

Last week I was talking about sharing God with one of my Christian students I tutor. She expressed a problem she sees in that people are not attaching to God like we are. Many people don't have an example of a healthy God Attachment, so they are not experiencing it. They are filled with avoiding the topic, or anxiety about salvation and go overboard. She sees more of her friends avoiding God altogether. She is studying psychology, going into her third year soon, and she said there are topics written by Christian Psychologists on the subject in the past 10 years, and so I looked it up online.

I started with the standard research on attachment disorder, and found Dr. Edward John Mostyn Bowlby's work analyzing his own losses and delinquent children's abandonment feelings, all which led him to coin the phrase "Attachment disorder." He was not a religious man, and his findings always bent towards evolution, but he observed through many trials in 1969 that human beings appear to be born already equipped with an innate psychobiological system, which he called the "attachment behavioral system." This system motivates us to seek proximity to those who are meaningful to us, or attachment figures as he called them.[1] This innate system also monitors proximity to the attachment figure, and compares it to the desired level of proximity. As we grow and explore, there may be illness, injury, fatigue, frightening or alarming events, even separation or threat of separation from the attachment figure. If the attachment figure is a safe haven or secure base in these times of exploration, attachment is reinforced. We know that we can return to the attachment figure and find refuge. If we don't explore at all, this can result in an attachment disorder as we never see that the attachment figure can be there for us in times of trouble. If we return to the attachment figure and they do not provide refuge, this can result in attachment disorder,

So what? We are born to attach. So attachment happens to strangers, or as we grow, potential partners, all too quickly. Why? Because we desire to be loved and find attachment. When this fails, we switch off or deactivates our innate "attachment behavioral system" out of self protection, and we have problems with behaviors, our emotions, our cognitive responses in social interactions, and this will happen over the life span unless a health attachment is formed with a person or with God, and we switch the "attachment behavioral system" back on because we feel secure enough to do so. And this is passed on to the next generation through faulty advice.

I'm reminded of a children's movie I just saw called "Coco." The wife lost her husband to the music industry because he left to sing to the world and never came back. She formed an attachment to the shoe business she created, and banned music. All future generations had to also not listen to or play music. When a great great grandson crosses over to the spiritual realm and is able to help his daughter remember him, the unhealthy attachment to the shoe business is broken, the attachment to the father is restored, and all the generations in between find true happiness.

We need both time with our attachment figure and time to explore away from them. Without exploring, we are out of balance. Without time together with our attachment figure, we are out of balance. If we don't get attention from the attachment figure, we get avoidant attachment problems. If we don't get to explore, getting too much attention, and feel we cannot be loved unless we get so much attention, we can get the anxious attachment disorder.

There is some interesting research being done at Biola University. I'll share information from Dr Reiner and her work with God as the attachment figure and Dr. Hall and his work on how God Attachment Disorders pass down to the next generation...

Dr. Sarah Reiner, from Wichita, Kansas is studying how people either attach or don't do God. She is a Staff Psychologist at the Department of Veteran's Affairs in San Antonio, TX. She received her PhD. From the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University. She specializes in: Coping, stress, trauma, integration of spirituality and psychology, and attachment issues. Her research has shown that even if a person has an attachment disorder with their attachment figure, it will not affect how they can attach to God. Reiner says that thankfully, our systems keep them separate. [5] So there are people attachments to be formed, but also God attachments. One cannot replace the other. Just as there are consequences to attachment disorders in people, there are consequences to not attaching to God. Reiner says that unlike in human relationships, when we seek proximity to God, it is maintainable because there are many spiritual practices which humans can employ to maintain closeness to God. And God reciprocates and shows up. So, when God is our attachment figure, we have a secure base and safety because God is ever present, all powerful, and all knowing. When we explore and come back to God, our attachment figure in God is available to us whenever we desire. There is no fear, because God is our haven of safety.

God Attachment Disorder comes when we avoid relationship with God. Perhaps we go about our exploration and don't return to God. It gets worse as we stop doing those things which brought us closer to God, (mission experiences and exploration, or spiritual practices like praying). This creates the Avoidance of God Attachment Disorder. If we don't start doing something which we need to run back to God for safe haven, like missions, or if we don't turn back to prayer and spiritual practices, the result is we don't learn to trust God, we try to do life alone, and we try to keep an emotional distance from God so we can not talk about it, and this perpetuates itself. I would say that this can be reversed because God is already seeking them, already active. We can help them do some spiritual practices, bringing them to church, inviting them on missions, and turning back to God together in prayer, reading the Bible, thanking God for keeping them safe, asking God to open their heart and let them feel God's love, reminding them that it is normal to explore, as it says in Proverbs 22:6 ⁶Train children in the way they should go; when they grow old, they won't depart from it. Meaning there is a time from when they lean on their parents faith, then go explore, then come back leaning on their own faith. This is normal and healthy. So let's help them come back without judgement.

God Attachment Disorder can also come when we are so crazy about church and God that it becomes fake, and we lean on our own spiritual practices for salvation, and start to believe that God won't love us if we don't do these things. The anxiousness about being attached to God results in what Reiner calls the Anxiousness of God Attachment Disorder. This results in so much worry that God will not be available partly because you anxiously doubt your own lovability and value.[1] I would say that many times this takes an outside person to tell the affected one over and over that "there is nothing that you can do to make God NOT love you." Until they believe it, this must be said to them. Also helpful is taking that person into a mission field, and experiencing God in nature, explaining that all of nature is Good, all that is life giving is from God. Read scripture to them, pray for them. God is already at work in them.

How is this passed on to the next generation? Let me introduce Captain Dr. Todd Hall. He was an Army clinical psychologist who has spent the past 20+ years doing therapy, coaching and consulting with leaders and organizations, teaching graduate psychology students, developing assessment tools, and conducting research on attachment, leadership, organizational culture, and motivation. In the process, his interests in social connection, connection with religion, motivation, well-being, and leadership have come together. He now teaches at Biola University in Los Angeles, and has a wife and two sons (one in high school, one in college). [3] Hall agrees with Reiner that the two kinds of God Attachment Disorders are avoidance (exploring so much you never return) and anxiety (not enough exploration and leaning too much on Spiritual Practices to save you). But Hall adds that if we have a God Attachment Disorder, we can't teach our children or anyone else's children to have a healthy God attachment. This problem can lead to further God Attachment Disorders in our Children. It can be problematic if these people are in leadership positions in the church. Instead of helping others to have secure attachment to God, they can either overcompensate or be overly anxious. Hall explains it like this..

If the parent or spiritual leader has the Avoidance of God Attachment Disorder, the children will either compensate for the loss of attachment to God, by a) seeing their parent or spiritual leader as God, or b) they will overly depend on an inanimate object which will never leave them, like a cross, blanket or a toy. (Hall calls this the Compensation Hypothesis) I believe we need to be understanding when we see this, and teach them about God. Remind children that God loves them and that they are part of God's family and inheritance. Ephesians 1:4-5 may be helpful, explaining as Paul did to the Ephesians that God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in God's presence before the creation of the world. Therefore we should teach others that God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love. This was according to God's goodwill and plan. Also we can do parent classes, showing the reasons why our children need a healthy attachment to God, and teach them Proverbs 22:6 Train children in the way they should go; when they grow old, they won't depart from it. Parents are the children's first teachers, and should train them in God's ways so that when they are older, they won't depart from it.

If the parent or spiritual leader has the Anxiousness of God Attachment Disorder, the child will correspond with this disorder through fear and anxiety, They overly fear what would happen if they didn't love

God, and wonder if they are worthy of God or love if they don't do spiritual practices the parents or spiritual leaders are insisting they do. (Hall calls this the Correspondence hypothesis.) The child would be pleading with God to be there because without their effort, they feel God might not be there for them. [4] I believe 1st John 4:19 is helpful in these situations, explaining that We love because God first loved us. God doesn't love us because we express love. Out of nothing – God loves us 1st. God loves you more. From this the term Let Go and Let God comes into play. Relax in God's love. Breathe.

So as a congregation, let's make sure we give people space to explore, and invite them to report back. Let's give them a loving environment to return to, and share with them the confidence in we have in God's love in spite of ourselves. Let us go forth knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ go before us, beside us, and protects us in this journey. Now go explore and come back. Amen.

Works Cited:

[1] Granqvist, P., Mikulincer, M. & Shaver, P. R. (2010). Religion as attachment: Normative processes and individual differences. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14. doi: 10.1177/1088868309348618

[2] <https://www.questia.com/library/psychology/psychologists/john-bowlby>

[3] <https://www.drtooddhall.com/about>

[4] TODD W. HALL, Attachment to God and Implicit Spirituality, Clarifying Correspondence and Compensation Models, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 2010

[5] Sarah R. Reiner *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 2010: Adult Attachment, God, Attachment and Gender in Relation to Perceived Stress by Sarah R. Reiner

[6] Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

[7] The Holy Bible, CEB