

**Fatherless Church:
Addressing the Issue of Father Absence Through Divorce in the American Church**

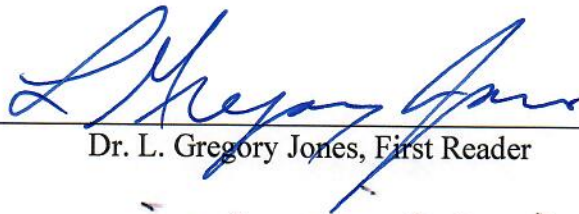
by

Ryan Nicholas Reed

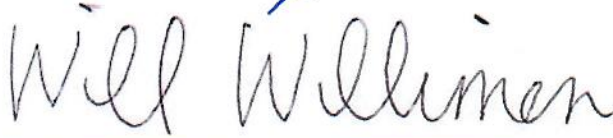
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Date: 21 January 2022

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of
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ABSTRACT

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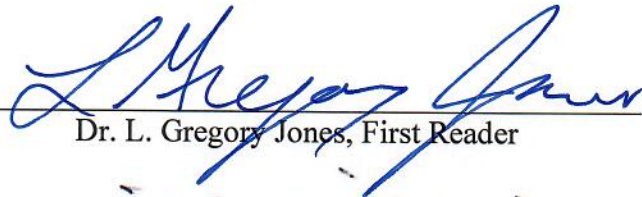
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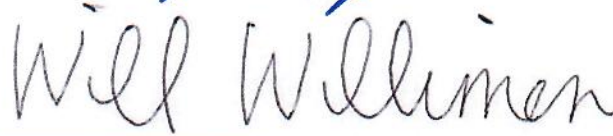
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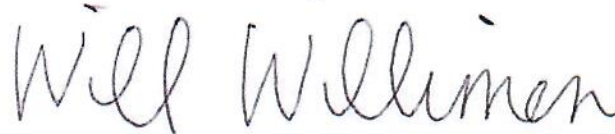
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Abstract

Fatherlessness may be one of the most critical issues facing American society. With the increasing prevalence of divorce in the twentieth century, more and more children face the harsh reality of growing up without their father present at home. Divorce is the number one predictor and cause of father absence. The emotional, social, and spiritual repercussions of growing up with an absent father last long after childhood ends. In fact, many children experience the tumultuous consequences of divorce and fatherlessness throughout their entire lives. Yet, the scriptures reveal God as a “father to the fatherless” (Psalm 68:1, NIV). Thus, as Christ’s Body alive in the world, this issue beckons the church’s best and most intentional response.

This thesis seeks to prove its argument by referencing the wide body of research on this issue available through books, journals, magazine articles and social research data. Sociologists and researchers began widely investigating divorce and fatherlessness in the early 1970s after California Governor Ronald Reagan passed the first ‘no-fault’ divorce laws in 1969. Intended to correct the abuses of the ‘fault’ divorce law system, ‘no-fault’ divorce introduced a whole new set of complications that now plague American society, which among the many include father absence.

Yet, as “the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ,” the church stands in a unique position to address this issue with authority and resolve. This endeavor calls both clergy and lay leaders, alike, who embody the threefold offices of Christ. Courageous leaders walking worthily of their calling (Ephesians 4:1) speak the truth in grace (prophetic), lead the broken and hurting into a life-giving relationship with Christ (priestly), and make a way for the reconciliation of relationships and the restoration of the family (kingly).

As leaders take on this monumental challenge, Design Thinking methodology specializes in finding solutions to complex and seemingly impossible societal challenges, such as divorce and fatherlessness. Design Thinking combined with Traditioned Innovation provides a framework for the church to honor and leverage the best of its history with a clearly defined, solution-based vision. These solutions, however, need practical implementation. This thesis closes with a brief presentation on a Logic Model to provide church leaders a way to execute on Design Thinking solutions toward maximum impact for the community and the Kingdom!

To Stacy

The love of my life and my rock, who prays for and encourages me every day to grow “to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13, NRSV).

To Hannah, Levi, Jacob, and Eden

My soaring arrows, who bring me great joy, fill my heart with so much love, and constantly show me the true adventure of fatherhood.

To Sean

My brother, who made the difficult journey of fatherlessness with me. I love you.

To all the fatherless children

Those hurting tonight, who feel abandoned and unworthy, your Heavenly Father sees you, and the church is on its way.

Oh, how I long for Heaven in a place called Earth, where every son and daughter would know
their worth.

– Jon Foreman, “A Place Called Earth”

Contents

Acknowledgements	x
Chapter 1 – Review of Literature	1
Personal Introduction	1
Statement of the Issue to be Addressed	1
Outline of Chapters	3
The Brutal Facts on Divorce	3
Fatherlessness and Divorce	8
Fatherlessness and Shame	12
Where Do We Go from Here?	13
Adoption into Christ’s Family	14
The Witness of the Church	19
The Vocation of Redeemed Sons and Daughters	20
Redeemed Sons and Daughters as Wounded Healers	23
Chapter 2 – A Sociological Review of Divorce and Fatherlessness	25
The Reformation and Enlightenment Eras	25
The Nineteenth Century Through the Golden Age	32
The Postmodern Marriage	38
Postmodernity and Unwed Parents	41
The Effects of Divorce on Children	42
Chapter 3 – A Christological Framework to View Divorce and Fatherlessness	48
“I believe in God, the Father Almighty”	53

“This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.”	55
A Father as Servant and King	63
Chapter 4 – The Church on Mission to the Fatherless	67
A Covenant People	68
Augustine and the Doctrine of the <i>Totus Christus</i>	69
The Church as the “Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ”	77
Chapter 5 – The Way of Leadership for the Fatherless Church	84
Leadership for the Missional Church	84
A Missional Church for the Fatherless	86
Leading a Life Worthy of the Call	88
The Pathway of Pastoral Leadership: The Three Offices of Christ	90
The Core Characteristic of Pastoral Leadership with the Fatherless	95
Chapter 6 – Leading the Church to Address Fatherlessness Through Divorce in the American Church	98
Creating a Better Story for the Divorced and Fatherless	99
Traditioned Innovation and Divorce and Fatherlessness	100
Leading with the End in Mind	102
Design Thinking on Divorce and Fatherlessness	104
Finding a Logic Model to Apply the Solutions of Design Thinking	112
Concluding Reflections on Divorce and Fatherlessness	113
Bibliography	115
Biography	123

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As a runner, I learned that great competitors never cross the finish line by themselves. Whether in competition or friendly races like 5Ks or city-wide marathons, a runner needs the support of a strong crew to cross the finish line. In writing this thesis, my crew consisted of scores of people who committed to pray for me, encourage me, ask me questions, review my material, and provide me with feedback to help this idea grow into something that might serve the church. While I am not able to acknowledge the whole team, a few special individuals who paced alongside me deserve mention.

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Likewise, thank you Dr. Will Willimon, who served as my second reader, for your encouragement and wisdom in class and in this writing. During my freshman year of college, I read your book *Calling and Character*. Twenty years ago, your mentorship from afar helped me begin my life in ministry. Never did I think that I would meet you, let alone complete my doctoral thesis with you. God bless you for your years of ministry service to the church.

The seed of this thesis was planted in conversation with Dr. Ken Hood, the 2019 Cohort Spiritual Formation Director, during my second intensive week (and last physical in person gathering) in January 2020. I entered Duke with one thesis idea in mind, but after my conversation with Ken that evening, I left with the early thoughts of what would become this thesis. Ken saw something deeper in me than I saw in myself. Thank you, Ken, for asking all the right questions to open my mind to the possibilities of this topic.

I need to acknowledge the 2019 Cohort, who gave me so much lift during our 3 years together. Over time, our motto became “fumbling with love,” which freed all of us to show up in conversations and debates without fear but in grace and truth. Prior to starting at Duke, I prayed for a cohort that would enrich my doctoral experience at Duke, and the Lord provided! Each one of you deserve a personal thank you by name: Adam Ridenour, Amy Rinehults, Angel Collie, BJ Nielsen, Brian McCormack, Cliff Matthews, Jr., Cola Collins, Craig Sefa, Daniel Corpening, Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes, Janice Hodges, Jeremy Scott, Jerry Christian, Julio Andujo, Kaiya Jennings, Rochelle Webster, Scott Searl, Stacy Nowell, and Tom Fay.

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I thank God for my mom, my hero, who mothered and fathered my brother and me through the challenges of fatherlessness with such love, mercy, and wisdom. I don't know where

I would be or how my life would have turned out without your sacrificial love for Sean and me. I pray that my life matches the value of the cost that you endured to give us a great life filled with opportunity and faith. I love you with all my heart. Your resilience continues to inspire me.

Thank you, Pastor Bill White, my father in the faith and mentor in ministry. After sharing with Stacy about my dream to pursue a doctorate, I spoke with you next, and you asked me all the right questions. Thank you for your support in this venture and for giving me one of the greatest gifts a fatherless son could want: a glimpse into life with a father.

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As I reflect on this race, with a tender heart, I thank God for each one of you and pray, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Leviticus 6:24-26, NRSV).

Chapter 1 – Review of Literature

Personal Introduction

The genesis of this thesis began more than 30 years ago during a crisp summer Sacramento evening in 1989. I was 5 years old. My father divorced my mom and, subsequently, left his family. I'm not aware of all the details that transpired during that time in my life, but I am all too familiar with the consequences of them. My brother and I grew up fatherless. Yet, through the enduring, God-given strength of my mom and the village of the Spirit, our local church, the Lord redeemed our pain into something extraordinary. This thesis seeks to point to that extraordinary transformation that took place within us.

Statement of the Issue to Be Addressed

My story is one of literally millions of other tragic stories of children who have faced father abandonment because of marital divorce. Theologian and scholar, Andrew Root, writes, “It may be that divorce is the defining generational mark of those raised after 1970, as the Kennedy assassination was for our parents, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor for our grandparents.¹ If this is the case, then fatherlessness is one of the regrettable results of divorce. Fatherlessness may very well be one of the most under-addressed social issues in American society today.² When test scores decrease in counties and states, more funding goes toward

¹ Andrew Root, *The Children of Divorce* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2010), loc 150, Kindle Edition.

² See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995).

education reform. When an airplane crashes, a national board of inquiry invests months of human resource and capital to investigate the cause. Yet, as millions of children go to sleep in homes across the country in which their fathers do not reside, little attention is being given to address this phenomenon in either churches or governmental agencies. Fatherlessness negatively affects the social-emotional well-being of children³ across all stages of life. Future generations need a better way, and the church is uniquely equipped to change the tide. The National Fatherhood Initiative contends that “there is a father factor in nearly all social ills facing America today”⁴ because of the hardships that children experience from divorce and, subsequently, fatherless homes.

Therefore, this thesis will seek to offer a practical theological framework for pastors to engage their congregations in reducing fatherlessness by addressing divorce and reframing the essential nature of fatherhood in families and our society.⁵ This thesis will examine the sociological phenomenon of divorce and the resulting effects of fatherlessness on families.⁶ As a result, millions of children and single mothers experience not only the economic and emotional hardship of fatherlessness but also the spiritual repercussions of shame caused by rejection. This thesis will explore Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Reconciliation as a guide toward developing a practical theological approach that helps children of fatherless homes restore their identity as adopted sons and daughters of the Most High God and helps fathers live into their God-given calling. Finally, this thesis will propose a programmatic opportunity to help churches reduce

³ Sara McLanahan, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 39 (2013).

⁴ “Father Absence and Involvement Statistics,” National Fatherhood Initiative, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://www.fatherhood.org/fatherhood-data-statistics>.

⁵ While many other factors contribute toward parental absence in a child’s life, this thesis will focus exclusively on divorce between two heterosexually married individuals.

⁶ See “Father Absence and Involvement Statistics.” While divorce rates may be decreasing within the United States, fatherlessness is increasing due to several factors, including out of wedlock child births and divorce.

fatherlessness in their local communities by applying the Design Thinking methodology and a logic model structured to allocate resources toward Kingdom and community impact.

Outline of Chapters

The remainder of chapter one will review pertinent literature on the social issue of divorce and the subsequent problem of fatherlessness. The second chapter will examine the socio-historical phenomenon of divorce and its effects on children. The chapter will close with a focused interrogation of fatherlessness and its unique impact on sons and daughters. Chapter three will propose a Christological framework that addresses divorce and fatherlessness through the lens of adoption into Christ's family. Chapter 4 will build an ecclesiological framework toward reconciliation and restoration among father-absent children, with a particular emphasis on St. Augustine's *totus Christus* and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics IV.3.II*. Chapter 5 will provide a missional leadership framework for pastors to engage the congregation and fathers on a worthy walk toward reconciliation in the home and within the community. And last, chapter 6 will offer a practical and programmatic framework for how churches might tangibly help divorced and fatherless families become restored into healthy, faithful homes that embrace as Ephesians 4:12-13 as a vision for their lives and faith.

The Brutal Facts on Divorce

In 2019, the national marriage rate was 16.3 per 1,000 women, while the divorce rate per

1,000 women was 7.6.⁷ This figure does not represent a clear percentage divorce rate. Rather, this data point shows that for nearly every 2 women who enter marriage (without distinction for how many times that woman has previously been married), another woman files for divorce (regardless of how many times that woman has previously filed for divorce). The CDC states, “Compared to married individuals, divorced persons exhibit higher levels of problems, greater risk of mortality, more social isolation, less satisfying sex lives, more negative life events, greater levels of depression and alcohol use, and lower levels of happiness and self-acceptance.”⁸ In general, the CDC recommends against divorce based on the negative health factors associated with it.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the general amount of time that both men and women have invested into marriage has declined due to delayed marriage, higher rates of divorce, and increasing rates of cohabitation.⁹ Black married couples show a higher likelihood toward marriage dissolution than white couples. One cause could be a phenomenon known among black Americans as the “marriage squeeze.” The CDC defines this issue as “when the ‘marriageable pool’ of black men is low due to high rates of joblessness, incarceration, and mortality. Employed men are more likely than unemployed men to marry.”¹⁰ The following factors increase the probability of divorce: “younger age at marriage, lower education and later birth cohort, later marriage cohort and presence of a premarital birth, premarital cohabitation,

⁷ On the issue of focusing on females only for marriage and divorce rates, the CDC research methods states, “Historically, women’s data have often been presented when a choice needs to be made. Research shows that [women] were more often reporting the data for themselves and reporting more accurately.” From: “U.S. Marriage and Divorce Rates by State: 2009 & 2019,” United States Census Bureau, accessed June 27, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/marriage-divorce-rates-by-state-2009-2019.html>

⁸ “Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States,” Center for Disease Control: Vital and Health Statistics, Series 23, Number 22 (July 2002): 3-4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and premarital sexual activity.”¹¹ The CDC also cites psychiatric disorders linked to marital dissatisfaction, including: “General Anxiety Disorder, depression, and panic.”¹² Last, certain economic issues create marital instability and favor opportunities for divorce. The CDC states, “Marriage market conditions may also play a role, in that the probability of divorce is higher in areas with large numbers of economically attractive potential alternate partners.” In other words, greed plays a role in divorce. Partners with higher economic earning potential – in both men and women – increase instability and probabilities of divorce without proper interventions and care.

Not surprising, the CDC concludes that multiple adverse outcomes arise for children of divorced homes. Even when the mother remarries, studies suggest that children in re-married homes experience similar life-long outcomes as those who grow up in single-parent homes. The CDC states, “Both groups of children do worse than children living with two biological parents in terms of academic achievement, depression, and behavior problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, premarital sexual intercourse, and being arrested.”¹³ Studies have shown that children of divorced homes compared with children with both biological parents living in the home “score lower on measures of self-concept, social competence, conduct, psychological adjustment and long-term health.”¹⁴ Furthermore, children from divorced homes are more likely to drop out of high school, have lower grades and attendance while in school, and are less likely to attend and graduate from college than children raised in two-parent families... and more likely, ultimately, to become single parents themselves.”¹⁵ The socio-emotional effects of divorce manifest in a variety of externalizing behaviors, such as poverty, truancy, juvenile delinquency, early sexual

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

activity, and teen pregnancy.¹⁶

Yet, for most children, the effects of divorce lay far below the surface. Marquardt argues that for many children of divorce, the effects of divorce are often less overt. Marquardt cites the research of Judith Wallerstein, who claims that divorce affects children long into adulthood, stating: “[Wallerstein] shows that experiencing parental divorce during childhood has a ‘sleeper effect’: its worst symptoms often appear when children of divorce leave home and attempt to form intimate relationships and families of their own, but do so with much less ability to trust and little idea of what a lasting marriage looks like.”¹⁷ The subtle, long-lasting effects of divorce can neither be overlooked nor overstated based on how a person’s behaviors appear on the surface. Though divorce’s effects may cause some to commit spectacular acts of failure or self-destruction, for most children of divorce, the consequences tend to linger under the radar for years or even decades following the event. Even when a child, teenager, young adult, or adult appears ‘fine’ on the outside, underneath the surface, there exists the slow rumblings of tumult and distrust, giving rise to other less visible issues, such as depression, detachment, anxiety, and the inability to experience intimacy.¹⁸

Divorce severs the communal and familial identity of children, causing a disruption in a child’s ontological sense of self.¹⁹ The founding community for every child consists of one mother and one father. Regardless of the love shared or relational status between a child’s

¹⁶ Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), Loc 325, Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Loc 335-338.

¹⁸ Marquardt argues in chapter 1 that divorce resulting from low-conflict marriages tends to give rise to invisible emotional stressors.

¹⁹ Root argues that divorce fundamentally calls into question a child’s sense of self and need for love. He states, “When the two selves are allowed to depart the union when there is no longer love, the product of this love, the children, who need the family in order to understand themselves, are left without it. The family is an environment created in either actual or perceived love that the child needs to know himself or herself, and his or her world.” Andrew Root, *The Children of Divorce* (Grand Rapids, Baker Publishing Group, 2010), 23.

biological parents, a child enters the world wired for relationship, beginning first with these two individuals.²⁰ Thus, when the unity of parental marriage disintegrates, this poses an ontological threat to the being of the child. Root states, “Divorce should be seen as not just the split of a social unit, but the break of the community in which the child’s identity rests.”²¹ The consummation of a marriage covenant established by two individuals creates not only a new family for the blessing of the world but also one entity from two individuals by the unifying power of the Holy Spirit. Divorce severs this oneness, but the child formed by this union still finds her or his identity through this oneness. Therefore, when one becomes two and the parental fellowship ceases, then the child is left to contend with the question: Who am I now as a child, a human being, whose primary identity resides in a parental union that no longer exists?²²

According to both Marquardt and Root, such an identity disruption at any age of a child’s life places the child’s sense of self in jeopardy.²³ Marquardt’s research discovered that even in the best situations, a ‘good divorce’ still threatens a child’s identity. Marquardt states, “While a ‘good divorce’ is better than a bad divorce, it is still not good. For no matter how amicable divorced parents might be and how much they each love and care for the child, their willingness to do these things does absolutely nothing to diminish the radical restructuring of the child’s universe.”²⁴ Among young adults from divorced homes, those who experienced a ‘good divorce’ fared worse than young adults who grew up with parents who identified their marriage as

²⁰ Root argues that one’s very being exists within the framework of a community, writing: “The most significant and core of these communities is the one made up of a biological mother and father. Without their community, there would be no child.” *Ibid.*, Loc 130, Kindle

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Root bases this argument in a Hegelian philosophy known as Dasein, which translates to: “being there” *Ibid.*, loc 164.

²³ Root’s introduction cites the turmoil that he endured in adulthood over his parents’ divorce. Likewise, Marquardt’s research through her book affirms that adult children of divorced parents also face emotional hardships, though on a lesser level than younger children.

²⁴ Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds*, Loc 445, Kindle Edition

‘unhappy.’²⁵ Whatever circumstances lead to divorce, the research concludes that the effects of divorce on children at any age are negative.²⁶

Fatherlessness and Divorce

From the most recent 2020 Census Bureau reports,²⁷ one in four children under the age of eighteen, totaling approximately 18.3 million children, are being raised without a biological, step, or adoptive father present in the home.²⁸ The 2020 census reported an increase of 1.1 million father-absent children since 2016.²⁹ Additionally, based on the same 2020 U.S. census data, “20.2% (about 7 million) of all biological fathers are ‘absent’ dads of *all* of their minor children”³⁰ across multiple households and not necessarily resulting from divorce. Compared to children born within marriage, children born to cohabiting parents are three times as likely to experience father absence, and children born to unmarried, non-cohabiting parents are four times as likely to live in a father-absent home. About 40% of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all during the past year; 26% of absent fathers live in a different state than their children; and 50% of children living absent their father have never set foot in their father’s home.³¹

²⁵ Ibid., Loc 441.

²⁶ Yet, whatever the effects of divorce, divorce is always a preferred option when abuse or neglect are taking place in a family.

²⁷ The U.S. Census has indicated that due to so many late responses because of COVID-19, demographic information on family structures will not be released until sometime in late 2020.

²⁸ “The Proof is In: Father Absence Harms Children,” National Fatherhood Initiative, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.fatherhood.org/father-absence-statistic>.

²⁹ Esther Streicher, “When Fathers Leave: Effects on the Self and Other Relationships (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing: 2020), 1.

³⁰ “Solo Dads and Absent Dads Not as Different as They Seem.” United States Census Bureau, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/11/the-two-extremes-of-fatherhood.html>.

³¹ “Research and Statistics,” Rochester Area Fatherhood Network, accessed on June 11, 2021, <http://www.rochesterareafatherhoodnetwork.org/statistics>.

Fatherlessness and divorce go hand in hand together. Other factors, however, also contribute to fatherlessness. Births between consenting, unmarried adults account for the second highest number of fatherless children. Emotional detachment contributes to the effects of fatherlessness among children, even if the father resides in the home. Death leaves children fatherless. Though relatively low among our society, sperm donors also account for fatherlessness. Divorce, however, is the number one cause of fatherless children in the United States.³² Popenoe writes, “Although not always an intended measure of fatherlessness, divorce-effect studies provide in fact such a measure because most children of divorce end up living in single parent families apart from their fathers.”³³ While not all husbands who divorce their spouses abandon their children, divorce has nearly a one-to-one correlation with father abandonment. For children, the effects of both living in a single parent household and fatherlessness intertwines so closely that “in many studies the factors are combined or are virtually inseparable.”³⁴ Thus, to address divorce, then, is to essentially address fatherlessness.

Prior to the 1960s, the number one cause of fatherlessness among children was paternal death. Inadequate healthcare and two world wars contributed to similar numbers of fatherless children in the first half of the twentieth century that exist today. Yet, a child’s memory of a healthy, present father creates lasting positive affects for the child into adulthood.³⁵ The volitional abandonment of a father with his children, however, diminishes the family and demeans the child. Blankenhorn writes, “Historically, we have viewed the death of a father as one of the greatest tragedies possible in the life of a child. Today, we increasingly view the

³² David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Blankenhorn, *Fatherless*, 23.

departure of a father as one of the things that we must simply get used to.”³⁶ The rise of volitional fatherlessness leads to the most severe impact on the holistic development of children in every way. Blankenhorn writes, “Death kills men but sustains fatherhood. Abandonment sustains men but kills fatherhood.”³⁷ What if the church learned to see father abandonment as more devastating to a child than the death of a father?

In most cases, divorced fathers lose a significant majority of, if not all, contact with their children. Judith Seltzer argues, “marriage and co-residence usually define the responsibilities to children.”³⁸ The demands of childrearing require a consistent routine for parents and children. As the divorce boom began with the onset of the first ‘no-fault’ divorce laws passed in California in 1969 by Governor Ronald Reagan, sociologists and psychologists once conceived of a high-divorce society where men and women could co-parent with little to no effect on the children. The opposite proved true. The average married father spends roughly 6.5 hours per week conducting primary parenting duties, such as taking children to appointments, helping with homework, cooking, and reading bedtime stories. Conversely, divorced fathers spend far less time on these tasks. Roughly 22% of divorced fathers see their children once a week. A further 29% see their children less than four times per month. And most concerning is that 27% have absolutely no contact with their children at all and spend no time parenting their children.³⁹ In the months and years following divorce, contact with children dramatically decreases with fathers. In their book *Divided Families*, Furstenberg and Cherlin conclude based on empirical studies of divorced families that “over time, the vast majority of children [of divorce] will have

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Denise Erlich, “Single Fathers, Single Mothers, and Child Custody Statistics,” Erlich Law Office, LLC, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://erlichlegal.com/blog/single-fathers-single-mothers-child-custody-statistics/>.

little or no contact with their fathers.”⁴⁰

Father abandonment leads to a wide variety of emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical distresses. Beginning in the earliest moments of a child’s life, the absence of a father’s nurturing love effects a newborn baby’s physiological development. In a 2016 clinical report, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended to all pediatric care providers that a father’s presence in a newborn baby’s life positively correlates to the mitigation of disease spread. Furthermore, the report also demonstrated that absent fathers adversely affect a newborn baby’s ability to properly latch onto the mother’s breast for feeding. The report concluded that present father figures across all family structures, including residential and non-residential fathers in both hetero- and homo-sexual family types, provide greater psychological and physiological stability than children without a father or father figure present in the home.⁴¹

In the years between the divorce boom, beginning in 1969 til the end of the twentieth century, the well-being of children decreased dramatically for the first time in modern history. Juvenile crimes increased by six times during a period when the number of minor-aged children remained stable. Reports of child neglect and abuse quintupled. Increases of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders soared dramatically. The most impoverished among the US population shifted from the elderly to the youngest and most vulnerable children in our society.⁴² While Popenoe and other sociologists acknowledge factors such as commercialism, the widespread availability of guns, and the decline of religion as contributing factors to the decreasing wellness of children, Popenoe states, “the evidence is now strong that the loss of fathering from the lives

⁴⁰ Popenoe, *Life Without Father*, 31.

⁴¹ Garfield Yogman. “Fathers’ Roles in the Care and Development of Their Children: The Role of Pediatricians,” *Pediatrics*, (Clinical Report: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016), e7.

⁴² Popenoe, *Life Without Father*, 53.

of children is one of the most prominent reasons of all.”⁴³

Fatherlessness and Shame

Truly, fatherlessness is the ultimate form of rejection. For a child, if father can leave, then who else? Volitional father abandonment pronounces judgment and rejection upon a child’s ontological sense of self, causing that child to experience shame. In her seminal book, *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown argues that shame is “the fear of disconnection.”⁴⁴ Connection gives purpose and meaning to life. Human beings need connection. God hardwired humanity for connection, creating all people in God’s image, and inviting us into a love relationship with God and others. Brown argues that whenever someone becomes insecure and afraid of either not making a connection or disconnecting from an already established relationship, such as with a father, then the natural emotion that one feels is shame. Brown writes, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”⁴⁵ Father abandonment severs one of the most essential and biological relationships in a child’s life. Thus, one of the most poignant and painful emotions that a fatherless child will experience is shame.

Shame may be one of the most destructive emotions in humanity and most common among fatherless children and children living in divorced homes. Dalbey argues, “When a man doesn’t get from his father what he needs for manhood, the vacuum in his masculine soul fills with shame.”⁴⁶ When a father engages in a healthy relationship with his daughter, he inspires her

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Avery, An imprint of Penguin Random House, 2012), 68.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁶ Gordon Dalbey, *Sons of the Father* (Folsom, CA: Civitas Press, 2011), 10.

sense of agency, autonomy, and ability to individuate into a larger sense of self.⁴⁷ Conversely, for father absent daughters, the void of male affirmation may lead her to seek an idealistic love, projecting grandiosity onto her lovers or sons.⁴⁸ Recent Census data shows that daughters of single parents without a father involved are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers, 711% more likely to have children as teenagers, 164% more likely to have a pre-marital birth and 92% more likely to get divorced themselves. Adolescent girls raised in a two-parent home with involved fathers, however, are significantly less likely to be sexually active than girls raised without involved fathers.⁴⁹ Both fatherless sons and daughters experience significant emotional, sexual, and relational issues, leading to shame and unhealthy behaviors.

Where Do We Go from Here?

These statistics show a stark reality. Every percentage represents an empty seat at the table, the quiet tears of a teenage girl, and the anxious thoughts of a young boy eating his meal at home alone. The data presented in this thesis points to homes in every neighborhood across the United States. This issue impacts families of every race, religion, geography, and socio-economic status. This issue highlights the shadow side of the human experience, which begs the question: what is the role of the local church to address divorce and fatherlessness?

Divorce and the subsequent challenge of fatherlessness defines one of the most critical familial and societal issues of our day. Over the last century, the entire landscape of marriage and family has been transformed by a once-in-a-millennium shift among technological and cultural

⁴⁷ See Streicher, *When Fathers Leave*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Research and Statistics," Rochester Area Fatherhood Network, accessed on June 11, 2021, <http://www.rochesterareafatherhoodnetwork.org/statistics>.

norms. While this has brought welcome change to the world, it has wreaked havoc on the home, which has left behind countless children in its wake. Of any institution in the world to tackle divorce and fatherlessness, the corporate Body of Christ, the Church, is equipped with the messaging, resources, and power not only to address this issue but change the tide. In fact, the Church's lack of engagement on this issue will only result in increasing the 81% of non-Christians who already do not have a positive perception of the local church. Moreover, 52% of non-Christians do not trust local church pastors and ministry leaders.⁵⁰ Perhaps one way for the church to earn the trust of the community and follow the way of our Savior's command to love is to reach out and care for a segment of the community that most people would agree need attention: fatherless children.

Adoption into Christ's Family

Every child desires a father. It's a tale as old as time and literature itself. Telemachus begins his odyssey in search for his absent father, and so, too, goes the odyssey of every fatherless child in every generation. Among the earliest leaders of the Christian Church, Augustine documents much of his own father woundedness in *Confessions*. He recalls his father's alcoholism, abuse, and general neglect toward him and his mother. James K.A. Smith writes of Augustine's father in *On the Road with Saint Augustine*, "His failure as a father reflects a certain failure at being human."⁵¹ Augustine's own search for a father led him into a friendship with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who mentored and disciplined Augustine into an intellectually

⁵⁰ Carey Nieuwhof, "The Self-Awareness Gap: What Non-Christian People Really Think About the Church," accessed June 28, 2021, <https://careynieuwhof.com/the-self-awareness-gap-what-non-christian-people-really-think-about-the-church/>.

⁵¹ James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019) 198.

informed faith through the tender approach of a father with his son. Smith writes that Ambrose “helped Augustine over some intellectual hurdles by first loving him like a father.”⁵² A father-figure’s love in Ambrose softened a young fatherless Augustine’s heart to grow in love for Christ and the church.

Augustine’s exploration of Luke 15 most directly speaks to how God the Father satisfied Augustine’s own father hunger by finding and adopting him into His family through Christ Jesus. Quoting Augustine in *Confessions*, Smith writes, “‘To be comforted by the word of God’s grace unto the hope of pardon of our sins,’ Augustine comments, ‘is to return after a long journey to obtain from a father the kiss of love.’”⁵³ All fatherless sons and daughters long for a father’s affectionate embrace. Though this hope may never come true for some, God the Father promises to embrace us, welcome us into his kingdom, give us an inheritance, and offer His Spirit to us as a guarantee that He won’t ever leave or forsake us but remain ever-present as God with us! Smith writes, “At the heart of the madness of the gospel is an almost unbelievable mystery that speaks to a deep human hunger only intensified by a generation of broken homes: to be seen and known and loved by a father. Maybe navigating the tragedy and heartbreak of this fallen world is realizing this hunger might not be met by the ones we expect, or hope will come looking for us, but then meeting a Father who adopts you, who chooses you, who sees you a long way off and comes running and says, ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’”⁵⁴ This is the heart of the Gospel. Smith states, “If Christianity is ultimately the proclamation of a gracious Father who runs to the end of the road to gather up his prodigals, it is decidedly *not* an ethereal appeal to yet another absent but heavenly Father.”⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 201.

⁵³ Ibid., 200.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Undoubtedly, Augustine's father hunger informed the development of the *Totus Christus* doctrine. The *Totus* claims that in Christ, all believers become united into an existential relationship with Christ and one another by the bonding power of the Holy Spirit to form the Church, the Body of Christ. More than friendship, formed by the new covenant, the Body of Christ comprises a new family where Christ's Spirit unites all believers together as one united body through adoption into the Father's family. Smith writes, "Indeed, to be adopted by this Father is to be enfolded in a new household where family is redefined, and bloodlines transcended by the genealogy of grace. In the household of God's grace, you find sisters and brothers you never knew you had, and father figures where you didn't expect to find them."⁵⁶

Augustine's earliest sermon on the *Totus* draws on Psalm 17. The final verse declares: "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied, *beholding your likeness*" (Psalm 17:15, NRSV, emphasis mine). In the Psalms, Augustine employs a prosopological hermeneutic, which interprets the Psalms through Christ himself as the primary speaking voice. Thus, in Psalm 17, according to Augustine, Christ holds the very substance of God in his physical body, which he then gave to the Church by the power of his Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

According to Augustine, the *Totus Christus* doctrine teaches that the church encompasses the real, living essence of Christ's Body in the world, embodied through believers who profess faith in Christ. The doctrine of the *Totus Christus* represents how the church manifests the literal character and activity of Christ's work through the calling, fellowship, mission, and dare I say, family, of its members. Moser states, "And by this same divine power working in his bodily death and resurrection (Rom. 7:4), Christ has made us his body so that 'we, who are many, are

⁵⁶ Ibid., 202.

one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another' (Rom. 12:5, NRSV)."⁵⁷ As the fellowship of believers, God's Spirit unites all of God's people to form one Body, one family, with Christ as its Head. Moser states, "For Augustine, this scriptural teaching reveals a crucial claim about the Church's identity: Christ is united with his Church so that one new spiritual entity—the *Totus Christus*—comes to be."⁵⁸

Some scholars claim, however, that the *Totus Christus* doctrine crosses a line between the church as *embodying* the living essence of Christ and the church as *being* the living essence of Christ. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that Augustine overreaches his definition of the church by linking the people of God with the incarnation of Christ. Vanhoozer states, "When Reformed Protestants speak of 'the whole Christ,' the reference is often not to Head and Body, but to Christ's person and work."⁵⁹ Vanhoozer then quotes Bavinck, saying: "we receive and take on the whole Christ and give ourselves entirely and completely to him (2 Cor. 8:5). However, there is no Christification or deification of the believer, no blending, no exchanging of Christ and the believer, but a spiritual fellowship."⁶⁰ Vanhoozer notes that the *Totus Christus* emphasizes a believer's *joining* to the mystical body of Christ, while the Reformation doctrine of *Solus Christus* emphasizes a believer's mystical *union* with Christ. Vanhoozer states, "I venture to suggest that 'union with Christ' emphasizes a person's individual and communal *participation in* (i.e. spiritual *fellowship with*) the person and work of Christ, whereas *Totus Christus* tends to put the accent on the Church as the (institutional or organic) *continuation* of the person and work of

⁵⁷ J. David Moser, "Totus Christus: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology." *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, Vol 29, (2020), 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer "Hocus Totus," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, Vol 29, (2020), 37.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Christ.”⁶¹ Yet, Moser clearly delineates Augustine’s argument between the church as Christ’s body and Christ as the incarnation of the living God by following Barth’s argument, who affirmed the *Totus Christus*, “to guard against viewing Christ and the church as numerically identical.”⁶² What the *Totus* seeks to advance is the continuation of Christ’s mission in the world. True fellowship only truly occurs when the church is alive and obedient to its Head, Christ Jesus, on mission to advance the Father’s Kingdom in the world! Otherwise, the fellowship of the church is nothing more than a mere social club. Fatherless children and divorced families don’t need a social club. They need the living witness of Christ to invite them into Kingdom living.

The church is alive and active, not as the incarnate Son of God, but through God’s Spirit alive in it! Without Christ’s Spirit alive in the church, then the church would cease to be. According to Augustine, the mysterious union between Christ and the church is understood “in some way as the whole Christ (*Totus Christus*) in the fullness of the church, that is, Head and Body, according to the completeness of a certain perfect man, the man in whom we are each members.”⁶³ This does not create, in turn, members who become miniature version of the incarnate Christ. Rather, through the victory of His resurrection and initiation of His ascension, Christ lives on in the world through the ministry of all of those who profess faith in His name and tangibly live out God’s promise to always be: “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling” (Psalm 68:5, NIV). The church is this holy, set apart community who possesses the power of God’s Spirit to change the tide of fatherlessness. Christ’s work continues today through each member’s faithful witness to His mission in the world!

⁶¹ Ibid., 38.

⁶² Ibid., 39.

⁶³ Moser quoting Augustine in “Totus.” See Augustine, *Sermo* 341.1 in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* (PL), vol. 39, ed. J-P Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844–1864), col. 1493.

The Witness of the Church

In his collection of essays in *God Here and Now*, Karl Barth calls the church a “dynamic reality.”⁶⁴ Its existence arose from Christ’s resurrection and lives on today by the power of God’s Spirit alive and active in the formation, calling, and vocation of the community. Hunsinger writes, “[The church] attests the reconciliation in Christ that has already taken place and awaits the ultimate unity of all things to eternal life. In its vocation of attesting Christ, it is a living community— ‘the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ’”⁶⁵ Like Augustine, Barth understood that the church as a living entity. All of those who participate in the life of the church participate in the life of Christ here and now. For fatherless sons and daughters, the church is more than a life raft on an open ocean of despair. It is a living grace, real love, and the tangible presence of our eschatological hope in a new and restored family to come. No other organization or entity in this world shares the same purpose for which God called the Church. Therefore, no other organization can offer redemption for fatherless children and divorced families than the Church. Many organizations can help, but no other organization can offer ontological redemption, new life!

Barth offers a compelling vision for leadership in Christ’s realized and present Body in the world. He writes, “It is in this event that God allows these men to be heralds of the victory which He has won over sin, suffering, and death, harbingers of His coming revelation and those who make known the burning love of the Creator for His whole creation. The Church is the community of men which God allows to live under this determination and with this character.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Karl Barth, *God Here and Now* (London: Routledge Classic, 2003), 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, loc 134

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Christ gave the church and empowered its witness to Christ's redemptive work so that all people may receive salvation from the sin of fatherlessness and become reconciled to God as His son or daughter. God calls all men and women to participate in this vocation, and to some, God calls to pastor. Thus, as a pastoral leader called and equipped to steward Christ's Body, one must lead the Body toward the determination and character of God's grace for all to receive adoption into God's family through Christ. To pastor without leading the fatherless into spiritual adoption misses the mark of pastoral leadership over Christ's Body.

The Vocation of Redeemed Sons and Daughters

In *Called to Witness*, Darrell Guder calls this ethic "walking worthily." He writes, "'Walking worthily' appears to be a key description of the life and conduct of these communities as they continue the apostolic witness that is their very reason for being. They are to walk worthy of God, of his call, of the Lord, of the gospel of Christ, of the calling to which they have been called."⁶⁷ This is a Christian's vocation. Following in the theological logic of Barth, Guder argues that if a Christian only understands their faith within the context of justification and sanctification without vocation, then that person will become inevitably trapped in the wretched arms of western individualism and miss out on the full transformation of the Gospel. Similarly, fatherless sons and daughters who have already endured the hardship of isolation because of shame from abandonment need more than a Gospel that begins with justification and ends with sanctification. While one may still experience the joy of a life saved by grace through faith and the Spirit's healing of sin with only this knowledge of faith, that person will not experience the

⁶⁷ Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, ed. John R. Franke, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 130.

abundant life that Christ promised in John 10:10 until she or he decidedly walks worthy of the calling to which God uniquely called every person.

While a Christian's vocation may take on unique traits, some constants remain true for all Christ followers. One unchanging factor is for all Christ followers to be a blessing to others. Missiologist, Christopher Wright, turns to Abraham in Genesis, "No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Genesis 18:19, NRSV). God sought the trust of an unknown nomad to serve as God's chosen instrument of generational blessing for the world. Wright states, "The power of Abraham's personal example was to be reinforced and multiplied by direct instruction and moral formation. Abraham's family, and then his whole household after him—that is, the whole community of Abraham's descendants who would be the people of God—were to be taught to walk in the way of the Lord, by doing righteousness and justice."⁶⁸ To this day, God's preferred mode of blessing continues through the church. Like Abraham, God desires to bless the world through Christ's living body in the world! And where does this blessing seem to begin? *In the family*. Perhaps the first steps of a Christian's long worthy walk ought to begin at home. Even if reconciliation cannot take place, the place of justification, the beginning of healing (sanctification), and the start of one's missional work (vocation) begins at home, the place where many of God's sons and daughters experienced the greatest wounding.

As Marquardt outlined earlier in this chapter, many children of divorce, and subsequently, father abandonment, live life relatively normal on the outside, disguising and hiding many of the hurt emotions on the inside. Peter Scazzero calls this the "shadow side."

⁶⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 83.

Scazzero defines the shadow as “the accumulation of untamed emotions, less-than-pure motives and thoughts that, while largely unconscious, strongly influence and shape your behaviors. It is the damaged but mostly hidden version of who you are.”⁶⁹ Facing the shadow side of oneself doesn’t come easy. It requires great courage. Yet, in doing so, one is given the opportunity to gaze upon Christ’s saving love and redemption from the shadows. Often, as scary as the shadows may seem, facing the shadows initiates the liberty for which our souls long and Christ provides!

The parable of the Prodigal Son shows a Father not waiting to punish but longing to receive. Nouwen’s work *The Return of the Prodigal Son* shows this truth through the lens of Rembrandt’s paintings based on the Luke 15 passage. Nouwen writes of the prodigal’s return,

Seeing Jesus himself as the prodigal son goes far beyond the traditional interpretation of the parable. Nonetheless, this vision holds a great secret. I am gradually discovering what it means to say that my sonship and the sonship of Jesus are one, that my return and the return of Jesus are one, that my home and the home of Jesus are one. There is no journey to God outside of the journey that Jesus made. The one who told the story of the prodigal son is the Word of God, “through whom all things came into being.”⁷⁰

Jesus came to rescue, not as one apart from us, but as God with us. Christ showed the way for abandoned sons and daughters to return home to a waiting Father, the Father that every fatherless son and daughter truly desires. Christ even showed the way as an abandoned son himself, assuming humanity’s sin and death on the cross, separated from God the Father, and crying out

⁶⁹ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 25.

⁷⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group, 1992), 73-74.

the same question that every fatherless child asks: “Why have you forsaken me?” Jesus knows the pain of rejection, but also the promise of reconciliation.

Redeemed Sons and Daughters as Wounded Healers

Nouwen also provides a framework in *The Wounded Healer* for how a Christ follower lives out their vocation to help other abandoned sons and daughters turn to Christ and return home to their Heavenly Father. He suggests that Christians lead from their woundedness, especially to those in the rising generations behind them. He states, “We are facing a generation which has parents but no fathers, a generation in which everyone who claims authority—because he is older, more mature, more intelligent or more powerful—is suspect from the very beginning.”⁷¹ For those who are suspicious of anyone who displays father-figure leadership, the way into relationship, Nouwen and Brene Brown argue, is through vulnerability. The great dare of leadership is how one shows the healed wounds by the Wounded Healer himself. Pain is the teacher, not comfort.

This task cannot be undertaken alone, however. It takes place in the company of what Greg Jones calls “holy friendship.” He writes, “Holy friends help us to see the world first and foremost through God’s eyes, so we can locate ourselves in the larger story of God. We need help from our holy friends, and we in turn offer such hope to them, to see God at work in our lives and in the world. Too often our own self-understanding is distorted by sin, by self-deception, by our participation in destructive mindsets, habits, and practices. Holy friendships reorient us and stir our imaginations.”⁷² Holy friendships help us see our shadow sides. They

⁷¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1972), 30.

⁷² L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 88.

make the journey far less painful and a lot more fun. Holy friendships provide wounded pastors with the kind of stability and proper confidence necessary to lead amidst personal and organizational tumult.

Yet, for fatherless children, if there is anything to be gained from father abandonment, it is the rare kind of resilience coupled with grit that results from persevering through hardship. Angela Duckworth defines grit as the combination of “passion and perseverance.”⁷³ William Willimon says that nothing bad ever happens to pastors because all things can be transformed in ministry for Christ’s glory, even circumstances as atrocious as father abandonment! Truly, a wounded healer with resilient grit is an unstoppable force within the Body of Christ on mission in the world!

In the next chapter, this thesis will explore the history of divorce and fatherless in the United States to better understand how the church may address this issue.

⁷³ Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 7.

Chapter 2 – A Sociological Review of Divorce and Fatherlessness

Fatherlessness is one of the most critical issues facing this generation. Under the right set of circumstances, absent fathers may arise from any kind of household, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, religious belief, or geography. Since the 1970s, divorce continues to be the number one predictor of fatherlessness in the United States.¹ So long as divorce continues to persist across American society, producing hundreds of thousands of new father-absent kids every year, then fatherlessness will be an ongoing concern for the church to tackle. Thus, to understand how fatherlessness became such a significant sociological issue, this thesis will offer a brief survey of the history of marriage from the eras of the Reformation and Enlightenment to the present day and show how the circumstances concerning divorce evolved during those eras to create the kind of impact that children experience in their lives. While the issue of divorce impacts all people across sociological, racial, and economic divides, this thesis will predominantly focus on the history of marriage and the impact of divorce on the working and middle classes. All else is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The Reformation and Enlightenment Eras

For millennia, marriage predominantly sought to accomplish one single priority: advancement. Coontz argues, “The system of marrying for political and economic advancement was practically universal across the globe for many millennia.”² Advancement brought security,

¹ David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 26.

² Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 7

and with security, families could produce offspring, develop property, merge, and build wealth through the generations, along with defend against those who sought to infringe upon a family's property, people, or prestige. Marriage functioned like a social contract to ensure that all parties involved secured the requirements for survival—first and foremost—and then progress into the higher classes in society. To accomplish this priority, parents or other close family members typically arranged the marriage of their children with another family that possessed the prerequisites and economic opportunity for advancement.

Across cultures and geographic locations, generation after generation adhered to this way of practicing marriage. Of course, some anomalies occurred.³ Yet this social construction of marriage in some shape or form persevered throughout history. That is, until the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) and the Enlightenment eras (1715-1789) arose in Western European society. The Reformation introduced dignity to all people, especially for women and children. Many historians agree that among the many tectonic shifts initiated by the Reformation, the validation and celebration of marriage as the locus of love and companionship between a man and a woman was one of the most significant.⁴ The Catholic Church, however, remained firm on their doctrinal positions against clergy marriage and the meaning of marriage among the laity. In 1563, the Council of Trent declared, "If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy, let him be anathema."⁵ Yet, generally, Protestants argued that the institution of marriage and its benefit for men, women, children, and the wider community

³ Ibid., 24. Sociologists know of only one society in world history that did not make marriage a central way of organizing social and personal life, the Na people of China. With that exception, marriage has been, in one form or another, a universal social institution throughout recorded history.

⁴ Ibid., 123.

⁵ Ibid., 134.

served as one of the primary building blocks for society as a whole. Protestant reformers boldly and publicly rebuked the widely accepted practice of adultery that “marked courtly love poetry and popular literature of the Middle Ages.”⁶ The Reformation also introduced a subtle shift away from marriage as a social contract between families to marriage as the economic, political, and religious foundation for the nuclear family.⁷ As the Reformers sought to counter the Catholic church’s hold over the lives of its parishioners, a family’s source of identity began to differentiate from the wider clan and village to the parents and children. The Reformation ushered in a relatively new concept of marriage that consisted of marital and familial privacy among the community, rather than a home comprised of multi-generational family units living in the same space.⁸ The Reformers led through a dress rehearsal of what would become one of the Enlightenment era’s core ideals: the individual as an autonomous, self-determining human being.

The rise of the Enlightenment forever altered the social landscape of the world, including marriage and family. The Enlightenment inaugurated a new way of thought in western culture, including early glimpses of what would eventually become a market-based economy. Known as the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment established empiricism and humanism as dominant philosophical ideologies. Moreover, virtues such as liberty, liberalism, consumerism, and the separation of church and state also grew out of this period. This era in human history opened the possibility for individual autonomy to rise as one of the essential values of western culture. Rene

⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁷ Coontz argues for how this shift took place: “The growing economic importance and political independence of the nuclear family led writers of all religious persuasions to direct more attention to relations between husband and wife. Because marriage was so important, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentators agreed, people ought to think carefully about the character, as well as the wealth, of their partners. The best mate was someone whose social station, temperament, values, and work ethic were similar to one’s own. There should also be enough love, or least mutual respect, between prospective partners to prevent quarrels that might disrupt the orderly functioning of the household.” Coontz, *Marriage*, 134.

⁸ Ibid.

Descartes, widely regarded as the Father of the Enlightenment once penned the famous words, “I think, therefore I am,” originally published in *Discourse on the Method* in 1637. Descartes’s logic ended up significantly shaping marriage and family. For the first time in human history, husbands and wives viewed their marriage not as a tool for clan and village advancement but as a means by which one may experience personal fulfillment.

Additionally, one of the primary confessional texts that gave shape to the theological foundation of the Reformation offered a fresh reframe of the marriage and family. The Second Helvetic Confession, written by Heinrich Bullinger, a contemporary of John Calvin and successor of Huldrych Zwingli, argues that marriage and family are an essential institution created and ordained by God. The Confession states, “For marriage (which is the medicine of incontinency, and continency itself) was instituted by the Lord God himself, who blessed it most bountifully, and willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparable, and to live together in complete love and concord (Matt. 19:4 ff.).”⁹ The Second Helvetic Confession directly challenged the culture of marriage and family that had culminated in the Western European Catholic Church. The Confession ushered in a new era of theological and scriptural primacy for marriage in the Reformed Church that continues to this day.

Emerging out of the Enlightenment came a new economic system called Capitalism in Western Europe and North America. Unlike the agrarian and trading systems of the past, this new system was formed based on private ownership, wage-based production, competitive markets, and the voluntary exchange of goods and intellectual property. No longer did a son or daughter need their parents’ marital arrangement to provide for their needs. Rather, “marriage came to be seen as a private relationship between two individuals rather than one link in a larger

⁹ See the Second Helvetic Confession

system of political and economic alliances.”¹⁰ In only a few generations’ time, marriage transitioned from a social contract to the locus of emotional satisfaction.¹¹ Coontz argues, “Where once marriage had been seen as the fundamental unit of work and politics, it was now viewed as a place of refuge from work, politics, and community obligations.”¹² In a matter of decades, marriage and family quickly became the seat of self-governance and independence. Men and women could go to their place of work, return home, and then within their home, exercise their right to privacy and self-fulfillment however they saw fit. Much in the same way that the Enlightenment introduced the principle of separation of church and state, that similar principle applied to the separation between work and family, which in many ways, still applies to this day.

Yet, during the Enlightenment period, couples did not immediately begin marrying for love. New modes of work shifted the economic structures for families, which presented new opportunities for how couples engaged in relationship with one another. Prior to the Enlightenment, working class men and women often spent ten to fifteen years as indentured servants to wealthy families to earn the amount of money required to purchase land or a business. This process often delayed marriage for the working class, and for those of color who served in slave labor, the possibilities of marriage often vanished altogether. The dawn of the Industrial Revolution and Capitalism, however, allowed men and women to enter the workforce sooner. As a result, a wage-based production economy gave rise to the opportunity for young people to earn wages without first entering into domestic service, and thereby, marry sooner.

¹⁰ Coontz, *Marriage*, 146.

¹¹ Coontz argues that during the Enlightenment period, the success of marriage transitioned from contracts to emotional fulfillment. She writes, “The measure of a successful marriage was no longer how big a financial settlement was involved, how many useful in-laws were acquired, or how many children were produced, but how well a family met the emotional needs of its individual members.” Coontz, *Marriage*, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*

Thus, the mean age of marriage during the end of the Enlightenment and beginning of the Industrial Revolution began to decline. Instead of men and women needing to find a partner who could advance the family with economic means, men and women now needed to find a suitable working companion who shared the same values and vision for how their shared wage earning could advance the family unit, instead of the whole village. Root states, “Marriage was about who could provide the spouse with an adequate labor mate. People were often drawn to men and women who would be ideal partners for their small businesses or farming.”¹³ Yet, this assumes a certain amount of means and social movement to seek a spouse with shared values. Men and women of color, those in lower classes, and certainly those engaged in slave labor, did not have that luxury of choice.

During the intervening years between the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, marriage was considered more like a labor contract between individuals than a social contract between families. Certainly, some couples grew to love each other, but that wasn’t the expectation, nor the norm. Graff states, “If your life’s income was based on your marriage, you wouldn’t be so foolish as to marry only because you ‘fell in love,’ any more than you’d hire a business partner based only on sexual infatuation.”¹⁴ Rather, marriage served to satisfy the couple’s needs. The economy did not yet allow for the kind of financial freedom that many American families enjoy today. Still, the 18th and 19th century western family, could not survive apart the marriages in the village. If a marriage ended, then the result placed the immediate family and even the village in jeopardy.

During this period, even though marriages began to experience increasing freedom, marriage partners still relied on kin and family members to locate each other. Root argues, “In

¹³ Root, *Children*, 11.

¹⁴ E.J. Graff, *What is Marriage For* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), loc 452, Kindle.

this period, individual choice in marrying increased, but the choice was based on labor needs and made within the limited community of the wider kin unit and village.¹⁵ Marriage became the locus for advancement rather than the wider clan. A couple no longer needed the agreement of both families to wed and gain a labor force and security from outside threats. Instead, the Reformation and Enlightenment eras effectively ended in the West a millennia long tradition of two parties executing an arranged marriage for the mutual benefit and advancement of the larger whole.

The dawn of the Enlightenment also saw a shift in how parents raised children. Pre-Reformation, most cultures gave little regard to children. At best, they sealed the social contract and provided additional hands to drive the village economy, but more commonly among lower class families, they were considered less than human and could be expendable, if necessary. Yet, with the transition of the family away from clan advancement to the new system of Capitalism, children now became essential workers in the family with great purpose and meaning.¹⁶ As early as 5 years old, children could expect to work in the family business or trade. They also could expect not to grow close to their parents. The relationship between parents and children functioned more like employer and employee during this age.

In the latter years of the Enlightenment era, however, as the need for skilled laborers grew in the new Capitalist economy, combined with the Reformation's inherent value upon

¹⁵ Root, *Children*, 11.

¹⁶ Root argues that children became essential to the family business, a phenomenon that only became normalized in human history during this period. He writes, "Children were essential to the survival of the family; without their labor the family would cease to exist. Therefore, unlike today, where everyone in a family is under the cultural obligation to carve out a meaningful life and future for himself or herself, the family as a unit provided meaning and purpose in this period. While the idea of the self as independent from the kin unit was evolving, ultimately the idea of self was still held securely within the family unit, which provided unquestioned purpose and meaning to life. You were an essential cog in your family's labors. In sum, while the Reformation and Enlightenment raised issues of the individual self, functionally the self remained embedded in the family unit that provided belonging, but even more, offered purpose and meaning." Root, *Children*, 14-15.

children, both Europe and the British colonies of America introduced large scale education initiatives. In the mid 18th century, divorce rates lowered and remained low until the mid-twentieth century. Marriage called for a working partnership and families needed children in the labor force. This created a recipe for stick-togetherness, but not for creating a healthy culture of fruitful love and respect.

The Nineteenth Century Through the Golden Age

During the Victorian Age in Europe and North America, marriage and family experienced another tectonic shift. In previous centuries, families worked together to ensure economic security. That being so, it was all hands-on deck. Everybody participated in the ‘village’ business. In the Victorian Age, however, the family economy became localized to the parents and children, even individuals could earn a living apart from the village or family. Root states, “Instead of one’s survival being dependent on kin unit or familial labor, one’s survival became dependent on oneself. With mechanization, nascent bureaucracy, and budding urbanization, the individual could go out, alone, into a money economy and find an individualized job.”¹⁷ Whereas home and work once operated as the same entity, work and home now became fully separate. Most men during this period transitioned into the role of sole breadwinner, while most women became homemakers and caretakers. Furthermore, children were made to focus on skill development to increase profitability in an industrialized society. Colleges and universities became prevalent during this period as education became democratized.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

The Victorian Age radically changed the male and female roles in the home and inaugurated a new era of domestic roles for women, which elevated their superiority in matters of moral and religious influence. During this era, many women converted to Christianity. Consequently, the woman's moral and religious influence in the home altered the cultural perception of masculinity. Up until then, men served as the head of the family but did not necessarily participate in it. Coontz argues, "His social status rested on his right and ability to represent his family in the outside world. Now men came to view the lives they led outside the home as morally ambiguous. Their greatest satisfactions and highest moral strivings were transferred to the sanctuary of the home."¹⁸ During this era, a man's identity shifted away from the fraternity of work to the domestic ties of family life. As an illustration of this shift, consider the song "The Life I Lead" from the 1964 Walt Disney film, *Mary Poppins*. The song is sung by the father, George Banks, after he arrives at home from a long day of banking. The setting is London, England, in 1910, at the beginning of the Edwardian period, following the reign of Queen Victoria. The lyrics state, "I feel a surge of deep satisfaction / Much as a king astride his noble steed / When I return from daily strife to hearth and wife / How pleasant is the life I lead! / It's grand to be an Englishman in 1910 / King Edward's on the throne; It's the age of men / I'm the lord of my castle / The sovereign, the liege! / I treat my subjects: servants, children, wife with a firm but gentle hand / Noblesse oblige!"¹⁹ The noble banker and father, George Banks, embodies how the Victorian Age in England ushered a new era of domestication not only among women but also for men, as well, setting into motion a new era of what would later become the aloof domesticated breadwinner husband and the meek domesticated homemaker wife. During the Victorian period, the economic engine of Capitalism, along with Enlightenment values, gave

¹⁸ Coontz, *Marriage*, 165.

¹⁹ "The Life I Lead," sung by the father, George Banks, in *Mary Poppins*, 1964.

way for the privatization of the family, while also inciting the desire for families to escape from the self-centered, godless society Capitalism by creating a safe haven in the home. Yet, similar to the agrarian and village-based eras of the past, the dawn of modern political and economic eras still relied upon each family member playing their roles, except this time, in the comfort of their own home instead of at the farm. At the turn of the twentieth century, without the bonds of advancement and security or the necessity for family-based labor, marriage and family now held together by a new way of being together: through the finicky, intangible emotion called love.²⁰

As a result of newly formed domesticated roles for the husband and wife, the Victorian Age introduced new sexual and marital norms for western society, as well. Men and women elevated domestic obligations to a matter of prime import. The locus of morality, thus, shifted from the village to the private family unit. Coontz states, “Religious as well as secular moralists came to view doing well for one’s family as more important than doing good for society.”²¹ Men and women placed their primary focus on the behaviors of each other and their children. Ethics started in the home. Faith, too, became privatized. The roles of parents evolved into the primary influencers of a child’s ethical and behavioral norms.

Yet, as both Coontz and Root argue, few, if any, of these standards could be upheld by the lower working and slave classes. By all measures, the middle and upper classes reviled those in the classes beneath them, projecting impossible social expectations upon them and then criticizing them for their lack of advancement. Coontz argues, “By limiting their moral concerns

²⁰ Here, I am referring to love more like affection compared with the unbreakable bonds of love that occurs in Scripture and is experienced between highly committed married couples. The kind of love to which Christ calls all of us his followers and for husbands to emulate with their wives (Ephesians 5:28) is not easily swayed by the finicky, intangible emotions of affection and desire. Yet, I still find the word “love” more appropriate than, say, affection, because most couples since the Victorian Age forward say that they married for “love,” even though they may mean “affection” or “desire.”

²¹ Coontz, *Marriage*, 167.

to domestic and sexual behavior, many members of the middle class were able to ignore the harsh realities of life for the lower classes or even to blame working people's problems on their not being sufficiently committed to domesticity and female purity."²² Furthermore, women who could not commit to domesticity or engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage became labeled as moral degenerates by the standards of polite society. Men faced undue pressures, as well. Popular church teaching called upon men not to succumb to their sexual pleasures, which led many men to seek sexual fulfillment elsewhere, while their wives faced the burden to live according to unrealistic standards of purity.²³

The radical internalization and sentimentalization of marriage, however, afforded some benefits. During the Victorian era, changes were made in family law to allow the right for a wife to inherit her husband's wealth upon death. Increased domesticity and higher social moral standards resulted in decreased domestic violence. Social norms welcomed increased affection between parents and children and between spouses. Governments launched education reforms for women and children.²⁴ While this era cleared the way for so many positive advances in society's view of marriage and family, these changes also set the stage for what would later become one of the most challenging eras for marriage and family in history. What appears like the Eden years of marriage and family during the years of the Golden Age of the first half of the twentieth century don't seem so golden in retrospect. Coontz states, "The hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists,

²² Ibid., 169.

²³ See Coontz, *Marriage*, 168-172. Coontz cites several secular and religious moral leaders who wrote about how men ought to take the virtuous path of resisting sexual pleasures, even within marriage, to tame his appetites for the betterment of his character.

²⁴ Ibid., 172.

tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it.”²⁵

The Victorian ideals of marriage, which first started taking shape during the Reformation and Enlightenment eras of the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, continued all the way through the mid-twentieth century, culminating in what Americans often refer to as the “Golden Age” of the 1950s. In the years following the World Wars, America witnessed unprecedented economic expansion, increased quality of life, and heightened technological achievement. The slow evolution of the love-based marriage, however, finally reached a breaking point in the 1960s. The tensions between the growing superiority of the self, increased criticisms of religious morality, and the proliferation of Capitalism and consumerism eventually cracked the seemingly impenetrable facade of the so-called “Golden Years” of the love-based marriage, especially for women. The fullest integration of Enlightenment ideals paved the way for couples to choose whomever they wanted to marry based on the tenuous and subjective feelings of ‘love,’ which might be better defined as infatuation and pleasure.

For many, the promise of individual happiness didn’t materialize. Without the social contract for advancement and security to bind couples together in marriage, little kept them from growing apart. Wives often lived in quiet despair caused by loveless marriages. Lower classes could hardly attain the American Dream of happiness. Not too long before the 1960s, if a woman left her marriage, then it meant almost certain destitution. A woman could not live apart from her provider and still receive the provision that she needed. She no longer had her village to guard her and give her a future.

In the 1960s, however, a perfect mash-up of social acceptance and economic favor created the opportunity for women to flee from loveless marriages by having the ability to

²⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1992), 3.

achieve financial independence in a worker-driven economy. Now, apart from her village and husband, a woman could theoretically provide for herself. During this period, the ideal of happiness evolved from marriage as the source of fulfillment to the self as the source of happiness. As a result, divorce rates started to increase for the first time in centuries in the 1960s and then skyrocketed in the 1970s as states adopted no-fault divorce. This led to divorce becoming a widespread social phenomenon across the United States and Europe. Root states, “Such a reality allowed for freedom and the possibility of equality (and helpfully freed many from abusive and miserable marriages).”²⁶

While the foundation of marriages became unstable, the 1950s and 60s witnessed an unprecedented idyllic time for children compared to the previous centuries. What began a century earlier during the Victorian age, now children no longer needed to tend to the family business. Governments passed child labor laws and standardized education across the nation. Children lived free in the paradise of suburbia and the budding industry of childhood entertainment. During this period, attitudes toward children progressed from toleration to the object of parental affection. Prior to the Reformation, society viewed children as sinful and less than human. In the Golden Age, however, children were seen as having inherent worth and value. Root states, “The sharp teeth of kin-unit mergers and family labor were dulled on contractual, individually chosen love bonds. A child’s belonging no longer rested in the history of a lineage, but in the affection of individuals.”²⁷

The love-based family created a warm, yet vulnerable, environment for children. Root argues, “Because love was based on the free decisions of the self, the mother/wife and father/husband now possessed not only the power to create the family, but also the freedom to

²⁶ Root, *Children*, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

destroy it.”²⁸ While children could be sheltered from the harsh realities of labor, they could not escape from their parents’ right to break the bonds of their marriage and family stability. Root states, “Now that the family and one’s belonging and meaning within it was based solely in the affection of love, whenever father or mother decided that love no longer existed, then neither did the union that provided the self of the child with his or her essential belonging and meaning.”²⁹ Hardly ever before in history did a marriage end because the spark of love died between two individuals. While legal divorce goes back thousands of years across human civilization, most people tended to divorce based on opportunities for advancement elsewhere, not because of the dissolution of love. Root states, “Becoming a self became the child’s vocation, and the family his or her location to do so. The child was dependent, then, on the belonging and meaning provided by the tenuous family, which when sunk by divorce left the self of the child without a place or purpose to grow.”³⁰

The Postmodern Marriage

The result of the Reformation, Enlightenment, Victorian, Industrial, and World War eras was the culmination of life away from the village to life interpreted through the self. In Postmodernity (circa 1970s to the present), the self now reigns supreme. Oneself has ascended to the throne of moral judgment. Root argues, “Love has become so central to the fulfillment of the self, and the self so significant, that tradition has simply melted away, leaving individuals so free that they can literally choose to be with each other outside of anything but their own choice.”³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

The modern period hearkened back to tradition to guide society and set social mores and customs. In modernity, familial and social history underpinned one's sense of self. Families followed in the way of their ancestors' footsteps. The village carefully and intentionally passed down customs and traditions from one generation to another. Love and marriage, the ideals of family, and rearing children to carry on the family legacy each occurred within the traditional context of family, guided by the meaning and significance of tradition.

In Postmodernity, however, tradition and customs have given way to a future-oriented perspective. It "is future-oriented, and as such it places the self in center view, for only the self, the individual cut free from all past constraints, can colonize an unknown future."³² A hyper-focused sense of self creates a singular myopic view for how one engages in all spheres of life, including marriage and family. In postmodernity, a love-based marriage is free to seek its own path. On the one hand, what a great opportunity for couples who live in this day and age in human history. Yet, without a location or lineage to guide a couple's path, then they risk floundering without a stable foundation to weather the stresses and complexities of life. In a similar fashion to the Mary Poppins illustration earlier in this chapter, the Disney storybook takes its cues from the current cultural trends taking place in society. Consider the postmodern story of *The Little Mermaid* (1989). The little mermaid, Ariel, defies family tradition and breaks with all the customs and traditions of her father's kingdom to love a complete and total other—not only a stranger, but someone of an entirely different species. Ariel's actions are akin to a couple making up their own last name to signify the creation of a new family without being shackled to either's heritage. More recently, Disney's *Frozen* (2013) tells the story of Anna, princess of Arendelle, who grew up orphaned and isolated and willingly risked her entire

³² Ibid., 28.

kingdom for a one-night stand. These stories reflect more than cute fairytales for children's viewing pleasure. They highlight a significant principle about postmodern culture: the self is supreme above all else, including marriage, family, and even, society.

The traditions and customs of modernity allowed little room for subjectivity and doubt. Marriage and family followed similar patterns from the past. For newlywed couples formed out of family mergers, the future was largely writ. Yet, for postmodern couples, the future is seemingly their oyster. On the one hand, the best-case scenario for a postmodern love-based Christian marriage is that a new family is created for the blessing of the world! On the other hand, a future orientation makes the assumption that whatever path a couple traverses has not yet been trod. Even under the healthiest circumstances, operating under this assumption is naïve. At worst, this assumption can lead to all sorts of doubt and uncertainty, causing hardship and pain, which may result in the couple choosing an easier way through divorce. A future-oriented horizon constantly shifts and fluxes depending on the tides of culture, circumstances, and emotions. Stressors end up steering the direction of a love-based marriage and, as a result, lead couples into states of confusion and conflict toward a clouded horizon.

Though rigid and predictable, modernity offered stability. Love was considered impractical and, in some cases, unnecessary, but divorce was rare. In postmodernity, however, divorce is viewed as a kind of 'get out of jail free' card for couples who feel like their marriage has taken them too far off the path of happiness. Root states, "Divorce then becomes a maneuver done always for the future: for future happiness, for future health, for the possibility of future love."³³

³³ Ibid., 30. This thesis acknowledges that future orientation positively correlates with means and resources. The more resources one has, then the more one can live future focused with the ability to make decisions that please the self. This certainly does not mean that future-oriented dreams are reserved for people of means, but too often, those in the middle class and above are the ones who are able to act toward the future.

Postmodernity and Unwed Parents

As a result of no-fault divorce laws becoming standard operating procedure throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many couples opted out of marriage entirely. This contributed to a decrease in divorce numbers in the early 1980s. Fewer marriages ended in divorce because more couples decided not to marry. Coontz argues, “Some of the increase in unwed motherhood in the 1980s and 1990s may have been a reaction against the rise in divorce in the 1960s and 1970s.”³⁴ Research revealed that many women either delayed marriage or did not marry at all for fear of repeating the same cycle of marriage strife experienced by their parents. Throughout the late twentieth century into the beginnings of the twenty first century, rates of cohabitation increased significantly, “even as divorce and unwed pregnancy slowed.”³⁵ Yet, this decision did not keep women from bearing children. Coontz states, “A 1997 study found that more than 40 percent of births to unmarried American women in recent years were intentional pregnancies.”³⁶ Though unmarried, women still desired children and considered raising children in a single parent household better than raising children in a conflict-ridden, loveless marriage. Additionally, Coontz claims, “One-third of the fifty thousand children adopted in the United States in 2001 went to single women. These women are not being irresponsible. Indeed, the Adoption Information Clearinghouse believes that single-parent homes may be especially well suited for ‘special needs’ children who require close, intense relationships.”³⁷ What a change from the

³⁴ Coontz, *The Way*, 269.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

preceding decades. Coontz also notes, “African American [women] accounted for 30 percent of adoptions of hard-to-place foster children.”³⁸ This shows how a woman’s maternal desire to raise a child supersedes a marital relationship. Coontz concludes, “Population experts predict that 50 percent of children in the United States will spend part of their lives in a household that does not contain both their married, biological parents.”³⁹ Marriage once served as the gateway to mature adulthood and respectability. It used to benefit the village and all of those who came within proximity of it, but not anymore. For perhaps the first time in human history, marriage is now considered a risk, and more kids may live their lives outside of a home with married parents than in it. Coontz states, “The potential gains of getting married need to be weighed against the possibilities offered by staying single to pursue higher education or follow a better job. And the greater likelihood of eventual divorce reinforces the appeal of leaving your options open while investing in your own personal skills and experience.”⁴⁰

The Effects of Divorce on Children

In divorce, no one walks away unscathed. Ahrons states, “Every thirteen seconds, someone gets divorced. Each year, in the United States alone, over one million families experience divorce. Each year, for every two couples that get married, one couple gets divorced. It ranks right at the top of the personal stress index, second only to death of a loved one. It is an extraordinarily painful experience that invades one’s whole life space.”⁴¹ Sometimes divorce is necessary. In some situations, divorce may even be the preferred (and better) option for couples

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 271.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 277.

⁴¹ Constance Ahrons, *The Good Divorce* (New York: Harper Collins ebooks, 1994), loc 42, Kindle.

who engage in toxic, destructive behaviors. Yet, two-thirds of all divorces result from the termination of “low-conflict” marriages.⁴² Low conflict couples do not report abuse or high intensity arguments. Rather, what characterizes ‘low conflict’ is consistent, unresolved low-grade tension endured over the course of many years. In some cases, the couples attempted therapy, but in most cases, psychotherapy eventually resolves “low-conflict” issues in a relationship. Furthermore, in a study conducted on “low-conflict” parents who divorced, researchers asked the parents how the divorce impacted their children. The consensus was “many people think that a ‘good divorce’ and a happy intact marriage are about the same for kids.”⁴³ Such an observation couldn’t be further from the truth. In a landmark study published in *Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, the findings concluded, “Ending high-conflict marriages may benefit children, but ending low-conflict marriages may put children at risk.”⁴⁴ Norman Wells, director of the Family Education Trust, stated, “Many parents make sterling efforts to mitigate the damaging consequences of family breakdown for their children, but they can never be eliminated altogether. We have not taken seriously enough the extent to which children are affected when their parents separate.”⁴⁵

Divorce always negatively impacts children. Based on decades of longitudinal study, Marquardt states, “Research demonstrates strongly that, without question, a ‘good divorce’ is far worse for children than an unhappy marriage.”⁴⁶ Divorce creates a monumental shift in a child’s identity, which often results in the absence of the child’s biological father from the home. Such a

⁴² Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds* (New York: Three Rivers Press, a division of Random House, 2005), loc 445, Kindle.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, loc 445, Kindle.

⁴⁴ Jonathon J. Beckmeyer, et. al., “Postdivorce Coparenting Typologies and Children’s Adjustment,” *Family Relations* 63 (October 2014), 527.

⁴⁵ “US Study: Divorce Never Good for Children,” *The Christian Institute*, February 3, 2012, <https://www.christian.org.uk/news/us-study-divorce-never-good-for-children/>

⁴⁶ Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds*, loc 434, Kindle.

radical change dramatically alters a child’s ontological sense of self. Marquardt writes, “While a ‘good divorce’ is better than a bad divorce, it is still not good. For no matter how amicable divorced parents might be and how much they each love and care for the child, their willingness to do these things does absolutely nothing to diminish the radical restructuring of the child’s universe.”⁴⁷ A child’s entire identity, especially during the minor years, is completely enveloped into the relationship with their parents. Over the last few decades, a growing body of research shows that children do not fully individuate from their parents until their mid to late twenties.⁴⁸ Thus, whatever sense of self a child receives and projects onto their parents, divorce disrupts it at best but, at worst, severs it. In response to Ahrons’ concept of a ‘good divorce,’ Marquardt states, “when you talk to the children themselves you find that the popular idea behind the ‘good divorce’—that the quality of the divorce matters more than the divorce itself—is actually an adult-centered vision that does not reflect their true experiences.”⁴⁹ The stories of children show a much different reality. Divorce leads not only to a variety of emotional and social responses that extend long into adulthood and often throughout a divorced child’s entire life, but it also results in the loss of both parents’ active involvement in the child’s life.

The number one cause for fatherlessness in American society is divorce. In a 2014 study, a joint effort by scholars at Princeton University, Cornell University, and UC Berkeley undertook a massive effort to comb through each one of the 47 published journal articles to date on fatherlessness to determine causal effects of father absence on children. In general, their

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett *Emerging Adulthood* for reference on delayed adolescence. As a counter argument to Arnett, see Jeffrey Epstein’s work *The Case Against Adolescence*, which he labels an unnecessary social construct that derived more than a hundred year ago. While this thesis gives credence to Epstein’s argument, the cultural pull upon teenagers and early twenty somethings certainly show a stronger trend to Arnett’s research.

⁴⁹ Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds*, loc 440.

research determined “that studies using more rigorous designs continue to find negative effects of father absence on offspring well-being, although the magnitude of these effects is smaller than what is found using traditional cross-sectional designs. The evidence is strongest and most consistent for outcomes such as high school graduation, children’s social-emotional adjustment, and adult mental health.”⁵⁰ The study concluded that children on the whole experience negative adjustment to father absence. Yet, the research shows that fatherless children can develop strategies to cope and overcome. In another 2014 study on children of divorce, the authors conclude, “Most children demonstrate resiliency; fall into normal ranges for psychological and cognitive functioning; and grow up to be healthy, functioning adults (Ahrons, 2007; Amato, 2010; Emery, 1999).”⁵¹ All children across social and economic ranges have the capacity to develop coping mechanisms, but children with access to resources typically fare better than those without access.

Divorce-caused fatherlessness results in several social and emotional factors for children of all ages and genders.⁵² The 2014 study on fatherlessness states, “We find strong evidence that father absence negatively affects children’s social-emotional development, particularly by increasing externalizing behavior.”⁵³ Typically, these effects increase in severity the earlier a child experiences father absence. Among adolescents, strong evidence suggests that father absence influences negative externalizing behaviors on both males and females, such as drug and alcohol abuse and early sexual activity. Overall, though, father absence affects boys more

⁵⁰ Sara McLanahan, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 39 (2013), p.1.

⁵¹ “Postdivorce Coparenting Typologies and Children’s Adjustment,” p. 527.

⁵² In “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” McLanahan writes, “studies that compare parental death and divorce often find that even if both have significant effects on well-being, the estimates of the effect of divorce are larger than those of parental death, which can also be read as evidence of partial selection” (p. 18) While the death of a father creates trauma in a child’s life, this study concludes that father absence creates more substantial negative effects in a child’s life.

⁵³ McLanahan, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” 17.

severely than girls.⁵⁴

The effects of father absence extend into adulthood, as well. The 2014 study concludes, “The research base examining the longer-term effects of father absence on adult outcomes is considerably smaller, but here, too, we see the strongest evidence for a causal effect on adult mental health, suggesting that the psychological harms of father absence experienced during childhood persist throughout the life course.”⁵⁵ The “strongest evidence” of the examined body of studies suggests that father absence persists throughout a child’s entire life course! How tragic!

On a personal note, this conclusion draws to mind a conversation that I shared with my mom a few years ago. I told her that I recalled the evening when my father came home and confessed to her about his affair. I recounted those 60 seconds to near perfection. My mom looked at me aghast and said, “I can’t believe you remember.” She said that she once asked my dad why he would do such a thing in front of his 5-year-old son, and his response was simple, “He won’t remember.” 32 years later, I still remember, and I will remember those events for the rest of my life.

Father absence is not a trivial matter. It is one of the most detrimental social issues that negatively impacts the entire life span of every son or daughter who experiences it. One of the ways to understand how children might process the loss of a father into adulthood is through a psychological theory known as attachment. Attachment Theory claims that “adult attachment is guided by the assumption that the same motivational system that gives rise to the close emotional bond between parents and their children is responsible for the bond that develops between adults

⁵⁴ The evidence does not parse how father absence impacts individuals who identify as non-cis gender.

⁵⁵ Popenoe, *Fatherless*, 18.

in emotionally intimate relationships.”⁵⁶ As a result, the emotional bond that develops between two adults in an intimate relationship corresponds to the kind of emotional bond that developed between a child with her or his parents. Without care and healing from insecure attachments, then unhealthy attachments become projected onto new family systems in adulthood, perpetuating the cycle of brokenness and abandonment for future generations.

The central questions of attachment theory and, ultimately, of faith are: When I need you, will you be there? When I call you, will you answer? These are the questions of every child to their parents. They are also the questions of every human being to God. Will you be there? Will you answer me? If I call upon your name, will I be saved? Will you heal my broken heart? In the first two chapters, this thesis attempted to articulate the presenting issue of divorce and father absence as one of the key societal issues of this generation. In the next chapter, this thesis will attempt to show that as families stand on the brink, Christ hears the cries of fatherless children, drawing near to the brokenhearted, and calls his Body, the Church, to do likewise.

⁵⁶ R. Chris Fraley “Adult Attachment Theory and Research” Accessed July 19, 2021, <http://labs.psychology.illinois.edu/~rcfraley/attachment.htm>.

Chapter 3 – A Christological Framework to View Divorce and Fatherlessness

In Frederick Douglass' 1855 book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he tells the story of a young lady who embodied all the virtues of the Christian faith. Douglass writes, "There was no sorrow nor suffering for which she had not a tear, and there was no innocent joy for which she had not a smile. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach."¹ Her life exuded Christ—that is, until she became enslaved by white southern plantation owners. The shackles of bondage, according to Douglass, squeezed every ounce of goodness and happiness from her. Douglass writes, "Conscience cannot stand much violence. Once thoroughly broken down, who is he that can repair the damage?"² Some authors believe this quote later became the basis for the apocryphal quote attributed to Douglass: "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."³ This statement is true whether Douglass penned these words or not, and they most certainly resonate with the position of this thesis.

In building strong children, the role of fathers cannot be overstated. Healthy, faithful, love-filled fathering serves as one of the primary foundation stones on which a child builds her or his life. A child does not need a perfect father, but a present, consistent, and loving father. Even divorced fathers who create daily loving rhythms of presence (or at the very least, weekly) can grow up strong, healthy children, especially within the context of non-conflictual

¹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), chapter 11, paragraph 3, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://authenticamericandream.blogspot.com/2018/05/quote-investigation-frederick-douglass.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Jon Tyson, *The Intentional Father* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 49.

relationships with their ex-spouse.⁴ Anything longer than a week between father-child contact creates destabilizing tensions among children, as noted in chapter 2.

Divorce is a very strong predictor for fatherlessness, but it isn't a certainty. According to a 2019 study conducted by the US Census Bureau, the conclusion revealed: "Studies have shown there are unexpected positive ripple effects when laws make divorce easier and quicker, including: the number of marriages increases by at least 9%; female suicides decrease by 8% to 16% and domestic violence decreases by around 30%; women start working more outside of the home — up to 7 percentage points more — increasing their economic clout in a marriage by bringing income that they control into the home."⁵ In some cases, in particular in cases of abuse and neglect, divorce is the preferred option for both the spouse and the children. Such circumstances, though not without consequence, create freedom and peace for all people involved.

Yet, no other event predicts the onset of fatherlessness in a child's life more than divorce, not even death. As the previous two chapters in this thesis argued, fatherlessness by divorce harms children.⁶ According to the consensus among most sociology and psychology journals on

⁴ University of California in Santa Barbara professor, Tamara Afifi wrote, "In one study [published in the American Psychological Association], we brought parents and adolescents from non-divorced and divorced families into our lab. We'd sit one parent and one child on a couch and ask them to talk about stressful aspects of the parents' relationship. We'd take a sample of the child's saliva before the interaction and three times afterwards (right after, 15 minutes later, 45 minutes later) to see how their body responded to discussing family stress.

For children of divorce who felt caught between their parents, their cortisol would be elevated after their conversation. But if their parent supported them emotionally and comforted them, their cortisol levels would show a steep decline within 30 to 45 minutes. After their interaction, the kid's stress level was like a super ball bouncing around a room, and they'd still be revved up 45 minutes later." Tamara Afifi, "The Best Possible Thing You Could Do To Help Your Child Through Divorce," accessed August 20, 2021, <https://ideas.ted.com/the-best-possible-thing-you-can-do-to-help-your-child-through-your-divorce/>.

⁵ Misty L. Heggeness, "The Upside of Divorce?," US Census Bureau, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/12/the-upside-of-divorce.html>.

⁶ In the situations of abusive and neglectful fathers, father dismissal that leads to father absence may be required for the well-being a child. These situations, no matter how necessary and relieving they may be, still do not produce the desired outcome for which a child longs. In these situations, the long-term pain of the father's absence is compounded by the consequences of the father's abuse when he was present.

the issue of fatherlessness and divorce, without proper care and attention, the wounds of fatherlessness remain with children into adulthood, resulting in countless adult men and women making life decisions based on the influence of unresolved wounds from their father absence. Robert McGee names these wounds “father hunger.”⁷ McGee argues that while children need both of their parents to become their best selves, children tend to receive identity from their father. He writes that mothers offer nurture, safety, and supplication, whereas fathers tend to bestow identity and build up children for courage and resilience. Each of these characteristics combined help the child to leave the family household in adulthood and lead a fully individualized life for the building and blessing of a new family. This is not to say that mothers cannot give shape to their child’s identity and cultivate resilience in their children. Additionally, good fathers provide care and nurture to their children. While both parents are capable and often do provide all things to their children, in typical heterosexual-normative households, mothers and fathers tend to lean toward raising their children according to a set of characteristics.

Therefore, when fathers leave, their absence creates a void of distinctives that a father typically provides. Without a father, children miss out on fully knowing their sense of self and place in this world. Both parents play crucial roles in shaping a child’s identity. This formation begins first with parents and then grows to include other family members, friends, mentors, communities, and so on as a child’s security and social network grows. Chapters one and two discussed this in reference to Root’s argument about how divorce creates an ontological break in a child’s identity. Thus, if father absence leads to an ontological break in a child’s sense of self, then father absence inevitably leads to shame because shame results from the feeling of disconnection and being flawed.⁸ Shame is the emotion of feeling “less than,” not enough, or

⁷ Robert McGee, *Father Hunger* (Middletown, DE: Robert S. McGee Publishing, 2021).

⁸ See Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 68.

even worthless. Perhaps no other emotion creates a void that results in ‘father hunger’ more than shame. On the positive, a child’s ‘father hunger’ points to the Creator’s innate design within each child for the love of her or his parent. In the case of fatherlessness, however, a child’s hunger for a father who sees her and calls her worthy stems from the shame that a child feels from father absence. When a child is rejected by one of only two individuals on the planet who is biologically wired to care for that child, then all of reality fractures for the child.

In Barack Obama’s 2020 book, *A Promised Land*, he gives a brief, yet telling, insight into how his father hunger drove him all the way to the White House. Obama wrote:

[Michelle asked:] God, Barack, when’s it going to be enough? Before I could answer, she had gone into the bedroom and closed the door. How could I blame her for feeling this way? By even suggesting the possibility of a run, by involving my staff before asking for her blessing, I had put her in an impossible spot. For years now, I had asked Michelle for fortitude and forbearance when it came to my political endeavors, and she had given it, reluctantly, but with love. And then each time, I came back again, asking for more. Why would I put her through this? Was it just vanity? Or perhaps something darker, a raw hunger, a blind ambition, wrapped in the gauzy language of service? Was I still trying to prove myself worthy to a father who had abandoned me and live up to my mother’s starry-eyed expectations for her only son and resolve whatever doubt from being born a child of mixed race. ‘It was like you have a hole to fill,’ Michelle once said after she had watched me during a stretch of working myself to near exhaustion. ‘It’s why you can’t slow down.’ In truth, I thought I had resolved those issues long ago, finding affirmation in my work, security in the love of my family, but I wondered now if I could ever escape whatever is in me that needed healing, whatever kept me reaching for more. Maybe it was impossible to disentangle one’s motives... If one of the qualifications for running for the most powerful office in the world was megalomania, then it appeared that I was passing the test.⁹

Obama’s words so aptly describe the hunger of a fatherless child. Not only does Obama beautifully express the tension, but he also speaks to other facets of his identity as a bi-racial man and only son of an idealistic white mom. Now, as he stood on the threshold of a presidential campaign, his deepest question wasn’t about strategy but healing. Could he ever escape the hurt

⁹ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2020), 70.

inside that needed healing? Would he ever feel content without being compelled to reach for more? Some might call this ambition, which can lead to wonderful, amazing accomplishments, such as becoming President of the United States. Ambition is a great virtue when contained by the right motivations. Yet, according to his statement, whatever motivated him was driven by a ‘darker, raw hunger’ or what might otherwise be called shame. What a profound admission of self-awareness. Yet, for Obama and so many fatherless children, the question remains: Is healing from the shame of fatherlessness possible? With so many fatherless children longing for good news, is there any hope of redemption?

This thesis contends that the answer to these questions is a resounding “Yes!” The hope for which so many fatherless sons and daughters long goes far beyond the prescribed therapeutic steps outlined in a sociological research journal (as appropriate and helpful as those next steps may be). Rather, true, real, and lasting hope is found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In this chapter, this thesis will seek to build a biblical and theological infrastructure through which the church may view fatherlessness and respond with solution-based, visionary leadership. The only enduring, satisfying source of hope for the millions of children who endure the hardship of fatherlessness is in the very being and act of the Triune God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The layout of this chapter will first call upon the wisdom of Karl Barth who describes the almighty nature of God’s fathering as “grace” to humanity.¹⁰ “God’s Fatherhood,” as Barth says, provides a model for human fathers to lead sons and daughters into loving, fulfilling relationships that bear witness to the love that God the Father displayed to the Son.¹¹ Then, this

¹⁰ “God is therefore in truth Father because and in so far as He is in truth the Father of Jesus Christ and with Him the source of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, and in so far as He can be and is He, our Father. It is grace and not nature (the nature of the relationship of God and man, already known to us) that we may call God “Father” in virtue of the knowledge of His omnipotence.” Karl Barth, *Credo* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26. The Christological framework presented in this thesis does not neglect mothers or women whatsoever. Rather, this thesis is seeking to provide a Christological framework that invites fathers to remain

chapter will show how God's fathering heart is demonstrated through the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son as depicted in the baptism and transfiguration narratives in the Gospel of Matthew.¹² Following the exegesis of these two passages, this chapter will close with a brief application of how God calls fathers into the roles of Servants and Kings with their sons and daughters.

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty"

Taken from the first line of the Apostles' Creed, Karl Barth asserts that God is Almighty because God is Father and loves in freedom.¹³ God's remarkable revelation as 'Father' through the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, shows God's true power for the sake of humanity. God as Father is the Lord over life and death, light and darkness, and all things seen and unseen. Barth states, "Now in this revelation of omnipotence, that is to say, in giving us His Son and the Holy Spirit for the knowing of His Son, God shows Himself as the Father... It demonstrates and this demonstration is the truth that God is Father, not only and not first of all as *our* Father, but already in Himself *eternal* Father and precisely as such, *our* Father."¹⁴

God's almighty, all-powerful, omnipotent character identifies God as a Father. Though these characteristics sometimes seem to conflict with goodness because of humanity's corrupt

present with their children in whatever situation, including divorce. Often, single women are required to assume fathering attributes for the growth and well-being of their children. Such women deserve admiration and praise for their sacrifice and willingness to take on a seemingly impossible task for the sake of their children.

¹² Regarding the use of the name "Father" in reference to God, this thesis outrightly rejects any notion that God is a male or embodies only masculine traits. God's Word reveals many different names for God. Some names inherently possess masculine characteristics, while others embody feminine attributes. Since this thesis is exploring the issue of fatherlessness, God's revelation as Father by the Son will be explored.

¹³ Barth, *Credo*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

view of power, Jesus' response to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 reveals how God's omnipotent power works in the lives of God's people. Paul writes, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NRSV). God's power manifests itself as a personal, relational, perfect Father, as revealed in Christ Jesus, and demonstrated in God's power to defeat sin and death. Hence why God models the truest essence of a good Father, which is: "the One who loves in freedom."¹⁵ That's the heart of fathering, freely choosing to love your children through humble sacrifice. God did not become a Father because of humanity, nor did God become a Father because of any obligation or compulsion to humanity. Rather, God has always existed as a Father and has always chosen to act for humanity from the position of a Father. God the Father "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Ephesians 1:4, NRSV). God is a Father at heart.

God's fatherhood radically alters many of the cultural interpretations and projections of human fatherhood. As this chapter will seek to show, the fathering heart of God revealed in the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son reveals a Father who, ultimately, desires His children. God the Father is not aloof; in fact, quite the opposite. God the Father knows every human heart, including our sinful pride, and still chose to save us by his grace through faith.¹⁶ As God's people being transformed into Christ's likeness,¹⁷ the fatherhood of God calls forth the

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, Part 1, Vol. 2 (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 322.

¹⁶ "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:4-9, NRSV).

¹⁷ "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18, NRSV).

same kind of fatherhood among men, not as God, but as men who follow in God's way: fathers who love in freedom through sacrifice. The following section exegetes the Baptism and Transfiguration narratives in Matthew to show how God the Father loved Christ the Son in freedom.

“This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.”

The Baptism and Transfiguration narratives in Matthew's Gospel provide an anchor point for how the biblical witness informs fatherhood. The waters of baptism symbolize the restoration of the Father's relationship with His people through the death, burial, and resurrection of the Son. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:3-4, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (NRSV). In each one of the synoptics, the Baptism and Transfiguration narratives record the only occurrences in the New Testament when God the Father's voice broke the cosmic boundary between heaven and earth. In both of these occurrences, the God the Father speaks affirmation over the Son. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Father affirms Jesus at his baptism, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17, NRSV). Then, at Jesus' transfiguration, God the Father spoke again, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5, NRSV). Twice God spoke, and twice God stated nearly the same declaration, affirming Jesus as the beloved son of the Father, and bestowing upon him the roles of King and Servant.

In the Father's affirmation of the Son, the divine voice echoes Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, respectively. As one of the most frequently quoted Psalms in the New Testament, Psalm 2 provides tremendous insight into how the Gospel writers considered Jesus' life and role as the Son of God. In its original context, the Psalm was used as a song of coronation. The newly crowned Davidic king would recite Psalm 2:7 as he ascended to the throne: "I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'" (Psalm 2:7, NRSV). Craigie states, "At the heart of the covenant is the concept of *sonship*; the human partner in the covenant is *son* of the covenant God, who is *father*. The covenant principle of sonship is a part of the Sinai Covenant between God and Israel. The covenant God cares for Israel as a father cares for his son (Deuteronomy 1:31) and God disciplines Israel as a father disciplines a son (Deuteronomy 8:5)."¹⁸ Since the Davidic covenant was eternal, each time one king died and another rose to power, the covenant would be renewed through the recitation of Psalm 2:7 by the ascending king. Craigie states, "The principal form of renewal in the royal covenant took place in the coronation, when a new descendent of the Davidic dynasty ascended to the throne. Thus, the divine words 'you are my son' mark a renewal of the relationship between God and David's house in the person of the newly crowned king."¹⁹

The rising king's pronouncement affirmed God's promise of 'with-ness,' to remain with the newly established king in the same way that a good father remains with his son. Furthermore, God's declaration, "I have begotten you," over the new king signified a new kind of spiritual birth that both affirmed the new king and bestowed upon the king the calling of responsibility to lead God's people. Moreover, God's declaration also locates ultimate responsibility with God. God claims the king and assumes responsibility over the king, even when if the newly coronated

¹⁸ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, vol 19, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

king chooses to do evil in God's eyes. Remarkably, even as God's regent, the king's actions do not break the covenant between God and his people. Certainly, the king's actions may harm God's people, but the Father's promise to God's people remains because God appointed the king in an analogous way to a father begetting a son. Israel's king was not autocratic, nor was he sovereign. The king belonged to God, and thus, served God's people in covenantal relationship with the Father.

Inherent within God's declaration were the cultural legalities of adoption, which became important for the Apostle Paul's interpretation of Christ in his New Testament writings. Paul used the term "adoption" (υιοθεσία) five times in his letters (Galatians 4:5; Romans 8:14, 23; Romans 9:4; Ephesians 1:5). Each use refers to God's adoption of his covenant people. In the same way that God the Father adopted a human being to become God's covenantal son and serve as Israel's king, God the Father chose all people in Christ Jesus to be his covenantal children. In Christ, God demonstrated God's fathering heart by loving his people in freedom through sacrificial covenantal faithfulness.

Each one of the synoptic writers, the Apostle Paul, and the author of Hebrews,²⁰ interpret Psalm 2 as a foreshadowing of divine sonship that Christ the Son, ultimately, fulfilled. The messianic applications of Psalm 2 over God's truly begotten Son, Jesus Christ, accomplished what none of the previous earthly kings in the line of David could do: atone for the sins of the God's people and inaugurate the Father's desired Kingdom into the world. Craigie writes, "Whereas the coronation of the Davidic king took place on one day, there is a sense in which the coronation of Jesus took place throughout his ministry."²¹ Christ's work of salvation, restorative

²⁰ See Hebrews 1:5, 5:5, NRSV.

²¹ Craigie, *Word*, 69.

justice, and reconciliation inaugurated the kingdom that God longed to establish after the fall of creation.

In addition to the synoptics quoting “You are my Son” at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, the evangelist quotes Psalm 2:7 again in Acts 13:33 in reference to Jesus’ resurrection: “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’” (Acts 13:32-33, NRSV). The Apostle Peter also opened his second letter by acknowledging the honor and glory that God the Father bestowed upon the Son when the voice of “Majestic Glory” affirmed the Son by quoting Psalm 2:7.²² Jesus’ resurrection defeat over death and his final ascension to the right hand of the Father culminated the coronation period to establish once and for all time the Father’s eternal kingdom on Earth. Jesus’ work distinguished him apart from the kings of Israel’s past and placed him higher than the angels (Heb 1:5, 5:5) as the Almighty Father’s Almighty Son and King!

In the God the Father’s affirmation of Christ the Son, the listener also hears echoes of Isaiah 42:1, the first of four servant songs that later became interpreted by the New Testament writers as the path of suffering that Jesus would endure during his ministry and at his death. The words of Isaiah’s first suffering song describe how the coronation of Christ the King would take place through suffering and appear like defeat. In addition to referencing Isaiah 42:1 at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, Matthew also quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 in its entirety in Matthew 12:18-

²² “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet 1:16-18, NRSV).

21.²³ In this passage, God's fathering voice once more calls the Son beloved (ἀγαπητός), showing the Father's deepest affection for the Son and bestowing upon Jesus the mantle of divine kingship.²⁴ Matthew's inclusion of Isaiah 41 also shows how the Father not only affirmed Jesus as Messiah King but also as one who rules as a Servant, for as Jesus states, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28, NRSV). Woodley states, "At his baptism, Jesus made a clear statement of his intention and mission: he wanted to identify with us. Jesus' ministry is not just *to* sinners; it's *with* sinners."²⁵ Jesus' ministry with sinners revealed another aspect of God's fathering heart for humanity. The Father neither rules with an iron fist nor capitulates to injustice. The Father loves his children in freedom through sacrifice and disciplines with "grace and truth (John 1:14, NRSV)."

In the baptism and transfiguration narratives, Jesus announced the position of the Father's heart as one *with and for the salvation* of God's children. Jesus' entire ministry sought to define the Father's kingdom not by the riches of a distant benefactor but by the power of servant hearted love displayed through the perfect sacrifice of by an up close and personal God! Unlike the violent imagery in Psalm 2 of breaking the nations with a rod of iron and dashing them to pieces like a potter's vessel, the Messiah-Son, Servant-King inaugurated a Kingdom marked by peace and established without breaking the bruised reed of humanity or quenching a dimly burning wick of faith.

²³ "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope" (Matt 12:18-21, NRSV).

²⁴ The term connotes the most endearing reference known in Koine Greek. See Matt Woodley, *The Gospel of Matthew: God With Us* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 43-44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

For all who place their trust in Jesus, the Father's justice seeks to make right what sin broke and buy back the lost from death through the ransomed sacrifice of the Messiah King. Such love reconciles all sinners into a right-standing relationship with the Father through Christ's healing mercy. Through Christ's atoning sacrifice and victorious ascension, God revealed his nature as a Father through His *only begotten*. As the Father's own substance, not merely an adopted earthly regent, Christ Jesus revealed the Father's heart to love the whole world in freedom through sacrifice. God the Father is not absent or distant. Rather, God the Father is like an abba-daddy, wrestling on the floor with his boys or braiding his daughter's hair. The fathering heart of God beats for every person, every nation.

Each one of the synoptics record the Spirit's descent upon the Son after baptism, completing the Triune coronation of Christ as King and Suffering Servant. Matthew and Mark both describe the Spirit alighting upon Jesus like a dove. Luke, however, adds the descriptor: "in bodily form." Here, Luke's Gospel provides clarity to the role of God's Spirit in the Father's affirmation of the Son. Green states, "The Spirit both certifies and makes sonship possible."²⁶ God's verbal affirmation in Matthew 3:17 in conjunction with the bodily descent of the Spirit upon Jesus' person, together, actualize his identity. Whereas baptism symbolizes a person's status reversal from sinner to saint, Jesus's baptism authenticates his Sonship. The Father did not say 'You have become my son.' Rather, the declaration "You are my Son" signified that Jesus the Nazarene has, in fact, always been the Father's Son. Now, with God's presence upon the human being of Jesus, his identity became fully confirmed and later fully refined after the trials of Satan's temptation in the wilderness. Green states, "Working in concert with the endowment of the Holy Spirit, this divine affirmation presents in its most acute form Jesus' role as God's

²⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), 184.

agent of redemption.”²⁷ Hence, redemption is the primary vocation of the Father’s work through the Son. Green says, “His mission and status are spelled out in relation to God and with reference to his purpose as expressed in the Scriptures, as God’s Servant and Son who fulfills his mission of redemption and establishes peace with justice in ways that flow out of his uncompromising obedience to God.”²⁸

God the Father’s statement in Matthew 3:17 *chose* the Son just as much as it affirmed the Son. In addition to meaning beloved, the term ἀγαπητός also denotes that of being ‘elected’ or ‘chosen.’ Luke even goes so far as to substitute ἀγαπητός in 3:22 for ἐκλελεγμένος in 9:35 to make the point even clearer that the Father not only loves the Son but freely chose the Son in the same way that God the Father willingly and freely chose the kings of Israel’s past.²⁹ Perhaps another way to translate Luke 9:35 is: “This is my *chosen* Son.” The term ἐκλελεγμένος implies a freewill choosing of the Father to enter a beloved relationship with the Son, which also implies that the Father assumed responsibility for the Son’s ministry, just like the Father did for Israel’s kings. Yet, the Son’s obedience to ‘fulfill all righteousness’ demonstrated the Son’s reciprocal choosing of the Father in a way that Israel’s kings could not completely do as human beings.³⁰ The terms ἀγαπητός (beloved) and ἐκλελεγμένος (chosen), according to Nolland, mark “the seam where Is. 42:1 and Ps. 2:7 were combined. In the present context of divine acclamation in heaven, this implied uniqueness and the use of εὐδοκεῖν [well pleased] to identify Jesus as God’s favorite prepare for the unique father/son relationship which will come into clearest focus at

²⁷ Ibid., 187.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ In Luke 9:35, the NRSV translates ἐκλελεγμένος as ‘beloved,’ but the connotation clearly refers to choosing.

³⁰ See Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 94.

Matthew 11:27.”³¹ Jesus says in Matthew 11:27, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (NRSV). Unlike past kings, only the Father’s truly begotten Son can reveal the heart of the Father. As King and Servant, the Father’s chosen Son revealed the fullness of God’s fathering heart for humanity. Hagner states, “Jesus, now anointed with the Spirit (cf. Ps 2:2), is through this ceremony of inauguration about to enter into his ministry whereby the nations shall become his heritage (cf. Ps 2:7).³²” Thus, the life of Christ the Son, Servant King,³³ marked a turning point in history that resulted in the Father’s adoption of all people.³⁴

In Christ Jesus, the Father’s one and only Son offered to humanity what all the prophets, priests, and kings represented but could not accomplish, which is: “the power to become children of God (John 1:12, NRSV).” In what this thesis would name the most soaring passage in all of Scripture, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:3–6, NRSV). Through Christ, God the Father laid claim to the world. God chose the world for adoption through the election of His Beloved Son. As a result, all believers belong

³¹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 158.

³² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, vol 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 58.

³³ Paul interpreted the cross as a life-giving act for all, stating: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:18–19, NRSV).

³⁴ See Luke 12:50, NRSV.

to the Father as His adopted sons and daughters through Christ. Therefore, a believer's life no longer belongs to him or her.³⁵ The Son ransomed humanity through death; Christ purchased every Christian from sin. Thus, God the Father gave an inheritance to all believers and extended to them rights as heirs to the kingdom. This undeserved, unmerited gift affords the same privilege that was once reserved for Israel's kings. Now, it belongs to every adopted son and daughter. Paul even applies God's coronation over David to every believer, stating in 2 Corinthians 6:18: "I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (NRSV).³⁶ In this passage, God displays God's almighty omnipotent power through the ultimate showing of benevolent generosity by, quite literally, giving everything to God's people, withholding nothing. God the Father gave the Son to make every son and daughter righteous and then offered the kingdom as an undeserved, unmerited inheritance! What a good, good Father! And if that wasn't enough: as a guarantee of everything that God promised, God gave God's Spirit to indwell every son and daughter as a living temple who confesses the Son as Lord [read: King and Servant] and Savior!

A Father as Servant and King

The baptism and transfiguration of Jesus the Nazarene actualized his identity as Christ the Son, Messiah, Servant and King over the world. Faith profession in Christ does the same thing. Faith profession in Christ actualizes one's redeemed, saved, and reconciled identity with God the Father. The same words that God the Father spoke over the Son become the very words

³⁵ "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20, NRSV).

³⁶ See 2 Samuel 7:14, NRSV

that God the Father speaks to every person who finds life in Christ: “This is my Son [or daughter], the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” In an analogous way with the family, this is the calling and responsibility of every human father.³⁷ As a father grows into “the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:13),” a human father becomes like a king and servant to his children. This does not mean in the regal sense of kingship, but in the kind of Christ-like leadership that a father provides for his family. A father’s kingly role is not ‘over’ the family as a king presides ‘over’ a kingdom. Rather, a father establishes his kingly leadership through love.

Jesus modeled true kingship through humility. He was King and entitled to the fullest rights and privileges of kingship as the incarnate God. Yet, Jesus did not exert his power through his position of authority. As the kenotic hymn in Philippians so aptly describes, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8, NRSV). His humility wasn’t passive. He didn’t abdicate his role as God and King. Rather, from his position as the Son of God and King, he performed miracles, signs and wonders of the Father’s Kingdom, healed the lame, ministered to countless individuals, forgave sinners, and “endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2, NRSV).

In the same way that God’s omnipotence flows out of God’s fatherhood, a father’s kingly power in his family is expressed as an outflow of his fatherhood, not as the source. For those fathers who view their power as the source of their fatherhood, their power manifests in authoritarian behaviors. Hence why power must be balanced with humble servant leadership.

³⁷ In the absence of a father, this task belongs to single mothers or guardians.

Power that only seeks to benefit oneself results in men who father their children in ways that contradict how God showed (and continues to show) his fathering love to the world. Such authoritarian power lays the groundwork for fathers to abuse, neglect, or even leave their children, altogether. Corrupted power contradicts how God the Father modeled true Servant King power by way of love in freedom through sacrifice.

The baptism and transfiguration narratives model how the love of a good father for his children presents itself through *affirmation, choice, and bestowal*. Though fathering children encompasses a variety of characteristics, these three behaviors continually arise in every situation at every age and stage of a child's life. Every situation and season of life gives rise to new opportunities for a father to affirm, choose, and bestow upon his children. In affirming, a father says, you are good, you are loved. Whether in plenty or want, success or failure, you are good, you are loved. In choosing, a father says, you are mine, and I am yours. Last, in bestowing, the father gives an identity to his children, believing for and leading his children to do more and become more than the father could do or become himself. A maturing father in Christ doesn't limit the capacity of his children. Rather, a good father helps his children see beyond what they can see for themselves. This kind of leadership demands that a father shows humility through sacrificial servanthood. As a father continually affirms, chooses, and bestows, he removes any hint of shame or unworthiness that his child might feel and, instead, leads his children to love others in freedom through sacrifice, as well.

Christ the Son made the greatest display of kingly servant hearted leadership on the cross. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you (John 15:12-14, NRSV)." Human

fathers bear witness to their own reconciliation to their Heavenly Father as they lay down their lives, setting aside their own preferences and desires, for the sake of their family and children.

This is the way of the Triune God. This is the ethic of Christ's Kingdom.

In chapter 4, this thesis will demonstrate how a Christology rooted in Christ as Servant and King informs the mission of the church to the fatherless.

Chapter 4 – The Church on Mission to the Fatherless

In a 2020 study, sociologist, Matthijs Kalmijn, concluded that both divorced parents and children of divorce experience some form of guilt, even in situations of low-conflict divorce. Kalmijn defines guilt “as the negative feelings that arise from having done something that is or is perceived to be wrong.”¹ Kalmijn states, “The analysis provided the first systematic piece of evidence that divorced parents have more feelings of guilt toward their children than married parents. The effects are significant, substantial in size, and persist when parents and children are older.”² The study also reveals that couples without children who divorce do not experience the same degrees of guilt as couples with children. Yet, couples with children who do feel guilty often ascribe that guilt to their identity. Guilt, Kalmijn suggests, lead many who experience divorce - parents and children, alike - to feel depressed.³

Divorced couples with children feel a sense of wrongdoing. According to Kalmijn’s research, children feel the same way, too. While this thesis contends that on some occasions divorce is warranted and necessary, this thesis argues that divorce incurs a painful consequence for children. As Root argues, divorce creates an ontological tear in a child’s world. Though repairable, restoration requires great intention on the part of the parents, along with the surrounding community of adults in a child’s life, such as extended family members, teachers, coaches, and, perhaps most important, the local church.

The truest and best expression of the church contains everything a child needs to experience restoration and redemption from the ontological break of divorce. Moreover, the

¹ Matthijs Kalmijn, “Chapter 13: Feelings of Guilt in the Family: The Case of Divorced Parents,” *Divorce in Europe*, European Studies of Population 21 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25838-2_13, 271.

² *Ibid.*, 285.

³ *Ibid.*, 284-285.

church is uniquely equipped to address the pain of father absence in a child's life. One of the tasks of the church, as Christ's Body, is to equip servant kingly fathers to bear witness to a kingdom ethic of love that finds its source in the love of God the Father. This chapter will demonstrate how a Christology rooted in Christ as Servant and King shapes and influences the mission of the local church as Christ's Body to the fatherless. The layout of this chapter will begin with a brief definition of ecclesiology. Then, it will explore Augustine's ecclesial doctrine of the *Totus Christus* as a foundational church doctrine for understanding the church as Christ's Body. Next, this chapter will call upon Karl Barth's doctrine of the church as the 'living congregation of Jesus Christ.' Finally, this chapter will close by offering a way for Christ's Body to live together on mission to the fatherless as a witnessing and restoring community.

A Covenant People

Misconceptions about the nature and essence of the church abound in American society. The most notable ones include the church as merely a building or a social organization. Though most churches meet in a building and certainly host numerous social functions a year, simply defining the church in these ways could not be further from the truest essence of the church. Fundamentally, the church is a people of promise, a covenant people, who receive the promise of salvation in Christ Jesus and live according to it.

Yet, the people of promise have a checkered history. Throughout the last two millennia of Christianity, the Body faced many challenges to stay unified. Sometimes, this happened because of sin and disobedience. Other times, this resulted from theological or hermeneutical differences. Either way, this thesis acknowledges that on the topic of fatherlessness through divorce, the

church does not have been consistent in its response and care for families. The church has faltered and limped along the way, but at its core, the church possesses all the power and potential of Christ Jesus to see healing and restoration begin in this world. Though wildly imperfect, the church is God's chosen instrument to advance God's kingdom mission in the world. The covenant people of God are a called people. At its finest, God's covenant people bear witness to the hope of Christ Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:21, "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (NRSV)."

As a covenant people, the New Testament describes this community using the Greek word 'ekklesia,' which translates into English as 'church.' The term derives from the Greek base word 'kaleo,' which means 'to call,' plus the preposition 'ek,' meaning 'out of.' The most concrete translation of ekklesia is 'the called-out ones.' God's covenant people are called out *from* sin and death and called out *to become* a holy nation of God, the Body of Christ, and a temple of God's Holy Spirit.⁴ The church embodies each person of the Trinity in its essence and purpose, not in static terms, but in a dynamic, life-transforming way. In fact, the Scriptures name more than 80 images to describe the church, none of which imply institution, building, or organization. Some of the images mentioned in the New Testament consist of the church as follows: the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13), a love letter from Christ (2 Corinthians 3:2-3), a fishing net (Mark 1:17), a wedding feast (Revelation 19:9), citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), and members of the God's household (Ephesians 2:19).⁵ These images refer to the church as living, directional, and transformative. It cannot be defined as simply one thing, but it is nothing

⁴ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 465.

⁵ See Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

less than ‘the called-out ones’ by Christ Jesus, the Son of the Living God! Each one of the images points to a different attribute of the church. Only as we turn the diamond and appreciate each one of its features do we truly understand the nature of the church for the world and fatherless children.

In the history of the church, one of the most significant leaders in the church was St. Augustine of Hippo. While many rightly celebrate Augustine for his work on *City of God*, *Confessions*, and *On Christian Teaching*, his most significant ecclesiological contribution was developing the doctrine of the *Totus Christus*. The doctrine formed during a time of great cultural and ecclesial strife. At the end of the 4th century into the turn of the 5th century, the church was inadequately equipped to respond to heresies arising from within the Body. False teachings by sectarian teachers misguided bishops and other leaders away from orthodox apostolic teaching. The church needed a developed ecclesiology about its essence and nature. As a result, Augustine’s development of the *Totus Christus*.

As every pastor knows, no sermon or teaching ever occurs apart from one’s own lived experience and background. One may infer that as Augustine developed the *Totus* during the early years of his pastoral ministry, his own father-woundedness and father hunger influenced the development of a doctrine rooted in the familial nature of Christ’s Body. One may also imagine how his friendship with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, provided a healing port of grace for him to experience the love of his Heavenly Father. At the heart of the *Totus*, Augustine taught, the church makes up the Body of Christ alive on earth through the love of God the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Augustine and the Doctrine of the *Totus Christus*

Augustine conceived the *Totus Christus* in response to theological controversies that arose nearly a century prior by a sect called the Donatists. Practitioners of Donatism called for a moralistic, legalistic approach to faith and leadership in the church. Donatists taught right-wing fundamental extremism and sought legalistic purity through violence and mass suicide. They achieved the height of their influence precisely when Augustine assumed the seat of Bishop of Hippo.

Augustine once remarked, “What is debated between the Donatists and us is, where is to be found this body of Christ which is the church? Are we to seek the answer in our own words, or in those of the Head of the body, our Lord Jesus Christ?”⁶ Refuting these issues became the motivation for uniting a fractured community into one Body, the *Totus Christus*. During Augustine’s era, the church lacked any defined doctrine to promote its self-understanding and unity. Ployd argues, “Augustine uses pro-Nicene principles and exegesis to construct his anti-Donatist vision of the church, and in doing so he describes how the church shares in the life of the Trinity through the Son’s giving of the Spirit to his own body. The unity of the church is an expression of the unity with which the Trinity operates to establish that church.”⁷

Over the course of several years, Augustine built a biblical rationale for the *Totus Christus* by focusing scores of sermons in the Psalms, the Gospel of John, and the First Epistle of John.⁸ According to Michael Cameron, “Augustine’s first known use of the *Totus Christus* motif

⁶ Adam Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 151.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ See Ployd, “Introduction,” *Augustine*.

appears in his exposition of Psalm 17.”⁹ The end of Psalm 17 states, “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, *beholding your likeness*” (Psalm 17:15, NRSV, emphasis mine). In the Psalms, Augustine employs a unique kind of technique called a prosopological hermeneutic to interpret the writings of the Psalms through the voice of Christ himself. In Psalm 17, according to Augustine, Christ beholds the very substance of God in his physical body to which He gives to the church by the power of his Holy Spirit. Spears writes of prosopological interpretation, “Scripture is about Christ, but the Christ of Scripture is not only himself but also his body. The Christ who is the subject matter of Scripture is the *Totus Christus*.”¹⁰

According to Augustine, the *Totus Christus* embodies the real, living essence of Christ’s Body in the world through those who profess faith in Christ. The *Totus Christus* describes how the church became the tangible witness of Christ’s character. Christ formed the church through the calling, fellowship, and mission of its ‘called-out’ members. Moser states, “And by this same divine power working in his bodily death and resurrection (Rom. 7:4), Christ has made us his body so that ‘we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another’ (Rom. 12:5, NRSV).”¹¹ Together, as the fellowship of believers, God’s Spirit unites all of God’s people to form one Body with Christ as its Head, the *Totus Christus*, the church. Moser states, “For Augustine, this scriptural teaching reveals a crucial claim about the church’s identity: Christ is united with his church so that one new spiritual entity—the *Totus Christus*—comes to

⁹ J. David Moser, “Totus Christus: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology.” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*. (2020, Vol 29), 6, footnote 9.

¹⁰ Aubrey Spears, “[Preaching the Old Testament](#),” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 400–401.

¹¹ Moser, “Totus,” 6.

be.”¹²

After his ascension, Christ gave his Spirit to unify all believers into his Body and guarantee every promise of God.¹³ According to Augustine, Christ is understood “in some way as the whole Christ (*Totus Christus*) in the fullness of the Church, that is, Head and Body, according to the completeness of a certain perfect man, the man in whom we are each members.”¹⁴ Thus, following Christ’s ascension to the seat of cosmic kingship, his work and ministry lives on to accomplish “even greater things”¹⁵ through all of those who belong to his Body, the church. As one Church, one Body, all God’s people seek and pray for the Father’s Kingdom to come and will be done “on Earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10, NRSV). With Christ the Son seated next to the God the Father, the Spirit empowers the Body to enact God’s will on earth. When a person connects with the *Totus Christus*, a person experiences a foretaste of Heaven and a glimpse into the fullness of life as God originally intended.

Critics of the *Totus Christus*, however, claim that it teeters on a fine line between heresy and liberation. The freedom gained from this doctrine celebrates “a spiritual union between Christ and the Church so that, out of the two, one spiritual entity, Head and members, comes to be.”¹⁶ What a profound and awesome mystery! In the Pentecost event, Christ proved ‘God with us’ by giving his Spirit to permanently unite the fellowship of believers with him for all time. The Spirit liberates the church to live most fully into the reality of Christ. Yet, others argue that Augustine crosses the line into making the church part of the divine union with Christ. The

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Ephesians chapter 1, NRSV.

¹⁴ See Augustine, *Sermo 341.1* in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* (PL), vol. 39, ed. J-P Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844–1864), col. 1493

¹⁵ “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12, NIV).

¹⁶ Moser, “Totus,” 9.

church “is qualitatively distinct from the hypostatic union and from the unity of the three divine persons.”¹⁷ Moser states, “*Totus Christus* denotes a kind of metaphysical identity between Christ and the Church, such that the ‘whole thing’ (*totum*) is Christ. But this spiritual entity is not composed of two distinct entities that become numerically identical, or one and the same thing. Christ and the Church are distinct in one way and united in another: distinct in their being, we might say, since God and creatures are distinct, but united by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸

The *Totus Christus* does not denote a perfect union between Christ and the church, nor does it argue that the church is the incarnation of Christ. Only the incarnate Word of God in Jesus Christ lived a perfect life as fully God and fully human. Rather, the *Totus Christus* describes the metaphysical nuptial between two separate entities, joining them together into one substantive whole.¹⁹ Christ is the head; the church is Christ’s Body, and the source of all life flows from the Head to the Body. Goudge writes, “It is the Lord Himself from whom proceeds the whole life of the Church, and upon whom its growth depends. The individual member lives not so much by an individual gift of divine life as by sharing in the life of the whole.”²⁰ In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul described how the leadership gifts of the Body build up the Body in order that “all of us come to the *unity of the faith* and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the *measure of the full stature of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:13, NRSV, emphasis mine). Thus, as the church embraces and lives according to its identity as the *Totus Christus*, its members grow into the measure of the full stature of Christ, not as Christ, but into his likeness.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Ephesians 5:21-33, NRSV.

²⁰ H. L. Goudge, “[The Theology of St. Paul](#),” in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture: Including the Apocrypha*, ed. Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, and Alfred Guillaume, vol. 3 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 419.

As the Head, Christ participates in the Body of the Church through what Augustine termed the ‘wonderful exchange.’ Here, Moser quotes Augustine in his second exposition of Psalm 30, stating: “Christ suffers for the church both in his body on the cross and in the present with the church.”²¹ Based on a prosopological interpretation of Psalm 30, Augustine argues that Christ feels what the members of his Body feel, experiences what the members of his Body experience, and knows what the members of his Body know. Christ joins in the sufferings and joys of his people through the one-way exchange of the Head with the Body. This proves Christ’s commissioning promise to his disciples when he said, “And remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, NRSV, emphasis mine). Christ comes up and close and personal with humanity by doing the unfathomable: permanently attaching himself to the brokenness of the world by uniting his spiritual Body to the sinful, not-yet-fully-restored brokenness of humanity. Hence, “our life *is* Christ’s life when we participate in him by faith, hope, and love.”²² Moser states, “Christ is mystically united to us in one body and his is therefore present in our actions and sufferings.”²³

Augustine’s doctrine still speaks today. As a church in need of unity, the *Totus Christus* provides a foundation of understanding to lead others into a restorative, redemptive relationship with God the Father through Christ the Son. Augustine’s doctrine, however, achieves more than an exercise in theological study. The *Totus Christus* lays a foundation for how the church understands itself and its mission. The church is the living Body of Christ in the world. While Jesus fulfilled his Messianic purpose on the cross, the church as Christ’s Body, now continues the next chapter of God’s mission to the world, not through salvific means, but by witnessing to

²¹ Moser, “Totus,” 13.

²² J. David Moser, “Corpus Mysticum: A Response to Vanhoozer, Horton, and Allen.” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 29 (2020), 58.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

the salvation work of Christ through the tangible community of the church. Any other definition falls short of the church's truest essence.

The *Totus Christus* provides an ontological framework for the church to equip its members to live as kings and servants. Christ is King and Servant over his Body, and as members of it, the church carries the charge to live as servant leaders in every aspect of life, bearing witness to the character of its Head, because the Body makes up the same substance as the Head.

Christ lives in his people. In Colossians, the Apostle Paul writes, "Christ in you, the hope of glory!" (NRSV). The Head leads the Body; the Head unites the Body. In the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he writes: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Based on these scripture passages, how might the church be seen as the location of redemption for fatherless children rather than a passive social organization in the neighborhood? What if single mothers viewed the church as the most reliable and authoritative source of partnership in their children's lives? What if married and divorced men, alike, trusted the church to equip them to become fathers who affirm, choose, and bestow blessing upon their children? Not only does God's Word provide a foundation for this way of being the church, but throughout its two millennia history, the best moments of the church reflect an outward movement of the ekklesia gathering into Christ's Body on Earth. When the gathered community lives into its calling as the Ekklesia, then it realizes and lives by the same power that raised Christ from the dead, which empowers the church to be and

act with the same character as its Savior.²⁴

The being of the church is Christ's Body, and the task of the church is to continue the ministry of Christ wherever it goes. Where there is brokenness, the church seeks restoration. Where there is injustice, the church fights to make wrongs right. Augustine offered a foundational doctrine in a time of great need. Though Donatism ended long ago, the need for the church to rise into its God-given calling in Spirit and Word still exists today. Fast forward from the fifth century to the twentieth, one of the greatest modern theologians, Karl Barth, offered a fresh take on the how the church continues to live as Christ's Body in the world.

The Church as the “Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ”

Karl Barth defined the essence of the church as the “living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁵ The church is alive because Christ is alive. Barth calls the church a “dynamic reality.”²⁶ It's active, moving, responding, and leading. Unlike an organization or institution, the truest essence of the church can be described as an “event.”²⁷ Barth writes, “It is in this event that God allows these men to be heralds of the victory which He has won over sin, suffering, and death, harbingers of His coming revelation and those who make known the burning love of the Creator for His whole creation.”²⁸ Thus, the church, Barth says, exists in real time here and now, bearing witness to and living as the embodiment of Christ's activity in the

²⁴ “And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:19-20, NRSV).

²⁵ Karl Barth, *God Here and Now* (London: Routledge Classic, 2003), 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

world.

Barth parses the ekklesia, the gathered Body of Christ, in eight distinct dimensions, beginning each new distinctive with the phrase, “The essence of the Church is the *event...*” (emphasis mine). In Barth’s view, the church is a phenomenological occurrence, not merely a programmatic calendar event that happens on a Sunday morning. The church happens when its members gather in the Spirit, equip each other for works of service, and send out into the world as witnesses. The church *always* signifies the reality of Christ and the presence of his Kingdom on earth. The first four of Barth’s dimensions correspond to what takes place in the life of every believer. The second four dimensions correspond to the Spirit’s work in the life of the corporate community.

In the first four dimensions of the church’s essence, Barth describes what happens in the life of every member of Christ’s Body. First, believers gather in the time ‘in-between’ the ascension and the final Parousia, and in this gathering, believers offer thanks and praise. To give thanks means *to look back* on what Christ did, and to give praise means *to look ahead* to what Christ will do. Second, believers find togetherness and unity in one another as Christ empowers and inhabits each believer in a unique way to establish his presence on earth. Next, Christ gives each member the freedom to respond and lead within the Body. Finally, each believer receives the capacity to know and tell the truth based on the Word of God in Scripture, which establishes the building up and discipleship of the church. Each one of these dimensions points to the church as a movement. Any other way of living and being, Barth argues, erodes the church into something else other than living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ.

The second four dimensions of the church’s essence indicate the presence of God’s living Spirit within the church. First, the church is only the true embodiment of Christ’s Body. As

believers gather in Christ's name, they align their wills to the power of God's Spirit alive in each one of them. Barth writes, "The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is nothing other than the actually operative might and power of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, which has become a word addressed to particular men and has awakened their answer. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit creates the living community."²⁹ Thus, the fellowship of the gathered community is formed by the very heart of God himself. God wills, desires, and even, needs the church, for the church itself is the living expression of God's character, albeit imperfect in the time 'in-between,' but at its best shows the love of God and points to the work of Christ in the world!

Next, Barth shows how the essence of the church is reflected in baptism and the Lord's supper. In Baptism, God's Spirit brings "to their remembrance that they have been received into the friendship of God and therefore have been made responsible before the whole world for the things of God,"³⁰ In a similar way that Christ the Son showed the heart of God the Father by doing the things of God the Father, now the church participates in the things of God the Father by sharing in the work of Christ the Son. The church is fully alive and living into its calling when it shares the good news with the poor in Spirit, releases those captive to sin, recover sight to those blind to faith, frees the oppressed by injustice, and proclaims the year of the Lord's favor.³¹ Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18, NRSV). The church is responsible for binding and loosening the things of God. Every baptism celebrated in the triune name of God

²⁹ Ibid., 80.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ A clear distinction must be made here between the work of the Lord and the work of the church. The church does not participate equally in the things of God in the same way that Christ did. Only Christ effects these things in the world. Yet, as the Apostle Paul declared, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27, NRSV), the church is able and permitted to participate in the things of God because the church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It does not fulfill Isaiah 61 like Jesus did. Rather, the church witnesses and reveals its true Savior and Lord by doing the work of the Lord in the world, not as the Lord, but as the redeemed.

reminds the church of this truth. In the Lord's Supper, the church remembers both its forgiveness and confirmation of God's covenant with God's covenant people.³²

Barth's final dimension of the church's essence marks a light shining bright throughout all the world. Barth states, "It is a question of this community opening wide its doors and windows in order to truly share not in the fraud and especially not in the religious and moralistic illusions of its environment, but in its real concerns, needs, and tasks, that it may represent a calm center of lodging and reflection in contrast to the world's activity and idleness, and also in order to be, in this context, the source of prophetic unrest, admonition, and instigation, without which this transitory world can never endure."³³ The church exists in the world, but at the same time, apart from it, warning it but also deeply caring for its redemption. The church mercifully withholds its judgment over the world and graciously gives generously from its power, but the church does not tolerate its sin and selfishness. The truest essence of the church seeks to engage the world to bring the world in contact with its Savior. A static, disengaged church is not a church. It is something altogether different. A church that is ALL IN, however, is the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ!

The living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ has everything it needs to address the issues of its people and community, including the issues of fatherlessness and divorce. When the church acts with the mind of Christ, then truly, nothing in this world is too hard for the church because nothing is too hard for God!³⁴ Issues such as divorce and fatherlessness, which seem impossible to correct—let alone solve, begs for the church's engagement. The Body of Christ lives at its best when it rises to meet the impossible challenges that face our world.

³² See Matthew 26:28, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (NRSV).

³³ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 81.

³⁴ See Matthew 19:26, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (NRSV).

Nothing in this world can stop the church, not the gates of hell, nor the powers or principalities of this world.³⁵

As the Body of Christ, the church walks in confident hope with the source of its witness, Christ Jesus, and the future day of His final return. Until that day, the only threat to the church, according to Barth, is the people who make up the church. Barth writes, “The possibility of unbelief, false belief, and superstition, of ignorance, indifference, hate, and doubt, even of the powerlessness of their prayer—all lie close at hand and will continue so to lie as long as time lasts, as long as the final revelation of the victory of Jesus Christ has not yet dispersed these shadows.”³⁶ The church’s greatest threat and temptation lies within its own walls, revealing the location of its vulnerability but also the place of its greatest opportunity.

One example of this opportunity at work in the Body of Christ is the church in Broward County, Florida. In April 2014, the Senior Pastor of Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale, the largest local church in Florida at the time, resigned after admitting to multiple affairs. The shock wave reverberated across the country and the world, but the reality hit hardest in Broward County. Local church pastors and congregations felt betrayed and confused, and for a brief time, the church in Broward County lost its way. Bob Coy provided leadership and inspiration for scores of churches across Broward County and South Florida, but in what seemed like an instant, one man’s sin set into motion months of deterioration in the unity and fellowship of the Body.

About a year after Coy’s admission, several local churches in Broward County invited a

³⁵ Though nothing in this world can stop a church fully empowered on mission, this thesis acknowledges that many examples exist throughout the history of the church when it did not live at its finest. In fact, there are many people who do not trust the church because of sin, neglect, and abuses of power. While the church at its finest is an aspirational value that requires great effort, faith, and character, it is not impossible. The church has much standing against it. The powers and principalities of this world do not want it to succeed. They are actively pushing back against the church’s advancement of God’s kingdom on earth. Yet, even when the church falls short, its mission remains the same: to seek God’s kingdom come and will be done on earth, as it is in heaven!

³⁶ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 84.

pastor named Alan Platt from South Africa to help facilitate a process of healing and restoration. Remarkably, after months of praying for direction, the pastors of Broward County discerned that whatever new season of ministry God desired for the church, it needed to begin with *repentance*. Together, united by the Spirit, pastors across denominational and theological lines realized their own selfishness and pride toward Coy and one another in the wake of his confession. In fact, many of them admitted to feeling complicit in Coy's behaviors. Though no one admitted to knowing about the affairs, they all saw signs of leadership drift, spiritual doubt, and growing isolation, but no one warned Coy about their observations. Moreover, several of these same pastors confessed to feelings of competition toward one another.

In the months that followed, through repentance and forgiveness, the pastors identified and removed the single greatest threat to the church in Broward: their pride. It wasn't Coy's sin alone that created hardships for the advancement of God's Kingdom in Broward. It was everyone's. Upon this realization, the pastoral leaders in the community sought and offered forgiveness to one another and cultivated a new vision forward. The result led to a new ecumenical initiative called Church United.³⁷ Birthed out of friendship and trust, Church United seeks to organize and catalyze hundreds of local churches across Broward, Palm Beach, and the Treasure Coast toward a shared vision of kingdom expansion. Church United is comprised of an even split between evangelical and mainline churches. It is entirely comprised of Protestant churches but is open to the possibility of Catholic churches joining the movement. With the help of Church United, South Florida churches decided to strive for the impossible: to make South Florida the best place to live, work, and raise a family. As a way to see this vision become a reality, the churches in South Florida set their mission to eradicate the list of children waiting to

³⁷ For more information about Church United, visit <https://churchunitedfl.com>

enter foster care homes. Palm Beach already accomplished it. Broward is close.³⁸ Palm Beach County officials called what the church did ‘impossible.’ Yet, when the church lives worthy into its calling, nothing is impossible with God. No issue, not even fatherlessness, is too far out of reach from the church’s calling and capacity. How might the church’s witness in the world be more impactful if it made its mission all about seeking to accomplish the impossible?

For the church to achieve the impossible, it starts with a leader who embodies the character of Christ and believes in the impossible. How does a pastor lead toward this vision? Chapter 5 will focus on how the essence of the church described in this chapter requires the faithful presence of a pastoral leader who embodies the threefold offices of Christ and embraces a missional call to confront the powers, principalities, and brokenness of this world, including divorce and fatherlessness.

³⁸ Miami Dade County is not involved in Church United, as of now, because there has not been enough support among pastors and ministry leaders. In the opinion of this thesis, this points to the ongoing struggle of pastoral leaders in Miami who continue to lead from a place of pride and personal ambition.

Chapter 5 – The Way of Leadership for the Fatherless Church

As chapter 4 aptly showed through the ecclesiological shaping of Augustine and Barth, the church, indeed, is the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Body of Christ, and King Jesus rules over His Body from His seat of power in the Heavenly realms. It is so much more than Sunday morning service. If Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, then the church is Christ's instrument. The heart of Christ is the heart of the church; the activity of Christ is the activity of the church. The church is about the things of God. Each time the church rights a wrong, offers redemption, extends grace, and reveals mercy, the Body bears witness to its Head and advances the kingdom of God on earth.

Leadership for the Missional Church

The movement of the church is missionary in nature. It is not still. Rather, the church has been called by Christ to move out to bring in the lost.¹ In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21, NRSV). The church is a sent community. As Christ's Body, Jesus charged the church to continue what he started in his ministry, which was "to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Each individual member of the Body is a royal ambassador,² love letter,³ and witness to the world,⁴ which means the church

¹ See Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8.

² "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20, NRSV).

³ "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor 2-3, NRSV).

⁴ "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, NRSV).

both gathers and scatters. It is always gathering for worship, prayer, and the building up of the Body, while also always moving away from the center of church life to those not yet part of the fellowship of the Spirit.

In humanity's rebellion, God the Father sent Christ the Son on mission away from the center of Triune fellowship and into a world that did not know God, even though the world came into being through Christ.⁵ God risked everything by giving everything "to move into the neighborhood" and show God's unending, gracious, and merciful love.⁶ The nature of the church is to do the same: to move toward the world in grace and mercy to show love. In a similar way that Christ entered the world on mission to serve the world, Christ's Body now continues His work by serving on mission in the world, for the world!

The call of pastoral leadership brings this starting point for the congregation. Paul speaks directly to the spiritual gift of leadership in Romans 12, following his call to the church to offer their bodies as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice to God as an act of worship.⁷ A few verses later, Paul writes that God graces different gifts to members of Christ's Body, including, "the leader, in diligence" (Romans 12:8, NRSV). One with the gift of leadership influences the Body with meticulous care, constancy, and perseverance toward its mission. A leader often sees the vision of a preferred reality before and clearer than anyone else. A faithful leader leverages her or his position of influence for the good of the Body. Christian leadership moves the Body forward, not through coercion, but by the same character of servant-hearted mercy that Christ Jesus demonstrated in John 13. True leadership among the Body bends down lower than anyone

⁵ "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (John 1:10, NRSV).

⁶ John 1:14, The Message; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16, NRSV).

⁷ "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1, NRSV).

else and leads by lifting from the bottom, rather than drilling down from the top. According to Paul's letter to the church in Rome, leadership isn't given to everyone; it is a gift bestowed in grace to whomever God wills. It is a gift to the called, and the role of the pastor is to help each member of the Body identify her or his spiritual gifts and equip them for works of service in the Body, for the kingdom, toward unity and maturity in Christ!⁸

A Missional Church for the Fatherless

The church is most fully alive and active when it draws close to the lost and brokenhearted.⁹ Roxburgh and Romanuk define the 'missional church' as "how we cultivate a congregational environment where God is the center of conversation and God shapes the focus and work of the people."¹⁰ A missional congregation seeks that which moves God's heart. In his work on the foundation of missional church leadership, Darrell Guder writes, "The purpose of leadership is to form and equip a people who demonstrate and announce the purpose and direction of God through Jesus Christ."¹¹ Thus, the movement and activity of Christ during his ministry on earth becomes the movement and activity of His Body now. Among the many ways that the church executes its missionary calling, one must include witnessing to God's redemption and restoration of the fatherless. The Psalmist describes God by saying: "Father of orphans and

⁸ "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:11-14, NRSV).

⁹ "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Ps 34:17-18, NRSV).

¹⁰ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 2006), 26.

¹¹ Lois Barrett et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder and Craig Van Gelder, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 183.

protector of widow is God in his holy habitation” (Psalm 68:5, NRSV). Later in the New Testament Epistle of James, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27, NRSV). The biblical mandate for the church is clear on this issue: care for and witness to the fatherless. Regarding the divorced and fatherless, however, the church’s word and deed seems largely silent and absent.

The church needs clear vision and bold movement on this matter. As noted throughout this thesis, issues such as criminal behavior, drug abuse, and truancy each arise at least in part from fatherlessness. Early in my pastoral ministry, I received an invitation to tour San Quentin State Prison in Marin County, CA. During the tour, I attended a Q&A panel of inmates sentenced to life without parole. After some time, I mustered up the courage to ask this question, “What percentage of guys at San Quentin do you estimate grew up without a father present at home?” The inmates on the panel looked at each and chuckled. Then, the lead spokesman stood up and said, “That applies to 98% of the guys here.” Now, more than ever, the church needs courageous pastoral leaders to guide the church with a missional ecclesiology from a Christology based in a Heavenly Father who chooses, affirms, and bestows.

Yet, before a pastoral leader can begin cultivating ministries and diving into problem solving on this matter, a pastoral leader’s attention needs to start within the walls and address the hearts of those who already make up the Body . While on the one hand, God’s fathering heart beats for the fatherless in the world, God’s heart beats more widely for unity among God’s people as a sign of God’s Kingdom reign in the world. Fatherlessness is one way in which sin divides and separates love from one another and God. Thus, one of the church’s strongest witnesses against fatherlessness is by doing anything short of sin to seek and maintain its own

unity by investing into marriages before they end in divorce and fathers before they leave their families. God's character manifests in unity, and the church incarnates this reality as it seeks to fulfill God's plan for unity in the world.¹² One of the many roles of the pastor is to guide Christ's unity among the fellowship, and since unity both answers Jesus' prayer from the upper room and repairs the consequence of sin, unity is inherently a missionary task of God's people.¹³ Guder states, "These ministries of leadership are given to enable the church to carry out its fundamentally missiological purpose in the world: to announce and demonstrate the new creation in Jesus Christ. This purpose necessarily involves leaders in equipping and guiding the body in those ecclesial practices that form the community in a oneness that is a living demonstration of the ethics of God's reign."¹⁴ A pastor who desires to guide the fellowship of the Body into a kingdom way of life needs to lead the kind of life worthy of the calling given by Christ Jesus.

Leading a Life Worthy of the Call

After providing one of the most supercharged theological treatises in the New Testament (Ephesians 1-3), Paul turns to a simple, yet deeply profound charge to the saints: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Ephesians 4:1, NRSV). Paul charges every member of the faith community to lead a life that

¹² "He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10, NRSV).

¹³ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20-23, NRSV).

¹⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, 185.

matches the worth and value of God’s calling. This call entails both a call *out of* sin and death and *into* life and vocation with Christ. This kind of pastoral leadership requires modeling character and integrity to form and equip God’s people to unity, knowledge, maturity, and stature in Christ. While most other English translations, including the New Revised Standard Version, translate περιπατῆσαι as “lead,”¹⁵ Guder argues that Paul intended to mean the action verb “walking” as a paradigmatic idiom to describe how congregations on mission ought to live: ‘walking worthily.’ Guder states, “‘Walking worthily’ appears to be a key description of the life and conduct of these communities as they continue the apostolic witness that is their very reason for being. They are to walk worthy of God, of his call, of the Lord, of the gospel of Christ, of the calling to which they have been called.”¹⁶

The translations ‘lead’ and ‘walking worthily’ certainly share common themes, but one noticeable key difference emerges for consideration: ‘walking’ connotes what Eugene Peterson calls ‘a long obedience in the same direction.’¹⁷ Leading implies influence, which the church desperately needs. To walk worthily, though, paints a different picture of a leader than the one portrayed by American society. A leader who walks worthily in the way of Jesus influences as one with the people, not necessarily in front of them with directives. In fact, Simon Sinek argues that the most effective leaders are the ones who serve and, often, from the back.¹⁸ One who walks worthily of the Lord and His people makes steady, consistent progress over time. A pastoral leader walks worthily by persevering in hardship and staying faithful to God’s mission in whatever circumstance. A pastor who walks worthy of the call exemplifies leadership by

¹⁵ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 803.

¹⁶ Guder, *Missional Church*, 130.

¹⁷ See Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2019).

¹⁸ See Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2017).

stewarding the Body, not commanding it. Christ is Lord and King, not the pastor. While a CEO, non-profit leader, or pastor might assume that he or she holds the reigns of authority in the company, organization, or church, there is always one greater. In fact, all authority and power originate from and bestowed by God. The Apostle John recounted Pilate's conversation with Jesus before turning Jesus over for crucifixion, writing: "Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above'" (John 19:10-11, NRSV). Jesus clearly states that God authors power and confers it on whoever God wills.

This reality breaks some pastors, but the ones who understand that pastoral leadership is stewardship are the ones who walk worthily on mission. These leaders have been transformed and are in the process of being transformed by the true source of power in God's Holy Spirit. Roxburgh and Romanuk write, "Missional leadership is about shaping cultural imagination within a congregation wherein people discern what God might be about among them and in their community."¹⁹ Missional leaders leverage their power and authority to benefit the growth of the Body for the sake of the kingdom.

The Pathway of Pastoral Leadership: The Three Offices of Christ

Pastoral leadership is best defined as influencing God's people to advance the Gospel witness to advance God's kingdom. For a pastor, the vocation of pastoral leadership demands obedience to and embodiment of Christ's threefold offices. Freeman states, "God has entrusted

¹⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 26.

the ministry of reconciliation to the church (2 Cor 5:19) and yet the competence of its ministers is not dependent on homiletical eloquence, pastoral skills, nor programmatic innovation. It is dependent on a single criterion—participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.”²⁰ The only way that a pastor can holistically and faithfully lead the church to address the matter of fatherlessness is by incorporating the threefold offices of Christ. A pastoral leader’s participation in Christ’s ongoing ministry necessitates leadership in each one of these offices. As a church walking with the fatherless, pastors embody Christ by leading the brokenhearted into relationship with their Heavenly Father (priestly leadership), speaking words of life (prophetic leadership), and providing the resources and tools that a fatherless son or daughter would need to heal and thrive as an adopted son or daughter of God (kingly leadership). Whether ordained or lay, every Christian follows Christ in his threefold offices by leading at home with family and friends, work, and the church. Each one of the three offices of priest, prophet, and king points to the leadership attributes of vulnerability, imagination, and transformation, respectively.²¹ Though the terms prophet, priest, and king typically refer to the male gender, this thesis argues that the threefold offices of Christ cover every Christ follower. These terms name the attributes of leadership that Christ embodied during his ministry, and His calling to obedience applies to every Christ follower, regardless of gender.

In Old Testament leadership, each one of the unique offices of prophet, priest, and king represented God’s presence with God’s people. Yet, no leader held all three offices at the same time. Rather, God typically called and appointed leaders to serve in only one of the offices as

²⁰ Curtis W. Freeman, “Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 31/4 (Winter 2012): 395.

²¹ The following exposition into the threefold offices of Christ have been heavily influenced by lectures offered by Dr. Curtis Freeman, most notably: Curtis Freeman, “Theology of Christian Leadership” (lecture, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, August 12, 2020).

God's representative. Israel's Messiah, however, embodied each one of these offices fully and uniquely, incarnating the full presence of God, in his ministry. Now, as God's adopted sons and daughters in Christ, God's Spirit provides the opportunity for all Christ followers to participate in each one of the three offices. Allender states, "We are to be all three, all at once, and with all three in play with, for, and against one another. To lead is to mirror Jesus in all three of these capacities."²²

With every step that a pastor takes on the path, the call of leadership beckons that leader to embody Christ's threefold office by sharing in his sufferings and carrying on the ministry of reconciliation to a world separated from its Heavenly Father by sin. On the path, ministers walk in the revelation of the prophet, the peace of the priest, and the mighty courage of the king. While not every leader manifests each office with the same degree of giftedness, the way of Christ exhorts every Christian, especially every pastor, to incorporate each one of these offices into the daily outworking of ministry leadership. The threefold offices attend to every dimension of leadership in the church and apply to every follower of Christ.

Christ as priest points to the church as a foretaste of the kingdom. The priestly attribute mediates between the brokenness of the world with Christ's call to reconcile with the Father. This office begs the question: "Where are we?" The priestly attribute defines reality according to God's kingdom ethic. It invites others into the presence of God here and now. Pastors leading from this attribute clarify 'what is.' The priestly office seeks to make disciples who draw people into relationship with God and point them to the in-breaking of God's Kingdom in the world. This office requires that ministers pursue formation-care with their congregation, partnering in the Spirit's work of forming God's people into Christlikeness.²³ This office beckons pastors to

²² Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2006), 187.

²³ See Ephesians 4, NRSV.

lead from a position of servant-hearted vulnerability. The priestly leader models for the church how the community might cultivate vulnerability through humility. The office of priestly leadership assumes a kenotic posture, calling pastors to empty themselves for the sake of others in the same way that Christ did for our salvation on the cross.²⁴

Yet, the kenotic posture of priestly leadership does not call pastors to divest themselves of their families, relationships, or identity. Nor does the priestly office implicitly demand that a pastor needs to cross boundaries and lead with an ‘at all costs’ mentality for the sake of higher productivity and gain. That kind of emptying leads to exasperation and exhaustion, which results in ineffectiveness, a low sense of well-being, and in worst case scenarios, sinful and disqualifying behavior. Instead, the priestly office calls leaders to pour out their lives for the sake of others so that the world may know Christ crucified and risen, which, ultimately, points to life! Thus, as leaders develop competency in the priestly office, leaders ought to experience more and more life, which, serves as a witness to fatherless sons and daughters to the possibility and potential of experiencing true life in this life!

Kenotic, priestly leadership means going the extra mile in hospitality, generosity, and service. For a pastoral leader, it also means extending forgiveness and mercy, refraining from positional power, and loving the unlovable. Often, the congregation takes its cues on how to love from the pastor, who models how to do that in this office. The priestly office invites pastors to lead with open hands by equipping and empowering the community to build up the Body and lead as Christ’s witnesses in the world. A priestly leader is not threatened by people. Rather, a priestly leader seeks to help others find their place within the larger Body of Christ. There are countless opportunities for pastors to lead with vulnerability and wisdom without placing

²⁴ See the Kenotic Hymn in Philippians 2:6-11, NRSV.

themselves, their families, or their churches at risk. The fatherless need a leader who exhibits healthy virtues, especially at home.

Christ as prophet bears witness to the church as a here and now present sign of the kingdom. The prophetic tells the world of God's Word in action. A pastor leading from the prophetic office asks the question: "Where should we be?" The prophetic office beckons others to embrace a vision of a different reality other than 'what is.' Often, the prophetic leans into holy discontentment, longing for what could be. In the prophetic office, pastoral leaders make disciples who not only desire a vision for a new world, but who bring that vision into reality. The church needs the prophetic office to help shape a new way of life. In this office, a pastor might envision a world without fatherlessness and every father stays present for their wives and children. Here, a pastor firmly rooted in the prophetic office helps the church dream of ways to influence this vision to become reality. A potential starting point could begin with equipping dads to stay when they want to leave through resources and providing fellowship for men who hold one another accountable with respect and dignity.

The prophetic office disturbs the status quo for the sake of change through the promises of God's Good News in Christ. The prophetic office evokes the trait of imagination. It presents opportunities for the eidetic leader to guide the church into a kingdom vision that begins with a Spirit-led imagination. A prophetic leader acts courageously and with counter-cultural boldness. Eidetic leadership envisions a different kind of reality than one that includes fatherlessness. In this manner, a prophetic leader can help the church see how fatherhood, motherhood, and the family, altogether, positively influences the life of a child and community for generations. Yet, this attribute doesn't just stay in focused on the future. It also imagines a way for healing and wholeness to occur here and now when marriages breakdown and fathers leave, asking "If

fatherlessness cannot be completely eradicated, then how might the church serve as a village for the fatherless and walk worthily alongside them?”

Last, the church is an instrument of God’s reign. Christ is the true King, and by the power of God’s Spirit, the church is the royal priesthood in His kingdom. Wherever the church is located, God’s people bear witness to the in-breaking of God’s kingdom into the world. The kingly office asks: “Where can we be?” More than organizational leadership, the kingly office serves as an exemplar of covenantal faithfulness to the true King and Lord. Through Holy Spirit inspiration, a pastor who leads with the attribute of kingly leadership guides the direction in which God desires to lead the church. The kingly office makes disciples whose inheritance is God’s kingdom. These disciples show enduring leadership in the face of opposition. Disciples shaped by the kingly office seek to gain kingdom ground by adhering to God’s law of love first and then making God’s covenantal love known to all. In this office, pastors create order through effective systems, follow process, and hold themselves accountable to the Body as one among the Body. By God’s power, pastors transform chaos, destruction, and injustice into peace, restoration, and righteousness.

The kingly office is metamorphic. As Christian leaders embrace their God-given calling to serve from a kingly office, they serve as agents of change to the existing systems and structures under their influence. The kingly office believes that any person can experience growth and life change through Christ on earth as it is in heaven! Therefore, every fatherless son or daughter, along with every absent father for that matter, is not too far from God, and though this issue may seem impossible to effect, nothing is too hard for God!

The Core Characteristic of Pastoral Leadership with the Fatherless

As leaders live the kind of life that matches the worth of their call to follow Christ's threefold office of leadership, they become guides for the community of God into the presence of God (priestly leadership) for a new reality (prophetic leadership) in the here and now (kingly leadership). Herein lies a remarkable opportunity for pastors who embody the threefold office to lead the fatherless. As pastors seek to lead in the way of Jesus, the most profound way to connect with the brokenhearted is by vulnerably identifying with one's own broken heart. This act requires one to adhere to the core characteristic of pastoral leadership: humility. A humble posture provides a way for genuine, authentic connection with another. On the virtue of humility, John Dickson writes, "Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself. More simply, you could say the humble person is marked by a willingness to hold power in service of others."²⁵ Humility creates the opportunity to join a person in power with another who does not share that same power. For a pastor to open her or himself in humility to join the worthy walk of a fatherless son or daughter unites both together on Redemption Road. As leaders in positions of power and authority, pastors more than many other leaders are blessed with a unique opportunity to show the supreme grace of God's work in them through their limp. Allender states, "A leader who limps subverts the expectations of those who define leadership as running an organization. It is not that a limping leader does not hire, fire, advance, reward, discipline, and delegate. These are inescapable duties of leadership. But the aim of a leader's activity is not the growth of the organization. It's not even meeting needs or doing good. The purpose of limping leadership is the maturing of character."²⁶

²⁵ John Dickson, *Humilitas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 24.

²⁶ Allender, *Leading*, 143.

God the Father showed the greatest humility by holding power in the ultimate act of service to others. God the Father gave God the Son, Christ Jesus, who did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped but, instead, assumed the role of a servant. How might a pastoral leader follow Christ in the same way with God's people? When a pastoral leader lives with this kind of humility, as opposed to the pride-driven celebrity that our culture craves and devours, then the movement of God's mission can advance through the local church. Shame stalls leadership at best, but at worst, usurps it. Conversely, humility leads to life. It opens a pastoral leader to receive the Spirit's guidance to form a missional imagination for Gospel transformation. Humility opens my eyes to see myself through how Christ sees me. A missional leader who follows Christ in humble servanthood guides the community in a priestly manner, paints a vision for how God's mission can impact others, and leads the community toward vision achievement for the Kingdom.

And the good news? God's way of missional leadership happens all the time – often under the radar – through ordinary, broken people who simply answer yes to God's call. Now more than ever, the church needs healthy, faithful leaders to walk worthily in the line of Christ's threefold office and address the issue of fatherlessness in our society. It is paramount. Christ is beckoning His Body to seek the fatherless with Him and restore broken man back into healthy fathers! The church has every resource at its request to help the fatherless feel needed and known by their Heavenly Father. The time is now, and the pastor is the linchpin. In the last chapter, this thesis will examine how Design Thinking may provide a way forward for pastoral leaders to create cultures and ministries that address and solve this monumental crisis.

Chapter 6 – Leading the Church to Address Fatherlessness Through Divorce in the American Church

Divorce and fatherlessness pervade across American society and western culture. For so many children, life without father is an all too familiar pain. It is so prevalent that popular culture normalizes it as an ordinary element of society through fiction, stories, and film. At the time of this writing, a brand-new blockbuster action film called *Red Notice* released on Netflix in November 2021. It stars Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and Ryan Reynolds. On the surface, it appears like a fun, buddy-type heist film, which it is, but less than twenty minutes into the film, the viewer observes both men sharing stories about how their father abandonment inspired their nefarious activity. Both characters describe how the lack of a father who showed them love initiated their life of crime and justified their anti-hero criminal behavior. They share their father wounds like a benign scar rather than a real source of pain that needs healing. In fact, the assumption is that it can’t be healed. Instead, life carries on and their woundedness gives grounds for hurting others and taking whatever they want. Films like *Red Notice* follow in a long line of films that leverage father woundedness as an emotional access point to build a storyline that shapes the behaviors of the characters in the narrative.

This thesis seeks to offer an alternative narrative to the norms of divorce and fatherlessness. Divorce leads to all sorts of perils, even in the most amicable situations, and fatherlessness negatively shapes sons and daughters, alike. Too many consequences weigh on the effects of divorce and fatherlessness to normalize them. Because these events shape so much of what our society experiences in family life, a better question could be: how might these events become opportunities for redemption and growth, rather than accepted as one of the

consequences of marriage and family life? Historically, the church has fallen short in viewing this issue through the lens of redemption and growth. To Lauren Winner's point, the church has largely been silent on tackling the issue of divorce.¹ At best, church leaders welcome divorced families, but do not provide much in the way of support and resources. At worst, some church leaders exclude and condemn divorced families, along with those who disengage from their children. Ironically, however, the church is uniquely equipped with both a message and the necessary resources to offer hope and a way forward through this seemingly impossible challenge. Real lives, namely children, hang in the balance of divorce and fatherlessness. They deserve the church's best leadership, thinking, and action on this matter.

The final chapter of this thesis will offer pastoral leaders a way to care for the divorced and fatherless, as well as equip families to prevent these circumstances from ever happening, through the framework of traditioned innovation by applying the Design Thinking methodology.² Finally, this chapter will conclude with a practical application of a logic model to aid pastoral leaders toward kingdom impact in Christ's name!

Creating a Better Story for the Divorced and Fatherless

In a 1906 edition of *The American Journal of Theology*, Professor James Richard raised the concern of how the church was addressing the growing numbers of divorces in the United States. He argued that pastors were syncretizing divorce with the state, calling marriage a "holy

¹ Lauren Winner, "Lectio Divina and Divorce: Reflections in Twelve Parts about What Divorce Has to Teach the Church," *Anglican Theological Review* Vol 97, No 2 (Spring 2015): 282.

² This thesis gives credit to L. Gregory Jones for crafting the phrase 'traditioned innovation.' It was popularized in his book *Navigating the Future*.

estate,”³ and beckoned pastors to help divorced people in need, not shun them out of the church. One hundred and fifteen years later, what makes Richard’s article so fascinating today is how the church was trying to process the complicated realities and consequences of divorce. With the full onset of Enlightenment values taking root in American society, individuals sought fulfillment over communal responsibility.⁴ As a result, the church faced an increasing tension with how to lead and teach the values of marriage and family in a growing secular society.

Fast forward 106 years to 2012, pastor and author, Carolyn Call describes the deeply complicated and spiritual implications of divorce on her life.⁵ Call argues that divorce goes so much deeper than the surface level assumptions about the couple’s marriage. For many divorced individuals, she argues, divorce raises complex questions about God, love, reconciliation, grace, and redemption. The church has a responsibility to both welcome, care for, and disciple divorced families into maturity in Christ, while also developing more constructive and positive ways to discourage divorce and fatherlessness in the first place.

Traditioned Innovation and Divorce and Fatherlessness

In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, God revealed Godself as a creator and sustainer of life for the purpose of human flourishing with God and one another. God created because of love.⁶ God sustains in provision and relationship because of love. And God grows life in God’s image

³ James Richard, “The Church and Divorce,” *The American Journal of Theology* Vol. 10, No. 3 (July, 1906): 452-474, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3154292>.

⁴ See chapter 2 of this thesis

⁵ Carolyn Call, “Spiritual cul-de-sac: How the Church Fails the Divorced,” *Christianity Today*, July 10, 2013, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-07/spiritual-cul-de-sac> .

⁶ “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16, NRSV).

bearers because of love. Jones writes, “Traditioned innovation begins with the End that points back toward a generative Beginning, Flourishing, and holds the past and future together in creative tension as a way to strive toward that end—for ourselves, for our friends, families, neighbors, and coworkers, for our communities and institutions, and for our societies and the cosmos at large.”⁷ Traditioned innovation finds its root in the Creator. Though sin wrecked God’s original intention for human flourishing, God made a way possible in Christ by the power of God’s Spirit to experience a foretaste of flourishing here and now.

The church not only exists as the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ who made flourishing possible despite our own sin, the church also exists as the ‘playing field’ for people to experience the flourishing of life in Christ. Jones writes, “Traditioned innovation focuses on forming soulful people of character, on cultivating transformational relationships and networks, on developing a pioneering spirit that pushes into the future in ways that illumine the present through the wisdom of the past, and on building communities and vibrant institutions that have the potential to shift equilibriums and promote the flourishing of all.”⁸ The work of ‘traditioned innovation’ seeks to offer practical change toward a promised future. Divorced families and fatherless children need more than a word of hope; they need real and lasting change toward a new reality. Often, pain and despair mark the present circumstances of the divorced and fatherless. While popular culture and postmodernity might write that off as a natural consequence of a finite, individualized society, the good news of Jesus offers a radically different alternative to the postmodern, secular frame.

As the church seeks to address the issues of divorce and fatherlessness, the practice of traditioned innovation informs pastoral leaders on the historical insights of the church’s past

⁷ L. Gregory Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

toward a new future yet to be discovered. Traditioned innovation critiques what some creatives and business leaders might call pure innovation. To start from scratch on addressing the issues of human suffering dismisses the two millennia history of the Spirit's work in the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ. Pure innovation is akin to a newly married couple creating a new last name and starting a new family tree from scratch apart from their historical lineage. The church is not charged with creating something new. That effort belongs to Christ and Christ alone.⁹ The church is tasked with embodying the character and message of its Lord as a witnessing community. The very nature of this task demands that the church reflects upon its history, critiques it, honors it, learns from it, and leverages all the best of it toward a new and beckoning future distinguished by reconciliation and restoration.

Leading with the End in Mind

For the church to solve any challenge, a leader must start with a clearly defined and compelling 'why.' Sinek basis his work in what he calls 'the Golden Circle.' The Golden Circle shows how a leader may "inspire action instead of manipulating people to act."¹⁰ The Golden circle consists of three concentric circles, which list from the inside-out: WHY, WHAT, and HOW. Sinek contends that to truly motivate people toward change and transformation, a leader must always seek to inspire, which begins with the 'why' or purpose.

Most organizations, Sinek argues, start with 'what.' The 'what' makes up the 'doings' of an organization. In most churches, this includes providing safe, relevant, and irresistible family ministry environments, offering an inspirational and biblically based message every Sunday, and

⁹ "And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new'" (Rev 21:5, NRSV).

¹⁰ Simon Sinek, *Start with Why* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 38.

helping people grow in life-giving community. All these statements identify ‘what’ a church does. A ‘why’ statement, however, conveys “purpose, cause, or belief.”¹¹ The WHY expresses the very reason for that organization’s existence. Sinek repeats throughout the book: “People don’t buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it.”¹² In a church, this statement might translate better as, “People don’t experience transformation because of WHAT you do, they experience transformation because of WHY you do it.” The more that churches define themselves by ‘what’ they do and offer, then the more the church becomes defined by what commodity it provides, instead of the Good News that Christ offers.

The ‘why’ matters most. Sinek writes, “When the WHY is absent, imbalance is produced, and manipulations thrive.”¹³ No hymn of ages past describes the Christian life more straightforwardly than “And Can it Be, That I Should Gain?” This is an example of a clear and compelling ‘why’ for the church. Written by Charles Wesley in 1738, the final verse states, “No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him is mine! Alive in Him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine; bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.” How glorious! How might the tides of fatherlessness and divorce ebb if hurting individuals knew the true purpose and ‘why’ of Christ and the church?

When the ‘why’ is clear, then everything else follows. As Sinek states, “WHATs don’t drive decision-making, WHATs should be used as proof for WHY.”¹⁴ The ‘what’ always points to the greater ‘why. The ‘how’ identifies the organization’s core principles and values. At Christ Journey Church, the ‘why’ is clear and drives everything forward: ‘helping people find and follow Christ.’ What do staff teams do to equip the congregation to accomplish this? ‘By

¹¹ Ibid., 39.

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

cultivating relevant environments toward Christ-centered living.’ How does this happen? Every ministry leader is charged to lead every Christ Journey attender to live on the EDGE: Evangelism, Discipleship, Generosity, and Empowerment. As Pastors and ministry staff leaders, the EDGE shapes ‘how’ every age and stage environment at Christ Journey Church accomplishes the ‘what’ toward the ‘why’ of our calling. When churches invert the Golden Circle and lead with ‘what’ or ‘how’ instead of a strong and compelling ‘why,’ then churches become known by ‘what’ or ‘how’ they provide ministry and risk becoming a service to the community rather than a transformational witness to Christ in the world!

Churches that keep the ‘why’ front and center, while staying true to Christ’s calling, practice traditioned innovation. Jones writes, “To navigate our complex, bewildering present and our evolving, unpredictable future, leaders and institutions should start with, and hold to, an unwavering commitment to WHY—and to a particular kind of why: to the promotion of flourishing in our own lives, in our relationships and institutions, in our communities, and in the larger world.”¹⁵ An organization’s ‘why’ keeps the eyes of its leaders and stakeholders forward when bewildering circumstances rock the boat, and certainly, divorce and fatherlessness qualify as bewildering circumstances. When this purpose gets lost in the milieu of sin and deception, then divorced families lose and fatherless children miss God’s presence in their lives as a good, loving, and present Heavenly Father.

Design Thinking on Divorce and Fatherlessness

The church must no waver from its white hot ‘why.’ Instead, the church needs to lean

¹⁵ Jones, *Navigating*, 48.

into the power and presence of the Holy Spirit's guidance to offer solutions to the most challenging issues facing society. The good news hope of Christ proclaims that past and present circumstances do not define the future, so even though the current state of the world's brokenness inhibits total and complete resolve to issues like divorce and fatherlessness, healing and restoration is possible for anyone who "calls upon the name of the Lord" (Romans 10:13, NRSV). One of the methodologies that contributes seeks to find solutions to complex problems is Design Thinking.

Typically, Design Thinking benefits companies operating in the business, engineering, and education sectors, but if any institution stands to gain from this methodology, it is the church. The church lives in the gap between the complex and the impossible. In fact, it witnesses the impossible done every day through the movement of God's Spirit in people's lives. As the church seeks to walk worthily into its calling, it inevitably moves closer to the complex issues of society to offer tangible hope through real life solutions. The Design Thinking methodology makes this intention possible.

Design Thinking addresses complex issues with the user in mind. Of course, the result matters, but Design Thinking asserts that people matter more. Design Thinking tackles "complex problems that are ill-defined or unknown, by understanding the human needs involved, by re-framing the problem in human-centric ways, by creating many ideas in brainstorming sessions, and by adopting a hands-on approach in prototyping and testing."¹⁶ Stanford's d.school created a five-stage approach to implement Design Thinking: Empathize, Define the Problem, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. While each stage follows a progression toward discovering a solution, the

¹⁶ Rikke Friis Dam and Teo Yu Siang, "5 Stages in the Design Thinking Process," Interaction Design Foundation, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/5-stages-in-the-design-thinking-process>

stages do not always need to occur sequentially in practice. Dam and Siang state, “[the stages] do not have to follow any specific order and they can often occur in parallel and be repeated iteratively.”¹⁷ For example, after a period of testing in the fifth stage, new insights shape how leaders empathize with their audience in the first stage, which then, influences a whole new process of design. Testing also creates new ideas in the third stage and reveals new learnings that redefine the problem in the second stage. Learnings from prototyping in the fourth stage typically spark new ideations in the third stage.¹⁸ As the process continues over time, the stages become less linear and more concurrent. Tim Brown, former CEO of IDEO, listed the top leadership characteristics that best match with the Design Thinking methodology: empathy, integrative thinking, optimism, experimentalism, and collaboration.¹⁹

As a methodology, Design Thinking aligns with the mission of the church.

Fundamentally, the church is in the people business, and Design Thinking is all about the people. The methodology begins by empathizing with the people most impacted by the problem. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. For Christ followers, empathy is the lived experience of those who follow Jesus’ greatest command: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39, NRSV).

Empathy also points to the incarnation. God the Father became human and demonstrated the fullness of His empathy by becoming a human being in the person of Christ the Son, who felt

¹⁷ Rikke Friis Dam and Teo Yu Siang, “Stage 2 in the Design Thinking Process: Define the Problem and Interpret the Results,” Interaction Design Foundation, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/stage-2-in-the-design-thinking-process-define-the-problem-and-interpret-the-results>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tim Brown, “Design Thinking,” in *HBR’s 10 Must Reads on Design Thinking* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2020), 10.

our need, demonstrated the love and power of God the Father for us, and met our need for salvation and redemption on the cross.²⁰ The author of Hebrews said it best, writing: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15, NRSV).

God showed empathy for every human being through the Son. In an analogous way, empathy adjusts a leader’s focus from the self to on another as a valued and meaningful person. As shown in chapter 5, empathy flows from the core characteristic of leadership: humility. Empathy creates an alternative starting point. Rather than beginning with the needs of the institution or organization, the Design Thinking process attempts to solve human-centered needs. Leaders who begin with empathy become better positioned to solve the intricate and complex problems of a community because they know the true needs of the people. Empathetic leadership builds a better and more prosperous organization that contributes to the flourishing of society.²¹

In the church growth movement, many churches rightly sought the benefit of corporate business practices to build small organizations into large, enduring institutions. Some of them experienced success and served many thousands of people in Christ’s name. Yet, the goodwill intentions of other churches became amalgamated with the same self-serving culture of modern corporations. In these instances, pastors became corporate executives, ministries became commodities, and many lives got churned up and forgotten about in the bureaucracy of process.

²⁰ “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16, NRSV).

²¹ For more information about the flourishing of society, see The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science. The program identifies five domains that contribute to an individual’s overall flourishing: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. Divorce and fatherlessness influence each one of these domains. See <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu>.

The same results happen in the church when it begins with output-driven, metric-based outcomes instead of empathy. When leaders invert the Golden Circle and let the ‘what’ or ‘how’ drive the direction of the organization, then, at best, the ‘why’ becomes an inspirational rally cry. Empathy is the corrective. When the ‘why’ is clear and compelling and the organization is steadily moving toward the vision of its preferred future, then those leading it can’t help but see others with empathy because they want as many people as possible included in their future.

The Design Thinking methodology empowers the church to adopt a system of problem-solving that keeps the ‘why’ behind God’s mission front and center. In ad hoc conversations during the writing of this thesis, I asked a couple of dozen colleagues to share the way they apply the Golden Circle to divorce and fatherlessness in their churches. In short, most don’t. Though several pastors expressed a desire to address these issues, many confessed that these issues don’t get featured in their churches. When asked why, they cited either theological complications or other ministry priorities. Hence why so many pastors operate on a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy. For the few church leaders who do address these issues, however, it was exclusively in the form of small group-based curriculum for divorced individuals. Though helpful, this response isn’t connected to a larger ‘why.’ Rather, it answers a ‘how’ for individuals in need. Small group and Sunday school studies attend to the ‘how’ for people in need, but the church misses a much greater growth opportunity to care for families in need without a greater ‘why.’

When the church begins with ‘why’ and leads with empathy, then a much different outcome arises. As the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ, the why behind solving divorce and fatherlessness is not merely ‘stronger marriages and more present dads.’ Though this is an outstanding outcome for which to strive, a stronger why is “unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ”

(Ephesians 4:13, NRSV). When this ‘why’ drives the church’s response to divorce and fatherlessness, then real life change is possible. Stronger marriages and more present dads become ‘what’ happens when the church seeks the ‘why’ defined by Ephesians 4:13.

With the ‘why’ clearly defined, then the Design Thinking method can begin with stage one: Empathizing. Dam and Siang state, “This involves consulting experts to find out more about the area of concern through observing, engaging and empathizing with people to understand their experiences and motivations, as well as immersing yourself in the physical environment so you can gain a deeper personal understanding of the issues involved.”²² During the first stage of empathizing, leaders may discover that small group curriculum might be the most appropriate response to divorce and fatherlessness. Church leaders might be surprised, however, to learn something different by asking single parents questions like: What do you need from the church? How may the church serve your children? How might the church assist with addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of your family? For married couples, especially with children, perhaps parents need a date night or a few church members to help them clean their home. Only by drawing close, earning trust, asking lots of good questions, and listening to their needs will leaders gain insight into how to transition to the next stage: Defining the Problem.

After a substantial period of listening and learning, leaders can move into the next stage of Design Thinking: Defining the Problem. Dam and Siang call this second stage “the most challenging part of the Design Thinking process, as the definition of a problem (also called a design challenge) will require you to synthesize your observations about your users from the first stage in the Design Thinking process.”²³ This often begins with an iterative process of analysis

²² Dam and Siang, “5 Stages,” <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/5-stages-in-the-design-thinking-process>.

²³ Dam and Siang, “Stage 2,” <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/stage-2-in-the-design-thinking-process-define-the-problem-and-interpret-the-results>.

and synthesis, which breaks down the learnings gained in the empathizing stage to build a holistic working definition. According to Dam and Siang, a strong problem statement ought to possess the following traits: “human-centered; broad enough for creative freedom; and, narrow enough to make it manageable.”²⁴ Dam and Siang list a number of methods for interpreting the findings of the first stage, such as Space Saturate and Group and Affinity Diagrams, Empathy Mapping, Point of View, “How Might We” Questions, and Why-How Laddering.²⁵ Each one of these methods offers a different perspective to conduct analysis and synthesis towards defining the problem that needs to be solved.

The next three stages in Design Thinking build upon the work done in the Empathizing and Defining stages to create Ideas, Prototypes, and Tests. The Design Thinking method takes time and requires input from many different people—both inside and outside of the organization—to find solutions to complex problems. For the sake of experimentation, let’s apply a hypothesized version of the Design Thinking method onto the issue of divorce and fatherlessness.

In the first stage, let’s imagine that a Design Thinking Team formed to find possible solutions to the complex problem of divorce and fatherlessness. In stage one, the Design team dispersed throughout the church and wider community to practice Empathizing. The Design team consulted with and listened to divorced parents, fatherless kids, counselors, and community leaders. Over the next several weeks, after the team gathered enough data, they commenced stage two by engaging in a process of analysis and synthesis to Define the Problem. After several days of employing different methods to mine through the data, the team discovered something extraordinary. The common thread that united most of the divorced fathers who divorced their

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

spouses and disengaged from their kids was their own history of fatherlessness.

In stage three, as the Design team began to Ideate on solutions based on the defined problem, the team discovered that if churches would speak to the implications of fatherlessness and provide separate environments for married men with absent fathers and adolescent sons and daughters with absent fathers to name their hurts and receive healing and redemption in Christ's Name, then churches might be able to help divorced men and fatherless children find healing and restoration, as well as prevent other divorces and father abandonment from happening. In these environments, men would be given the opportunity to choose, affirm, and bestow blessing and identity upon one another in Christ.

In the next stage, the Design team developed a prototype based on cultivating faithful, holy friendships among men through outdoor activities, Bible studies, and marriage enrichment offerings.²⁶ The Design team learned through empathetic listening with men that when guys recreated together and then gathered for a hearty meal afterward, intimacy developed quicker than in a small group that met in someone's home. The Design team also developed a prototype for how to help single fathers restore loving relationships with their children through in-person gatherings that meet no less than every two weeks. Through empathizing with counselors, the Design team learned that children in divorced families need to see their fathers no less than every two weeks to sustain a healthy relationship, but once a week would be ideal. Last, in stage 5, the Design team put their prototypes to the Test and continued iterating to meet the ongoing needs of the community. The result is that divorce and fatherlessness in the surrounding communities of

²⁶ On Holy Friendships, Jones writes, "Holy friends address the gap between who we are, whether we are seekers or well along our Christian journey, and who God calls us to be. Holy friends orient us toward the future of God's reign, keeping us focused on the End, even while they engage us in deep reflection to help us unlearn patterns of sin and learn patterns of holiness." The Wesleyan practice of Holy Friendship provides a faithful, practical foundation for helping men grow into maturity and the full stature of Christ. From: L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 88.

the church have decreased by ten percent over 5 years.

This hypothesized version of Design Thinking reveals what could happen when the church leverages its already biblically defined ‘why,’ along with the best of its resources, to solve complex and challenging problems. Truly, as the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ, through faith and trust in its Lord, the church has everything it needs to tackle any problem it encounters.

Finding a Logic Model to Apply the Solutions of Design Thinking

After a Design team deploys tests and begins identifying practical solutions, a church needs a working logic model to appropriate resources to newly discovered opportunities. A logic model defines how an organization will expend resources to achieve its stated purpose. Several different kinds of logic models exist to help churches and non-profits achieve their ‘why,’ but most operate on the following framework: Desired Impact (Purpose or Why), Outcomes, Outputs, Key Activities, and Inputs.

In churches, the desired impact is to lead attenders into maturity and growth to the measure of the full stature of Christ. The outcome of this impact means that men grow into healthy, faithful husbands, restore broken relationships with their children, and receive healing from their own father woundedness. The output segment of the logic model constitutes the ministry environment, “the playing field,” to accomplish ministry outcomes. For example, an output could be a ministry environment for men to grow in holy friendship or an environment for fatherless sons and daughters to grieve and heal from their father’s absence. The key activities represent what needs to take place for outputs to occur, such as curriculum teaching, hospitality,

counseling, and recreation. Inputs stipulate the required resources to execute the key activities. In the mock illustration, some examples of inputs could be recreation sites, meals, staff leadership, volunteers for set-up and tear down, waiver forms, and financial support.

Applying a Logic Model assists church leaders with how to practically install the solutions from Design Thinking toward maximum impact. When the Design Thinking methodology and a Logic Model work together to facilitate a church's movement through the Golden Circle of why, what, and how, then the impossible becomes possible to achieve to the glory of God!

Concluding Reflections on Divorce and Fatherlessness

Divorce and fatherlessness affect millions of families and countless children. The prevailing reasons why date back at least to the Reformation and Enlightenment eras, but truly, extend all the way back to the beginning of human relationship. Through Christ the Son, though, God the Father demonstrated a model for fathering that consists of choosing, affirming, and bestowing blessing and identity upon a son or daughter. As the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ, the church needs to neither fear nor shy away from engaging in the complexities of divorce and fatherlessness. As church leaders, Christ provided a framework to tackle tough issues through his own embodiment of the threefold offices of prophet, priest, and king. As pastors walk worthily of their calling, leaders hold the past and future in tension through traditioned innovation by keeping the why and purpose of the church front and center. Through the Design Thinking methodology combined with a well-crafted Logic Model, pastors and ministry leaders stand on the cusp of achieving the impossible for this generational moment:

reducing divorce and fatherlessness in a community and developing preventative measures by helping the church grow in maturity and the full stature of Christ! Heavenly Father, may you grant your called sons and daughters wisdom and strength to see this vision become a reality. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen!

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Biography

Ryan Reed is a native Californian but grew up in the wild, wonderful hills of “Almost Heaven” West Virginia. After graduating from Alderson Broaddus University, Ryan attended Princeton Theological Seminary, earning his Master of Divinity and Master of Arts degrees. Following seminary, Ryan served at Hillside Church of Marin in Corte Madera, CA. Ryan has traveled the world on mission to Kolkata, India; La Mision, Mexico; and, Acajutla, El Salvador. He currently serves in local church ministry as the Coral Gables Campus Pastor and Executive Pastor of Ministries at Christ Journey Church in Coral Gables, FL. Aside from reading and writing, Ryan enjoys the simple pleasures in life: playing with his kids and conversations with his wife.