questions to ask when interacting with someone who feels unsupported: "How can we engage with them? How can we use this opportunity to fortify our relationships with others and build partnerships? How can I connect people with one another on this project? Whom can we turn to for caring support and wise counsel? How do we strengthen the sense that we are in this together?"[53] Notably, with each of these questions, the primary focus is not how to solve the specific problem surfaced by the person raising the issue. In fact, several of the questions imply the crisis will continue to remain because instead of seeking answers for how to prevent others from being affected, the questions assume others will be affected and look for ways to connect relationally with those individuals. While identifying answers to solve the crisis

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[51] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 47.

[52] Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 45.

[53] Kouzes and Posner, *Turning Adversity into Opportunity*, 32.

is, of course, important and necessary, Kouzes and Posner's questions seek to help those affected by the crisis to know that they are not alone, others are in it with them, and this situation is actually an opportunity to strengthen relationships.

Kouzes and Posner imply that the relational focus might be even more primary than solving the actual problem at hand. They write, "Just having one supportive, stable relationship is an important condition for transcending adversity."[54] In other words, the adversity might remain regardless of tireless efforts to remedy it. However, if the people in the crisis sense they are not alone but are instead facing the challenge alongside someone else, transcending the adversity becomes much more likely. Taking a relationally supportive approach, therefore, provides a way forward whether or not the crisis continues.

Biblical Evaluation

Attachment theory correctly identifies the need for the type of support commonly understood as empathy. As Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). However, certain attachment advocates give a primacy to empathy that Scripture does not. Emotionally focused therapists, including Sue Johnson, at least imply that connection with an attachment figure is more important than truth or accountability. Biblically, this overfocus on connection is not the case.

Support is not more primary than truth telling—nor vice versa. Both must be equally vibrant. "Being available" for someone who needs support cannot neglect identifying that person's own fault in the distressing circumstance if one exists. At the same time, such truth telling cannot be verbalized without the commanded empathy for the pain the person is experiencing as a result of his or her behavior. While simultaneously navigating these seemingly mutually exclusive responses is certainly

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[54] Kouzes and Posner, *Turning Adversity into Opportunity*, 29.

difficult, it is the Christian way. As Jesus compassionately addresses the woman caught in adultery and clearly communicates that He is on her side (emotional availability and responsiveness), He also tells her to leave her life of sin (John 8:1-11). One is not without the other, and one is not more primary than the other.

Vulnerability

As seen with biblical imperatives and historical groups, mutual support and vulnerability must go hand in hand. Often, support cannot be offered unless there is an understanding of what support is needed. Thus, the need for support must be communicated through some level of vulnerability even if it is only through the distress cues identified by attachment theory.

However, what the research literature has identified is that the willingness to be vulnerable is correlated to whether support is perceived. In other words, people are not vulnerable in order to receive support; they are vulnerable because they perceive they already have support. For instance, Martin Lynch writes that "those who are securely attached" are the test subjects who "exhibit greater willingness to turn to others" and therefore "benefit from such willingness."[55]

Adults become securely attached through at least two different means. First, their experiences in childhood teach them whether they can rely on others. Simply, if adults had childhood experiences that reinforced help is available, then they will believe that they will be supported when asking for help later in life. Thus, they will feel they are securely attached to those around them and ask for support when needed.[56] Secondly, the history of the particular relationship from which the adult might seek support instructs

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[55] Martin F. Lynch, "Attachment, Autonomy, and Emotional Reliance: A Multilevel Model," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 91, no. 3 (June 2013): 301.

[56] Lynch, "Attachment, Autonomy, and Emotional Reliance," 301.

whether support will be available for future needs.[57] In other words, the willingness to seek support from a potential attachment figure is related to how supportive the attachment figure was in the past. Again, adults who believe they have support will be willing to seek it when needed.

Conversely, Lynch writes, "Those with an avoidant attachment style would be unlikely to exhibit high levels of emotional reliance."[58] In other words, adults who have learned both during childhood and in current relationships that support will not be given are less likely to seek support when needed. These adults can "suppress thoughts of vulnerability or need, and rely steadfastly on oneself."[59] While attempting independence might sound like a positive behavioral trait, research has shown the opposite.

For instance, one study investigated how survivors of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were able to adapt and adjust back into normal life routines in reference to attachment. These high-exposure survivors (those within several blocks of the World Trade Center) were assessed for PTSD and depression at seven and eighteen months after the event. Additionally, close friends and relatives of the survivors provided an assessment of how the survivor was adjusting back to normal rhythms. The study found that survivors who sought support from existing secure attachment relationships manifested fewer symptoms of PTSD and depression than those with insecure or independent attachment styles. Additionally, there was evidence to suggest that highly secure individuals were able to use the traumatic events as a means to personal psychological growth.[60] In other words, seeking support through acknowledging and

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[57] Mikulincer and Shaver, "Boosting Attachment Security to Promote Mental Health, Prosocial Values, and Inter-group Tolerance," 141.

[58] Lynch, "Attachment, Autonomy, and Emotional Reliance," 301.

[59] Mikulincer and Shaver, "Boosting Attachment Security to Promote Mental Health, Prosocial Values, and Inter-group Tolerance," 142.

[60] R. Chris Fraley et al., "Attachment and Psychological Adaptation in High Exposure Survivors of the September 11th Attack on the World Trade Center," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 32, no. 4 (April 2006): 547.

admitting dependence needs (rather than attempting independence) yields more emotional stability and, paradoxically, more independence. These findings are in line with Feeney's dependency research previously mentioned.

Biblical Evaluation

One of the limits of any type of analysis derived from observation is that it can only speak to what is and can never speak to what should be. Thus, research is able to show that people who perceive secure attachment are more likely to be vulnerable and seek support for themselves. However, it struggles to instruct what people must do even if they do not perceive any support. Indeed, it has no ability to make such a claim. At most, it can observe the painful consequences if support is not sought, but even then, it leaves readers to draw their own conclusions. Perhaps the one who needs support has no obligation to seek it. Perhaps the potential attachment figure must reassure the one in need of support. Or perhaps nothing can be done at all. As far as observation is concerned, all that is known is that if someone does not perceive support, support is less likely to be attained. There is no prescription for correction.

Biblically, correction likely must take place on both sides. The attachment figure must communicate support is available (weep with those who weep), and the one needing support must communicate vulnerability (share burdens). Biblically speaking, one is not dependent on the other. Both are commanded, and both must be obeyed regardless of the behavior of someone else. No one can excuse his or her own sin (concealing a burden, for example) because of the sin of another.

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Forgiveness

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As previously discussed, secure attachment is the sense of connection or belonging to another individual along with the belief that the attachment figure will be responsive and available when needed. Given that all relationships experience conflict, forgiveness of the attachment figure will sometimes be necessary in order to maintain

<div align="center">130</div>

attachment.[61] A number of studies have identified such a link between forgiveness and attachment. These studies will be summarized below.

In one study, researchers investigated the connections between forgiveness, health, and attachment.[62] Participants' vital signs were recorded during interviews in which various relational partners and situations were discussed. Participants answered survey questions about the dynamics of those relationships. In terms of the health component, the study reinforced previous research to show a strong link between forgiveness and certain physiological markers. For instance, relationships containing elements of unforgiveness increased the level of stress and even prompted neurological, cardiovascular, and respiratory responses associated with anger and hostility.[63] Additionally, there was a positive correlation between respondents who characterized a relationship with unforgiveness and feelings of loneliness. As previously mentioned, loneliness is one of the factors associated with poorer health. The researchers claim there is "robust" evidence that lingering unforgiveness in a relationship contributes to diminished health.[64]

They contend the benefit from forgiveness is more than simply reducing anger or alleviating stress. Often when forgiveness is present, positive emotions result, such as favorable feelings toward the offender and "increased feelings of closeness and commitment."[65] Therefore, the benefit of forgiveness is multifaceted—both the reduction of harmful psychological and physiological factors and the addition of healthy ones.

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[61] Austin R. Beck et al., "Can't Shake It Off? Attachment Moderates the Link between Hostility and Forgiveness," *American Journal of Family Therapy* 45, no. 5 (October 2017): 250.

[62] Kathleen A. Lawler-Row et al., "Forgiveness and Health: The Role of Attachment." *Personal Relationships* 18, no. 2 (June 2011): 170-83.

[63] Lawler-Row et al., "Forgiveness and Health," 170.

[64] Lawler-Row et al., "Forgiveness and Health," 170.

[65] Lawler-Row et al., "Forgiveness and Health," 171.

In terms of attachment, they find positive correlations between securely attached relationships and forgiveness.[66] For instance, as trust, commitment, and communication (markers of secure relationships) increase, so does forgiveness. Similarly, insecurely attached individuals are "less forgiving, and therefore, experience more health problems."[67] However, the study does not prescribe how insecurely attached individuals can become securely attached or move through a process of forgiveness when markers such as trust and commitment are not present.

Another study researched the correlation between both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance with forgiveness and feelings of hostility.[68] Attachment anxiety happens when a person does not feel secure in a relationship but rather nervously feels a need to seek approval or inclusion by the other. Attachment avoidance occurs when secure attachment is lost, and the person responds by distancing from the other. Participants were surveyed to determine their attachment position and how they respond in relationship scenarios.[69] The study found when either attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety increased, feelings of hostility increased and forgiveness decreased. The authors conclude having secure attachment in a relationship will lessen feelings of hostility and increase forgiveness. They write that secure attachment has been shown to help "partners that have experienced pain in their relationships."[70] In the absence of such secure attachment, they notice relationships that are marked with anxious attachment (when people feel they must seek approval from each other) are more likely to move

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[66] Lawler-Row et al., "Forgiveness and Health," 179.

[67] Lawler-Row et al., "Forgiveness and Health," 179.

[68] Beck et al., "Can't Shake It Off?," 250-63.

[69] Beck et al., "Can't Shake It Off?," 254-55.

[70] Beck et al., "Can't Shake It Off?," 252.

toward forgiveness with less hostility than relationships that are marked with avoidant attachment (when people avoid each other during conflict).[71]

As far as implications for their research, they suggest clinicians and therapists work with their clients to understand what type of attachment is prevalent in the relationship in order to move toward more healthy types of attachment. They believe such movement would create an environment which would make forgiveness more likely.[72] Notably, their recommended approach for therapists is how to make forgiveness easier rather than how to forgive when it is difficult. Such a recommendation implies that unless a relationship is marked by secure attachment, forgiveness may not take place.

Another study researched the role of attachment and forgiveness specifically in reference to how divorced or separated individuals adjusted to their new relationship status.[73] The authors acknowledge that the people who adjust most quickly are the people who generally have secure attachment relationships with others and are willing to reach out and find support from their community.[74] However, their study is not intended to investigate the difference in how securely attached and insecurely attached people adjust to divorce and separation. Instead, their research attempts to measure what effect forgiving the former partner has on insecurely attached people adjusting to their new life situation.[75]

The researchers used various survey scales to measure the level of participants' attachment security, forgiveness of the former partner, and adjustment to life after

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[71] Beck et al., "Can't Shake It Off?," 259.

[72] Beck et al., "Can't Shake It Off?," 261.

[73] Mónica Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation: The Role of Forgiveness of the Former Partner," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 28, no. 11 (November 2019): 3011-21.

[74] Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation," 3012.

[75] Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation," 3013.

divorce or separation.[76] Results of their investigation were mixed. For insecurely attached individuals who manifest anxiety related to whether or not they have the approval of others, higher levels of forgiveness correlated with higher levels of adjusting to life after divorce and separation. On the other hand, for insecurely attached individuals who manifest avoidance of others as a result of conflict, higher levels of forgiveness made no difference to the adjustment to divorce and separation as compared to lower levels of forgiveness.[77] In other words, forgiveness helped adjustment to divorce and separation for one type of attachment insecurity (anxious) but not the other (avoidant).

As an implication from their study, they recommend that divorcing individuals receive therapeutic invention to help with the process of forgiveness—regardless of the type of attachment insecurity they have. While forgiveness did not help the adjustment to divorce in their study for those with attachment avoidance, they cite other studies in which forgiveness helps with a range of issues such as depression, anger, hostility, and stress.[78] Additionally, the authors recommend extending the forgiveness intervention therapy to the support network of both divorcing individuals. They believe as the support network forgives the individual's spouse or partner, the individual will be more likely to do the same and experience the benefits.[79]

In line with these studies, an article in the peer-reviewed literature summarizing the findings of numerous other studies, shows that differentiation of self is related to the ability and willingness to forgive.[80] Differentiation of self is the ability to connect and empathize with others without being overly dependent upon those

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[76] Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation," 3014.

[77] Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation," 3017.

[78] Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation," 3018.

[79] Guzmán-González et al., "Romantic Attachment and Adjustment to Separation," 3018.

[80] E. Wayne Hill, Cathy Hasty, and Carol J. Moore, "Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness: A Clinical Perspective for Couple and Family Therapy," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 32, no. 1 (March 2011): 43-57.

relationships.[81] In short, differentiation of self is evident in securely attached individuals. Those with high differentiation will have high attachment security.

The authors propose a model for promoting forgiveness through self-differentiation. The first step is to empathize with offender and particularly to empathize with the fallenness of the offender. The authors write, "The process of forgiveness . . . requires the humility to see oneself as equally as fallible and needy as one's offender."[82] They recommend this strategy even for the most extreme scenarios, citing Corrie ten Boom as an example. She was able to forgive a guard from the Nazi Concentration Camp where she had been a prisoner. They write that ten Boom was able to "acknowledge her own humanity and need for forgiveness," and therefore "could not in good conscience withhold her forgiveness."[83] Unfortunately, the authors attribute her empathy to her ability to self-differentiate rather than her faith. However, their analysis is not wrong—it just does not go far enough. It is difficult to imagine how anyone could come to believe he or she had an equal level of sinfulness to a Nazi torturer without understanding his or her sinfulness before the perfectly holy God. In other words, the authors' advice to empathize is valid, but they do not provide the means for how it can be implemented.

According to the authors, the practice of empathy is not limited to the offended but is also necessary for the offender. Instead of one person defending himself or herself when another is voicing a complaint, the accused person must act interested and concerned about the complaints of the offended person—a recommendation reminiscent of Johnson's emotionally focused therapy. When this type of empathy is extended through self-differentiation, the offended person is more likely to forgive.[84] Thus, the

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[81] Hill, Hasty, and Moore, "Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness," 44.

[82] Hill, Hasty, and Moore, "Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness," 49.

[83] Hill, Hasty, and Moore, "Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness," 50-51.

[84] Hill, Hasty, and Moore, "Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness," 53-54.

authors recommend that regardless of which side of the offense a person is positioned, the proper action is to relate to the other without need for approval or validation. They believe this type of approach will increase connection between the offended and the offender (create secure attachment) and facilitate the process of forgiveness.[85]

Biblical Evaluation

Much of the surveyed literature examined the influence of various levels of attachment on the practice of forgiveness rather than the influence of forgiveness on the experience of secure attachment. Positively, all of the surveyed studies indicate a connection between secure attachment (sense of belonging) and forgiveness. These findings could help convict and motivate individual Christians and the church at large who have offended others to express ongoing support and availability to one another as an aid to those they have offended. However, negatively, much of the research literature provides little instruction for how offended individuals can forgive their offender or why they must do so—especially if they do not already perceive secure attachment with the offender.

Tragically, an offended person might believe it is the responsibility of the offender to communicate availability and responsiveness before forgiveness is granted. In this scenario, the offended person might never extend forgiveness and therefore, experience the higher levels of stress and health deterioration noted in the first study. Worse, the offended person would be in violation of the biblical commands to forgive. The Bible, of course, makes no distinction between forgiving someone who communicates availability, responsiveness, and empathy, and one who does not. Regardless of the posture of the offender, the offended must forgive.

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[85] Hill, Hasty, and Moore, "Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness," 55.

As seen with vulnerability, observational studies are powerless to prescribe correct behavior for humans. They can only document the effects of various scenarios and are not always consistent in those observations. Therefore, they are blindly groping to discover better ways to live in connection with others without direction. They have hints of the truth but miss much of the fulness God offers through Scripture.

The obvious exceptions to this critique are the studies that recommend therapeutic intervention to facilitate forgiveness of the offender and the specific step to empathize with the offender. However, even in those studies, the motivation to move toward forgiveness is in order to achieve more emotional equilibrium rather than to live in obedience to God.

Accountability

A number of studies have identified a link between the extent to which an individual desires to belong to a group and how the norms of that group influence the behavior of the individual. In other words, if an individual perceives attachment to a group or desires an attachment, he or she will begin to conform to the practices and behavior of the group, which means the group holds the individual accountable. Either the individual conforms to the group and maintains belonging, or the individual will be rejected by the group.

First, as an overview, one article in the peer-reviewed literature summarizes the findings of numerous studies showing that social norms and social identity influence both behavior and behavior change.[86] The authors emphasize that while social norms are an important factor, social identity is even more influential. In other words, what a group

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[86] Katherine J. Reynolds, Emina Subašić, and Karen Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change: From Social Norms to an Ingroup Focus," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9, no. 1 (January 2015): 45-56.

expects is less determinative than if an individual believes he or she belongs to that group.[87]

Further, behavior change can occur through a change in social identity. The authors write, "Put simply, as definitions of who 'we' are and who 'we' are not shift, so does what 'we' (should) do."[88] They suggest that leadership plays the most influential role in defining what constitutes being a member of the group through "structures, rituals, and practices."[89]

Applications for modifying behavior through social identity are endless. The authors note studies where the approach was used to modify towel use in hotels, energy use in a home, and even timely payment of taxes.[90] In each case, the test population changed their behavior when messaging indicated most people in their room or city already adopted the desired behavior. Such messaging was more effective than messaging that gave reminders or mandates to behave in certain ways. The authors write, "From a social identity perspective, the effectiveness of these types of interventions relies upon the perception that 'others' who stayed in the hotel room previously, or who are living in one's community or town, are fellow ingroup members. 'They' influence 'my' behaviour precisely because 'we' share the same beliefs and values."[91]

Utilizing these types of concepts, a researcher investigated how the need to belong can influence behavior in an controlled experimental setting.[92] The author lists previous studies that indicate belonging is a fundamental human need and hypothesizes

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[87] Reynolds, Subašić, and Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change," 48.

[88] Reynolds, Subašić, and Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change," 51.

[89] Reynolds, Subašić, and Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change," 51.

[90] Reynolds, Subašić, and Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change," 52.

[91] Reynolds, Subašić, and Tindall, "The Problem of Behaviour Change," 52.

[92] Mark Manning, "When We Do What We See: The Moderating Role of Social Motivation on the Relation Between Subjective Norms and Behavior in the Theory of Planned Behavior," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2011): 351-64.

that the greater the social motivation for a behavior, the more likely a person will behave in line with it.[93] To test the hypotheses, the researcher performed an experiment in which test subjects were falsely led to believe they were participating in an image recall study, but were actually providing information for how often they participated in socially motivated behaviors. As expected, the higher the perception that a behavior could meet the need to belong, the more the test subjects participated in the behavior.[94] The researcher proposes that a potential application for these discoveries is to decrease underage drinking by showing that the behavior will interfere with belonging. However, he warns that the approach could fail among underage drinkers whose direct social group drinks heavily.[95]

Collegiate drinking was the direct subject of another study in which the authors investigate the relative effects of group norms and group identity on alcohol consumption on a college campus.[96] Citing previous research, the authors believe that campaigns designed to highlight the problems with drinking, such as increased driving accidents and sexual assaults, will not help lower excessive consumption on college campuses. In fact, such campaigns can be counterproductive because they give the impression that college students often drink excessively.[97] In other words, if individual students believe themselves to be part of a group that drinks excessively, it can influence them to drink even more.

Therefore, instead of negative messaging about the consequences of drinking, the authors predicted that messaging that communicates lower consumption rates among

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[93] Manning, "When We Do What We See," 353.

[94] Manning, "When We Do What We See," 353.

[95] Manning, "When We Do What We See," 360-61.

[96] Rajiv N. Rimal and Kevin Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," *Communication Theory* 13, no. 2 (May 2003): 184-203.

[97] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 189, 199.

students, less benefits for drinking, and more disapproval for drinking would lower consumption. In other words, they predicted the greater the amount of alcohol that students believed others to consume, the greater the benefit they believed they would receive for drinking, and the less disapproval they believed they would receive from drinking, the larger amount of alcohol they will consume.[98]

The researchers tested their hypotheses by simple surveys of college students disguised to ask about entertainment spending.[99] The results showed that most of their predictions were correct, with benefit to oneself for drinking being the most significant factor. As students perceived greater benefit for drinking, their consumption increased even across differing beliefs about how much others consumed.[100]

The only surprise to the authors was that as social disapproval increased, drinking increased.[101] However, the surveys only asked students' perceptions about the approval of society at large—not about approval from other college students. Therefore, the researchers can only quantify that as societal disapproval increases, drinking increases. Unfortunately, the researchers did not include a question regarding if college students believed their peers approved or disapproved of drinking. The authors are left to speculate that peer perception would track positively with consumption.[102] As peer approval increased, they would expect drinking to increase. Indeed, since inclusion with peers is often one of the perceived benefits of drinking, college students were likely considering their peers' approval as a benefit when they responded to the questionnaire. If so, peer approval is included within the result of increasing drinking tracking with

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[98] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 195-97.

[99] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 190.

[100] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 196.

[101] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 197.

[102] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 197.

increasing benefit to oneself. Similarly, the authors anticipate as peer disapproval of

drinking increases, drinking would decrease. They cite exclusion from the group is the

largest sanction a group can levy on an individual.[103]

As a result of their findings, the authors make recommendations for public

campaigns aimed to lessen excessive drinking on college campuses. They believe

campaigns that convey society's disapproval for drinking will not be successful. Instead,

they advocate for identity-based campaigns showing the infrequency of excessive

drinking among college students. Additionally, they recommend messaging that will

disrupt beliefs about the personal benefits of drinking but caution that such messaging

must be credible.[104]

Biblical Evaluation

Interestingly, the social psychological research does not comment on whether

groups should hold their members accountable. Instead, it exposes the inevitability that

groups will hold their members accountable. Norms will be enforced through various

types of communication, affirmations, and sanctions. The only question is whether

individuals believe themselves to be part of the group. Therefore, the typically

recommended approach to change the behavior of individuals is to frame the desired

behavior as something that is already done by a group with which they identify. If

individuals believe they belong to group X, and they are convinced group X does Y, then

they will begin to do Y themselves.

For churches, the research has multiple implications. First, it shows the

importance of working to help people experience a sense of belonging. If belonging truly

influences obedience, like the research shows, then belonging is crucial for formation.

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[103] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 187.

[104] Rimal and Real, "Understanding the Influence of Perceived Norms on Behaviors," 198-99.

Churches will be less effective in spiritual formation if members do not have a sense of belonging or identification with the church. Members will reject efforts at formation or simply leave because they do not see the church as "their ingroup." Therefore, churches must work toward the other practices in this dissertation to foster a sense of belonging so that accountability can be more effective.

Second, for churches, this research is rather convicting. The question is not "if" a church practices discipline, but "how" and "for what." The real beliefs of the church will be enforced on the members who identify with the church in some way. Therefore, if a church wants to know what it truly believes and values, it only needs to look at the behavior of its members. If members actually identify the church as their ingroup, then their behavior will track with the norms the group is enforcing. Doctrinal statements or official discipline are only a portion of accountability and might be inconsistent with other messaging about what is celebrated, permitted, and condemned.

Of course, churches must work to ensure all messaging is in line with Scripture. The Bible is always the standard, which is the piece totally absent from the social norm literature. Instead of working to enforce biblical standards, the examined literature hopes to enforce some other standard, believing it will provide a level of benefit to the group. To the extent their adopted standard overlaps with Scripture, they will succeed. To the extent their adopted standard conflicts with Scripture, their anticipated benefit will be short-lived at best.

Conclusion

Psychological and social psychological research has identified benefits of belonging and difficulties of rejection. Various writers have shown how the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are correlated with a sense of attachment or belonging. Attachment aides each practice or is aided by each practice, but in either case, a link between the two is evident.

With the examination of Trinitarian perichoresis, biblical imperatives, historical groups, and modern psychology complete, this dissertation will now focus on an empirical case study of a congregation.

CHAPTER 6

EMPIRICAL CASE STUDY

Introduction

In order to test the correlations claimed throughout this dissertation, an empirical case study was performed with the local congregation of Bridges Community Church in Los Altos, California. The study observed that rehearsing the biblical practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability within a group are correlated to the group members' sense of belonging to the group. As has been shown in previous chapters of this dissertation, a gap remains in the empirical research regarding the correlation of biblical and historical practices with a sense of belonging to a group. Clearly, Scripture provides imperatives regarding how individuals and the larger body of believers must interact with each other, and a number of Christian movements have emphasized the importance of communal life. However, the effect of these practices has not been measured. Similarly, modern psychological research has identified the holistic benefits of sensing belonging and the detrimental effects of perceived exclusion, but it has yet to empirically identify how individuals attain a sense of belonging to a group if they do not currently experience it.

Given that new believers must become integrated into the communal life of a church as part of their ongoing growth, understanding how individuals become attached to a group is vital for evangelistic church growth. The study performed at Bridges Community Church, therefore, utilized a validated research instrument to measure the sense of belonging among church attendees, implemented communal practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability, and reassessed the sense of belonging using the same instrument. Details of this study follow.

Method

Definition of the Research Population

The research population consisted of the regular attenders, including members, of Bridges Community Church in Los Altos, California, who are eighteen years of age or older. The total population is approximately three hundred people.

Methodological Design (Data Collection Procedures)

- The methodological design was fully quantitative, utilizing both pretest and posttest questionnaires to collect data from the sample population.

- Because validated quantitative instruments for measuring the sense of belonging have previously been developed (Revised SCS and Campus SCS), empirical studies such as the one in this dissertation can now test the correlation of implementing various practices and the sense of belonging participants perceive.

- Demographic information collected from the respondents included age, gender, marital status, ethnic identification, and education level.

- A five-week group training aimed at implementing the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability was given in a large group format for participants from the congregation.

- Teaching sessions focused on the "one-another" commands in Scripture, showing the biblical necessity of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.

- Breakout groups from the large group were given discussion questions to reinforce the importance and benefits of the one-another commands.

- Breakout group participants shared with each other their personal experiences with mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability and how they perceived the presence or absence of those practices influenced their sense of belonging.

- Breakout groups which identified additional practices had an opportunity to share those with church leadership.

- Homework included implementing the practices and reporting back to the group the results of their efforts.

- From breakout group feedback, churchwide change initiatives were implemented.

- Data interpretation using RStudio statistical analysis software assessed the change between the pretest and posttest and identified correlations.

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Instrumentation

- This study utilized both the Revised Social Connected Scale and the Campus Social Connectedness Scale originally developed by Richard Lee of the University of Minnesota but adapted for the use in a congregation. These scales can be found in appendix 1.

- Additionally, respondents were asked one question regarding their perception of whether the practice of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability most contributed to their sense of belonging within the church. This question was not part of a validated test instrument but was intended to be helpful for pastoral practice.

Hypothesis

Given the consistency of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability across Trinitarian scholarship, biblical imperatives, historical groups, and modern psychology, an intervention emphasizing these practices was expected to increase the sense of belonging among those who participated.

The Pretest

The congregation took a pretest utilizing the Revised Social Connectedness Scale (RSCS) and the Campus Social Connectedness Scale (CSCS) developed by Richard Lee of the University of Minnesota. Copies of these scales can be found in appendix 1. The scales are validated instruments to measure a sense of belonging. While his original scales are worded for people to reflect on their social lives in general or on a college campus, the people at Bridges were instructed to fill out the scales reflecting on their experience specifically at Bridges Community Church.

The scales were introduced at the end of a Sunday morning service and were available to be completed online or on paper handouts. The online availability to complete the survey was open for two weeks in advance of the beginning of the intervention. Two hundred and eight people above the age of 18 completed the survey. The average of the responses to the RSCS yielded a connectedness score of 85.18, and the average of the responses to the CSCS yielded a connectedness score of 61.65 among those who would later participate in all five sessions and complete the posttest.

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Since both the RSCS and the CSCS are continuous scales, there is no value threshold that represents the moment when a sense of belonging is achieved. Instead, the variance in values at different time intervals show whether a sense of belonging is increasing or decreasing. Therefore, the initial connectedness scores in isolation are not of relevance to this dissertation. They will only become meaningful when compared to posttest scores.

However, the pretest did provide useful information that can aid in understanding certain dynamics with the congregation through responses to individual questions. While any individual question on the survey is not a validated testing instrument, some responses to individual questions could be used for illustrative purposes to the congregation. Those findings are mentioned in week 1 and week 5 of the invention below.

The Intervention

Week 1. The sermon was titled "The Crisis" and came from Genesis 2:15-24, where man's need for companionship is evident. God Himself declares that it is not good for Adam to be alone even when Adam has unrestricted access to God, harmony with nature, and liberating work. Key points included that food, work, and even God do not fulfill God's design for human companionship. Instead, humans simply must be in relationship with other humans.

However, recent empirical evidence shows that man is increasingly lonely, as are many in the Bridges congregation. Some of the results of the pretest were shared to show that many people at Bridges experience a level of exclusion. For instance, approximately one-third of those surveyed indicated they did not feel like they belonged; they believed there was no sense of togetherness at Bridges; they believed they did not fit in at Bridges; they could not share personal concerns with others; they did not feel related to others; and they did not feel a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood.

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The answer to this problem is to live as the church in which God has mandated certain relational practices. These practices will be discussed over the coming weeks. Finally, as an evangelistic closing, Jesus was pictured as experiencing the ultimate loneliness on the cross to restore believers to an unending relationship with God. The breakout group questions were:

- What has made you feel connected to others at Bridges?

- What has made you feel disconnected from others at Bridges?

- What have others at Bridges done to make you believe that you can approach them?

- What have others at Bridges done to make you believe that you cannot approach them?

- How have people at Bridges made you feel understood? Unheard? Would you consider yourself closer to people outside of Bridges or within Bridges? Why?

- In addition to food, work, and God, how else have you tried to fill the void that can only be filled with companionship? Did it work?

- In what ways are Jesus's loneliness and isolation a comfort to you in yours?

Week 2. The sermon was titled "Love One Another" and came from John 13:31-35, where Jesus commands His disciples to love one another as He has loved them. Key points included a summary of all of the mutual support commands in Scripture such as greet one another, offer one another appreciation and encouragement, and show one another attention, concern, and empathy. Practical examples were given for how all these commands could be obeyed in the context of Bridges Community Church and where they were currently being neglected. Finally, as an evangelistic closing, Jesus was revealed as the basis for all the one-another commands. Christians are only able to one-another each other because they have been loved, accepted, appreciated, noticed, remembered, and encouraged by Jesus Himself. The breakout group questions were:

- When have you felt warmly welcomed by others at Bridges? Coldly greeted or ignored? (1 Thess 5:26)

- When have you felt accepted by others at Bridges? Unaccepted? (Rom 15:7)

- When have you felt appreciated by others at Bridges? Unappreciated? (1 Tim 2:1)

- When have people at Bridges expressed empathy with you? Insensitivity? (Rom 12:15; 1 Cor 12:25-26)

- When have you been comforted by people at Bridges? Neglected? (2 Cor 1:3-4)

- When have you been encouraged by someone at Bridges? Discouraged? (1 Thess 5:11)

- When have you felt respected or honored by people at Bridges? Disrespected or dishonored? (Rom 12:10; 1 Pet 2:17)

- When have you felt supported by people at Bridges? Unsupported? (Gal 6:2)

Week 3. The sermon was titled "The Toughest One Another" and was an application of Romans 15:5-7, in which Christians are commanded to accept one another as Christ has accepted them. However, for this type of acceptance to be possible, Christians must be known by each other as they are known by Christ. If Christians do not vulnerably reveal themselves to one another, they can never be accepted by one another in a way that is comparable to how Christ accepted them.

Three areas where Christians must be vulnerable with one another were identified from other texts: suffering, shortcomings, and sin. In terms of suffering, Paul vulnerably shares various types of pain he has experienced in 2 Corinthians 12. He goes as far as saying that he boasts in these hardships and persecutions (2 Cor 12:9-10). In terms of shortcomings, Paul vulnerably shares his "fear and much trembling" regarding his ability to speak eloquently (1 Cor 2:3). In terms of sin, James commands followers of Christ to confess their sins to one another (Jas 5:16). Examples for how people at Bridges could vulnerably share their sufferings, shortcomings, and sin with one another were given. Finally, as an evangelistic closing, Christ's acceptance of believers even in the midst of their sufferings, shortcomings, and sin was revisited. The breakout group questions were:

- When you think about people with whom you feel comfortable sharing hidden aspects of your life, what have they done or said to earn your trust?

- Do you believe people feel comfortable sharing hidden aspects of their lives at Bridges? Why or why not?

- Do you believe people feel comfortable sharing hidden aspects of their lives with you? Why or why not?

- Have you ever known someone who boasted about their weaknesses? If so, what are some examples of their boasting? If not, how do you think you would respond if you saw someone offering such boasts?

- Have you ever felt completely known and simultaneously completely accepted? When?

- Have you ever felt like you needed to conceal certain aspects of your life in order to be accepted? Has this ever happened at Bridges?

- Which is easiest for you to reveal to others: your sufferings, your shortcomings, or your sin? Most difficult? Why?

- What is one burden this group can help you carry at this time?

Week 4. The sermon was titled "Forgiveness or Accountability?" It explored the tension between biblical mandates to forgive one another and to hold one another accountable. It used 2 Corinthians 7:8-13 as an example when Paul rejoiced over the Corinthian repentance brought about through accountability. Accountability was therefore framed as restorative rather than punitive. The goal of accountability is always repentance and restoration to the community. Three markers of repentance were identified from the text: sorrow, acceptance of judgment, and eagerness for restitution. Examples were given for how Bridges could simultaneously practice forgiveness and accountability with and without repentance. Finally, as an evangelistic closing, Christ's forgiveness was offered through repentance. The breakout group questions were:

- When have you been conflicted whether to extend forgiveness or hold a person accountable? Which did you choose? Why? Had the person repented?

- If the church bridges forgiveness and accountability through repentance, should secular workplaces do the same? Why or why not?

- If someone is not repentant, how are forgiveness and accountability simultaneously offered?

- What is difficult about holding someone accountable? What is difficult about forgiving someone?

- What are the potential risks for neglecting accountability? Neglecting forgiveness?

- In addition to sorrow, accepting of judgment, and eagerness for restitution, what other markers of repentance would you look for to discern if someone is repentant?

- Who do you currently need to forgive? What is stopping you? Who do you need to hold accountable?

Week 5. The sermon was titled "Devoted to Fellowship" and centered around the communal practices of the early church in Acts 2:42-47. Out of the four practices listed in the text, two are explicitly communal: fellowship and breaking of bread. One is nearly always communal in the book of Acts: prayer. And even the least communal of the four practices, teaching, always happens in a group setting. The implication is that the early church devoted itself to communal practices. There was no concept of individual spirituality among those in the early church.

Examples were given for how Bridges could be similarly devoted to communal practices, especially in smaller group settings. Evidence from the pretest suggested that those who belonged to a smaller group within Bridges had a higher sense of belonging than those who did not. Of those who expressed they did not participate in a group at Bridges, 84 percent indicated they did not feel like they belonged. However, of those who do participate in a group, only 25 percent indicated they did not feel like they belong. While comparing responses of only two questions from the surveys is not validated to make a definitive statement on belonging, the data is noteworthy nonetheless. It was used to encourage people to be part of a group even if they had a prior negative group experience.

Finally, as an evangelistic closing, Jesus's work to commune with believers by being the communion meal Himself was seen as the means by which Christians can have fellowship with one another. The breakout group questions were:

- Do you think a church should be more devoted to fellowship or study of God's Word? Why? To which do you believe Bridges is more devoted?

- How much time does your Life Group spend learning about one another's lives and praying for one another? Studying God's Word? Something else? Are your current time allocations the best way to spend group time? Why or why not?

- In what ways could fellowship become more rooted in our practice at Bridges?

- What do you normally do when you see someone standing alone on the patio or in the lobby before or after service? How could you be more welcoming?

- What are some ways to invite a new person to engage more with the Bridges community without being too forward?

- How could people at Bridges be more involved with each other's lives outside of church?

- How could we better practice the "communal" aspect of communion?

Implementation

Following the five weeks of teaching and breakout group conversations, there seemed to be a new energy around helping people experience a sense of belonging at Bridges, and a number of adjustments to common Bridges practices were suggested by members. However, difficulty was expected to solidify such energy and maintain these newly suggested practices into the life of the church and even in its culture. Therefore, John Kotter's eight accelerators for organizational change as well as learnings from other organizational change researchers were utilized before assessing the congregation with the posttest.

Kotter's accelerators "expand on the eight-step model" that he originally proposed.[1] In the updated accelerators, Kotter collapsed the step of "communicating the change vision" into "empowering broad-based action" and labeled it "enlisting a volunteer army." He added the nuance of removing barriers and specified that his accelerators "never stop."[2] Additionally, he clarified the sense of urgency must center

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[1] John Kotter, *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2014), 29.

[2] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 14.

around a specific big opportunity.[3] His accelerators, which formed the general framework of the implementation efforts at Bridges are:

1. Create sense of urgency.

2. Build guiding coalition.

3. Formulate strategic vision and initiatives.

4. Enlist volunteer army.

5. Enable action by removing barriers.

6. Generate short-term wins.

7. Sustain acceleration.

8. Institute change.[4]

While Kotter's work itself is in the "trade book category" and therefore lacks internal "verification and validation," it has remained relevant and helpful.[5] Additionally, other academics have taken Kotter's claims and verified them through their own research. Nicole Stragalas writes, "Kotter's work has been validated through significant research and is a staple component in graduate management programs."[6] Even those who claim the specific sequence of Kotter's model has not been sufficiently researched empirically, show each individual step of the model has been subjected to such testing.[7] Instances of this validating research will be included throughout the following description of the implementation efforts at Bridges, thus reinforcing the credibility of utilizing Kotter's accelerators.

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[3] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 14.

[4] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 29.

[5] Warner Burke, *Organization Change: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 3.

[6] Nicole Stragalas, "Improving Change Implementation: Practical Adaptations of Kotter's Model," *OD Practitioner* 42, no. 1 (2010): 31.

[7] Steven H. Appelbaum et al., "Back to the Future: Revisiting Kotter's 1996 Change Model," *Journal of Management Development* 31, no. 8 (August 2012): 776.

Urgency. Kotter claims creating a sense of urgency is the first accelerator in a change initiative. The people in the organization must believe the change is necessary and must believe the change is necessary now. As Warner Burke writes, "Organizational members must see the need for change to be willing to embrace it."[8] Other researchers verified members desire to support change had "the most significant effect" on their commitment to change.[9] Unless this first accelerator is in place, people will lack the required motivation to carry out the difficult work for change. Those who oppose the change will be able to sway those in the middle to inaction since inertia will naturally make people want to stay in place. There must be an emotional response to the proposed change that is strong enough to move people's volition into action.

While it might be possible to manufacture a sense of urgency when no real urgency exists, ethical leaders must not overstate the potential threat at hand. By all means, a leader could ethically desire a change that is not essential to the survival of an organization. However, if the proposed change is less than critical, the leader should simply communicate that reality from the beginning. If the urgency is fabricated, eventually people will see through the facade, feel manipulated, and lose interest in the change initiative. However, when a true threat is identified and articulated with integrity, Kotter's accelerator will harness people's imaginations and energy and motivate them to work toward a solution. Naturally, by only alerting organizational members to real threats instead of exaggerated ones, Kotter's change strategy can only be appropriately implemented in specific circumstances. For many change initiatives, Kotter's strategy will simply not apply because there is no real urgency.

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[8] Burke, *Organization Change*, 7.

[9] Janet T. Parish, Susan Cadwallader, and Paul Busch, "Want to, Need to, Ought to: Employee Commitment to Organizational Change," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 21, no. 1 (February 2008): 44.

At Bridges, the urgency to invest relationally into others is a true emergency. No exaggerated claims to its importance need to be crafted. As evidenced by the pretest, many people at Bridges experience loneliness and isolation. Anecdotally, there are significant portions of the surrounding area who feel they have no one to support them, no one who wants to listen to their needs, and no one to celebrate their successes. Many feel like they must promote themselves to get another person to notice them. Simple questions like "Who would you call if you felt scared?" can reveal the need for deeper relationships, even in the church.

While anecdotal accounts of loneliness might highlight the urgency of the situation, especially for those members who experience a lack of belonging themselves, the psychological research surveyed in the previous chapter was more convincing for those at Bridges who do not experience loneliness themselves. Because Bridges is located in a tech-saturated, research-driven area, the raw facts claimed by credible experts were helpful to create urgency in their minds, and such information was sprinkled throughout the sermons.

Additionally, because Bridges holds a high view of Scripture, urgency was created through exhortation of various texts. The one-another commands of the New Testament were utilized to show that Bridges could either increase communal practices or disobey God. There is no other option. When people talk more about themselves than remembering significant events in the lives of others, they are disobeying the commands to build up and encourage. When new people do not feel welcomed in the church, Bridges is disobeying the command to show hospitality. When people feel like they have a difficult time connecting with other individuals in the church and therefore remain in isolation, Bridges has disobeyed the command to greet one another. As always, when one of God's commands is broken, there is a social or relational cost that results. In this case, loneliness, depression, and, according to the research literature, physical deterioration are the results of largely ignoring the commands for how Christians must live in community

with one another. Exhorting the members of Bridges, who truly desire to follow Scripture, helped to create Kotter's urgency.

   Guiding coalition. Kotter advocates for building a guiding coalition (GC) after the sense of urgency is created. The GC includes "individuals from all silos and levels who want to help you take on strategic challenges."[10] In addition to being sufficiently motivated to "be change agents and help others do the same," the GC also must possess the needed skills, capacity, and acumen to accomplish change.[11] Bill Cowley confirmed Kotter's claim in his research with Eli Lilly and Company, writing of the necessity for leaders to form a "linked-arm coalition" from their "relationship skills and knowledge of the informal organization to muster support for the cause."[12]

   At Bridges, the GC includes individuals from each life group and ministry focus. However, instead of trying to convince existing leaders the importance of the vision, the GC consists of people who already see the necessity. Whether potential team members are currently identified as leaders in the church is less important than if they understand and feel the urgency of the change. Their grasp of the urgency is precisely what will enable them to be effective change agents.

   At the same time, while the GC's membership certainly can and should include those from outside the already identified leadership structure, the existing hierarchy of the church must at least allow for the assembly of the GC. If the various political powers within the church are hostile toward developing a focus on connecting people relationally, there is little hope the venture could be successful. According to Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, such hostility could erupt if the proposed emphasis depleted scarce

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   [10] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 29.

   [11] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 29.

   [12] Bill Cowley, "Why Change Succeeds: An Organizational Self-Assessment," *Organizational Development Journal* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 28.

resources desired by one of the power players.[13] By God's grace, at Bridges, much of the established leadership saw the need to increase focus on relationally connecting.

Kotter claims that if the sense of urgency is strong enough, identifying people for the guiding coalition is "surprisingly easy."[14] They are the people who enthusiastically responded when the threat or opportunity was first discussed. At Bridges, Kotter's prediction rings true because it is "surprisingly easy" to begin a conversation about the problems of loneliness and isolation. Few claim they are not a problem, and most sincerely want to know what can be done about them. They are willing to listen and learn how the problem might be solved.

Change vision and strategic initiatives. The GC crafts and clarifies "a vision that fits a big strategic opportunity" and selects "strategic initiatives" that can move the organization with "speed and agility toward the vision."[15] In Silicon Valley, the largest opportunity for the church could likely be the deep loneliness and isolation experienced by the people living in the region. If the church were known as a place where anyone could be known and loved, those who were previously uninterested in attending church might begin to attend with enthusiasm. Additionally, since the plague of isolation is not limited to those outside the church, the promise of true Christian community shines as a powerful vision even to longstanding church members. As Mark McCloskey and Jim Louwsma contend, leaders must capitalize on such opportunities by having the intellectual flexibility to see the world as it really is and behave "in accordance with what

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[13] Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2017), 272.

[14] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 29.

[15] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 30.

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is seen."[16] Recognizing both the pain of loneliness and the potential for the church to address it gives the leadership of Bridges an occasion to display such intellectual honesty and flexibility.

At Bridges, the five weeks of teaching and breakout groups launched sufficient urgency to create a GC. With surprising ease, various constituents in the church rallied around the need to welcome and include each other and outsiders, including elders. Therefore, eventually, the elders added the phrase, "People Matter," to the vision statement of Bridges in order to articulate the change vision. The vision language resonated across the church likely because of the felt urgency. As Jaepil Choi writes, "Because the vision is greatly discrepant from the status quo, it provides the organization with a reason for change."[17]

While the simplistic articulation of the new vision was still forming, a number of strategic initiatives rose to the surface from elders and other leaders in the church through the breakout group conversations. At this stage, breakout group sharing resembled a classic T-Group. Burke explains T-Groups as "small-group discussions in which the primary, almost exclusive source of information for learning is the behavior of the group members themselves. Participants receive feedback from one another on their behavior in the group, and this feedback becomes the learning source for personal insight and development."[18] As one member shared his or her experiences, others could relate and validate they had experienced something similar. The learning came from the discussion. Imperatives emerged from members detailing their own struggles and pains. The group as a whole began to realize the depth of the problem and how they could help

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[16] Mark McCloskey and Jim Louwsma, *The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership: Building Strong Businesses, Organizations, and Families* (Bloomington, MN: Wordsmith, 2014), chap. 3, "DICE+1 of a Transformational Leader," para. 5, Kindle.

[17] Jaepil Choi, "A Motivational Theory of Charismatic Leadership: Envisioning, Empathy, and Empowerment," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 27.

[18] Burke, *Organization Change,* 41.

it by redirecting their focus on the needs of others. As T-Groups can be reinforced with lectures, the congregation's realization deepened as the surveys and discussions were paired with five weeks of sermonic teaching on how Christians must interact with one another.[19]

From these discussions, specific changes, or strategic initiatives, were proposed in individual life groups and passed along to church leadership for consideration for the church at large. First, a higher percentage of the group meeting time could be designated for relational development activities. While groups always dedicated time for casual conversation at the start of group time and prayer requests at the end, both of these activities could take more of a central role. Some groups were convicted that teaching content was only one out of four practices to which the early church was dedicated (from the week 5 session), but it was by far the highest or only priority in their groups. Therefore, instead of conversation time being only a buffer to give people a sufficient window in which to arrive before the start of teaching content, it could be emphasized as an opportunity for the group to catch up with each other on the events of the week and show one another how much they matter. In addition to the dedicated period of welcome, the prayer request time could be more extended than simply rushed through at the close of the group.

Groups found that while members had sat in the same life groups and attended the same services for years, many of their conversations centered mostly around the Bible and the meaning of various passages. By comparison, little conversation had centered around people, their histories, and how those histories influence who they are today. The five weeks of breakout groups revealed that people knew less about one another than they thought they did. Patrick Lencioni notices a similar phenomenon with teams he has coached: "We have them say where they were born, how many siblings they have, where

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[19] Burke, *Organization Change*, 40.

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they fall in the order of children, and finally, what the most interesting or difficult challenge was for them as a kid."[20] As a result, "People sitting around the table are genuinely surprised at what they didn't know about their colleagues' backgrounds."[21] More dedicated relational time would likely continue to reveal the same at Bridges. Eventually, the hope would be for every member to find it "okay, even gratifying, to tell their peers something about themselves that they had never mentioned or been asked about before."[22]

Another change that came out of these T-Group-like discussions was the necessity for people to volunteer for specific roles to serve the group. Beyond making a physical appearance at the group, some people felt responsible for little else. However, the T-Group discussions revealed members wanted to be involved in significant roles. In fact, having responsibility over a vital task could be another way to communicate they mattered to the group.

Several of these newly formed roles could be designed specifically to ensure newcomers easily connected to the group instead of continuing to feel like an outsider. For instance, a connections coordinator role could welcome and follow up with guests but also work to connect the new person to someone else in the group with similar interests or background. A communications coordinator could ensure everyone is signed up for all group communications. In addition to these relationally specific roles, some other job assignments could involve planning who brings snacks or what content would be studied. By each member contributing to the group through a specific role, no one would feel unnecessary. Additionally, members take time to thank other members for their service to the group, which deepens how essential each members feels.

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[20] Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 28.

[21] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 28.

[22] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 29.

A final strategic initiative came from an elder suggestion that the elders spend the first three minutes after service finding someone they did not already know and speaking with that person. Instead of gravitating toward people they already knew or even attending to important organization matters, they could prioritize meeting and connecting with those who were not yet known. Then, at the next elder meeting, elders could share who they met since the last meeting. Not only would this reinforce the new person in their minds, it would provide accountability for them to connect with others after the service.

Enlist a volunteer army. After the GC catches the vision and embraces strategic initiatives, a broader group across the organization must also buy into the proposed change. The GC is critical for passionately conveying the vision and recruiting more volunteers to help accomplish the change. At Bridges, the volunteer army began with those on various leadership boards (elders, deacons, deaconesses, life group leaders, school board, foundation board, and staff). The idea of spending the first three minutes after service connecting with unknown people was passed along to them so they could similarly share who they met in their board meetings.

By sharing the ideas for life groups that came out of the breakout sessions and the simple "three-minute rule" with these other leaders, an enthusiasm began to grow for meeting and connecting across the church. Kotter writes of the volunteer army, "This process results in many individuals wanting to help" and "starts to pull, as if by gravity, the planets and moons into the new network system."[23] The volunteer army, in essence, grows to a critical mass within the organization and becomes such a force that it reaches a tipping point. Eventually, there are more people in the organization who desire and act in

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[23] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 31.

line with the change vision than there are people who oppose it. Like a wildfire, it has spread and taken over.

By initiating change through large group teaching and individual small groups and then incrementally solidifying more allies from across the organization, the culture of the organization as a whole begins to shift. The movement feels more grassroots than top down. While banners could be hung in the lobby or t-shirts saying "People matter" could be handed out to everyone, neither are necessary. The real change come from the enthusiasm generated on making progress with the urgent need.

Remove barriers. As with any organization-wide change effort, some amount of resistance should be expected. Kotter explains that "identifying and removing barriers which slow or stop strategically important activity" should be anticipated, and by doing so, leaders move the change effort closer to success.[24] At Bridges, the largest barrier could be that some are not naturally gifted in developing relationships. Those who struggle with relationships tend not to say hello and introduce themselves to a new person, even in a small group setting. If asked about their weekend, job, or family, they will answer, but they tend not to reciprocate the question to the person who asked. While prayer requests are shared in life groups, they do not follow up with the person who asked for prayer in order to get an update. Likely, the majority of these members do not act these ways because they are cruel or mean spirited. Rather, providing for the emotional needs of others never comes to their minds. In other words, they are more task oriented that relationship oriented. Such personality types are a barrier to developing a sense of belonging at Bridges.

This barrier was addressed through group sharing of how those behaviors negatively impacted people (previous discussed), celebration of progress (detailed in the

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[24] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 31.

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next section), and ongoing correction when someone acted in contradiction to showing people that they matter. For correction, the volunteer army is essential because no one person could see every instance of neglect. However, if there are many individuals throughout the church keeping watch over interactions or lack of interactions, they can call out a problem when they see it, and they must do so in a public (not private) way. While addressing such infractions only with the individuals who performed them might be less embarrassing, addressing them to the entire group helps to ensure more compliance to the change vision. Lencioni observes a threefold benefit to group versus individual accountability. First, since all members receive the message at the same time, they are less likely to commit the same error as the person being corrected. Second, when members see the vision will actually be enforced by leadership, they gain confidence the leaders will follow through on their commitments. Third, with an example of accountability to follow, others will likely replicate the behavior of the leader to their peers.[25]

Celebrate short-term wins. Celebrating short-term wins comes primarily in elder and other leadership meetings when each person shares who he or she met since the last meeting. Leaders are verbally thanked in front of others in the group. The consistent positive reinforcement began to establish a culture of engagement rather than avoidance and "give credibility to the whole idea of pursuing a new strategic advantage."[26]

Additionally, one Sunday, a longtime member began standing at the entrance of the church to greet everyone who came. Rather than being a single occurrence, he has continued the practice ever since. Therefore, he has been celebrated as an example to follow in various meetings and groups. As Kotter explains, "Celebrations give a needed

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[25] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 63.

[26] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 132.

pat on the back to people who are trying to help"[27] and need to be "as visible as possible to the entire organization."[28] Stephen Leybourne found such celebrations help to make improvisational efforts more effective.[29]

Sustain acceleration. A culture change is not a flash in the pan focus that rises to importance and then fades. Culture is "the way we do things around here."[30] To change it is to change some of the core assumptions on a foundational level. Edgar Schein writes such a change "is intrinsically difficult because the reexamination of basic assumptions temporarily destabilizes our cognitive and interpersonal world, releasing large quantities of basic anxiety."[31] Naturally, such a change cannot be accomplished through a simple marketing campaign or even teaching series. It must have repetitive reinforcement over the long haul.

Kotter claims people have a natural "tendency to let up after a win or two."[32] He suggests finding a continual stream of "new opportunities and challenges" to keep people focused on the vision. Similarly, McCloskey and Louwsma claim successful change agents must emphasize "continuous, collective focus on constructive change."[33] In other words, change efforts are never fully complete because without a steady stream of new energy, the organization can drift back toward old patterns of behavior. At

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[27] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 124.

[28] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 32.

[29] Stephen A. Leybourne, "Managing Improvisation within Change Management: Lessons from UK Financial Services," *Service Industries Journal* 26, no. 1 (January 2006): 89.

[30] Edgar H. Schein with Peter Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed., Jossey-Bass Business and Management Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 32.

[31] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership,* 57.

[32] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 32.

[33] McCloskey and Louwsma, *The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership*, chap. 2, "Roles," para. 6.

Bridges, acceleration is currently sustained by ongoing anecdotes in sermons, life group questions, and lifting up positive examples of successful relational efforts.

Institute change. In the final accelerator of Kotter's change strategy, the vision anchors to the institution through its "processes, systems procedures, and behavior."[34] By doing so, the vision becomes a more permanent fixture that perpetuates itself. More than being an idea that members can choose to embrace or ignore, when the change reaches institutionalization, members must comply and often do so unconsciously.

At Bridges, the previously mentioned proposals that came from breakout sessions and became standard for all life groups are summarized below:

Communication Principles

1. Send weekly communication to the entire group regarding what will be discussed/taught in life group that week and any upcoming activities.

2. Identify a person to send weekly communications as well as a backup person.

3. Ensure all people in the group receive the weekly communication.

Group Activity Principles

1. Have an activity (social or service) at least monthly in addition to the weekly group time.

2. Invite all group members to the activity.

3. Communicate the activity at least two weeks in advance, and hopefully a month in advance in the weekly communication.

4. Identify a person or team of people to plan the activity.

Suggested Use of Weekly Group Time

1. Forty percent of time teaching/discussing content

2. Thirty percent learning about and showing interest in what is happening in each other's lives—possible suggestion is to divide into separate men's and women's groups for this time and prayer time.

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[34] Kotter, *Accelerate*, 33.

3. Fifteen percent praying for each other

4. Fifteen percent fellowship and greeting one another at the beginning and end of the weekly meeting

Principles for New Guests and Inclusion of All Members

1. Identify who will inform guests of the group communication and a backup person.

2. Identify who will be responsible for adding new people to group communication and a backup person.

3. Identify who will contact guests after they visit for the first time and a backup person.

4. Identify who can contact people who have missed more than two consecutive weeks of group time with a friendly "We miss you" message without implying any guilt.

These principles are reinforced at quarterly life group meetings, and life group leaders have an opportunity to share successes and challenges they have encountered.

The Posttest

Like the pretest, the posttest was introduced at the end of a service and available to complete through in-person paper surveys or online. The online version was open for four weeks in order to gather more responses. All responses were gathered in excess of 120 days following the completion of the five weeks of teaching and group sessions in order to allow time for new practices to become habitual behaviors. While studies have documented a variance for the amount of time necessary to form a new habit ranging from 18 days to 254 days, the average is 66 days.[35] This study allowed between 120 to 150 days before the posttest measurement.

While 201 people completed the posttest survey, only 100 of them had also taken the pretest and identified as participating in all five weeks of teaching and group

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[35] Benjamin Gardner, Phillippa Lally, and Jane Wardle, "Making Health Habitual: The Psychology of 'Habit-Formation' and General Practice," *British Journal of General Practice* 62, no. 605 (December 2012): 665-66; Phillippa Lally et al., "How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (October 2010): 998.

sessions. Comparing the results of the pretest and posttest for the 100 people who took both tests and participated in all sessions showed an increase in the sense of belonging.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations for this study, including those for pretest and posttest RSCS and CSCS, are shown in table 1. The findings suggest that RSCS and CSCS increased over the duration of the study. Mean-level social connectedness improved from pretest (85.18) to posttest (94.27) by 10.7 percent. Results from a paired sample t-test support that this effect is significant (t(df = 98) = 4.53, p < .001) as there is a less than 5 percent probability that this effect was the result of chance (95 percent CI = [.24, .57]). Similarly, campus connectedness improved from pretest (61.65) to posttest (69.08) by 12 percent. Results from a paired sample t-test support that this effect is significant (t(df = 98) = 5.03, p < .001), as there is a less than 5 percent probability that this effect was the result of chance (95 percent CI = [.28, .60]).

Additionally, analyses comparing changes in RSCS and CSCS showed no statistically significant differences between groups based on ethnicity, gender, marital status, or education level. These findings are not presented in the chart as they were all within the range of general improvement across the congregation. Similarly, no statistically significant differences due to age or tenure attending the church were found. These findings support the generalizability of the effect across the congregation.

With regard to the one follow-up question asking which communal practice that participants believed to contribute the most to their sense of belonging, 77 percent indicated it was mutual support. Twenty-one percent listed vulnerability. Two percent listed accountability. No one listed forgiveness. These results are not part of a validated instrument but are helpful for pastoral practice.

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Table 1. Sense of belonging correlations

	Mean	SD	RSCS (T1)	RSCS (T2)	CSCS (T1)	CSCS (T2)
RSCS (T1)	85.18	7.81	$\alpha = 0.94$			
RSCS (T2)	94.27	5.65	0.42*	$\alpha = 0.94$		
CSCS (T1)	61.65	6.90	0.95*	0.42*	$\alpha = 0.96$	
CSCS (T2)	69.08	4.36	0.43*	0.93*	0.45*	$\alpha = 0.96$

Note: n = 100. SD = standard deviation; tenure = years attending the church; RSCS = social connectedness; CSCS = campus connectedness; T1 = pretest; T2 = posttest. Measure reliability (α) presented on diagonals.
* significant at p < .05

Discussion

First, the pretest and posttest results show a statistically significant change in sense of belonging among the 100 people who took both tests and participated in all five weeks of the intervention. Thus, the null hypothesis was disproven. Because of the consistency of improvement demonstrated by the confidence level and intervals in the paired *t*-test, the prediction can be made that anyone who participated in such an intervention in the congregation would likely experience a similar increase in sense of belonging.

Second, the large number of people who took the pretest but not the posttest and the large number of people who took the posttest but not the pretest could help illustrate the general patterns of church attendance. Some people attend church every week (the 100); however, most people do not. Pastors who are working to implement a change initiative in their churches must realize they do not have a captive audience from week to week. Messages must be repeated many times and in many settings to reach those within the influence of the church.

Third, mutual support was perceived to contribute the most to a sense of belonging among most participants, and forgiveness was not perceived to contribute the

most to belonging by any participant. While these results are not part of a validated testing instrument, they likely show that more teaching on forgiveness is required. People may enjoy mutual support more than the other practices, and they may feel like they matter when others demonstrate that support. However, as has been shown throughout this dissertation, there is more to belonging than simply mutual support.

Limitations

A control group, who took both pretest and posttest but did not participate in any of the sessions, was not identified. Such a group would add confirmation that those who participated in the invention increased their sense of belonging because of the intervention. However, because of the consistency across those who did participation, the study did show that the increase in sense of belonging had less than a 5 percent probability of happening by chance. Therefore, the control group was not necessary to make a statistically informed observation.

Additionally, while no demographic (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, tenure at the church, education level) showed a statistical difference in sense of belonging, those findings are limited because of the small numbers of some of the demographics. Future studies could seek out larger numbers of minority groups. However, again, because of the consistency of result among those who did participate, future studies could confidently be expected to show similar improvement across demographics.

Finally, no attempt was made to isolate groups that only participated in one of the practices but not the others. This approach was intentional because of the nature of biblical commands. A church should never advocate for one of the practices under investigation in this dissertation without advocating for the others. As has been repeated throughout this dissertation, Christians do not have the option which commands to obey. They must obey them all. Therefore, an analysis of how mutual support (for instance)

could increase the sense of belonging in isolation from the practices of vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability would be anti-Christian. Such a practice should never exist, and in fact, would be sin. However, it is a limitation of this study. This study only investigated a correlation between combined communal practices and a sense of belonging. It did not investigate a correlation between individual communal practices and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The combined practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability were shown to be correlated to a sense of belonging in a local church through an empirical case study. Therefore, the importance of these practices in reference to a sense of belonging are not only evident in Trinitarian dynamics, biblical imperatives, historical groups, and modern psychology, they are observable in local congregation. The results of the empirical study further supports the findings in previous chapters. A unified conclusion will be presented below.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has investigated the correlation between the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability with a sense of belonging across Trinitarian perichoresis, biblical imperatives, historical groups, and modern psychology. Additionally, an empirical case study was performed in a local church in which the sense of belonging of members was measured before and after an intervention. The intervention specifically targeted the four practices under examination in this dissertation.

In each field of study, the practices at issue in this dissertation were evident. In the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit either participate in the practice, manifest the result of the practice, or relate to creation through the practice. Second, biblical imperatives leave no room for Christians to neglect any of the practices. While the one-another commands could be categorized in various ways, framing them under the headings of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability summarizes how Christians can obey Jesus's new command to love one another.

Third, each of the examined historical groups clearly incorporated all of the practices at issue in this dissertation into their regular rhythms. Even though the groups varied in their central focus, none of them neglected any of the identified practices. The Moravians under Count Zinzendorf were primarily concerned with missions; John Wesley and his Methodists were primarily concerned with perfection; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his seminary students were primarily concerned with Christ existing as church community—particularly through the practice of confession. However, all of them

incorporated mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability into their group structures.

Fourth, modern psychological research has discovered, and in some instances quantified, a connection between each of the four practices in this dissertation and one's sense of belonging or attachment. In some studies, the practices are observed to be a precursor to belonging or attachment, and in other studies, attachment is a precursor to the practice. Either way, however, mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are certainly linked to a sense of belonging or attachment.

Finally, the empirical case study of a local congregation showed a correlation between emphasizing the four practices under study in this dissertation and the sense of belonging felt by those in the congregation. Utilizing a validated testing instrument, the sense of belonging increased among those who participated in an invention that emphasized mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability.

Therefore, the conclusion of this investigation is that the four practices under study in this dissertation are indeed correlated to a sense of belonging and could increase one's attachment to a local church if practiced. More precisely, this investigation has shown a correlation between a sense of belonging and the combined practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. In other words, this dissertation has not shown that mutual support by itself (without the other practices) is correlated to a sense of belonging. Neither has this dissertation shown that any of the other practices by themselves (without the other three) is correlated to a sense of belonging. Only the combined practices have been tracked through Trinitarian perichoresis, biblical imperatives, historical groups, modern psychology, and an empirical case study.

While modern psychology has, at times, show correlations between individual practices and belonging, it has not shown if combining the practices would be correlated to a greater sense of belonging—to the knowledge of this researcher—nor should those results create any additional urgency for Christians if they existed. Biblical imperatives

mandate that Christians participate in all of the practices regardless of whether the combination of them creates a greater sense of belonging than isolating one practice.

However, as God, in His grace to His church, desires for His children to experience fulness of life (John 10:10), Christians should expect that God's commands will lead to the highest levels of flourishing. Therefore, disobedience to any command will diminish life in some way—whether or not it can be measured by modern research. As such, neglecting any one of the practices under investigation in this dissertation while continuing to practice the other three would be expected to correlate to a lower sense of belonging than practicing all of them together. These scenarios will be explored below, and while considering the consequences of neglecting any one of the practices is obvious, even tedious, that is the point. God designed the church to participate in all the practices together, neglecting none of them. His wisdom is not able to be challenged.

Without Mutual Support

In the Trinity, mutual support was seen as the members love and glorify one another. In regard to biblical imperatives, mutual support was categorized under Gary Chapman's *Five Love Languages*: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, physical touch. Historical groups practiced mutual support through prayer, financial assistance, bearing one another's burdens and oddities, and even aiding in child rearing. Modern psychology's emphasis on mutual support was seen primarily as emotional support or empathy—being able to understand and receive how the other person is feeling.

Imagine the effect on a person's sense of belonging if mutual support was not practiced but vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability were. In such a situation, there would be no affirmation, no empathy, no prioritizing the other, no prayer for the other, no honor for one another, and no financial assistance. However, everyone would still be expected to be vulnerable with each other, to forgive one another, and to hold one

another accountable. Such a situation would rob the group of any warmth. They would have shadows of community, but no community. Simply, without mutual support, belonging is severely limited, if not impossible.

Without Vulnerability

In the Trinity, the result of vulnerability, which is being known, was seen among the members and in God's revelation of Himself to His creation. In regard to biblical imperatives, vulnerability is commanded through the confession of sin and implicitly in the commands to share one another's burdens. Historical groups practiced vulnerability through confession of sin, even creating lists of questions to root out any hidden area that was concealed. All the historical groups investigated in this dissertation had leaders who pressed their groups to reveal absolutely everything to one another. Modern psychology identified various benefits to seeking help and admitting dependency needs while simultaneously discovering the detrimental effects of attempting self-sufficiency.

Imagine group members attempting to belong with one another without anyone being known by the other members. It is nonsensical. Unless the group knows the individual, the group cannot include the individual as member. As humans cannot be in relationship with God unless He revealed Himself to humanity, individuals cannot be in relationship with others unless they are known. Further, mutual support would be limited because true needs would never be seen. Forgiveness almost has no meaning because many offenses would not be visible. Similarly, accountability has no meaning because how could anyone be held accountable if he or she is unknown to the group? Simply, without vulnerability, belonging is severely limited, if not impossible.

Without Forgiveness

In the Trinity, none of the members ever have occasion to forgive the other members. However, the result of forgiveness—complete harmony between persons—is

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seen in the Trinity. Further, God's willingness to forgive is evident throughout Scripture. In regard to biblical imperatives, forgiveness of one another is commanded, and the opposite of forgiveness (bitterness) is forbidden. With the historical groups, each one labored through forgiveness of one another and instituted opportunities to speak God's forgiveness to each other as well. Modern psychological research showed the personal benefits of forgiveness as well as its relationship to attachment. They found where forgiveness is withheld, secure attachment decreases.

Imagine a group that did not practice forgiveness of its members. While theoretically, the group could begin practicing mutual support, vulnerability, and accountability, the minute someone transgressed in any way, that person would be excluded from the group. Soon, no one would be in the group, and therefore, no one would have a sense of belonging to the group and no one would not be participating in any of the other practices. For a group to exist in any sustaining type of way, forgiveness must be offered to its members. Simply, without forgiveness, belonging is severely limited, if not impossible.

Without Accountability

In the Trinity, no member is held accountable to other members because there is only one will within the Trinity. For accountability to exist, one member would need to submit His will to the will of another, which the single will of the Trinity precludes. However, the result of accountability, which is acting in accordance with God's will, is always perfectly evident within the Trinity. In regard to biblical imperatives, various texts mandate that church members hold one another accountable. The practice is often termed "church discipline" and is always for the purpose of restoration rather than punitive penalty. The surveyed historical groups all practiced such discipline in an effort to conform the members to the will of God. Modern psychological research is not concerned with the will of God, of course. However, it has discovered the unavoidability of every

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group enforcing its norms in some way. Additionally, as group members increase their sense of belonging or attachment to the group, the group's norms increasingly shape the individual.

Imagine a group that did not hold its members accountable or enforce its norms through any means whatsoever. Such a group would lose all cohesion. Members would enact the book of Judges and do what was right in their own eyes. Thus, anarchy would be the only trait that the group would continue to manifest. There would be no set standard for what it means to practice mutual support, vulnerability, and forgiveness. Everyone would define those for themselves, and no one would be brought to any type of conformity because it would not exist. Such a group is not a group. It has lost all of its boundaries and distinctives. Simply, without accountability, belonging is severely limited, if not impossible.

Summary

God has instituted the practices under investigation in this dissertation for human thriving and flourishing—that the church would have life and have it to the full. The cross-sectional analysis between Trinitarian perichoresis, biblical imperatives, historical groups, and modern psychology shows the correlation of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability to a sense of belonging. More precisely, it shows how these practices, when combined together, correlate to a sense of belonging, and even more specifically, to the sense of belonging in a local church. As churches aim to reach the lost and facilitate maturity in Christ, all the practices, working in harmony with one another, will contribute to members experiencing a sense of belonging to the church.

APPENDIX 1

SENSE OF BELONGING SCALES

This appendix contains the Revised Social Connectedness Scale and the Campus Connectedness Scale. Each is a Likert-scale of six measures, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Mildly Disagree, 4 = Mildly Agree, 5 = Agree, and 6 = Strongly Agree.

The Revised Social Connectedness Scale has two scoring options. The original scale consists of 8 items and the revised scale consists of 20 items. The original scale reverse scores items 3, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20 and sums 8 items. The revised scale reverse scores items 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, and 20 and sums all 20 items.

The Campus Connectedness Scale has one scoring option. The scale reverse scores items 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14 and sums all 14 items.

REVISED SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS SCALE

Directions: Following are a number of statements that reflect various ways in which we view ourselves. Rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = Strongly Agree). There is no right or wrong answer. Do not spend too much time with any one statement and do not leave any unanswered.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Mildly Disagree 3	Mildly Agree 4	Agree 5	Strongly Agree 6

#	Question	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	I feel comfortable in the presence of strangers.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2	I am in tune with the world.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3	Even among my friends, there is no sense of brother/sisterhood.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4	I fit in well in new situations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5	I feel close to people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6	I feel disconnected from the world around me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	Even around people I know, I don't feel that I really belong.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8	I see people as friendly and approachable.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9	I feel like an outsider.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10	I feel understood by the people I know.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11	I feel distant from people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12	I am able to relate to my peers.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13	I have little sense of togetherness with my peers.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14	I find myself actively involved in people's lives.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15	I catch myself losing a sense of connectedness with society.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16	I am able to connect with other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17	I see myself as a loner.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18	I don't feel related to most people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19	My friends feel like family.	1	2	3	4	5	6

#	Question	1	2	3	4	5	6
20	I don't feel I participate with anyone or any group.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Note: The Revised Social Connectedness Scale has two scoring options. The original scale consists of 8 items and the revised item consists of 20 items. The original scale reverse scores items 3, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20 and sums eight items. The revised scale reverse scores items 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, and 20 and sums all 20 items.

CAMPUS CONNECTEDNESS SCALE

Directions: The following statements reflect various ways in which you may describe your experience on this entire college campus. Rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = Strongly Agree). There is no right or wrong answer. Do not spend too much time with any one statement and do not leave any unanswered.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Mildly Disagree 3	Mildly Agree 4	Agree 5	Strongly Agree 6

#	Question	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	There are people on campus with whom I feel a close bond.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2	I don't feel that I really belong around the people that I know on campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3	I feel that I can share personal concerns with other students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4	I am able to make connections with a diverse group of people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5	I feel so distant from the other students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6	I have no sense of togetherness with my peers.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	I can relate to my fellow classmates.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8	I catch myself losing all sense of connectedness with college life	1	2	3	4	5	6
9	I feel that I fit right in on campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10	There is no sense of brother/sisterhood with my college friends.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11	I don't feel related to anyone on campus	1	2	3	4	5	6
12	Other students make me feel at home on campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13	I feel disconnected from campus life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14	I don't feel I participate with anyone or any group.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Note: Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14 were reverse scored before all 14 items were summed.

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ABSTRACT

FOUR PRACTICES CORRELATED TO A SENSE OF
BELONGING IN A CHURCH

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This dissertation examines the communal practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability as well as their correlation with the sense of belonging that members feel in regard to a church community. It utilizes Trinitarian scholarship, biblical imperatives for communal practices, historical investigations of Christian communities, and modern psychological research. Additionally, an empirical case study is performed in which the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are emphasized in a church congregation.

Following an introductory chapter, chapter 2 focuses on Trinitarian scholarship of perichoresis and carefully examines how the love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit informs proper loving relationships between Christians. Specific attention is given to Jesus's prayer in John 17 petitioning that the church would be one as He and the Father are one. In chapter 3, the biblical imperatives for communal practices are examined. They are rooted in Christ's love for His church, provide a comprehensive rubric for fellowship among church members, and are one means by which the church makes Christ known to the world. In chapter 4, the historical investigation includes studies of the Moravians, John Wesley's societies, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde community. These three groups show remarkable commonality in the practices of mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability. In chapter 5, modern psychological research, while not authoritative in isolation, provides insights into the benefits of obedience and the pain of

disobedience in regard to biblically commanded communal practices. In particular, studies of attachment theory, group identification, and one's sense of belonging reinforce scriptural one-another mandates. In chapter 6, the empirical study of a church congregation utilizes the revised and campus social connectedness scales, which are validated survey instruments used to measure one's sense of belonging to a group. From these five fields of study, a unified conclusion is drawn that mutual support, vulnerability, forgiveness, and accountability are indeed correlated to the members' sense of belonging in a church.

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