

# EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF A CRISIS OF FAITH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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July, 2019

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For some, religion and spirituality play a crucial role in one's life, influencing their values, behaviors, and relationships. Research suggests that spirituality gives one a sense of purpose and identity, and can allow an individual to make meaning out of negative life events. A crisis of faith is a painful experience in a Christian's life when he or she begins to doubt his or her beliefs, causing grief and confusion for the individual, as well as a sense of disconnection from God. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of a crisis of faith and gain a deeper understanding to why one might remain committed to his or her faith, or choose to abandon it completely. Grounded theory methodology revealed that crises of faith were connected to a relationship with God. This relationship fluctuated based on the individual's acceptance of self and acceptance of God's love. The results indicated that a crisis of faith could lead to a deeper relationship with God as well as spiritual growth. Findings also supported God as an attachment figure, who Christians interact with differently depending on attachment style and past attachment injuries.

*Keywords:* religion, spirituality, crisis of faith, attachment, grounded theory



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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Human Development and Family Science

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Marriage and Family Therapy

by

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July 2019

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although the road to completing my thesis has been difficult, it has also been incredibly rewarding. If it were not for the support and encouragement of my cohort, the effort, guidance, and patience from Dr. Andrew Brimhall, and the bravery and vulnerability of my willing participants, I would not have been able to see this vision through. I am immensely humbled and grateful to have been able to hear the stories of those who have grieved the unraveling and rebuilding of their faith. To my participants, you have taught me so much. I have learned that it is okay to wrestle with difficult questions, it is okay to reach for help, and it is okay to believe that I am worthy of unconditional love.

I would also like to thank Dr. Sandy Lookabaugh and Dr. Jake Jensen for their encouragement, wisdom, and expertise during this journey. My education and experience at East Carolina University has not been taken for granted and I appreciate all who have helped me reach the end.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“Religion engenders a sense of connection—a connection to something beyond ourselves, whether a higher power or a community, that both function as a ‘lifeline’ when experiencing personal distress.” – Smith-MacDonald et al. (2017)*

### **Relationship Between Religion and Spirituality**

In a longitudinal study exploring the development of spirituality across a person’s life, Wink and Dillon (2002) state, “The spiritual journey and associated experiences tend to be intimate, private, and are frequently hard to capture in words” (p. 90). Those who have explored the constructs of religion and spirituality agree that the two are difficult to define and even harder to separate when being researched (Smith-MacDonald, Norris, Raffin-Bouchal, & Sinclair, 2017; Wink & Dillon, 2002). Religion has been defined as an outward act of one’s faith (i.e., attending church, participating in religious activities), whereas spirituality has been named as the inward journey of a person to make meaning out of life and its events (Nadal, Hardy, & Barry, 2018; Wink & Dillon, 2002). A spiritual person may not be as involved in religion, and a religious person who is active in attendance and activity may not be spiritual. An interesting finding by Nadal et al. (2018) showed that those who identify as “religious but not spiritual” fared the worst psychosocially compared to those who identified as both religious and spiritual, only spiritual, or neither.

While greater consensus exists among scholars around religiosity, the definition of spirituality has been harder to construct. Some scholars prefer spirituality to refer to a broader term that captures the way individuals relate to nature, love, or personal experience (Nadal et al., 2018; Wink & Dillon, 2002). Others define spirituality as practice-oriented experience that consists of a “commitment, depth, and focus” that is not found in other more general definitions

(Wink & Dillon, 2002). The current study will be informed by the definition of spirituality emphasizing internalized beliefs from Christianity, which direct the actions, practices, and commitment of the individual (Nadal et al., 2018; Wink & Dillon, 2002).

### **Importance of Spirituality**

Aside from providing a framework for creation and the existence of a “higher power”, the Christian religion provides individuals with a sense of meaning or purpose in life, giving them a significant identity, as well as a community of social support (Ivtzan, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2013). While Christianity is the religion, spirituality is the inward experience of faith, the measure of one’s relationship with God, and journey of making meaning through the hardships of life. According to Hill et al. (2000), spirituality is “feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred” (p. 66). This “sacred” is a feeling of closeness with God and can exist within a religious system (Desrosiers & Miller, 2007).

**Growth across the life span.** Literature regarding spirituality across the life span, and how it is deepened, has revealed that spiritual development is often a result of crisis or adversity (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Wink and Dillon (2002) define spiritual growth as both a heightened awareness of “the sacred in everyday life” as well as an increase in commitment, engagement, and intentionality in spiritual activities. After completing a longitudinal study of two groups of adults (beginning from birth and preadolescence) across the life span, Wink and Dillon (2002) found an increase in spirituality in the older group at the time of older age when compared to middle adulthood. There was also an increase in spirituality in the younger group at the time of middle age when compared to early adulthood. Researchers assessed for number of negative life events across the life span of participants and found a correlation between spirituality in older age and negative life events occurring between teenage years and middle age. Spirituality has



been found to be particularly beneficial to those of older age who are reaching the end-of-life cycle (Hill et al., 2000). In addition, Wink and Dillon (2002) found that adverse events in the first half of adulthood were more influential in spiritual development than adverse events in late adulthood. Those who are more cognitively committed to their spirituality at a younger age are more likely to have higher levels of commitment after an adverse experience than those who have less cognitive commitment (Wink & Dillon, 2002).

Although researchers explored the relationship between negative life events and spiritual growth, they did not investigate the period of time between when the event occurred and when the individual showed changes or development in spirituality. Also, given the focus on the outcomes associated with the negative event, they did not discuss how the person processed the adversity and made meaning from these events. Nor did they focus on how it may have challenged a person's relationship with the sacred or divine.

**Spirituality and meaning making.** Previous research on spiritual struggle and the potential growth that follows has revealed a connection between spiritual growth and the willingness to endure suffering as well as the ability to make meaning out of grief (Desai & Pargament, 2015; Schnitker, Houlberg, Dyrness, & Redmond, 2017). Researchers discovered that participants who identified as spiritual/religious were more likely to possess the patience enabling them to make it through a hardship. Desai and Pargament (2015) found that making meaning and positive religious coping were the strongest predictors of growth following a spiritual struggle. While there are some positive outcomes associated with spiritual struggle, this literature too focuses on the outcomes and not the process. Schnitker et al. (2017) suggest that future research should explore sources of suffering and the disciplines or characteristics that

build the patience or resilience to endure grief, or in the interest of the current study, spiritual distress.

### **A Crisis of Faith**

In the words of Durà-Vilà and Dein (2009), a Christian is susceptible to a period referred to as the, “*Dark Night of the Soul*,” which is described as a “loneliness and desolation in one’s life associated with a crisis of faith or profound spiritual concerns” (p. 544). This crisis of faith can cause great suffering and emotional distress and can even resemble symptoms of a depressive episode (e.g., feelings of guilt, loss of interest, anxiety). Efforts to participate in spiritual activities such as prayer, attending church, or fellowship with other believers can feel overwhelmingly difficult. Additionally, these spiritual practices can lack the meaning they once held for the believer. These crises of faith can be short-term, or last years, and can potentially become as severe as an individual abandoning his or her faith altogether.

Given the pain associated with these crises of faith, some people may want to rush through them; attempting to minimize the grief (Chen, 1997; Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009). A crisis of faith is a painful event with the potential to cause one to question the very foundation she or he builds life upon. It can, however, be an opportunity for growth. Most people want to avoid pain, and the realization that there is no growth without pain is a hard one to make (Chen, 1997). Similarly, as with any great loss, individuals often feel a sense of grief. Christians might grieve a crisis of faith as if it were a loss, because they feel separated from something, or someone, they love. According to Chen (1997) a crisis of faith is:

The way the soul reminds us of our true nature, of our spiritual needs. Grief is an extreme form of emotional crisis. Because humans are first and foremost spiritual beings, we need to live with our spirituality to feel real joy inside. (Chen, 1997)

According to these two aspects of the literature, adversity is at times needed for spiritual growth and yet it can also test the faith and relationship of the person experiencing it. In short, it is common for some to turn to God during their time of hardship while common for others to turn away. For those experiencing a crisis of faith, the question is, “What is it like to need comfort from or connection to God, but feel as if He is not there?” The purpose of this paper is to try and explore that question and how individuals make meaning around their individual crises of faith.

### **Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experience of individual Christians in the Southeast who have endured a crisis of faith and have either chosen to remain committed to or leave their belief system. The results of this study will contribute to literature on the spiritual dimension of the biopsychosocial-spiritual (BPSS) model and will contribute to a better understanding of how spirituality and grief impact an individual’s identity and overall well-being. Additionally, the themes and concepts derived from this study will add to the literature on attachment styles and the way individuals experience spiritual hardship, as well as react to such hardship, when feeling insecurely attached or disconnected from God.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

*"I am convinced that neither life nor death . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God."- Romans 8:37-39*

### **Defining Religion and Spirituality**

The conversation about the classification and distinction between religion and spirituality has been over a century long (Ivtzan et al., 2013). During the mid 1900's, religion and spirituality became separate, having their own definitions and connotations. Over time, religion became associated with rules and rituals while spirituality became associated with "an inner, subjective experience" (p. 916) centered around a relationship with God, meaning, and purpose of life. Houck-Loomis (2015) discuss the difference between *doing* and *being* in order to develop into one's true, authentic self. When a Christian places more emphasis on religious rituals and acts, *doing* becomes the way of seeking satisfaction and approval from God, while *being* is more genuine and allows for authenticity and unveiling of our true selves. This conflict between doing and being is seen in the Biblical narrative of Job when he loses his family, personal possessions, and health. By Job's standards, his obedience and acts of faith should have been enough to secure a happy life, but what follows is a story of Job's struggle to see God's goodness during a traumatic trial. It is during this difficulty that Job has to be vulnerable with his friends and himself to admit helplessness and weakness, as well as acknowledge the way he has measured his faith through his perfectionism, and in turn, helps him confront his false perceptions of God and "earning" a good life.

Spirituality is said to be a component of religion, however, religion can often occur without a sense of spirituality, and one can be spiritual without partaking in religious activities (Hill et al., 2000; Ivtzan et al., 2013). Researchers have found that practicing spirituality within

religion gives deeper meaning to an individual's life, but practicing religion alone has an opposing impact. Those who identify as spiritual *and* religious have a more positive view of religious traditions such as worship, prayer, and attending church (Hill et al., 2000). This group is less likely to isolate themselves, and more likely to participate in group activities that may enhance spiritual growth. Recently, the word "spiritual" has been interchangeable with words such as "worthwhile," "moving," or "important" (Hill et al., 2000); however, as it pertains to this study, spirituality involves more *being* than *doing*, and maintaining a sacred relationship with God.

### **Impact of Spirituality in One's Life**

Religion and spirituality give people a sense of purpose and meaning, which contributes to a feeling of belonging, sense of control, and way to make meaning out of life events, and in turn, positively impacts the person's psychosocial and mental well-being (Russo-Netzer, 2018). Ivtzan et al. (2013) discovered that people who claim to be more spiritual also have more personal growth initiative than those who are only religious, or not religious/spiritual at all. Having a higher personal growth initiative means seeking to create or explore meaning of one's existence.

**Meaning making and growth.** A primary function of religion is to offer "beliefs that address human questions about dealing with the limitations and sufferings of life as well as the human quest for meaning" (Villegas, 2018, p. 1). These beliefs act as a guide in one's life for answers to existential questions, help during decision-making, or rituals and other religious practices. A person who purposefully integrates these beliefs into her or his life to achieve wholeness and meaning is acting spiritually.

Struggle and unexpected hardship are a normal part of life, and it is during times of struggle that people seek and often find deep meaning (Exline, Hall, Pargament, & Harriott, 2017). Such times of struggle include divorce, loss of a loved one, financial struggle, or any other disruption causing stress in one's life. Spirituality can act as a life raft in times of overwhelming struggle by providing faith resources such as positive religious coping (e.g., prayer, faith community), and a positive relationship with God, which includes feeling His presence, help, or comfort during pain.

**Spirituality and mental health.** There are findings across the literature to suggest that the impact of spirituality/religion has positive, negative, and neutral effects on mental health (Desrosiers & Miller, 2007; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Nadal et al., 2018; Russo-Netzer, 2018; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2017). In a systematic review of the literature on mental health, spirituality, and the treatment of post-combat veterans by Smith-MacDonald (2017), results revealed that incorporating spirituality into treatment affected the outcomes. Overall, more positive spirituality scores were related to a decrease in severity of PTSD symptoms. Researchers discovered a relationship between more positive, or healthy, spirituality and lower suicide risk scores, lower depression scores, and higher life satisfaction. After review of over 40 articles focusing on the topic of spirituality and mental well-being in veterans, spiritual activities such as forgiveness, having a relationship with God, and feeling a sense of purpose were all found to be related to lessening symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2016) also suggest that one's spiritual life improves his or her well-being in times of high stress and can act as additional support when an individual is lacking a major attachment figure such as a mother or father. Religion and spirituality also play an important role in healthy development and functioning of young people. There is evidence from

the literature to suggest a correlation between higher levels of religiosity and spirituality (R/S) in emerging adults and lower levels of risk taking behaviors such as substance abuse or sexual activity (Nadal et al., 2018). On the other hand, those who spiritually “sit on the fence” may experience negative effects. Nadal et al. (2018) discovered that those who identify as moderately R/S had more psychosocial struggles than those who identify as high/low R/S. This finding suggests the possibility that individuals who might be going through a spiritual transition or period of questioning face negative psychosocial outcomes.

Of all of the aspects of spirituality contributing to a positive effect on mental health, having a secure relationship with God appears to be the strongest. Forming a strong attachment to God increases religious behaviors such as commitment or prayer, which both have been shown to enhance mental health (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). While commitment and prayer have been shown to improve mental health, research exploring the relationship between spirituality and well-being has also found that a secure attachment to God (e.g., perceived closeness) has a direct positive influence on mental health (Desrosiers & Miller, 2007). An insecure attachment, however, has an unhealthy impact on mental health and well-being (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

### **Relational Spirituality**

It is common for Christians to define their faith as a *relationship* with God (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Villegas, 2018). A Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, even suggested that his relationship with God was his “lived spirituality” (Villegas, 2018, p. 4), which is similar to the idea suggested by Desrosiers and Miller (2007) that relational spirituality involves making meaning out of daily life through consistent dialogue and an ongoing relationship with God.

According to Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory, an attachment figure is a person an individual can reach for with confidence that the person will reach back. This confidence provides the individual with a sense of security found in attachment relationships. While studying predictors of spiritual growth in college students, Exline et al. (2017) found that one of the most important predictors was the perception of having a secure attachment with God and feeling confident that God was caring and compassionate towards the person's suffering.

**God and attachment theory.** Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2016) argue that people can form attachments even for figures who are unseen. In Christianity, part of one's spiritual journey is a relationship with God, which can involve deep emotion such as love. This attachment to God often mirrors a relationship similar to a parent-child bond, where the Christian feels a sense of protection and affection from God in daily life, and especially in times of hardship and trial. These researchers found that even non-religious individuals tend to convert to Christianity during their hardships because of their desire to connect with God as an attachment figure (AF) during their time of crisis.

An attachment relationship with God shares three similarities with other attachment figures (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). First, an attachment relationship involves seeking closeness and proximity to the figure. In the Christian faith, prayer is used as a line of constant communication with God, which is increasingly useful as a coping mechanism when a person senses she or he is in danger. It is this view of God as a safe place during times of trouble, which serves as the second reinforcement for God as an AF. Third, it is the sense of security and feeling of the constant presence of God that characterizes Him as a secure base. An example of this security is the idea that God "walks with" or "watches over" those who have a relationship with Him.



According to Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2016), there are three types of danger that “activate the attachment system” (p. 919) and encourage attachment behavior. These dangers include environmental crises, illness or injury, and separation from the AF. During these dangers, individuals use coping mechanisms such as relinquishing control of the situation to God, or praying to God to feel his comfort, presence, or healing in uncertainty (e.g., while experiencing a terminal/chronic illness). Faith and spirituality are found to be predominantly important during the threat of a loss of a loved one or death of an AF:

Loss of a principal AF is a particularly powerful stressor: Not only is it a stressful event in itself but it also eliminates the availability of the person to whom one would otherwise turn for support in a stressful situation (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 920).

When a loss threatens or takes away the availability of an AF, it is then that a person may either turn to God for comfort and security or attempt to replace the AF with God (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004). Since Christians seek God as a major source of comfort in the midst of grief or pain, this begs the question, “What happens when a person turns to God in a time of need, but feels He is unavailable, or distant?” The current study seeks to answer this question by inquiring about the human experience of one’s faith being tested when she or he feels cut-off or separated from God.

### **Crisis of Faith**

A “dark night of the soul” occurs when someone no longer feels the attachment, communion, or connection with God that she or he once felt (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Referring back to the narrative of Job, it was his feeling of being abandoned, or forsaken, by God that drove him to question his religious beliefs (Houck-Loomis, 2015). According to Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2016), these questions may lead to eventual separation:

Determining whether God meets these criteria is difficult; God does not die, sail off to fight wars, or file for divorce. The potential for true separation from God is usually seen by believers to come only in the hereafter, at which time one either spends eternity with God or is separated from God. It is noteworthy, however, that in most Christian belief systems, separation from God is the essence of hell (p. 921).

If separation from God truly is the essence of hell for a Christian, the psychological and spiritual impact could be tremendous. If, at its core, attachment theory is about being confident that one you love will be there when you need him or her, the effect of the loss, or separation, of God would be the same as losing a friend, family member, or other attachment figure. Findings from research by Desrosiers and Miller (2007) support the potential impact of a feeling of separateness from God on mental health. Their study concluded that girls who felt disconnected from God were subjected to struggles with depression and other negative psychological challenges.

**Coping.** According to Baker (2016), there are two distinct ways a person reacts to the emotional distress that accompanies loss of an attachment figure. It is common for those experiencing grief to exhibit avoidance behaviors such as participating in certain activities to avoid or escape emotional pain. Some may avoid places or people that remind him or her of the loss, or continually suppress pain; however, long-term avoidance can prolong the grieving process. Those who do not avoid will actively search for ways to feel close to their lost loved one by seeking out items, places, or other people who remind them of the lost person.

**Gender differences.** Women usually view spirituality in terms of connection and relationship, while men tend to view God as an authority figure who governs the rules and judges actions (Desrosiers & Miller, 2007). Women also define themselves through the lens of their relationships, while men attempt to build their identity independently of others (Desrosiers &

Miller, 2007). Desrosiers and Miller (2007) suggest that women may be more affected when feeling cut off from God, but men may feel more depressed when not given support from congregations.

Greater depth in understanding of unique ways in which individuals experience a crisis of faith might reveal how different genders or various coping strategies could influence the person's decision to attempt to reconnect with God or walk away from their belief system. This raises questions about how the person may reconnect with God, or what the decision-making process looks like.

### **Relevance of the Current Study**

Given that the role of spirituality in an individual's life has the ability to make a positive impact on his or her well-being (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Nadal et al., 2018; Russo-Netzer, 2018; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2017), exploring the effects of a negative change in regards to spirituality can help us understand experiences such as a crisis of faith. The literature has provided us with an understanding of relational spirituality, and God as an attachment figure (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Villegas, 2018); however, the literature also suggests that God is an immovable attachment figure, one we turn to when all other attachment figures fail (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The literature mentions a feeling of disconnectedness from God, which can bring confusion and pain (Houck-Loomis, 2015), yet there has been little to no research about the full experience and process of feeling separated from God, questioning one's beliefs, and coming to a fork in the road when the person must choose between remaining committed or abandoning his or her beliefs.

To gain perspective and understanding of a person who has experienced a crisis of faith, the purpose of this qualitative study is to use grounded theory methodology to identify concepts

and themes that arise from information obtained during an interview process. Interviews will consist of asking individuals questions regarding their level of religiosity/spirituality, relationship and commitment to God, and details of his or her crises of faith. Observation and analysis of recordings of interviews will give deeper insight to the possible growth or decline that accompanies the questioning of one's faith during a time of disconnection from God.

**Self of the researcher.** Although it is typical for researchers to be encouraged to approach their work through an objective lens, Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest otherwise. They write that those who choose qualitative methodology over quantitative “are not afraid to draw on their own experiences when analyzing materials, having rejected more traditional ideas of ‘objectivity’” (p. 9). Corbin and Strauss (2015) understand that hearing personal stories told by participants may have an emotional impact on the researcher, who will inevitably connect to his or her participants on some level. The idea for this study was a result of an experience I had when my parents divorced. The dissolution of my family led to the dissolution of my spiritual life. We had attended the same church as a family for over twenty years, and when I returned without my parents I felt isolated in my experience of having my parents divorce while I was in my twenties. Additionally, I did not feel supported by my faith community, and the same isolation and shame I felt within this community I began to feel in my relationship with God. This led to my own “dark night of the soul” period where I questioned my faith and trust in God as well as experienced depression and anxiety over the loss of my family and possible loss of my belief system. I have also witnessed this same experience in others, which is why I seek to understand this experience more deeply. I believe that recognizing my own personal experience will not only allow me to connect to each participant's story, but will also keep me aware of my personal biases or expectations.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

Rather than hypothesize a specific outcome for how one might react or cope during a crisis of faith, it seemed most fitting to choose a methodology that would allow for themes and patterns of the lived experience to emerge as data is collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A qualitative methodology, particularly utilizing grounded theory, most appropriately suits the desire to explore and understand the participant's lived experience during a time of disconnection from God (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Hylander, 2003). Grounded theory honors the story of the participant in a way that prevents the researcher's personal agenda from influencing the data. The purpose, then, is not to explore from the researcher's perspective, but through the lens of the participant and his or her story, which then allows the researcher to engage with the data and discover the concepts that emerge. Once these concepts emerge, they are analyzed and used to form a basic theory.

Utilizing qualitative methodologies and grounded theory helps to appropriately answer the research questions (What is the experience of having a crisis of faith? How does one decide to remain in or leave his/her faith?), which necessitate a description of the topic rather than the manipulation of variables to determine a relationship. Grounded theory allows the researcher to gain insight and understanding of an experience, supporting the next reason for selecting this particular method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A crisis of faith cannot be fully understood based on speculation, which is why it is important to gather data that more accurately represents the reality of the complex nature of an individual feeling disconnected from God, and then enduring the process of reconnection or abandonment.

## **Sampling and Recruitment**

**Recruitment.** Participants were gathered from one Christian church in the Southeast as well as from social media. Lead staff of the church was contacted to gain approval of the possibility of using church members as participants in the current study. Leaders were given sufficient information about the nature of the study and interview process. Once approval was obtained, flyers were given to the church to hand out to congregation members to contact the researcher if there was interest in participation. The researcher then screened each potential participant to ensure that they properly met the selection criteria. Upon concluding that the individual met selection criteria, the participant was enrolled in the study and an interview was scheduled.

**Selection criteria.** The following guidelines were used to determine whether individuals qualified to participate in this study:

- 1) The participant had to be over the age of 18 and able to speak English at least conversationally.
- 2) The participant had to have endured a crisis of faith, which was defined as a pivotal moment in his/her Christian journey where he/she questioned or doubted his/her beliefs due to a period of feeling disconnected or separate from God.
- 3) The person identified as Christian (or did identify as Christian) at the time of the crisis of faith.
- 4) The participant was not currently experiencing a crisis of faith.

**Sampling.** Typically, when conducting quantitative research, the overall goal is to report findings that are generalizable to the overall population, thus making it possible to apply to findings to more people than just the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This makes it

imperative to find a sample that resembles the desired population of the study according to specific characteristics. When conducting qualitative research, however, the researcher's focus is on representativeness of concepts rather than focusing on the representativeness of the sample. Therefore, instead of asking if the participant fits the whole, the focus is on whether the concept is present or not. The goal then is not to establish the correct number of participants for generalizability, but to achieve theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In order to achieve theoretical saturation, one must decide how long it is necessary to sample.

To decide how long one must sample, the general rule is to sample until each category is saturated (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This saturation can occur in three ways including 1) the cessation of new or relevant data, 2) properties and dimensions within categories that allow for variation between categories, and 3) the researcher is able to establish and validate relationships between categories. If the study is not able to achieve theoretical saturation, the theory that is developed will lack density and precision.

Based on this manner of sampling, the minimum number of participants desired was 10, but the exact number was not predetermined. Data collection began when I received contact information for the first participants interested who met the criteria. The final sample consisted of 10 (n=10) participants. There are a few reasons for ceasing sampling at 10 participants: 1) There were more than 10 individuals interested in the current study, however, only 10 were able to return an informed consent form and commit to an interview, 2) the time to collect and analyze data was not unlimited and had to be completed by a deadline, and 3) after 10 interviews, the researcher was no longer collecting new data, was able to identify properties and dimensions within categories, which provided variation, and was able to identify and establish relationships between categories.

**Overview of sample.** Overall there were 10 participants (n=10) who were involved in the current study. Of then ten, 60% are male and 40% are female. All participants were white, heterosexual, cisgender, and continued to identify as a Christian. The ten participants came from different denominations including Wesleyan, Baptist, Protestant, Methodist, and non-denominational. The age of the participants ranged from mid-twenties to late fifties. Half of the participants were married, two were in a dating relationship, and three were single.

### **Procedures**

Those who meet the selection criteria were invited to meet with the researcher at the East Carolina University Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic for an interview. Those who could not travel to the university therapy clinic were asked to complete an interview via Webex, or Zoom. One of the interviews was completed in person at the church where participants were recruited because the participant could not travel to the ECU Marriage and Family Therapy Clinic. The interview was completed in a private and confidential space per consent of the participant. All other interviews were completed via live video recording. During the consent process, all participants were given information regarding the study, as well as given the opportunity to ask questions concerning the interview. Participants were then asked to sign consent forms and were given demographic surveys. After informed consent forms and demographic surveys were completed, the researcher conducted the interview. Individual interviews lasted anywhere from 35-60 minutes.

**Semi-structured interviews.** All participants were assigned a pseudo name to ensure confidentiality. Participants were given as much time as they needed to answer the following questions. When necessary, participants were asked to clarify or expand on their answers. While some questions were adapted based on emerging data, the initial questions were:



- 1) When did you become a Christian, and what was that experience like?
- 2) At some point many people experience a crisis of faith. Tell me about the experience of your crisis of faith.
  - a. What was happening (e.g., life events, struggles, traumatic events) around the time of the crisis of faith?
  - b. What resources, if any, did you use (community, church, friends, family, etc.) during this time?
- 3) Please tell me about your relationship with God during your crisis of faith?
- 4) Tell me about the process you used to decide whether to reconnect with God or walk away from your faith.
- 5) What did you learn during your crisis of faith?

## **Measures**

Participants were given a packet of questionnaires to complete before the interview process began. The packet included a demographics survey, the Duke Religiosity Index (DRI), measuring the participant's levels of religiosity and spirituality, the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI), the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) and the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R), which both measure attachment styles. .

**Demographic Survey.** The purpose of the demographics survey is to gather information about the sample, and included questions about age, gender, race, affiliation with a certain faith denomination, and inquired about the presence of a grief event around the time of the participant's crisis of faith.

**Duke University Religiosity Index (DRI; Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997).** The DRI measures “organizational, non-organizational, and intrinsic dimensions of religiousness”

(Koenig et al., 1997). This index consists of 8 items with different scales and inquires about church attendance, personal religiosity, and religious and spiritual experiences. The first two items are based on a 10-point Likert scale (*1= Not religious to 10= Very religious; 1= Not spiritual to 10= Very Spiritual*). The next two items (3-4) are based on a 6-point Likert scale (*1= Once or more a day/week to 6= Rarely/never*). The final items are based on a 5-point Likert scale (*1= Definitely true of me to 5= Definitely not true of me*). The DRI demonstrates a high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha value of .75.

**Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI; Hall & Edwards, 2002).** The SAI is a 49-item measure of spirituality and relationship with God. The inventory has 6 subcategories: Awareness of God, Disappointment in Relationship with God, Realistic Acceptance of God, Grandiosity in Relationship with God, Instability in Relationship with God, and Impression Management. The Cronbach's alpha value for each subscale indicate good reliability with a value of .95 for Awareness, .90 for Disappointment, .83 for Realistic Acceptance, .73 for Grandiosity, .84 for Instability. The Impression Management subscale has recently been added, but according to Hall and Edwards (2002), has not been tested enough to ensure validity and reliability. Each item can be rated on a scale from 1 (Not True at All) to 5 (Very True). Examples of items include: "There are times when I feel frustrated with God", "I always seek God's guidance for every decision I make", and "I worry that I will be left out of God's plans."

**The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M., 1991).** The RQ consists of 4 items assessing adult attachment style. The four styles include: avoidant, anxious, secure, and dismissive-avoidant. A person's attachment style will influence how she or he shows emotion, forms expectations, and reacts defensively or relationally in all close relationships. The scale consists of four attachment styles and asks participants to choose which

statement they feel best describes how they perceive they are in their relationships with others. For example, a securely attached person would most likely choose “*A. It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t worry about being alone or having others not accept me.*” Participants will then be asked to rate how accurately each attachment style represents his or her general relationship style on a scale from 1 to 7 (*1=Disagree Strongly to 7=Agree Strongly*).

**The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).** The ECR-R is a 36-item measure of adult attachment style, which measures individuals on the subscales of Avoidance and Anxiety. Those with an avoidant attachment style will likely desire independence over closeness in relationships. Those with an anxious attachment style are afraid that close ones will leave or reject them. This scale was influenced by The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), which asks the participant to categorize himself or herself as one of the four attachment styles (i.e., avoidant, anxious, secure, and dismissive-avoidant). The reliability and validity of the RQ has not yet been tested, however, the ECR-R has a Cronbach’s alpha of .92 (Anxiety) and .93 (Avoidant) (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). The ECR-R lists 36 statements exploring how the participant generally feels in relationships, to which the participant will rate how much he or she agrees or disagrees with each. For example, to the statement “I rarely worry about my partner leaving me”, one could rate anywhere from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*).

### **Data Analysis**

According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), “Analysis for us refers to both the concept and the thought processes that go behind assigning meaning to data” (p. 58). To arrive at meaning

from data, the researcher must begin this process immediately as data collection begins, all the while brainstorming, comparing, and interpreting (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Analysis in qualitative research is exploratory in nature and requires attention to various possible meanings of the data, while also inviting the researcher to keep track of her process of coming to certain meanings. In the current study, data was collected through interviews, recorded, and observed for the purpose of pulling significant themes and concepts from the data to form a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework developed through the analysis process provides a possible explanation for why a person might choose to either continue commitment to his or her relationship with God or choose to walk away.

**Data coding.** Upon completion of each interview, memos and notes were written to capture impressions, thoughts, and feelings the researcher viewed as important to the data collection process. Simultaneously, the primary investigator transcribed the data. When using a qualitative approach, it is important that the researcher transcribe interviews soon after they occur, for this allows the researcher to use insights from previous interviews to guide future interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). *Line-by-line coding* was the first step for developing concepts and themes from the data. This strategy of coding enabled the researcher to summarize major themes from each line of the transcription. Each line of the data was named to give meaning to what was said by participants. After each line was named, the researcher used *open coding* to pull concepts and their properties from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). All codes and concepts were analyzed to pinpoint those that were consistent across participants. The open coding stage allowed the researcher to find broader categories within the data while the next step, *axial coding*, was the process of breaking down those categories into smaller properties, dimensions, and subcategories. By breaking down categories, the researcher was able to more

fully understand which categories most accurately represented the data. Finally, *selective coding* was used to begin the process of forming a theory, which is built by finding relationships and connections between categories and concepts.

**Participant feedback.** Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest that the researcher keep participants engaged in data analysis by receiving their feedback after the interview process. The researcher included the participants in this process by sending participants interview summaries of each participant's interview. A few days after summaries were sent, the researcher either called the participant or communicated through email asking them to expand or change any data from their summaries. Keeping participants engaged in the data collection process helps ensure that the researcher's interpretations are correct and provides the participant the opportunity to make any changes necessary to better understand their story. Attempts were made to contact all 10 participants for feedback. However, only 3 participants were able to respond to the primary investigator with feedback and approval of transcript summaries. All feedback was included in the final data analysis.

**Internal/external auditors.** When using qualitative methodology to analyze data, there are two distinct goals (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). First, another perspective should be obtained to read transcripts and ensure that codes found by the researcher are congruent. The second goal is to ensure that the researcher's biases and personal experience and agenda do not interfere in the theory building process. In this study, this was accomplished by having a member of the research team with experience and background using qualitative methodology (i.e., an internal auditor) read interview transcripts and code information. The primary investigator met regularly with the internal auditor to discuss the process of data analysis, as well as discuss any changes needed to be made to interview questions or the coding process. The internal auditor also assisted the

primary investigator in discussing the results and accurately naming the categories to best express the themes throughout the participant stories. The internal auditor also helped the primary investigator develop the theoretical model for the results. In addition, an external auditor, who has completed a research project using similar qualitative methods, was asked to read through the transcripts, post-interview memos, and the interview summaries of all participants, as well as the final results, to ensure that a logical path was followed. The feedback received from the external auditor was noted and incorporated into the final analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results that emerged from interviewing participants and asking them to answer questions regarding their experience having a crisis of faith. Although the study was successful in gathering information about the process of a crisis of faith, the purpose of the study was to develop a theory as to why someone might experience a crisis of faith, and how that person might come to a decision to remain committed to the Christian faith or abandon it completely. Developing a theory requires multiple steps after completing the initial interviews. Summaries of the interview transcriptions were created along with coding of major categories and themes across all interviews. Categories, which will be discussed further in this chapter, were formulated based on the framework of grounded theory and the experience as told by each participant. Additionally, relationships within and between categories will be discussed.

### **Grounded Theory Terminology**

The terminology specific to this qualitative study will be outlined and described below. It is important to understand the terms that are specific to grounded theory methodology so the results can be interpreted correctly. The three terms to understand in regard to the current study are (a) categories and subcategories, (b) properties and dimensions, and (c) the central category.

**Categories and subcategories.** Categories begin to take shape when the primary investigator starts the open coding process. Categories are derived from the data and represent important concepts based on the ideas that emerge. The categories represent important aspects of the stories being told and exist to label major parts of the individual's experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Categories allow the researcher to make connections across all participant data, and subcategories help explain more detailed phenomena such as how or why something might

occur. The terms category and subcategory will be used in the results section to identify major ideas that emerged from the data.

**Properties and dimensions.** Properties are the different perspectives of a category. Dimensions help explain where properties are located along a continuum in a category. The overall goal is to recognize important patterns within the data, however, to also honor the variation and uniqueness that every story will possess dimensions and properties are used to help highlight the variation that exist surrounding specific experiences or events. Identifying properties and dimensions allows the primary investigator to make connections and “indicate the relationships between categories” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 130). To understand the categories presented more deeply, the properties and where these properties exist in the dimensions of the categories will be discussed.

**Central category.** The central category is the main theme that emerges from the data. The central category must be chosen based on its relevance and meaning in relation to the rest of the data, and must logically and easily relate to all other categories. The central category must be abstract enough to encourage future research that can deepen and expand the category. Finally, the category must be able to explain and allow for variation in the data.

### **Participants**

The following section will include a description of each participant interviewed in the study for a deeper understanding of the individual’s background and Christian faith journey. Differences between participants included an age range of early twenties to mid-fifties, with a mean age of 30.3 years old, and various Christian denominations. Of the ten participants, 40% identified in the Wesleyan denomination, 20% identified as Baptist, 20% identified as non-denominational, 10% as Protestant, and 10% as Methodist. All participants were white,



heterosexual, cisgender, and continue to identify as Christian. Of the ten participants, 50% were married, 30% were single, and 20% were dating a significant other. Nine of the ten participants are from the United States and one is from Canada. Of the 9 participants from the United States, 60% were from the Southeast, 20% resided in the Midwest, and 10% lived in the Southwest.

Participants were asked to complete 4 assessments along with a demographics survey. Two of the assessments (RQ, ECR-R) evaluated the participant's attachment style, while the remaining two (DRI, SAI) assessed the religiosity/spirituality of each participant. As previously stated in the methods section, the RQ invites the participant to indicate which of four statements most accurately describes his or her relationship with others. Each statement is indicative of each of the four attachment styles (i.e., secure, avoidant, anxious, dismissive-avoidant). The ECR-R also assesses for avoidant and anxious attachment behavior by inquiring about experiences in close relationships. There are separate scores for anxious attachment and avoidant attachment behavior. The score of each subscale can range from 1 to 7. A high score indicates high anxiety or high avoidance.

The DRI consists of three subscales, which assess for involvement in religion, including organizational involvement (e.g., church attendance), private religious activities (e.g., prayer), and intrinsic religiosity (e.g., spirituality, relationship with God). High scores of each subscale indicate heavy organizational involvement, high participation in private religious activities, and a high level of integrating one's religion and spirituality into all aspects of one's life. Finally, the SAI assesses the quality of the individual's relationship with God. The SAI specifically assesses five areas of relationship with God including Awareness of God (A), Disappointment in Relationship with God (D), Realistic Acceptance of God (RA), Grandiosity in Relationship with God (G), Instability in Relationship with God (I), and Impression Management (IM). The five

subscales are meant to be assessed individually from each other because they each measure something different about the individual's relationship with God. The Awareness subscale measures feeling God's presence, response, or attention. The Disappoint subscale measures the individual's level of negative emotions towards God (e.g., anger, frustration, disappointment). The Realistic Acceptance subscale is measured based on the Disappointment responses. Realistic Acceptance measures how much the individual still desires a relationship with God, even if He disappoints or upsets the individual. The Grandiosity subscale measures how much the individual believes his or her relationship with God is special in comparison to His relationship with others. For example, one might say they are more dedicated to God than others. The Instability subscale measures instability in the individual's relationship with God. Someone with a high Instability score may believe that God is angry with him or her or is punishing him or her.

Eight of the ten completed all requested assessments. Two of the participants completed the informed consent form as well as the demographics, however, did not respond or follow up with the primary investigator when given the DRI, SAI, RQ, and ECR-R. Scores and results of the assessments will be provided below with the description of each participant. It is important to note that, since this is a qualitative study, the assessments were used as additional information about each participant. The scores of the assessments served the purpose of supporting information given by participants in their interviews and helped to explain certain reactions participants had to their crises of faith.

### **Participant 1: Amy**

Amy is in her mid-twenties, attended and graduated from a Christian university, and is currently married to the youth pastor of the Wesleyan church she attends in the Southeast. Amy became a Christian as a teenager, and experienced a crisis of faith due to depression and suicidal

thoughts. Amy experienced abandonment from both parents as a child and had to live with her aunt and several other siblings and stepsiblings. Amy was forced to act as a caregiver for younger siblings and struggled with feeling unworthy of love. Amy reported that she had an encounter with God that kept her from attempting suicide, which then led her to read the Bible thus beginning her relationship with God. Amy was able to work through her feelings of abandonment and accept God's love.

Amy's RQ score indicated an avoidant attachment style, however, her ECR-R scores for anxious and avoidant attachment were low (1.7, 1.7). It is important to know participant attachment style in regard to the current study to possibly help explain how or why an individual might respond to God or reach out to Him a certain way. If God is an attachment figure, it would make sense that an individual with an anxious or avoidant attachment style would also approach God in the same way he or she approaches others. The explanation for Amy's low ECR-R score could be that the questions ask how the person feels in her current relationship. Amy is in a secure relationship with her husband, but her RQ score (i.e., avoidant) does reflect the fear of trusting others that she described in her interview.

Amy's DRI score was 6 for Organizational Involvement, 5 for Private Religious Activity, and 20 for Intrinsic Religiosity. These scores reflect Amy's active participation in organized religion (e.g., church attendance), and active pursuit of God outside of church through prayer, studying the Bible, and integrating her beliefs into all aspects of her life. These scores reflect Amy's comments in her interview about the activities she takes part in to maintain her relationship with God such as small group, prayer on her way to work, or worship. Amy's highest scores on the SAI were 4.33 for Awareness and 4.7 for Realistic Acceptance. These results indicate that Amy feels she is aware of how God is present in her life or attentive to her.

Her high score for Realistic Acceptance indicates that even if she is disappointed in God or angry with Him, she still seeks a relationship with Him, further supporting God as an attachment figure.

### **Participant 2: Jake**

Jake in his mid-twenties, married, grew up in a Protestant Christian family, and lives in Canada. Jake began a relationship with God in high school, and throughout his life has struggled with childhood abuse, addiction (both himself and his father), imprisonment of brothers, and a temporary separation from his wife. Jake's crisis of faith occurred when he felt abandoned by God. This caused Jake to isolate himself from church, friends, and family. During this time, he struggled with addiction and, after being challenged by his wife to recover from his addiction, he was able to receive help and reconnect with God while learning that God is a loving Father. Jake's attachment assessment scores seemed contradictory.

According to his RQ Jake has an avoidant attachment style. His ECR-R score was 4.4 for avoidant and 5.1 for anxious attachment behavior. His attachment assessment scores accurately reflect comments made in his interview. Jake mentioned that during his crisis of faith he isolated himself and cut himself off from others, implying an avoidant attachment style. The reason his anxiety score could have been higher is because he also mentioned a desire to be close to God, but a fear that God would be angry with him.

Jake's DRI scores were 3 for Organizational Involvement, 5 for Private Religious Activity, and 12 for Intrinsic Religiosity. These scores reflect Jake's focus on privately maintaining his relationship with God through communication with Him (e.g., prayer). The highest of Jake's SAI scores was Instability (4.2). This result does not mean that Jake does not

believe in God, but reflects comments he made that he is still gradually coming to accept that God is not angry with him and is not trying to punish him.

### **Participant 3: Matt**

Matt is also in his mid-twenties and is currently a youth pastor in the Southeast. Matt experienced an initial commitment to Christ as a thirteen year old, but was blindsided by an injury that changed his plans to play college football. These failed plans caused Matt to question God's love and plan for him. Through this, Matt felt God call him to work in ministry, which led to a journey of self-acceptance and a deeper relationship with God.

Matt's RQ score indicated him as a person with anxious attachment. His ECR-R scores (1.5, 1.8) reflect his secure attachment with his wife, but his interview and overall comments about his relation to others indicate that he wants to be accepted by others to feel loved. His DRI scores of 6, 5, and 19 indicate his involvement in church, private communication with God, and integration of his beliefs into other areas of his life. Matt's highest SAI scores were Awareness (4.6) and Realistic Acceptance (5). These scores align with Matt's comments about feeling God's involvement in his life as well as his desire to continue to pursue God even when He does not understand what God is doing.

### **Participant 4: Sarah**

Sarah is a single graduate student in her early twenties studying English in the Southeast. Sarah identifies as non-denominational. Sarah initially committed to Christianity as a teenager, but became interested in a deeper relationship with God throughout college. Sarah's experience of a crisis of faith included acknowledgement of feelings of abandonment by her mother, transitioning from firmly following the "rules" of Christianity to asking herself what it really means to follow Jesus Christ, and exploring the conflict between American Christianity and

Jesus' teachings in the Bible. Through her crisis of faith, Sarah was able to develop a more positive view of herself and God, and is continuing to point out injustice in American Christianity and help others understand that questioning is normal.

Sarah's RQ score indicated an avoidant attachment style, as did her ECR-R score (Avoidant: 5.5). These results are supported by her comments about her "mommy issues" and feelings of abandonment and distrust. Sarah's DRI scores were 6, 3, and 16, indicating that she is heavily involved in organized religion and fellowship with other Christians and tries to incorporate her beliefs and relationship with God into her every day life. Sarah's SAI scores were average across all subscales, with the highest scores being 3.6 for Disappointment and 3.3 for Realistic Acceptance. This can be explained by Sarah's experience with God being more focused on her self-acceptance rather than her anger or negative view of God.

#### **Participant 5: Jeff**

Jeff is a male in his early forties, lives in the Southeast and attends a Wesleyan church. Jeff was eleven when he received Christ for the first time, but reports that he rededicated his life to God in college. As a college student, Jeff experienced an event in which his life was in danger and he was forced to have a new perspective about life. Jeff expressed that his crisis of faith was not one particular moment or season, but is a continuing battle with doubt because of prayers that have gone unanswered for him and his wife. Jeff has worried that these unanswered prayers are indicative of God withholding favor from him because he is sinning or not living in the way God wants him to. Jeff believes God is good regardless of whether or not his prayers are answered. Jeff was asked to fill out the assessments and questionnaires but did not follow up with the primary investigator.

### **Participant 6: Drew**

Drew is a male, in his fifties, married, Wesleyan, and lives in the Southeast. Drew experienced God reach out for him to comfort him after his grandfather died when he was younger. He reported that he strayed from his Christian roots in college, but committed his life to God again when his father died. Drew described his crisis of faith in terms of his first marriage, which consisted of trust issues that also reflected his difficulty trusting God. His first wife did not attend church or encourage living according to the Christian faith. He divorced and eventually met his now wife, who he says has been influential in his relationship with God. Drew was asked to fill out the assessments and questionnaires but did not follow up with the primary investigator.

### **Participant 7: Steven**

Steven is a male in his early twenties, identifies as non-denominational, and is in a dating relationship. Steven became a Christian as a teenager and later doubted his faith in college when he saw the hurt and pain of his friends battling addictions, rape, and other struggles. Steven's father helped him during a time when he felt empty due to self-hatred and lack of trust in others. His father then died and caused even more grief for Steven, who was then challenged by his mother to overcome his grief and alcohol addiction in order to have a relationship with God.

Steven's RQ indicated an avoidant attachment style, and his ECR-R indicated an anxious attachment score of 4.2 and an avoidant attachment score of 4.4. Steven's avoidant attachment style is supported by his comments of lack of trust in others and his high anxious attachment score is supported by his comments of self-hatred and negative view of self. His DRI scores are 3, 2, and 17, aligning with his comments that he has a relationship with God, but may not be as involved in organized religion and private religious activity. Steven's highest SAI score was

Realistic Acceptance (4.5), which supports his experience of continuing to want a relationship with God even when feeling disappointed with Him.

### **Participant 8: Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is a Baptist in her early twenties and currently in college at a Bible Institute in the Midwest. She is currently in a dating relationship. Elizabeth grew up in a single-parent household after her father left. Elizabeth reported that she lived in a rough neighborhood in Chicago and was introduced to drinking and smoking at an early age. Elizabeth was introduced to Christianity when she was eight, but did not take her relationship with Jesus seriously until she transferred to a Christian high school and saw people living according to the standards of their Christian faith. Elizabeth struggled with depression in college and dealt with suicidal thoughts, which she felt would be a constant in her life that she would never overcome. Elizabeth described a miraculous healing after people in her life began praying for her.

Elizabeth's RQ scored indicated an anxious attachment style, and her ECR-R resulted in a score of 3.4 for anxious attachment and 4.2 for avoidant attachment. Elizabeth's anxious attachment style could be indicative of the emotional abuse she says she experienced as a child, and her avoidant attachment can be supported by her comments that she avoided telling others about her mental health struggles and crisis of faith. Elizabeth's DRI scores are 5, 5, and 20, aligning with her active involvement in her faith community as well as the fact that she studies at a Bible Institute and seeks to involve God in all areas of her life. Her highest SAI scores were 4 for Awareness and 4.6 for Realistic Acceptance. These results align with her comments about witnessing God work in her life and desiring a relationship with Him even when she feels negativity towards God.



## **Participant 9: Sam**

Sam is in his mid-twenties, single, and grew up in a Lutheran church. His initial view of Christianity was to be morally good and do the right things. Sam described that he was challenged in his faith after a sequence of good things in his life during high school that led to a period of hardship. Sam began studying the Bible more seriously during a mission trip and then attended a secular university where he grew in his faith; however, when an acquaintance died by suicide his faith was shaken, and then shaken further when his cousin died by suicide only a few weeks later. Sam's crisis of faith included a dark period of processing these deaths and the surrounding emotions, as well as guilt and wondering if it was normal or okay to be angry with God. An experience when worshipping with friends in addition to several answered prayers allowed Sam to slowly heal and shape his belief that God forgives and loves him.

Sam's RQ score indicates a secure attachment style. His ECR-R score was 2.3 for anxious attachment and 3.7 for avoidant attachment behavior. Sam's slight indication of avoidant attachment behavior can be supported by his avoidance of his friends when he was going through his crisis of faith and questioning his beliefs about God and who God is. His DRI score is 6, 5, and 20, indicating heavy involvement in organized religion, private activities such as prayer and Bible study, and integration of his faith into his life. Sam's highest SAI scores were Awareness (4.2), Realistic Acceptance (4.3), and Disappointment (4.6). Sam's high Disappointment with God score can be explained by his previous experiences wrestling with God during hard times that did not make sense to Sam. Although Sam has faced disappointment with God, his Realistic Acceptance score shows that he pursues a relationship with God regardless of positive or negative feelings towards God.

### **Participant 10: Maddy**

Maddy is single and in her mid-thirties and lives in the Midwest. Maddy is part of the Methodist church. Maddy's singleness has been at the core of her spiritual struggles because it has isolated her from major supports and groups within her church. Maddy has felt ignored and forgotten by God in the midst of her unanswered prayers and feelings of exclusion in church because of her age and single status. Maddy found fulfillment in challenging herself to travel and find adventure. Recently, answered prayers have renewed her hope that God is faithful and loves and sees her.

Maddy's RQ score indicated an anxious attachment style. Her ECR-R scores were 3.9 for anxious attachment and 2.5 for avoidant attachment behaviors. Maddy's anxious attachment style can be supported by her comments about her deep desire to belong in her faith community and feel accepted as a single, adult woman. Her anxious attachment can also be explained based on her previous experience feeling rejected by her faith community. Her DRI scores are 6, 2, and 18, indicating her more recent involvement in her faith community and desire to seek God's guidance in all areas of her life.

Table 1. Demographics Table.

	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Amy</b>	Married	Wesleyan	Southeast
<b>Jake</b>	Married	Protestant	Canada
<b>Matt</b>	Married	Wesleyan	Southeast
<b>Sarah</b>	Single	Non-denominational	Southeast
<b>Jeff</b>	Married	Wesleyan	Southeast
<b>Drew</b>	Married	Wesleyan	Southeast
<b>Steven</b>	Dating	Non-denominational	Southeast
<b>Elizabeth</b>	Dating	Baptist	Midwest
<b>Sam</b>	Single	Baptist	Midwest
<b>Maddy</b>	Single	Methodist	Southwest

Table 2. Table of Questionnaire/Assessment Scores.

	<b>RQ: Attachment Style</b>	<b>ECR-R: Anxious/Avoidant (Score: 1-7)</b>	<b>DRI (Organizational Involvement, Private Religious Activity, Intrinsic Religiosity)*</b>			<b>SAI (Awareness (A), Realistic Acceptance (RA), Disappointment (D), Grandiosity (G), Instability (I)**</b>
<b>Amy</b>	Avoidant	Anxious: 1.7 Avoidant: 1.7	6	5	20	<b>A: 4.33, RA: 4.7; D: 2.7; G: 1.85; I: 1.11</b>
<b>Jake</b>	Avoidant	Anxious: 5.1 Avoidant: 4.4	3	5	12	<b>A: 2.5; RA: 2; D: 2.3; G: 1.6; I: 4.2</b>
<b>Matt</b>	Anxious	Anxious: 1.5 Avoidant: 1.8	6	5	19	<b>A: 4.6; RA: 5; D: 2.7; G: 1.4; I: 1.4</b>
<b>Sarah</b>	Avoidant	Anxious: 4.9 Avoidant: 5.5	6	3	16	<b>A: 3.2; RA: 3.3; D: 3.6; G: 2.3; I: 1.7</b>
<b>Jeff</b>	N/A		N/A			
<b>Drew</b>	N/A		N/A			
<b>Steven</b>	Avoidant	Anxious: 4.2 Avoidant: 4.4	3	2	17	<b>A: 3.5; RA: 4.5; D: 1.7; G: 1.9; I: 1.8</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	Anxious	Anxious: 3.4 Avoidant: 4.2	5	5	20	<b>A: 4; RA: 4.6; D: 2.4; G: 2; I: 2.8</b>
<b>Sam</b>	Secure	Anxious: 2.3 Avoidant: 3.7	6	5	20	<b>A: 4.2; RA: 4.3; D: 4.6; G: 2.5; I: 1.5</b>
<b>Maddy</b>	Anxious	Anxious: 3.9 Avoidant: 2.5	6	2	18	<b>A: 3.1; RA: 3.2; D: 5; G: 1.1; I: 1.6</b>

\*The DRI scores are split into three to show each subscale score. Each subscale is considered independently because an overall score does not accurately indicate the overall religiosity or spirituality of the individual. As previously stated, the overall DRI assesses for organizational involvement, private religious activity, and intrinsic religiosity. The highest score for the first subscale (organizational involvement) is 6, indicating high religious involvement. The highest score for the second subscale is 6, indicating high involvement in private religious activities. Finally, the highest score for the third subscale is 20, indicating high intrinsic religiosity. Further explanation for each individual's scores can be found in the description of individual participants above.

\*\*The SAI is split into the five subscales of the assessment. Each subscale indicates something different about a certain domain of the individual's relationship with God. The highest score for

each subscale is 5. High scores for each participant are in bold. Further explanation for each individual's scores can be found in the description of individual participants above.

### **Overarching Context**

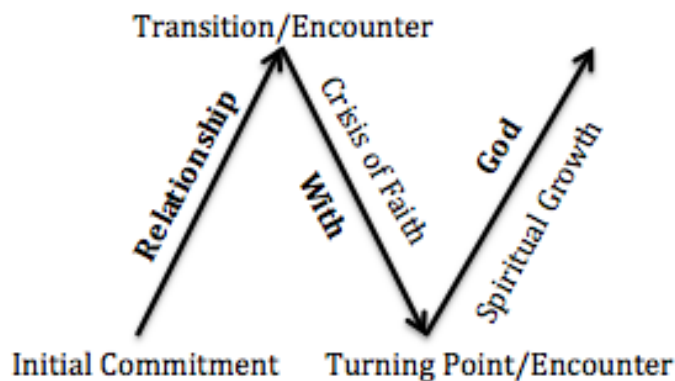
The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of a crisis of faith as well as more deeply understand why one might abandon his or her faith after this experience. As previously stated, the study was successful in obtaining a depth of information about the experience of a crisis of faith; however, to best understand the context in which to interpret the results it is important to note that none of the participants abandoned his or her faith, and all still identify as Christian. During the course of interviews, the primary investigator noticed something across all participant stories. Although some participants may have questioned God's existence, the center of the crisis of faith was not questioning if God was real, but questioning God's love or care for them. It was not God's existence or non-existence that caused the participant grief, but the ups and downs of the relationship with God, or feeling disconnected or unloved by Him. Therefore, the results are aimed at understanding the experience of individuals who have formed a relationship with God and have then grieved and worked through the possible loss of this relationship. This is the context in which the results should be interpreted. The following will describe the central category along with other categories and their properties and dimensions.

### **Relationship with God: Central Category**

The purpose of identifying a central category is to condense findings from the analysis to explain the essence of the research. As participants told their story of the impact of their crisis of faith on their Christian belief system and on their self, every participant described a relationship with God that was formed and then tested at some point. The interviews were analyzed within and across participants. Based on these analyses, the primary investigator discovered that

“relationship with God” was the central category. The purpose of the current study was to explore the experience of a crisis of faith when an individual is grieved by the questioning and doubt of his or her faith system that once provided stability, security, or relationship. It was in fact the ups and downs of this relationship that were central to the crisis of faith and renewal of faith thereafter. The participants described their interaction with God as a two-way relationship, characterized by communication with God, positive and negative emotions towards Him, and desiring closeness and love from Him. Participants also described conflict with God characterized by being angry or disappointed in Him. Likewise, participants worried if God had left them or was angry or disappointed with them. The following theoretical model emerged (see figure 1).

*Figure 1. Theoretical model for relationship with God.*



There are three main categories illustrated by the theoretical model: Initial Commitment, Crisis of Faith, and Spiritual Growth. Participants reported an initial commitment to the Christian religion, which led to a transition event or encounter with God that initiated a change from

commitment to Christianity to a genuine relationship with God. Participants then spoke of their crisis of faith, which is characterized by a traumatic event, doubt of God's character, grief and confusion, and a negative view of self. For all stories, there is a turning point, which acts as a catalyst for renewal of faith and spiritual growth. This growth is characterized by a relational deepening when participants were able to display self-acceptance and acceptance for God's love.

A relationship with God emerged as the central category because (a) it was connected to all of the data; (b) it was a core part of every participant story; (c) the relationship between this major category and all other categories are logical and consistent; (d) it was abstract and left questions to be answered by future research; (e) it grew in depth as it was defined and explored; and (f) it helped explain some of the variation among each individual's story and experience. The goal now is to provide a logical outline for how the primary investigator reached this explanation. Therefore, the following section will provide specific categories that emerged and the underlying properties and dimensions.

### **Category 1: Initial Commitment**

The most common similarity across participant stories was not only the initial commitment to Christianity, but also the transition later from commitment to Christianity to a genuine relationship with God. All participants reported either growing up in a Christian home, hearing about Christianity from a family member, or an experience when she or he prayed a prayer of salvation. For example, Steven told the primary investigator that his dad "*called me into a room and he was crying*" and he asked Steven if he wanted to "*accept Jesus.*" Steven reported that later in middle school he had a "*first real moment*" when he decided "*I believe this for myself.*" Other participants had a similar experience, in which the initial commitment was not monumental for their faith. Another participant, Jake, explained that he "*prayed the prayer*" and

it was “*anti-climactic*” because Christianity was something he had “*always been a part of.*” Speaking to the event of “*praying to receive Christ*” was Jeff, who stated, “*as a 10 or 11 year old, there’s just only so much you understand*”, and proceeded to explain that his faith deepened in college. Sam described the experience of growing up in a Lutheran church and the disconnect between knowledge about the Christian faith and a relationship with God:

*I learned a lot of knowledge about God...and I did hear the Gospel a lot growing up, but there wasn’t like a driving force for a personal relationship with Jesus. And so it was more...under my parent’s encouragement, a lot of it was being moral and not doing bad things.*

### **Transition to Relationship**

All participants reported an initial knowledge of God and an acceptance of Him, and then a separate rededication later in their journey involving entering into a relationship with God. Overall, this transition from belief in a religion to a relationship was marked by an increase in depth and meaning for the participant. Participants initially accepted the knowledge of the existence of God and Jesus Christ, yet expressed that Christianity became more meaningful when they were able to experience relationship with God through an encounter with Him, or by witnessing the relationship others had with God.

About half of the participants reported an experience when they felt a spiritual connection or encounter with God that moved them from initial commitment to relationship. Jake describes his “*big, emotional experience*” as a teenager when he was at a youth conference and he had a “*moment*” where he decided to change from having a “*faith system*” to “*actually having a relationship.*” Jake stated that something “*came over me*” and he “*felt His presence.... And that is when the relational aspect started.*” Drew also reported a sense of feeling God’s presence



when his grandfather passed away. He reported that *“God just reached out to me and it just felt like He was wrapping His arms around me.”* After a rough time in college, Drew described a second moment, which he reported was *“most significant”* when his father died and he committed to *“becoming a complete Christian.”* Sam describes an encounter with God when he was studying his Bible that *“painted a picture”* of one of his prayers and *“showed that God wants to have a relationship with me and it opened my eyes to.... that’s what Jesus died for.”* With a similar experience, Amy reported a period of time when she felt reading the Bible was helping with her depression symptoms and she *“realized this does have to be a relationship, this is continuous.”*

Other participants experienced a transition from knowledge and commitment to God to sincere relationship by witnessing the faith of others. Elizabeth stated that she *“assumed”* she was Christian because she attended church, however, when her mother told her to *“pick a private Christian school”* to attend she realized upon meeting her new peers that she *“was embarrassed”* and told herself, *“I am not a Christian. I haven’t given my life to the Lord, I haven’t grasped these Christian truths and what the Gospel is and what it means to have a relationship with God.”* Similarly, Sarah described her experience living in the south, which is culturally known as the Bible Belt, where it is common to attend church and identify as Christian. Sarah said that she *“committed my life to Christ.... But I also say that I didn’t become a follower of Jesus until college but that’s a different thing.”* Sarah told the primary investigator that it was not until a trip to Guatemala after her freshman year of college that she was immersed in *“authentic Christian culture”* and *“saw older people following Jesus”* that helped her realize *“who God is and this is who I am.”*

## Category 2: Crisis of Faith

As interviews were conducted, it was discovered that a crisis of faith was either (a) preceded by a traumatic event, or (b) triggered by an ongoing suffering in the participant's life. Although response and reaction to each crisis of faith varied among participants, the primary investigator found similarities among all stories including (a) a negative view of self, others, or both; (b) a doubt of who God is or a doubt about God's character; (c) grief and confusion about his/her belief system; and (d) a turning point or encounter with God that renewed the person's hope or perception of who God is.

### Catalyst for Crisis

When analyzing the data, the primary investigator realized that all participants either experienced a traumatic event or experienced ongoing suffering as a catalyst to their crisis of faith. Out of all participants, 6 experienced a traumatic event, which led to a crisis of faith, and 4 experienced a period of time of unanswered prayer or feeling of disconnect from God, which caused significant stress.

**Traumatic event.** Of the 6 who experienced a traumatic event, half experienced trauma related to a parent. Sarah described how her "*world collapsed*" when she battled depression and thoughts of suicide after her father was diagnosed with cancer. This news was especially hard for Sarah because she was mostly raised by her father after her mother (who was a drug addict) "*chose drugs*" over her and her brother. Both Drew and Steven experienced the death of their father, which led to a period of grief and eventual re-commitment to God.

Of the remaining 3 participants, Amy had an experience of near suicide, when she "*sat in a parking lot at an intersection and just watched the traffic...to see how I could drive into it and not come out.*" Sam was deeply affected by suicide when an acquaintance at his college died by

suicide. According to Sam this “*shook*” him. A few weeks later he received additional news that his cousin had also died by suicide. He stated that he “*didn’t know how to process it*” because he felt he was in “*the valley of darkness.*” Finally, Matt experienced a devastating sports injury, which ruined his future plans and led to what he described as “*rock bottom*”:

*So I tore my ACL and that ruined all my plans. I had planned to go to college and play football and try to make it to the NFL.... You know that was my goal, and I had scholarships to schools and when I tore my ACL that kinda all went away because I could not surgically repair my knee.... My biggest thing I held onto in life was knowing my plan. I had security in that.*

**Ongoing suffering.** The remaining 4 participants experienced an extended period of time in which he or she suffered due to an unanswered prayer or felt a disconnection from God for a distinctly long period. Maddy shared that her faith crisis has been “*gradual*” because she is “*35, still not married, and that has been my biggest fear of my entire life.*” Maddy explained her anger with God because she “*didn’t know if there was a point to prayer*” and stated that she “*didn’t feel like God was saying ‘no’*” but felt forgotten by Him. When speaking on her the grief her crisis of faith caused her, Maddy said that she took a year off from church because it was too painful to go. Maddy revealed, “*I took probably a year off of church because when I went I would just cry.*”

Similarly, in Jake’s experience, he had a period of time when he had “*a good relationship with God.... And then there was kind of nothing....*” Jake described it as an “*extended period of time of very spiritual experiences to nothing... And I felt completely abandoned and alone.*”

When discussing her life long struggle with mental health, Elizabeth told the primary investigator that she tried counseling, medication, and physical activity to help her symptoms, but nothing seemed to work. She expressed that she got to a point where she told herself, “...*the only thing that is going to change it is God doing something.... And I truly believe God is all powerful, but that doesn't mean God is going to do every single thing we want.*” According to Elizabeth, she was convinced that she would never experience healing: “*like I am not going to experience that before I die, I will never be free from this struggle.*” Another participant who believes he may never experience healing or answered prayer is Jeff, who has been praying for his wife’s healing for over a decade. When describing the consistent prayer of he and his wife, Jeff stated, “*She is a prayer warrior. She cries out to Him, we pray to Him. Why in the world has He not done anything?*”

### **Negative View of Self or Others**

When speaking to the experience of their crisis of faith, all participants included details about negative views of themselves, others, or both. Several participants exclaimed that they felt abandoned, unworthy, or too dirty to be loved by God. Many participants reported their lack of trust not only in God, but also in other people. A few participants reported the shame they felt because of their questioning. This shame led to isolation from others or fear of telling others that he or she was experiencing doubt.

When describing her crisis of faith, Amy told the primary investigator that she had heard of God from family and was invited to church, but asked, “*Why would I do that? I am not loved in any aspect of my life. Why would I go to church for a God who loves me whenever I've been through all of this mess?*” Amy could not imagine there being a God who loved her because she had endured abandonment and other negative experiences, which shaped her view of herself as

unworthy of love. Amy was abandoned by both parents at a young age and said she *“had always felt abandoned and not loved.”* Steven stated that his mindset was *“I suck, people suck”* and he felt that he was never allowed to *“mess up.”* He described his crisis of faith in college and said, *“I just felt dirty I guess.... I didn’t feel worthy to approach God.”* Sarah spoke to her experience with *“self-loathing”* and acknowledged the abandonment she felt after her mother left. She had an experience of addressing the *“deep self-loathing rooted in mommy issues”* and expressed that this abandonment was *“at the core”* of her hatred towards herself:

*You hear a lot about how people view their dad is linked to how they view God but they don’t talk about moms. People don’t talk about mommy issues ever. And so my mom left, she was a drug addict and chose drugs over me and my brother.*

### **Doubt of God’s Character**

These negative views of themselves and others extended to how participants viewed God. Several participants included moments or periods of time when the individual questioned what she or he thought about God and His character. For example, during the period when Jake felt abandoned by God, he stated that he wondered *“that maybe if God was real maybe He was different than the God of the Bible.”* Similarly, when discussing his frustration over a long-term, unanswered prayer, Jeff expressed that he questioned God’s favor for him and said, *“I doubt that God is who He says He is.”* Jake described his original view of God’s character:

*There’s a lot of daddy issues and I think that’s a big piece of it. It was the comparison of earthly to Heavenly father, where I just always understood him as vengeful and punishing and harsh.... I think it was just kind of natural for me because it was always “our Father who art in Heaven” and “our Heavenly father” ...and it was constantly ingrained in me...and I was like “well I don’t really like my father.*

In regard to his injury and ruined plans to attend college, Matt spoke of his doubt that God loved him:

*...And then it was all taken away from me and I questioned if God was even real and if He was real then why did He hate me? I just had this perception that God hated me, God didn't love me, and if God was real He obviously left me and didn't want anything to do with me. Like if there was a God He was nowhere near around.*

These instances of questioning what they originally thought of God and His character reflected an underlying fear that God may not be as good as the participant thought, or possibly even worse, may not love them as much as they thought.

### **Grief and Confusion**

For all participants, disconnection from God, a long wait for an answered prayer seeming to go ignored, or questioning of who they are and who God is, caused grief and confusion. For the participants, these events or circumstances were so difficult because they had to question their foundational beliefs about God, which make them question Him as well as themselves.

**Disconnection from God.** Four of the ten participants described experiencing a low period characterized by disconnection from God after a period of feeling close to Him. For example, Jake stated that he went from having a good relationship with God while “*getting a lot of prayer and Christian influence*” to a long period of nothing when he felt abandoned. Jake continued, “*I did everything my church and mentors told me to do. I said the right things and prayed the right prayers and never got anywhere.*” Jake describes the period when he felt abandoned by God and therefore isolated himself: “*I had cut off any connection in my life... I isolated myself from everybody.*”

In a very similar experience, Sam stated, “*God put a lot of ‘no’s’ in my path after a season of ‘yesses’ and a lot of growth.*” When Sam went from having several prayers answered and feeling like he was growing spiritually to a season of grief after the death of a friend and a family member he mentioned a “*period wondering if God is good*” and questioning the foundation upon which he built his faith.

**Unanswered prayers.** For four participants, grief and confusion was born from unanswered prayers or feeling unimportant to God. For example, When Jeff described his struggle with questioning God’s favor after praying for his wife’s healing for several years, he also mentioned confusion regarding his own worthiness to receive good things from God:

*...Maybe He’s waiting on me to stop doubting. Maybe He’s waiting on her to stop doubting.... And I think what am I doing that I shouldn’t be doing... Like, there must be something hidden that I haven’t put a spotlight on... like I feel like the reason she isn’t healed is because I’m cancelling out His favor by something I’ve done.... I feel that guilt.*

For Jeff, the unanswered prayer was tied to his faithfulness to God, and has caused confusion for him because he describes himself as someone faithful who cares about doing the right thing.

**Contradictory beliefs.** Other confusion came from contradictory beliefs in comparison to other Christian groups. Two participants, Sarah and Maddy, expressed concern over the difference between what they believe the Bible says about God and what the American Christian culture claims Christianity to be. According to Sarah, the foundation of her beliefs was shaken when she began to disagree with the message that American Christianity says about Jesus. She described this conflict between American Christian culture, which she feels projects judgment and hate, and the message of the Bible, which sends a message of love:

*I think I felt lied to in those situations. Like by the culture.... How have I been a Christian for ten years and I don't know how to share the Gospel? And why do people hate so much? It was this conflict of love, unconditional love, like who Jesus is and who culture made Him out to be.... Being very confused about culture and how this white Jesus has been produced out of the Bible.*

Similarly, Maddy expressed her struggle with the emphasis the American church places on marriage. She admitted, *"I didn't know where I fit in the community or in the American church, who idolizes marriage, or at least uses it for the basis of inclusion."* Later in her interview, Maddy revealed that she now believes in being a voice of change in the church by stating, *"I am in a place right now where it's too important to not speak up about certain things... I think too much is at stake."*

### **Turning Point**

Perhaps one of the most important findings as it is related to the overall goal of the study, is the finding that all 10 stories included a moment or event in which the participant experienced a major turning point during their crisis of faith that renewed his or her hope in God and faith. These moments included subcategories of encounters with God, intervention by a family member or friend, or experiences of rebuilding one's faith and accepting that questioning and doubt are normal. The following subcategories will be explained with their properties.

**Encounter with God.** Of those who had spiritual encounters, Amy, Elizabeth, and Sam, had significant moments, which provided a turning point that led to a more intimate relationship with God. As previously described, Amy had a plan to attempt suicide when *"something told me to go home."* This led to an incredible moment when she opened her Bible and placed her finger on Isaiah 43:4, which says, *"You are precious to me, I will love you, and honor you so much that*



*I will give other people in your place and other nations to save your life.*” The last part of the verse was especially important to Amy because she believes God saved her life that day.

Elizabeth and Sam described events in which they were worshipping with friends and had spiritual experiences that changed them. When describing praying with an acquaintance and finally revealing her struggle with suicidal thoughts, Elizabeth stated, *“I felt God press on my heart to just spill it and the Lord prepared her to take it and I broke down and just confessed everything I was dealing with.”* Not long after, Elizabeth felt the need to tell another friend and expressed, *“I felt their prayers and the Spirit of God working in me.... and after there was this miraculous healing.”* In a similar experience, Sam attended a worship night with friends where he finally *“came to terms that Jesus died”* for him and was a *“step in the right direction”* to learn how to grieve his cousin’s death among other struggles.

**Intervention by others.** Of those who experienced intervention by a loved one, Jake revealed that his wife gave him no other choice but to find healing from his addiction, and Steven described a moment with his mother when she told him, *“You are nothing without God”*, which he stated caused a change in him and made him say, *“You’re right, I am going to be okay and I will be better.”* Other participants found hope in mentors or others who had experienced similar questioning.

One participant took matters into her own hands and found healing in different experiences. Maddy stated that her turning point happened when she simply devoted more time to adventure and began to travel by herself. Overall, whether instantaneous or gradual, all participants had experiences, which led to renewed hope and spiritual growth. These experiences allowed each participant to gain a different perspective of self and a different perspective of God, which became healing.

### **Category 3: Spiritual Growth**

After experiencing a turning point in her or his crisis of faith, each participant had her or his own change in perspective of God and self. As earlier mentioned, participants held negative views of God and self before or during their crisis of faith. Many struggled with self-loathing and a belief that, if God were real, He did not love them or want to give them good things. Several questioned if God was good at all, and many expressed anger with God or mistrust towards him. After their individual turning points, however, the participants began to see God work in their lives, or made personal changes that allowed them to have love and acceptance for their selves. Several also commented that their crisis of faith was a time in their life that they actually felt closest to God and reflected with gratefulness the experience.

#### **Relational Deepening: God and Self**

For the participants, it was the turning point, or time thereafter that allowed them to not only believe, but also accept that God loves and cares for them. It is unclear if accepting God's love helped the individual love and accept one's self, or if self acceptance led to acceptance of God's unconditional love. It could be possible that both happen simultaneously. Overall, this acceptance of self and God's love led to a greater relational depth with God.

To highlight this cycle of self-acceptance and acceptance of God's love, Sarah discussed the link between what we think of ourselves and what we think of God and quoted Tozer, who said, "*The most important thing is what you think about God and what you think about yourself.*" She continued on to say:

*I have found in my story that those are very linked. In therapy I reckoned with all of my trauma for the first time... I realized through therapy that I hated myself.... It wasn't that*

*I hated myself and I am okay with it, it was I hate myself and I am sad.... And God, 'I need You to show me who I am and who You are.*

**Acceptance of God's love.** Later in Sarah's story, she shares that she realized God was "pursuing" her. She said, "He was pursuing me and...He wanted me, and not because He made me but because of who I am." This illustrates the acceptance that God is a loving God who is not obligated to love, but loves His followers as individuals. Sarah revealed that she never stopped believing in the existence of God because, "Logically to me God can't not exist." Sarah explained that because of God, she did not take her own life during her darkest times, and she has had "experiences with Him, intimately that I cannot deny."

Jake shared his transition from believing that God was angry and vengeful to believing that He was forgiving and loves His children. Jake stated that he was able to "remember the God of my youth as opposed to this thing that I made him out to be, this kind of super villain I had become afraid of." He said that he always "wanted His affection, His presence, and His love.... But was still expecting the blow." Jake ended his interview by stating, "He's patient and forgiving and... He genuinely loves us as His children and not just as trophies or possessions or just things that happened and now He has to deal with us." For Jake, this view of God as vengeful and villainous brought him feelings of shame and made him feel unworthy to go to God, however, he has slowly accepted that God is forgiving and loves him.

When Matt was asked what he learned most during his crisis of faith he responded by saying, "That I was loved." He continued to say, "I felt finally what it was like to be truly loved and that was a big thing that changed my life." Previously, Matt had described how he thought God hated him, but he gradually learned to trust God and see that "God was working" in his life. Matt described, "And looking back at how angry I was, that was probably the closest to God I

*had ever been in my life.... It was the realest I had ever interacted with God.*” In fact, all ten participants mentioned the realization that they were truly loved by God, and in hindsight could see how God had been there for them in their time of grief.

**Acceptance of self.** It was also discovered that there was a gradual acceptance of self for each participant. Participants mentioned feelings of unworthiness, shame, or guilt in the midst of their crisis of faith, but showed more self-compassion and self-acceptance as they worked through their crisis of faith. Amy described that when she thought of herself in relation to God she did not feel *“loved in any aspect”* because of what she had been through. Amy stated that once she worked through *“abandonment issues”* in therapy she was able to view herself as worthy of love, which influenced her ability to accept God’s love. Similarly, Elizabeth expressed her belief that she was not worthy of answered prayers or good things: *“I just don’t believe that God’s goodness will ever apply to my life.”* After having a miraculous healing of her suicidal thoughts, Elizabeth stated, *“The one thing that stuck in my head is that God cares for me and loves me personally... and I thought ‘well I am one of God’s people’.”* Sam spoke about the guilt he felt after his cousin died by suicide because he had just talked to his cousin a couple weeks prior about another friend who had died by suicide. Sam was able to let go of this guilt and accept that he was forgiven and stop blaming himself for his cousin’s death.

As stated earlier, it is unclear if either self-acceptance or acceptance of God’s love precedes the other, but it can be supported from the data that there appears to be a cycle of the two. As participants accepted God’s love they then began to accept that they were worthy of love. Also, as participants felt worthy of love there was an acceptance that God is good and loves His people. This cycle of acceptance influenced an overall greater depth of relationship with God for each participant.

This relational deepening with God can be shown in the participants' acceptance of doubt and questioning of their Christian faith. Most participants discussed the guilt they felt about questioning God or doubting Him, but eventually came to appreciate wrestling with hard questions. Jake stated, *"One of the biggest things I learned was that it's ok...it's ok to change your mind. And it's ok to be wrong about things."* Sarah expressed that accepting that she questions things has made her feel freer in her relationship with God:

*I used to feel like I needed all the answers... And now I enjoy being a Christian a lot more than I did before... I am very thankful for those seasons and the follower of Christ I am on the other side.*

Sarah continued, *"I thought that to question God was to be unfaithful.... But learning that it is okay to question things.... I know who God is...and who I am, and that is where I will rest."*

The overall experience of having a crisis of faith and the cycle of both accepting God's love and one's self that followed contributed to a deeper and more personal relationship with God for each participant. It is not that participant's stopped questioning or wrestling with their faith, but they accepted that this conflict was part of a relationship with God just as it would be with anyone else. To summarize, based on the results of the current study, the experience of a crisis of faith can be characterized as grief brought on from the feeling of some kind of separation from God. This feeling of separation, however, cannot be significant without first forming a relationship or attachment to God. Once the relationship was formed and an event triggered the participant to feel disconnected from God, the participant had to wrestle with their view of God and view of self until they were able to reconcile their questioning or grief. Reconciliation came when participants experienced a turning point in which they were able to accept themselves and God's love for them.

## **Relationships Between Categories and Subcategories: Understanding the Process**

Although relationships between subcategories and their respective categories have been addressed, the relationships between the various categories, and the central category, need to be explored. The theoretical model presented in *Figure 1* represents the relationship that exists between the categories. Relationship with God is the central theme that runs through all of the data; hence, it is represented by the bold arrows that incline or decline amidst the categories. The other categories (initial commitment, transition/encounter, crisis of faith, turning point, and spiritual growth) are represented by the slopes and points of the lines, suggesting that the categories influence one another. The separate categories, and their respective subcategories, provide the structure for understanding the experience of a crisis of faith and why it might occur. However, it is important to explore and describe the process by discussing the relationships between the categories. Therefore, the purpose of the next section is to integrate the process and the structure by discussing relationships between categories.

### **Variation Among Participants**

Although relationship with God was the central category for all participants, the amount of impact it had on individual participants varied. In the previous section the focus was on the categories and how the participant's experiences supported these categories, thus providing the structure. However, in this section the experiences of two participants will be shared from beginning to end to attempt to highlight the process. By doing so, the variation that exists between categories will emerge.

**Jeff.** The attempt to highlight the process will begin with Jeff and his experience with his crisis of faith. Jeff described his initial commitment to Christianity as something he did not fully understand as a ten year old. He reported:

*I remember praying to receive the Lord. Then you know as a ten, eleven year old there's just only so much you understand about it. And then I really feel like when I was in college.... Was when I did it again and kind of rededicated my life.*

This rededication Jeff talked about was the transition point from believing in Christianity to actively pursuing a relationship with God. For Jeff, his transition into relationship with God was sparked by a “*crisis moment*” when Jeff was at the bank running an errand for work and a bank robbery occurred. He recounted the experience to the primary investigator:

*I was in there when the guys came in with shotguns, and handguns, masks, police scanners. I mean, it was surreal. And I had a gun held to me, and you know when you're in those situations, the first thing you start thinking is 'this could be it.' So you know I started praying just to make sure I was right with God.*

After this, Jeff reported that his life went back to normal and that he “*never felt traumatized*” by the experience, but “*it put a lot of things in perspective*” and encouraged him to maintain a serious relationship with God.

When asked about his crisis of faith, Jeff reported his “*doubts, frustrations, and confusion*” over an unanswered prayer. Jeff's wife has been sick for most of her life, and he has watched her suffer during their marriage. He reported, “*She cries out to Him, we pray to Him. Why in the world has He not done anything?*” The fact that Jeff has not seen God do anything to answer the prayers of him and his wife leaves him questioning. Jeff stated in his interview, “*You have that doubt that creeps in your mind, is there really a God? If there's really a God He would have done something for her, to her.*”

In regards to how this has impacted Jeff's view of himself, Jeff told the primary investigator that this unanswered prayer has left him feeling like he has done something wrong in

God's eyes that might be "*cancelling out His favor.*" Jeff feels guilty for having doubts about God and reported that "*maybe He's waiting on me to stop doubting.*" He reported that his doubts about God leave him "*confused and frustrated.*"

When asked about resources that have helped him through his crisis of faith Jeff responded by saying:

*I don't have anyone I can lean on or really talk to. Besides my wife...you know it's just me and God trying to deal with it myself.... But I feel heightened by the Holy Spirit, like I feel a good connection, and I would say that is probably my guiding light.*

Jeff still feels connected to God through the Holy Spirit and stated that it is sensitivity and awareness to the Holy Spirit that keeps him from walking away from his faith. Jeff stated that a major part of his journey has been realizing that he is in control of how he responds to negative situations:

*No matter what happens to you, whether you did it or somebody else did it to you, you have a choice in your attitude towards it. Yes, you can't control it. But you have a choice in your attitude towards it.*

When asked what he has learned most during his crisis of faith and his doubts, Jeff reported that he trusts in God and trusts in the fact that one day "*we're going to know exactly why she's going through what she's going through... I trust in God and He has complete control.*" Although Jeff's prayer has not been answered yet, he reported that he realizes it may never be answered, but he now "*one hundred percent trust that God knows what He's doing.*" Jeff stated that he has chosen the same attitude that Job of the Bible had when he went through severe loss:



*My wife will never be compared to what Job went through, and if he can sit up and say after he's been cleaned out, his whole family's dead...all of his possessions, everything's gone. And what Job says is so amazing, He says, 'Though you slay me, yet I will still praise you.'*

Jeff ended his interview by saying that he hangs on to praising God even in hardship and trial.

In Jeff's experience, his relationship with God has been tested because of his wife's long term suffering though he has prayed intensely for her healing. Because Jeff has not seen healing for his wife, he has experienced doubt of God's favor and existence, which causes him grief and frustration with his self because he feels that he should do right and trust God. Through his struggle and doubts, Jeff has remained committed to his faith because he feels he has the choice to respond either positively or negatively to his and his wife's circumstances. Jeff has accepted that his prayer may never be answered, but chooses to praise God regardless. If Jeff's experience were to be diagrammed using the theoretical model described previously, his decline during his crisis of faith would not be as steep, and his incline afterwards would not show as much significance in spiritual growth. Although Jeff has embraced acceptance of his circumstances through his crisis of faith, his crisis was not as intense in comparison to other participants. While the same categories were present in Jake's interview, the level of impact appears to be much more severe.

**Jake.** According to Jake, he had grown up in a Christian family, so committing to the Christian religion was "*anti-climactic*" when he "*prayed the prayer.*" There was a shift from "*yeah I have a faith system to actually having a relationship*" when Jake experienced God's presence at a youth conference at the age of 14. Jake described this experience by saying:

*I just remember having this overwhelming emotional experience... and at the end of the show I was just on my knees bawling.... Something just came over me at that point in the weekend and I felt His presence and had this big, overwhelming emotional experience. And that's when the relational aspect started.*

A few years later, Jake had another spiritual encounter, however, with negative spiritual forces. He reported that, at 17, he dated a girl who “*was involved in a lot of occult-ish things*” and he then started experiencing vivid demonic visions after. After the dissolution of their relationship, Jake reported that he eventually stopped having the demonic visions “*and at that point I had a good relationship with God.*” He described to the primary investigator that he then had positive, Christian influences in his life as well as a lot of prayer over him from others.

It was after this “*extended period time of very spiritual experiences*” that Jake began to experience his crisis of faith because there was a transition to “*nothing really at all happening.*” For Jake, the switch from these heavily spiritual encounters to feeling nothing from God made him feel “*completely abandoned and alone.*” Jake described his experience further:

*And I just came to a belief that maybe if God was real, maybe He was different than the God of the Bible.... Because I couldn't explain this sudden aloneness.... Then I kind of overcompensated I think... I went very conservative, so I acted like the more I preached against homosexuality, and gay people, and sinners and did the worship leading and did the Christian recovery groups, then I would earn back this relationship and nothing ever came of it.*

Jake reported that nothing came of his efforts to earn his relationship with God back, which led to feelings of anger and his eventual isolation of himself from those in his life. Jake told the

primary investigator that there was a two year period of abandonment that he felt from God, and during this period he “*cut off any connection*” in his life.

Jake told the primary investigator that during this crisis of faith period he was also trying to recover from an addiction and fix his marriage. He described it more fully:

*It was all probably very symptomatic...of the same issue...which is I feel like I have to control everything around me, and God is one thing I can't control.... With God there was more of a fear aspect.... Because I felt like if I came back I would be held accountable and punished for everything I had done.*

Jake explained that his view of God was closely linked to his view of his own father. He stated “*A big piece of it was the comparison of earthly to Heavenly father, where I just understood him as vengeful and punishing and harsh.*” In Jake’s experience, it was his wife who left him, and gave him no choice but to get help for his addiction and work on their marriage. His wife’s intervention made him realize that he was about to lose everything if he did not make a change.

At this point in Jake’s experience, there was a turning point when he not only realized he was going to lose his marriage, but connected with his father through their shared journey with addiction. Jake stated:

*It took my dad, who up until that point I had a garbage relationship with. He ended up graduating from the recovery program I am in now.... He was one of the people able to really connect on my level... and take me out of my denial and insanity.*

Now that Jake is in recovery, he said he has been able to “*see God in a different light*” and learn that being in relationship with God is not about being perfect or right about everything. Jake stated that he always wanted God’s “*affection and His presence and His love*” but expected the harsh and punishing God he imagined. Now, when speaking on his current relationship with

God, Jake says he is inching closer to God a little at a time, as he trusts that God will love him and not punish him. Jake currently describes God as *“patient and forgiving and... He genuinely loves us as His children.”*

In Jake’s case, he had a similar journey of feeling disappointed in God after forming a relationship with Him, but experienced a more severe crisis of faith period, and a more significant incline after his “turning point.” While the various categories were evident in Jeff’s experience, they did not seem to have the same impact as Jake’s experiences. It appears that because Jake’s perception of God was tied so closely to his father, who he describes as harsh and punishing, that Jake had a more difficult time accepting himself and God’s love. What Jeff described as his crisis of faith was a period of doubt and frustration over an unanswered prayer, but what Jake described is complete abandonment from God. If Jake’s experience were to be illustrated in a diagram similar to the theoretical model above, his crisis of faith period would decline into a deeper “valley” in comparison to Jeff. Additionally, his spiritual growth would be significantly more pronounced because he was able to begin to recover from drug addiction and change his perspective of God as a whole.

Although the categories, subcategories, properties, and dimensions listed above emerged from all participants’ experiences, the level to which they experienced those categories differs. For Jeff, his questioning and doubt did not affect his view of himself as deeply as it did for Jake. Although both Jeff and Jake have wondered if God was punishing them for something, Jake appeared to show depressive symptoms while Jeff did not. Overall, Jake’s crisis of faith was much more intense than Jeff’s although both shared similarities in categories. Therefore, while the experiences of Jake and Jeff were used to demonstrate some of the variation that exists, any of the participants could be located along a similar continuum.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

When using grounded theory methodology, it is necessary to develop a theory that is grounded in the data and also in existing research on the topic. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the link between the existing literature and the categories that emerged from the data of the current study. Following this will be a discussion of the limitations of the study, advice for those who have a crisis of faith in the future, implications, and the need for future research based on these findings.

### **Results in the Existing Literature**

In order to further validate the results of the study they must be compared to existing research. The purpose of the following is to show where the research aligns with or confirms the results and findings presented in the current study. Likewise, the findings of the current study will be used to highlight gaps in the existing literature. Like the model presented above, the focus of the literature will be on relationship with God, and more specifically focused on how attachment theory influences how participants interacted with God and responded during their crisis of faith.

### **Attachment Theory and Relationship with God**

The basic foundation of attachment theory is the idea that attachment figures are those we form close bonds with that make us feel safe and secure (Bowlby, 1973). Based on experiences with attachment figures (e.g., mother, father, sibling, romantic partner), attachment styles are formed that influence how individuals behave within relationships. These behaviors come from a place of security or insecurity depending on attachment style. Attachment behaviors, which can be healthy or unhealthy, are used to communicate what an individual needs from his or her attachment figure. Most research on attachment theory has been conducted on human-to-human

relationships, although there is some research on attachment to God (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The results of the current study suggest that God is potentially just as important as other attachment figures such as a parent or romantic partner. According to Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2016), for a relationship to be labeled an attachment relationship, three criteria must be met, including wanting closeness with the figure, viewing the figure as safe when one feels vulnerable, and having a sense of security with the figure. All participants described having this kind of attachment relationship with God. It was when the relationship was threatened in some way that participants experienced a crisis of faith.

The following sections will discuss how the literature on attachment injury offers an explanation for why those who experienced abandonment from a parent or other attachment figure appeared to experience a more intense crisis of faith. Additionally, some possible explanations for why participants responded in certain ways to their crisis of faith can be found in the existing literature regarding attachment style and attachment behavior.

**Attachment injuries.** The term “attachment injury” was coined by Johnson et al. (2001) when describing the impact that betrayal has on relationships. More specifically, an attachment injury occurs when an attachment figure fails to meet an individual’s need for security and presence during a time of distress, causing insecurity and a feeling of abandonment for the person who did not get the safety or comfort expected. Attachment injuries deem the relationship insecure and cause trust issues within the relationship. Dissolution of the relationship can occur quickly if one begins to view their partner or attachment figure through the filter of the injury. Based on the emotional reactions described by participants in this study, a case could be made that past attachment injuries influenced not only the participants’ reaction to their crisis of faith but also how they experienced God during those transitions. Viewing God as unavailable

reinforced preexisting fears of abandonment and turned a previously reliable God into a unreliable source of comfort and presence.

The concept of attachment injury from a previous attachment figure is present for four of the participants. The two most intense, however, are found in Jake and Sarah's stories. Jake, who experienced one of the most intense crises of faith among the participants, reported how his perception of his dad influenced his relationship with God:

*There's a lot of daddy issues and I think that's a big piece of it. It was the comparison of earthly to Heavenly father, where I just always understood him as vengeful and punishing and harsh.... I think it was just kind of natural for me because it was always "our Father who art in Heaven" and "our Heavenly father" ...and it was constantly ingrained in me...and I was like 'well I don't really like my father'.*

Here Jake describes that he did not view his father as a safe a secure place. Rather, he was afraid to approach his father because he knew him as vengeful and punishing, thus giving evidence to an attachment injury. Sarah described a similar experience:

*You hear a lot about how people view their dad is linked to how they view God but they don't talk about moms. People don't talk about mommy issues ever. And so my mom left, she was a drug addict and chose drugs over me and my brother.*

Both Jake and Sarah's experiences of attachment injuries from a parent influenced the way they viewed God and themselves. For Sarah, her self-hatred came from feeling abandoned by her mother. This self-hatred then influenced her belief that she was not worthy of God's love. Both Jake and Sarah's experience influenced their avoidant attachment styles, which then influenced their reaction to a crisis of faith. When describing the link between religion and attachment, scholars discuss two hypotheses that influence how individuals approach their relationship with

God. The compensation hypothesis suggests that those who are unable to seek proximity to unreliable earthly caregivers search for a more reliable source of comfort in God (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The correspondence hypothesis, however, suggests that internal working models are developed based on interactions with earthly caregivers and those internal working models influence how a person views and relates to God. Those who experience their caregivers as safe and reliable are more likely to see God in a similar light. However, like Jake and Sarah, those who experience their earthly caregivers as unavailable and distant often view God through a similar lens (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick). It appears that those with greater loss in their attachment history may be more likely to embrace the correspondence hypothesis and transfer those experiences over to their relationship with Deity. The next section will offer an explanation for why various participants responded differently to their crisis of faith based on their attachment style.

**Attachment style and behaviors.** The participants in this study were assessed for one of four attachment styles (i.e., secure, anxious, avoidant, avoidant-dismissive). The four-category model of adult attachment (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) illustrates each attachment style based on the individual's view of others (i.e., positive or negative) and view of self (i.e., positive or negative). A person with a secure attachment style will have both a positive view of self and others. A person with an anxious attachment style will have a positive view of others, but negative view of self, and a person with an avoidant attachment style will view others as negative but the self as positive. Finally, a person with an avoidant-dismissive attachment style will have both a negative view of others and negative view of self.

Based on attachment style, individuals will respond differently when in distress and in need of comfort from an attachment figure (Johnson, 2004). All participants describe exhibiting



attachment behaviors in relationship with God whether it is praying to Him, worshipping, studying the Bible, or attending church. It is when the relationship with God is perceived as threatened that participants began to behave according to their attachment style. For example, Maddy was identified with an anxious attachment style, and during her crisis of faith reported that she took time off of church *“because when I went I would just cry.”* A person with an anxious attachment style typically has a hard time regulating emotions, so Maddy’s response to attending church and crying during the period when she felt forgotten by God is accurate to her attachment style. To show an avoidant attachment response, Sam who self-identified as a secure attachment, exhibited avoidant attachment behaviors during his crisis of faith. Sam talked about the shame and embarrassment he felt, *“I met new people and friends from church to catch up, but at the same time I was trying to avoid them because of the hurt going on in my heart.”* Similarly, Jake reported, *“I had cut off any connection in my life... I isolated myself from everybody.”*

Attachment behaviors are the behaviors humans exhibit when trying to get comfort from an attachment figure (Johnson, 2004). Based on attachment style, individuals will respond differently to an attachment figure when in distress depending on if the bond is secure or insecure. For the participants of this study, their crisis of faith was a time of major insecurity that tested their trust in God when experiencing an attachment injury with Him. The next section will offer an explanation of how the participants moved towards safety and security with God according to the current literature on secure attachment.

**Secure attachment.** To refer back to the four-category model of adult attachment (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), for a person to exhibit a secure attachment style, he or she must hold a positive view of self or positive view of others. Therefore, to become more securely

attached, an anxiously attached person must work on a more positive view of self (i.e., I am worthy of love), and an avoidant person must move toward a more positive view of others (i.e., others are trustworthy). Exline et al. (2017) found that individuals who felt God cared about them and their suffering had a secure relationship with God. Much of the stress experienced by the participants came from the belief that God no longer cared for them or was not with them in their suffering. For example, when talking about her anger and hurt over an unanswered prayer, Maddy stated, *“I just felt like He was ignoring me, I felt forgotten.”*

However, at a turning point in their journey, participants reported moving towards a more positive view of self and more positive view of God. All 10 participants mentioned a transition from the *doing* versus *being* mindset that Houck-Loomis (2015) discuss. While *doing* focuses on earning love, *being* is the act of accepting one is loved and does not have to earn it from God (Houck-Loomis, 2015). The idea that one has to earn love or behave a certain way (i.e., focus on *doing*) to keep love reflects an insecure attachment (Johnson, 2004). This transition from *doing* to *being* was shown in comments from several participants. Matt described, *“And looking back at how angry I was, that was probably the closest to God I had ever been in my life.... It was the realest I had ever interacted with God.”* Matt realized that even though he was angry with God, the anger towards God did not have to mean that His relationship with God was negative, and in fact showed his closeness to God. This comment from Matt shows that being angry with God does not equal being punished by Him, and is a normal response when there is conflict in attachment relationships. Sarah is also one who accepted her questioning and reframed it as positive. She reported:

*I used to feel like I needed all the answers... And now I enjoy being a Christian a lot more than I did before... I am very thankful for those seasons and the follower of Christ I*

*am on the other side.... I thought that to question God was to be unfaithful.... But learning that it is okay to question things.... I know who God is...and who I am, and that is where I will rest.*

Johnson et al. (2001) state that attachment theory has also been called a theory of trauma because “when people are without physical and emotional support, they are the most vulnerable and have difficulty regulating their emotions” (p. 1055). For participants of this study, this lack of support caused major distress and incited their insecure attachment behaviors. However, because attachment is fluid, participants were able to move to a healthier and more secure bond with God through more positive experiences. Johnson et al. (2001) explain the attachment injury resolution model, which outlines how couples move forward with forgiveness after an attachment injury. Simply put, this occurs when the injured partner can get in touch with the injury and explain the injury’s impact. The injured partner becomes more emotionally engaged when she or he feels that the offending partner shows remorse and offers the comfort and support originally needed by the injured partner. This new, positive experience “acts as an antidote to the traumatic experience” (p. 1056).

In the current study, participants experienced attachment injuries, which provoked their insecure attachment behavior to earn back God’s love or gain comfort from Him. These injuries left the participants feeling abandoned and disconnected from God, thus impacting their trust and belief in Him. However, participants mentioned turning points when they had new experiences with God that renewed their hope that He was present to comfort and support them. The impact of these new experiences can be reflected in the literature on the attachment injury resolution model (Johnson et al., 2001).

## **Human Suffering and Relational Growth**

Upon reflection of their crisis of faith, participants reported either a feeling of gratefulness for the grief because it brought them closer to God, or it acted as a catalyst for spiritual growth. Previous research on the grief associated with a crisis of faith suggests that this grief can produce growth (Chen, 1997; Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009). In a systematic review by Mangelsdorf, Eid, and Luhmann (2019), researchers asked the question, “Does growth require suffering?” The results of the systematic review showed that previous studies indicated significant growth in relationships after negative events. Researchers stated that it might be possible that negative events and suffering might be more important for relationship growth than positive events. The results of the current study support these findings. Although participants experienced positive moments in their relationship with God, it was the suffering they endured during their crisis of faith that led to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. Other studies have shown a personal growth that accompanies spiritual suffering. Zarzycka and Zietek’s (2018) findings were similar to that of the current study. Researchers found that those who experienced self-doubt or confronted personal flaws due to spiritual struggle experienced an increase in life satisfaction if the individual was able to make a positive change in self-perception.

Although the impact of posttraumatic stress disorder has been studied extensively, there are a growing number of studies on posttraumatic growth (PTG), which is the positive outcome or meaning making after a traumatic event (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998; Castella & Simmonds, 2016; Mangelsdorf et al., 2019). Researchers who investigated the connection between spirituality and making meaning out of grief found that people with a relationship with God were more likely to exhibit the patience to endure hardship (Desai & Pargament, 2015;

Schnitker et al., 2017). According to Castella & Simmonds (2016), growth and deepening of relationships with others is a significant dimension of PTG. One of the main findings from Castella and Simmonds' (2016) study was that participants who experienced a traumatic event reported a deepened relationship with God. Similar to the current study, participants reported feeling a continual connection with God. Castella and Simmonds (2016) also found that the traumatic event deepened other relationships for participants. Not only were participants of the current study able to deepen their relationship with God, but many reported friends, family members, and mentors being an integral part to their spiritual growth. For example, Sarah reported that she had "*faith parents*" who walked with her in her Christian journey and helped shape her faith to what it is today. Amy also reported that her small group and fellowship with others helps her maintain her relationship with God.

When reflecting on their journey and experience of a crisis of faith, participants expressed gratitude for the trying time because it deepened their relationship with God, helped them make meaning out of hardship, and brought them closer to themselves and others. Perhaps all participants of this study were able to come out of their crisis of faith on the other side still committed to God because the relational aspect existed before the crisis. This relationship could have been the variable that encouraged participants to endure their suffering.

### **Provisional Hypotheses**

After validating the emerging theory with existing literature, provisional hypotheses can be formed. In this case, three tentative hypotheses will be presented. Although the three hypotheses are closely intertwined and difficult to discuss separately, for the purpose of this discussion they will be described independently. These are the three hypotheses:

1. The intensity of a crisis of faith is likely to be greater with those who have insecure attachment histories.
2. Individuals will play out similar attachment dynamics in times of distress with God as they do with other humans in their life.
3. Those who endure a crisis of faith are more likely to report a stronger connection to God, if they continue in that relationship.

This process is not linear and often results with one hypothesis impacting another. As the theory deepens and becomes more elaborate, this process continues. The following is a possible explanation for how these hypotheses are interrelated.

Whether or not all participants experienced a past attachment injury from an attachment figure, all participants exhibited anxious or avoidant attachment behaviors when their relationship with God was threatened. Those who experienced attachment injuries from parents or other major attachment figures, however, did endure a more drastic decline during their crisis of faith. Participants exhibited attachment behaviors because they wanted the reassurance that God was present with love and comfort, and when this comfort was not received, the participants began to feel abandoned by God, thus promoting a lack of trust in the relationship. Participants were able to move forward when they experienced a moment or event that renewed their view of God and gave them the security or reassurance they had desired. After the crisis of faith, participants reported a deeper relationship with God characterized by more closeness to or dependence on Him, more trust in Him, and less belief that His love has to be earned.

### **Implications for Marriage and Family Therapy**

The purpose of the study was to more deeply understand the experience of a crisis of faith and the grief that accompanies feeling disconnected from God. The themes that emerged from

the data could be useful for marriage and family therapists working with clients who have experienced a crisis of faith, since the tentative theory is relational at the core. It is also important to note the systemic nature of a crisis of faith.

Results from the current study as well as outcomes of other research studying trauma, growth, and spirituality have suggested that a relationship with God is just as significant as any other attachment relationship (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Castella & Simmonds, 2016; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Manglesdorf et al., 2019). When working with a client experiencing doubt or questioning about his or her faith it is important to remember the relational aspect and the potential pain that comes with feeling disconnected from an attachment figure. When working with a couple or family, it could be beneficial to ask who they believe God is, or what they believe about His character. This could allow the therapist insight regarding whether or not the couple or family's view of God is positive or negative. For example, does the system view God as harsh and punishing, or loving and forgiving?

The therapist can also offer assessments and questionnaires similar to the ones used in the current study to assess for attachment style (i.e., ECR-R, RQ) or level of religiosity and quality of relationship with God (i.e., DRI, SAI). These assessments can give the therapist insight to how much the client incorporates spirituality and religion into other aspects of his or her life, and can also offer an explanation for why the client may be responding in certain ways to spiritual or relational distress.

One of the major implications based on the results of the study is the systemic nature of a crisis of faith. It could be easy to focus on and draw attention to the crisis, questioning, or doubt; however, we now know how attachment relationships, traumatic events, and outside factors influence the entire crisis of faith experience. For clergy members or ministers, it could be

beneficial for them to receive education about the process of a crisis of faith and how individuals respond to attachment figures when in distress. This could offer them an explanation for why certain members may have abruptly ceased in church attendance or involvement, or could offer insight for why one individual feels the need to volunteer at every outreach event, participate in every small group, or other excessive involvement. If ministers were able to link these behaviors with church member distress and possible spiritual distress, perhaps they could assist these individuals more accurately.

Given the research on attachment injury resolution (Johnson et al, 2001), therapists can talk with clients about previous attachment injuries in important relationships as well as potential attachment injuries with God. If a client is reporting a difficulty with trusting God, then the therapist could inquire about other relationships the client has and if he or she has ever experienced an attachment injury that reinforces issues involving trust. Additionally, the therapist could ask the client what he or she has been taught about doubting or questioning God. It is likely that the client would feel that questioning is not allowed or shameful and the therapist could reframe this process as a time of spiritual and relational deepening, given that the research on PTG suggests that suffering produces more closeness in relationships (Mangelsdorf et 2019). This finding can help the therapist frame the suffering to the client as an opportunity for growth rather than an end to an important relationship. The therapist can offer the client assistance in working through the attachment injuries so the client can experience an increase in self-acceptance as well as increase in acceptance of God's love.

Finally, participants in the current study reported the impact that friends or family had during their crisis of faith. They also reported, however, that there was shame and embarrassment surrounding the crisis of faith that kept them from telling others about their



struggle and doubt. When participants did receive help from loved ones, it took great vulnerability to admit their difficult season of faith. This finding is important because it is likely that those who seek a form of therapy or counseling for a crisis of faith are attending therapy alone because they feel ashamed or embarrassed. The therapist could help incorporate family or friends into therapy to help offer more support and comfort.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of the current study is that all participants continue to identify as Christian after their crisis of faith. Therefore, the tentative categories and theory that emerged from the data should only be applied to individuals who meet these criteria. It is unclear whether the experience would be similar or vastly different for an individual who chose to abandon his or her religious beliefs after their crisis of faith, therefore a theory for these individuals cannot be assumed.

Although only the primary investigator was involved in immediate data collection and analysis, a strength of the study is found in the steps taken to protect the integrity and validity of the study. Participants were actively engaged in the study and were able to add to their story that contributed to the emerging theory. Also, internal and external auditors were included to verify that the logical path and findings by the primary investigator were truthfully consistent with the data. The primary investigator met with the internal auditor, who is knowledgeable about qualitative research and has conducted his own grounded theory studies, consistently and was guided through the process of completing grounded theory research by the internal auditor. The external auditor is currently completing a qualitative study and was able to read all transcripts, as well as the primary investigator's provisional hypotheses and concurred that all results related to the data.

The second limitation of the study is the lack of diversity among participants. All participants were White and heterosexual. Findings could differ for those of different ethnicities, race, and sexual orientation. Again, findings could also differ for those who abandoned their Christian beliefs or perhaps chose to commit to a religion other than Christianity after their crisis of faith. There was diversity, however, in participant location and faith denomination. Participants were from different faith denominations (e.g., Wesleyan, Baptist) and various locations across the United States and Canada. Overall, 5 different faith denominations were represented. The fact that participants were from various faith backgrounds and upbringings, yet still shared so much similarity in experience of a crisis of faith adds validation to the study since faith was such a core variable.

### **Future Research**

Even though the study was successful in developing a theory, the theory is tentative and needs further validation due to the limitations of the current study. A theory with more depth and validation can be developed through studies that include more diverse populations, and participants who no longer identify as Christian after their crisis of faith. Future populations to be explored could include various races and ethnicities, as well as those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender. Additionally, future research could compare religious and spiritual practices and beliefs between different generations.

Research aimed at understanding the experiences of those in the LGBT community who have felt isolated from their faith communities or rejected by God could provide clarification of oppression and prejudice LGBT individuals face due to certain Christian beliefs about homosexuality. Those who identify in the LGBT community are at risk for discrimination in faith communities if they also identify as Christian and want to participate in religious and

spiritual practices (Cole & Harris, 2017). Cole and Harris (2017) found that many LGBT individuals experienced a crisis of faith due to their exclusion from Christian community based on their sexual orientation.

One interesting finding from the current study was that participants between the ages of 24 to 35 mentioned having a hard time with “American Christian culture” and reconciling what they feel the American Church teaches about Jesus opposed to what the Bible says about Jesus. These participants feel that Christianity in America is currently based on conservative, Republican beliefs, which they feel do not necessarily align with the message of the Bible. It would be fascinating to interview more individuals in this age range to explore if other Christians have a crisis of faith for the same reason.

### **Conclusion**

Using qualitative methodology and grounded theory allowed the primary investigator to explore the depths of individuals’ lived experiences of the grief and pain associated with feeling apart from, or unable to connect with God (Chen, 1997; Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009; Houck-Loomis, 2015). The study was successful in that the experience of a crisis of faith was explored and is now more deeply understood. The findings from this study can contribute to the literature regarding God as an attachment figure, as well as the literature about posttraumatic growth. The current study lacked understanding of the experience of those who chose not to remain committed to their Christian faith, as well as lacked diversity among participants. Future research should include populations who did not remain committed to their faith, and could also include members of the LGBT community who may have endured a crisis of faith due to exclusion from Christian communities.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL FORM

**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 · [www.ecu.edu/ORIC/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/ORIC/irb)

### Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Claire Webb](#)  
CC: [Andrew Brimhall](#)  
Date: 2/27/2019  
Re: [UMCIRB 18-002701](#)  
Exploring the Experience of a Crisis of Faith

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 2/27/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Attachment	Surveys and Questionnaires
Consent Form _ REVISED2	Consent Forms
Demographics	Surveys and Questionnaires
DukeReligiosityScale	Surveys and Questionnaires
Interview	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Recruitment Flyer	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
SpiritualAssessment	Surveys and Questionnaires
Thesis Proposal	Study Protocol or Grant Application

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## **APPENDIX B: SOCIAL MEDIA SCRIPT**

**\*\*Spirituality Research Opportunity\*\***

Participants Needed for Interviews

Hi everyone! I am currently working on my master's thesis, so I'm looking for participants... I am reaching out to see if you could help me out.

My study is about God/attachment theory, and what it is like to go through a "crisis of faith" (i.e., a period when a person doubts their faith, questions beliefs, or goes through a "dark night of the soul" when they feel disconnected from God - and then makes a decision to either commit to their faith or walk away).

I know research sounds boring, but my study is solely story-based, and more focused on the participant's lived experience of their faith crisis. I need to interview at least 10 people and will use the interviews as "data" to come up with a theory about the experience of a crisis of faith and the decision making process involved when either recommitting/walking away.

I know this is very personal, and I respect that, and have every intention to honor participants' stories and experiences. Please DM me if you're interested! I would love to talk more about it/answer any questions.

Claire Webb 336-688-1248

## APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

### Demographics

1. What is your gender?

Male, Female, Other

2. How old are you?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your religious denomination?

Baptist, Wesleyan, Methodist, Free Methodist, Other

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. How regularly do you attend church?

Every Sunday, Every other Sunday, once a month, other

5. Are you currently single, in a relationship, engaged, or married?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Have you endured a grief event? (i.e., cancer, death of a loved one, traumatic accident, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Ethnicity/Race:

Hispanic/Latino, Asian, White/Caucasian, Black/African American, other (please specify)

## APPENDIX D: DUKE RELIGIOSITY INDEX

### DUKE UNIVERSITY RELIGIOSITY INDEX

1. How religious do you consider yourself to be? (*Religious* here means adhering to certain practices, such as prayer, attending services, volunteering time/giving money, or fasting, etc.)

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10  
Not religious    Mildly religious    Moderately religious    Religious    Very religious

2. How spiritual do you consider yourself to be? (*Spiritual* here means believing that the reason for existence, or the purpose of life at its core is a response to, or a relationship with, a transcendent being, higher power, or God.)

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10  
Not spiritual    Mildly spiritual    Moderately spiritual    Spiritual    Very spiritual

3. How often do you attend church or other religious meetings (exclude required school chapels)?

1. More than once/wk
2. Once a week
3. A few times a month
4. A few times a year
5. Once a year or less
6. Never

4. How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or Bible study?

1. More than once a day
2. Daily
3. Two or more times/week
4. Once a week
5. A few times a month
6. Rarely or never

*The following section contains four (4) statements about religious/spiritual beliefs or experiences. Please mark the extent to which each statement is true or not true for you.*

5. In my life, I experience the presence of the Divine (i.e., God).

1. Definitely true of me
2. Tends to be true
3. Unsure
4. Tends *not* to be true
5. Definitely *not* true

6. My religious/spiritual beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.

1. Definitely true of me

2. Tends to be true
3. Unsure
4. Tends *not* to be true
5. Definitely *not* true

7. I try hard to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life.

1. Definitely true of me
2. Tends to be true
3. Unsure
4. Tends *not* to be true
5. Definitely *not* true

8. I try hard to carry my spirituality into all other dealings in life.

1. Definitely true of me
2. Tends to be true
3. Unsure
4. Tends *not* to be true
5. Definitely *not* true

## APPENDIX E: SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT INVENTORY

### THE SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT INVENTORY SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT INVENTORY

Copyright Todd W. Hall, Ph.D. & Keith J. Edwards, Ph.D.

#### Instructions

1. Please respond to each statement below by writing the number that best represents your experience in the space to the right of the statement.

2. It is best to answer according to what *really reflects* your experience rather than what you think your experience should be.

3. Give the answer that comes to mind first. Don't spend too much time thinking about an item.

4. Give the best possible response to each statement even if it does not provide all the information you would like.

5. Try your best to respond to all statements. Your answers will be completely confidential.

6. Some of the statements consist of two parts as shown here:

[2.1] There are times when I feel disappointed with God.

[2.2] When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue.

Your response to 2.2 tells how true statement 2.2 is for you when you have the experience of feeling disappointed with God described in statement 2.1.

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>Not At All True</b>	<b>Slightly True</b>	<b>Moderately True</b>	<b>Substantially True</b>	<b>Very True</b>
1					A
2.1					D
2.2					RA
3					A
4					I
5					G
6					A
7					IM
8.1					D
8.2					RA
9					A
10					I
11					A
12.1					D
12.2					RA
13					G
14					IM
15					A
16					I
17					A
18.1					D
18.2					RA
19					A
20					G
21					A

	1	2	3	4	5
	Not At All True	Slightly True	Moderately True	Substantially True	Very True
22					I
23					A
24					IM
25					A
26					G
27.1					D
27.2					RA
28					A
29					G
30					A
31					A
32					IM
33.1					D
33.2					RA
34					A
35					I
36					A
37					G
38					IM
39					I
40					A
41					I
42					A
43					I
44					A
45					G
46					I
47.1					D
47.2					RA



## APPENDIX F: RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

### Scale:

Following are four general relationship styles that people often report. Place a checkmark next to the letter corresponding to the style that best describes you or is closest to the way you are.

\_\_\_\_ A. It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me.

\_\_\_\_ B. I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.

\_\_\_\_ C. I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.

\_\_\_\_ D. I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.

## APPENDIX G: EXPERIENCES IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS-REVISED

**Scale:**

The statements below concern how you feel in emotionally intimate relationships. We are interested in how you *generally* experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current relationship. Respond to each statement by circling a number to indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

	QUESTION	1=Strongly Disagree.....7=Strong Agree						
1.	I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2.	I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3.	I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	I worry a lot about my relationships.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	When my partner is out of sight, I worry that he or she might become interested in someone else.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8.	When I show my feelings for romantic partners, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9.	I rarely worry about my partner leaving me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	My romantic partner makes me doubt myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11.	I do not often worry about being abandoned.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12.	I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.	Sometimes romantic partners change their feelings about me for no apparent reason.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14.	My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15.	I'm afraid that once a romantic partner gets to know me, he or she won't like who I really am.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16.	It makes me mad that I don't get the affection and support I need from my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17.	I worry that I won't measure up to other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18.	My partner only seems to notice me when I'm angry.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19.	I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20.	I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	with my partner.							
21.	I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22.	I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23.	I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24.	I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25.	I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26.	I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27.	It's not difficult for me to get close to my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28.	I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29.	It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30.	I tell my partner just about everything.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31.	I talk things over with my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
32.	I am nervous when partners get too close to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
33.	I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
34.	I find it easy to depend on romantic partners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
35.	It's easy for me to be affectionate with my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
36.	My partner really understands me and my needs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

## APPENDIX H: EXAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

### *JC Interview Transcript*

**The first one...is how did you become a Christian and what was that experience like for you?**

I accepted Christ for the first time when I was 13 through the United Methodist Church and I was going through...I was about to begin confirmation and....I was talking to my pastor at the time. And I can't really remember the conversation we had...but he told my parents that he thought "Jon has had a genuine encounter with Christ and I think you should go ahead and baptize him" and everything in the United Methodist Church...and so I went through confirmation and that's when I accepted Christ initially....and I continued to grow from that. Also, kinda it never...it never became very real to me until I was a Junior in high school. That's when God got a hold of me and I realized..that's when my relationship with Christ started. That's when it became MY faith. My relationship and not necessarily my parents'. Not anybody else's.

**So was there a moment when you knew you were supposed to be in ministry then?  
[JC is a youth pastor]**

Oh yeah. I would say camp, and I had just...three months prior to camp I had torn my ACL and... during workouts for football. And so I tore my ACL and that ruined all my plans. I had planned to go to college and play football and try to make it to the NFL. And if I didn't make it I was going to major in sports management. You know that was my goal, and I had scholarships to schools and when I tore my ACL that kinda all went away because I could not surgically repair my knee...it was in a place where they couldn't so....my biggest thing, the thing I held onto in life was knowing my plan...I had security in that. And so that just broke everything down, I had nothing. And I was down at camp, and the speaker broke me....and I was down at the stage and I remember asking "God listen.." Like I gave God an ultimatum... haha and I said, "God I will give my whole life over to you....All of it...everything...I just need to know what you have planned for me and why is my plan taken away and what am I supposed to do?" I don't know what I'm supposed to do. And it was that night...and He was very gracious....And I knew that night that I was called into ministry. I didn't really like His answer...but...Very unexpected but....past camp and after I fell very in love with the idea. I remember being at an evening rally and I told God "I will give my whole life to you and I will make this a real relationship.

**So when do you feel like your crisis of faith happened for you?**

My crisis...to pick a moment in time, probably that moment....my crisis was over that 3 month period was my crisis because I dropped low. I tore my ACL and that was one of the lowest points I have ever been in my life. I was depressed and I tried to fix that by drinking a ton...and just got into a bunch of different stuff...and so for those three months, at that time I was rock bottom.

## APPENDIX I: EXAMPLE CONDENSED SUMMARY

### Participant #1 Condensed Summary

#### When did you become a Christian and what was that experience like for you?

Participant 1 (P1) described being “abandoned” by her mom and living with several siblings. P1 described her struggle “with suicide” and an incident when she seriously considered attempting to kill herself by driving her car into an intersection. P1 felt “something” telling her to go home and she returned home and opened up to her aunt about her suicidal thoughts. Her aunt requested that P1 “read the Bible”. P1 did what he aunt suggested and describes a moment when she “put her finger on a verse” and it was a verse that she “needed to hear.” P1 described feeling abandoned and not chosen by both her parents that it is “exactly” what she needed. She started going to church after this.

***P1: I had been through a ton of crap.... My mom had abandoned us. So we lived with my siblings, cause we don't have the same dad.... I had really been struggling with suicide for quite a while. So... one day I was just like, "I cannot do this anymore... I am not going to." So I went and sat in a parking lot at an intersection and just watched the traffic....to see how I could drive into it and not come out of it.....something told me to go home. I didn't have a relationship with God or anything. I went to church a couple times when I was made to.... so I went home, and sat down with our aunt. I just told her "I need to talk to you" ...So....I said "what I'm going to tell you,...I don't want you to look at me differently, I don't want you to send me off somewhere, I don't want to go to a hospital or anything, I just have to tell somebody."***

*And... so I told her, I said "I've been struggling with suicidal thoughts for a very long time...."And...she said, "I want you to do something for me.." **And she said, "I want you to try to read the Bible."***

*I had never really opened the Bible.....**I'll try anything at this point... because I was so depressed every day. I knelt beside the bed, put the Bible on the bed, and I just let it fall open....I let it fall open and I put my finger on a verse, and..... it was Isaiah 43:4. And....He talks about, "You are precious to me, I will love you, and honor you so much that I will give other people in your place and other nations to save your life."** And I just bawled. And, that was exactly what I needed to hear. Like, all this time through my biological dad **not wanting me** because I was a girl, **my mom choosing drugs and a lifestyle over me** and my siblings she just left us and never came back.....**And I had just always felt abandonment, or not loved, or anything and so, that was exactly what I needed to hear.***