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# Soteriology of Secure Attachment

*Saved by Secure Love*

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# Introduction

Christology is the study of Jesus Christ: who he is, and what he has done. Soteriology is the study of Jesus Christ as Saviour – what he has done *pro nobis*, “for us and for our salvation.” But what does “being saved” really mean? Saved from what? And for what? Soteriology asks the question: *how* is Jesus our saviour? Today we live in a world cracked by radically disintegrated communities, divisive enemies, and fear-driven media and politics. In 2023 the US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy declared the United States “a lonely nation” with isolation at an all time high and mental health at an all time low (NYT 2023). Is Jesus also our ‘saviour’ from *this*? If so, *how* in the world could he be?

The task of soteriology is to evaluate the effectiveness of a given metaphor in representing the *how* of salvation. The particular soteriological metaphor we will be exploring in this dissertation is that of ‘secure attachment’. Can we really be ‘saved’ through secure attachment to God? What would this even mean?

To answer this question, this dissertation will seek to evaluate three things. In the first chapter, we begin by exploring the nature of salvation holistically with the help of Baptist Priest Paul Fiddes. We explore the evolving metaphors that have been used throughout the history of the Christian church to illustrate how Jesus has ‘saved’ through time, and we finish the first chapter by exploring the cultural context of today. What might it mean for Jesus to save us *now*?

In the second chapter, we explore the emerging metaphor of salvation in the psychologically-inspired West – that of secure attachment as described by Dallas Willard and Jim Wilder in their book *Renovated*. What is secure attachment, and how would we be *saved* through secure attachment to God? Is this idea theologically rigorous? Does it hold up scripturally, historically, while also remaining relevant to today’s context? Using the acceptability criteria asserted by theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar and David Ford, we explore the strengths and weaknesses of this soteriological metaphor and evaluate its adequacy as a theology of salvation in its own right.

In the third chapter, we explore the high level implications that such a shift in metaphor could have on the Christian church, Christian identity, and on practical living in today’s world. How would church and discipleship evolve when the aim is more about cultivating deeper relationships with God and others instead of merely preaching beliefs? And what practically would it require of us to cultivate greater intimacy with God and others? We explore these ideas in light of theologian Catherine LaCugna’s vision for the church as a model of trinitarian love, as well as looking at what saints and mystics have said and modelled about these ideas across millennia. We conclude the third section by considering some possible critiques of these theories through the psycho-anthropological lens of René Girard.

At the end of our exploring we find not only that this metaphor does indeed meet the necessary level of theological rigour, but the implications are profound. Might the church today be freshly poised to become a place of gracious encounter, where imperfection is learned to be integrated instead of rejected? Might it become a place known for its welcome and humility, honesty and empathy? Could the integration of this new soteriological metaphor help to direct the people of God in actually *becoming* a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18, 20), and truly known in our world today as disciples by our love (John 13:35)?

# Chapter 1: What is Salvation?

## The Human Predicament

Every human knows discontent – the feeling that there is something missing, agitation, fear. How do we find peace? How do we find joy and contentment in a world of impermanence and change that cannot promise security, that inevitably brings suffering and loss? Humans have always been seeking ‘salvation’ from such predicaments, what Baptist Priest Paul Fiddes would describe as “a making whole of what is broken in existence” (Fiddes 1989, p3). Every major religion has considered and attempted to solve this question of salvation, with the Christian tradition answering these fundamental questions through the biblical story. The Bible starts with an image of harmoniously shared life with God in the garden. Humans fall from such gracious union, and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are reconciled and reunited with God in the garden once again. But what does this actually mean? What does life in ‘the garden’ represent? What is ‘the fall’? How does the life of Jesus make it all better, and how does this affect my life today?

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). The church over the centuries has always unanimously proclaimed that, through Jesus, humanity is reconciled to God. But the question of *how* exactly we are ‘saved’ through Christ, how we are *at-one-d* and brought home into unity with God – and thus into peace and harmony in ourselves – has been up for debate. Paul Fiddes, author of *Past Event, Present Salvation*, notes the wide variety of ways this reconciliation has been understood and debated about through time. He points out that there has never been one specific metaphor or understanding deemed ‘official’ in the church, and explains how varying illustrations of atonement have emerged as human anxieties have changed from age to age. He quotes John A.T. Robinson’s re-telling of once seeing a church noticeboard with the phrase “Christ is the answer”, and scribbling next to it “Yes, but what is the question?” (Fiddes 1989, p5). While all has been ‘answered’ in Christ, the questions that have been asked in light of the struggles, fears, and suffering of the times have continually evolved. He emphasises poignantly that while the Christian faith claims that ‘Jesus saves’, each new age must ask the question, ‘from what?’.

Despite the changing expression of these existential questions in each age, Fiddes claims that underneath the variations there are three fundamental constants of the human predicament. The first predicament he names *estrangement*: the feeling of being divided from others, feeling agitated or disharmonious in one’s self, or that general sense of not being at home in the greater world. This predicament highlights the intolerability of experience when left to one’s own thoughts and feelings, and the existential separateness, loneliness, and anxiety that comes with being human. He identifies the second predicament to be the *longing and failing to fulfil our potential* as human beings. Fiddes remarks, “Since we have failed to measure up to our destiny of sharing in the life of God, this loss of potential is also a kind of estrangement – a falling away from our true being” (Fiddes 1989, p6). He is saying that humans are born with potential, but the question of finding out what that potential is and how it can be filled is a profound cause of human discontent. The last predicament he identifies as our *slavery to sin*, which he describes as a failure in relationships between humans and God, as well as each other, due to human ‘rebellion’. This rebellion, he explains, at its heart is a failure of trust. A failure of trust in our belonging and connectedness to something larger, and that we might play a role in this larger thing too. In simplest terms, he is saying that every human in every age seeks to overcome these same fundamental existential anxieties – the sense of estrangement and separateness, of unfulfilled potential and purposelessness, and of the guilt and shame that arises in response to the ‘rebellious’ self-preserving actions we take when feeling separate and unfulfilled. Framed in the positive, we could say that every human in every age seeks an answer for how to feel *connected*, how to *contribute*, and how to *trust*.

We see these universal predicaments offered to us by Fiddes are played out in the very first scenes of the Bible. In the first chapters, we encounter a God who creates a good and abundant world, filling it with light and a variety of plants and vegetation, giving it the cycles of seasons, night and day, and time, a world filled with living creatures – filled with potential. God then creates mankind, “in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26). God then creates a garden and “put [Adam] in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15) – or in other words, to harness the potential of creation and nurture order and beauty in his world. In these opening chapters, we encounter a creator God who makes a world where humanity is designed to be like God, to mirror God’s benevolence, and to partner with God in bringing about abundance in this good world. We also find a God that gives these blessed humans freedom and a choice: to trust in God’s ways, follow the commands, and receive the gift of life in the garden with God – or instead to seek to claim power and control for themselves and compete with God. Only three chapters into Genesis do we find that humans do indeed break their working partnership; they trust the snake instead and go against God’s one command. In tragic consequence they are exiled from the garden with God, now estranged from both Godself and from each other. They are no longer living into their potential as stewards of the garden.

Before the instance with the snake in Genesis 3, it could be stated that all the living creatures in Eden were in unity and harmony, all simply mirroring the love of God to each other and all of creation, and *trusting* that this was indeed life in fullness. They had all they needed: food, companionship, good work in managing all the livestock, the birds in the sky, the wild animals. Famously, Genesis 2 ends with the words: “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” But then the temptation came – could it be better? Am I missing out? In Chapter 3 the snake hints that there could be more than the stewarding of life in the garden, and envy is sparked – could I know all things and become omniscient myself, like God? This doubt highlights the lack of trust at the root of all self-preserving actions that lead to further separateness, of which Fiddes speaks above. Throughout the remainder of this essay we will define sin as such: the actions we take in fear or self-preservation that separate us from communion with God, each other, ourselves, and all creation.

We return now to our original proposition: what exactly are we saved from? Paul Fiddes suggests that we are saved from these three elements of the human predicament – from *estrangement*, from *not meeting our potential as humans*, and from the ‘*rebellious*’ actions stemming from our lack of trust (Fiddes 1989, p7). Or Edward Schillebeeckx, a prominent 20th century Catholic theologian who contributed greatly to the reforming of the church in Vatican II, would say we are saved from: “sin and guilt; all kinds of existential anxieties; [...]; sorrow, despair and hopelessness, dissatisfaction with fellow men and with God; lack of freedom, unrighteousness, oppressive and alienating ties; lovelessness,” among many other descriptions of the discontented human condition (Schillebeeckx 2014, pg 500). René Girard, a 20th century historian, philosopher and anthropologist would say that we are saved from the destructive cycle of blind mimesis – from a life driven unknowingly and unconsciously by merely following the competitive desires offered by ‘the snake’.

If we are freed from these things, what are we freed *into*? Schillebeeckx in turn says we are freed, “for the healing and making whole of each and every individual; to be ‘imitators of God as beloved children’ (Eph 5.1), ‘to walk in love as Christ loved us’ (Eph 5.2)” (Schillebeeckx 2014, pg 500). Girard might say we are freed from the existential swirl to be able to participate in our world not from fear and as *competitors*, but as *partners* with God and each other – stewards of creation in this good world. In other words, we are freed for sake of union and togetherness, for sake of relationship and harmony among all creation. We are freed to take part in the cultivation of beauty – and in doing so, to become beautiful ourselves.

## Salvation Through Time

“These three constant elements in the human predicament – estrangement, loss of potential and rebellion (sin) – will, however, take on a different shape and colour in different times and in different cultures,” says Fiddes, “As the expression of the human predicament alters, there will likewise be a shift in the way that salvation is expressed” (Fiddes 1989, p7). In other words, Fiddes is saying that the existential anxiety of being human remains the same through the ages, despite there being ever emerging ways of illustrating the experience of ‘salvation’ from these anxieties through Jesus – none fully complete within themselves, each connected to those that have come before and will come after, and all furthering the more holistic picture of ‘the answer’ that is Christ, in whichever form the question comes. According to Edward Schillebeeckx in his book *Christ*, there are fourteen different metaphors found in the New Testament that each seek to illustrate the *experience* of salvation in Christ: being freed (from slavery), reconciliation (after a dispute), liberation (through being purchased or ransomed), expiation (sin offering to neutralise damage done), justification and sanctification (freedom from sin), forgiveness (of sins), being redeemed (for sake of community), satisfaction (from what is owed), Jesus as ‘legal aid’, being freed (for freedom), victory (over sin or ‘demonic powers’), being freed (for brotherly and sisterly love), renewal (of human beings and of the world free from sin), and life in fullness (versus emptiness) (Schillebeeckx 2014, pg 495). We see in these metaphors how many ways there are to feel estranged, to feel lost – we also find there are an equal number of ways that Jesus resolves each of these anxieties. The predominant metaphor of the era, however, has changed throughout time.

In the historical Judaic tradition, ‘sin’ was considered a breaking of the Judaic law resulting in ‘uncleanliness’. A person and community was cleansed through the regular ritual of animal sacrifice, and individuals could be exiled from their community if they became ‘unclean’ and did not participate. The animal sacrifice made by the Judaic rabbi could resolve the sin in time, but the emergence of Christianity brought about the idea of freedom from *all* sin and all guilt and shame, once and for all. Christ provided a higher freedom, freedom independent of circumstance, that could resolve the fear of being estranged, or the anxiety of estrangement itself. A new kind of belonging emerged in its wake.

As the centuries progressed, the soteriological metaphors shifted toward a focus on oppression and the struggle against foreign rulers, deities and most significantly, demons. Salvation in Christ was largely illustrated as *victory* over demonic oppression, emphasising how Jesus on the cross defeated Satan once and for all. In the Middle Ages, societies were governed under Lordships, with debt that would accumulate when honour was not properly offered. Issues were seen in terms of disorder and feuds between kingdoms, and subsequently we find in these years salvation metaphors illustrating the relief that comes after *settling a debt one couldn’t pay*. Regardless of whether that payment could be made in human terms, Christ’s sacrifice had the power to free a soul from the guilt and shame of that original debt. It was higher resolution, a higher absolution from anxiety (Fiddes 1989, p10). The Renaissance brought with it a focus on *law* and *justice*, and attention paid to Jesus’ *substitution* on the cross – his taking upon our guilt meant that we could be permanently freed from the consequences of our errors. With the Enlightenment came a focus on *reason and truth* with Jesus on the cross as teacher and example, modelling the perfectly moral and righteous life, i.e. ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6 NIV) (Fiddes 1989, p10).

We see here that the evolving images of salvation over time have to do primarily with the question of *relevance*. While the experience of worry and fear remains steady, the particular worries and fears change with each new era – and the metaphors used to speak to each new generation matters. And so, what are the predominant anxieties of today? How does Jesus save us from *them*?

## Salvation Today

In her 2022 State of the Union speech, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented the Commission's intention to launch a new initiative focused on mental health the following year. The 2022 Health at a Glance report highlighted that nearly one in two young Europeans report unmet needs for mental health care, and that depression in many EU countries more than doubled in young people during the pandemic. And the situation isn't any better in the United States. Former Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders writes, "In America [in 2023], two out of every five teenagers felt persistently sad or hopeless. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people age 15 to 24 in the United States. Nearly 20% of high school students report serious thoughts of suicide and 9% have made an attempt to take their lives" (Sanders 2023). Richard Rohr, 21st century Franciscan priest, comments on the current mental health crisis: "Our suffering in developed countries is primarily psychological, relational, and addictive: the suffering of people who are comfortable on the outside but oppressed and empty within," he says, "It is a crisis of meaninglessness" (Rohr 2019, pg 319). Loneliness, a sense of separation, a sense of lostness that manifests in poor mental health is rampant in our world today. *How are we saved from this?*

Today the widely accepted way to address issues of isolation, discontent, and generally poor mental health is through psychotherapy. Now the word 'psychology' itself is derived from two Greek words 'psyche', meaning 'soul or breath', and 'logos' meaning 'knowledge or study'. Psychology is therefore the 'study of the soul'. Until psychology emerged as an actual academic discipline in Germany in the late 1800s, the realm of the inner world – the mind, the soul, emotions – had strictly been the territory of religion, mythology, ancestral tradition, or art. But following the rise of the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, the mind, behaviour, emotions, and relationships became topics of interest for the scientific method as well.

Many schools of psychology have emerged over the last 150 years – ranging from structuralism, functionalism, Gestalt, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, humanism, and cognitivism. But emerging more recently from these scientific schools of thought is that of attachment psychology, which is a multi-faceted psychological, evolutionary and ethological theory regarding the nature of relationships between people. It was established by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, British psychoanalysts in the mid 1900s whose research began with the attempt to understand "the intense distress experienced by infants who had been separated from their parents" (Fraley, 2018). The theory suggests that young children must establish relationship with a minimum of one primary caregiver for healthy, stable emotional development and to be able to be at rest and peace. If a child had at least one stable caregiver that was near, attentive and responsive as the child grew up, the child would feel 'securely attached' and therefore could feel confident, playful, uninhibited, smiley, sociable, and free of fear. If the child did not have that relationship, the child would experience extreme distress, which would result in the development of 'anxious' or 'avoidant' behaviours like clinging, protest, searching or withdrawal and inhibition. Bowlby's theory presents that these behaviours are adaptive responses to separation from a primary attachment figure – from someone who provides stable support, protection, and care (Fraley 2018). It posits that many of the emotional, behavioural, and relational issues people have in later years stem from those primary relationships.

According to Ainsworth, a securely attached relationship is a "secure base from which to explore," and the foundation for the constructive expression of emotions and communication in future relationships. Such relationships allow for the healthy development of self-esteem, the ability to relate and connect and trust others, as well as the capacities for creative freedom and to have a differentiated, curious self contributing to the world. In essence, these foundational relationships allow a growing child to have an easier time

experiencing stable connection (and therefore not to feel estranged) and purpose (and therefore not feel lost), and therefore be less likely to act from fear (and therefore sin and be destructive). An insecure bond is one that requires a child to fend for themselves through coping mechanisms; a secure bond is one full of *trust* in their caregiver and therefore in the greater world.

Only a few decades after his initial research, other psychologists and researchers began to consider that these same attachment processes might play out also in adulthood in romantic relationships – and more broadly in any and all interdependent relationships between people. This theory of adult attachment introduced in the 1980s rose to popularity in mainstream culture with the release of the dating self-help book *Attached*, published by psychiatrist and neuroscientist Amir Levine and psychologist Rachel S. F. Heller in 2010. “We’ve been bred to be dependent on a significant other,” they write, introducing the theory of attachment. “Bowlby proposed that throughout evolution, genetic selection favoured people who became attached because it provided a survival advantage” (Heller and Levine, 2010). The book emphasises that we are evolutionarily creatures of intimacy, and that in addition to obvious behavioural evidence for the theory over the decades, these attachment systems are now neurologically and biologically proven. In 2022, their book resurged in popularity, becoming a top-ranked book on Amazon in the Social Science, Cognitive Psychology and Love and Romance categories – hardly off Amazon’s top 200 books list the whole year. The book has since been translated into 20 languages, and has sold more copies each year since its release.

Why the sudden increase in popularity? Certainly there are catalytic social factors such as the global COVID-19 pandemic leading to unprecedented levels of isolation and fear of loneliness, or the rise of social media platforms such as TikTok with the power to spread social trends at unprecedented speed. But perhaps more fundamentally, attachment theory in its fullness shines light on our most basic desires as humans – the desire for intimate relationships, and to be seen and known and secure as we are, to belong, to be at peace in relationship with others. Fiddes says that every human in every age seeks an answer for how to feel connected, how to contribute, and how to trust. These desires – these predicaments – really boil down to our desire to experience *intimacy*.

At its core, attachment theory suggests that dysfunctional relational patterns imprinted in youth keep us from the intimacy required with others to truly experience a sense of belonging, purpose, and interrelational trust in our greater world. The theory also suggests that these dysfunctional patterns can indeed heal – that we can *change* – through the cultivation of healthier, more stable, more secure adult relationships. All people long for close connection and intimacy. In our secular world, Bowlby’s theory offers not only *explanation* but *hope* that relational healing, harmony, union is indeed possible.

According to Fiddes, the predominant salvation imagery of recent times is indeed rooted in such psychological and sociological revolutions of the 20th century, with Jesus as the ‘wonderful counsellor’ and ultimate *healer* of our psychologically disordered and discontented selves and relationships (Fiddes 1989, p10). The notion ‘Jesus saves’, as discussed above, should therefore answer the existential ‘from what?’ of this cultural moment: *from loneliness, from emptiness, from broken relationships*.

We’ve said redeemed life ‘in the garden’ is a life lived free from separateness, purposelessness, and fear. If our ‘salvation’ is truly about being freed from such things into a life of relationship, unity, purpose, and trust – could we be truly *saved* through a secure, trusting attachment with God?

## Chapter 2: Soteriology of Secure Attachment

### Saved by Secure Love

“Psychology,” says Dallas Willard, “is the care of souls. The care of souls was once the province of the church, but the church no longer provides that care. The most important thing about the care of souls is that you must love them” (Renovated 2020, pg 3).

Dallas Willard is a 21st century American pastoral philosopher respected for his contributions to Christian spiritual formation, and in 2012 was the first to seriously consider a theology of salvation based on attachment with God (Renovated 2020, pg 3). He brought this idea to his dear friend Jim Wilder, PhD in Clinical Psychology and an M.A. in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, which led them to write the book *Renovated* to explore this soteriological idea more fully. Prior to this moment, the two of them over the years had shared a broader interest in the notion of transformation – how people actually *change*. If ‘salvation’ is about being freed from the innate human existential anxieties posed by Fiddes above, for sake of restored relationship and “to walk in love as Christ loved us” (Eph 5.2) – then Willard and Wilder would likely ask, *how* does life with Christ make us these people? How do we walk in love as did Christ?

Willard would describe his litmus test for Christlikeness to be whether one spontaneously responds to one’s enemies with love (Renovated 2020, pg 3), and Willard and Wilder’s book argues that we only transform into such Christlike character *not by knowledge but by experiencing secure, dependable attachment with God*. Western Christianity has often taught over the centuries that we change depending on what we believe and what we choose – by the human will. But Wilder, through many years of study and as an experienced working psychologist for decades, knew that people only experience lasting character change as the quality of their relationships change. But why? He says, “the only kind of love that helps the brain learn better character is attachment love. The brain functions that determine our character are most profoundly shaped by who we love. Changing character, as far as the brain is concerned, means attaching in new and better ways” (Renovated 2020, pg 6). The only real way we mature into a more loving character, he adds, is through being in an attached relationship with someone who has a more developed character than our own. He is naming here the reality that our whole selves are influenced by our attachments: by friends, by family, by those we want to be near. And the closer we are to them, the more *trust* there is, the more access they actually have to *change* us. While this idea is freshly neurobiologically proven, the concept is not new – 20th century historian and philosopher René Girard, whom we’ve mentioned above, has said very similar things.

René Girard is best known for his psychological and anthropological theories of mimetic desire. His theory states that people more or less learn what to desire by mimicking each other: wanting what others want simply because they want it. He says desire is never simply from subject to object, but rather borrowed and shaped by the world around us: those we admire, those who seem happy in ways we are not, those from whom we want to learn (CBC 2001, p3). Willard and Wilder’s soteriology of attachment takes this idea even further. They say, “in the human brain, *identity* and *character* are formed by who we love. Attachments are powerful and long lasting. Ideas can be changed much more easily. Salvation through a new, loving attachment to God that changes our identities would be a very relational way to understand our salvation: We would be both saved and transformed through attachment love from, to, and with God” (Renovated 2020, pg 6). Wilder’s proposition here is implying that it is only through securely, permanently attaching to a more matured and loving Other that we are not only ‘saved’ in theory but actually transformed into a new creation – our desires change, yes, but also our entire sense of self, purpose, belonging and ultimately our identity. Given that Jesus Christ, through the lens of Christological maximalism, is the most matured and most loving Other, a theology

of salvation through attachment would propose that it is only through a loving, attached relationship with God directly, and through the body of Christ, that we can become our most matured and most loving selves – into divine likeness. “If anyone is in Christ,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

It’s a beautiful concept with endless implications, but is this metaphor acceptable as the basis for a formal theology of salvation? Is it coherent with scripture? Do other theologians that have gone before have anything to say about this proposition?

### Is this Soteriological Metaphor Valid?

All metaphors are in and of themselves illustrative or emblematic – they are pointing towards, but are not, the exact thing. “Now, whoever inquires after the how of the *pro nobis* [Jesus for us and for our salvation] will realise that the theological discourse is far from being unified. The theologies of Redemption are manifold,” says Antoine Birot in his article “God in Christ, Reconciled the World to Himself: Redemption in Balthasar” (Birot 1997, pg 260). In the first chapter above, we noted many metaphors that have been used to illustrate aspects of salvation through the centuries – all relevant in their time, none complete on their own. He continues, “The understanding of this *divine* act ‘for us’, of the unique ‘substitution’ of the Cross, will be one of the greatest difficulties that theology will encounter” (Birot 1997, pg 262).

There are very clear strengths and limitations to any metaphor that attempts to illustrate the mechanics of a theology of salvation. Hans Urs von Balthasar – a 20th century prolific theologian whose work and contributions to the Second Vatican Council have been celebrated across the world – has considered exactly this. Balthasar asserts the need to be able to assess how closely a theory or metaphor really does capture the notion of being saved. Summarising Balthasar’s assessment, Birot lists the five aspects which Balthasar claims to be required for an acceptable soteriology. He says that any complete and theologically accurate soteriology must include:

1. The Father's handing over of the Son (the absolute and unprecedented gift of God’s love for us)
2. The event of atonement (An exchanging of places with us)
3. The result of the event of atonement (Negatively: liberation from sin, deliverance from darkness)
4. The result of the event of atonement (Positively: an introduction into the divine life)
5. All done in light of God’s merciful love (Overcoming wrath)

David Ford, 20th century Anglican public theologian and author of *Self and Salvation*, offers an additional six criteria to evaluate any new soteriology:

1. Do we have here an approach to salvation that helps us to focus the gospel story in its biblical setting, and yet have universal implications?
2. Can this theology of salvation be widely accessible today, and be related to imaginative, intellectual, emotional, and practical concerns?
3. Do we have here a theology of salvation which offers a key image or cluster of key images?
4. How conceptually rich is this understanding of salvation?

5. Does this theology have practical promise of fruitfulness in the three main dynamics of Christian living, namely worship and prayer, living and learning in community, and speech, action and suffering for justice, freedom, peace, goodness and truth?
6. Is this theology defensible against diverse attacks, and is it able to anticipate and deal with the main criticisms and alternatives?

In these next sections, we will examine Balthasar's five dimensions in terms of their relevance and applicability to Willard and Wilder's proposed soteriology of attachment. We will look at each of the events of the Bible through the lens of their proposed theology of attachment love – how does attachment love explain the Father's handing over of the Son, or the 'event of atonement', and what actually happened on the cross? We'll then look to Ford's questions in detail, and we'll ultimately ask the question: is adoption into God's family (i.e. a newly formed secure and loving attachment to the entirety of the Trinity made possible through Jesus) an acceptable metaphor that can help us to understand salvation in Jesus more completely?

### 1: *The Father's Handing Over of the Son*

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16), he "delivered him up for us all" (Romans 8:32).

The first scriptural dimension to consider is that of the Father 'handing over the Son'. Willard and Wilder in their book *Renovated* do not explicitly mention the relationship between Father and Son but rather focus on God's relationship with us and ours with God. However if we only zoom out only a bit, their theory of attachment love quite naturally aligns with a trinitarian theology that includes Balthasar's first point.

Catherine LaCugna is a standout Catholic theologian of the 20th century who devoted her life to making trinitarian doctrine relevant to the daily life of today's Christians. In her groundbreaking theological essay "The Practical Trinity," she sums up the entire theological enterprise with this one statement: "[it] begins with God turning toward the creature in love, through Jesus, and ending with all things being reunited with God" (LaCugna 1992, p 679). She is saying here that it is the loving trinitarian bond that is both *the source* that inspires all loving action, as well as its *final resolution*. Or in the words of 14th century Catholic mystic Julian of Norwich: "Who reveals it to you? Love. What did [they] reveal to you? Love. Why [do they] reveal it to you? For Love." Her essay posits that the nature of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as differentiated individuals acting in union together toward a shared purpose – reflects the reality of love itself and of flourishing for all creation. In psychotherapeutic language, we can also say that it models to us what *secure attachment* looks like. The trinitarian bond reflects both the individuation, the union, and most significantly the courage to leave, to even become estranged, and to *trust* that relationship can and will always be restored. But still, how does this profoundly trusting bond explain the 'handing over of the Son' by the Father?

In LaCugna's vision of the Trinity, it is this very communion of Jesus with the Father and the Spirit – the secure love that they know and live and breathe out of and are one with – that the Trinity so deeply longs for all of creation to be reunited with. Balthasar himself similarly takes this view in his *Theo-drama* Vol. 3, calling the sacrifice of the Son a "unanimous salvific decision on the part of the Trinity," – i.e. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit agreeing together on the Son's mission into the world (Lösel 2004, p148). Could it be that the joy of seeing humanity restored into a trusting bond with the beloved community, returning to the garden, makes the cost of suffering *worth it* for them? That their eternal purpose together was higher than the temporal pain it required? It could be argued that only a family so deeply assured of their eternal belonging to each other and convicted of the significance of their shared mission together, could be willing to take upon such suffering

with freely given joy. Through this lens we see how the Trinity perfectly embodies the nature of secure attachment – temporary separation caused by individuated purpose made possible by the eternal knowing that *nothing*, not even the sacrifice of a child, or death itself, could ever truly separate them from the love of each other.

Expanding our view of the Father and Son in light of their relationship to one another and within an interdependent trinitarian family, attachment love quickly emerges as the very source *and* inspiration both binding and motivating Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their collective and individual actions of love. A trinitarian theology of secure attachment is inclusive of Balthasar's first dimension, and naturally follows from Willard and Wilder's proposed soteriology of attachment love.

## *2: The Event of Atonement (An exchanging of places with us)*

*"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, through he was rich, made himself poor for your sake in order that you might become rich through his poverty" (2 Cor 8:9); "it is our suffering that he bore, and our sorrows with which he was burdened" (Isaiah 53:4).*

Balthasar's second scriptural dimension in evaluating a soteriological metaphor is whether it encompasses the 'exchange of places' that occurs in the atonement and on the cross. All soteriological theologies are aligned that Jesus' death on the cross is the moment of 'atonement' between humanity and God – the moment that reconciles our estrangement and makes our eternal reunion with God possible once again. But how would Willard and Wilder explain the significance of the atoning moment of Jesus' crucifixion in light of a soteriology of secure attachment?

The word "atonement" is of Anglo-Saxon origin with an etymology that literally breaks down into 'at-one-ment' – the bringing of two separate entities into union. The Oxford Dictionary describes it as, "the action of making amends for a wrong or injury," or reconciliation between two parties into peace and harmony. It is more precise than the broader notion of salvation, and refers specifically to the righting of relationship between God and humanity through Jesus Christ, at one particular moment in time. It is also inherently, in its etymology, relational – the making of one from two, *reunion*. Union implies relationship. The biblical story is very clear that we once lived in harmony and connection and trust with God, until trust was broken and humanity fell from such a life of trust. If we were to rephrase the question using the psychotherapeutic language of attachment theory, we could ask: how does Jesus' death on the cross allow for relationship between humanity and God to be *repaired*?

Attachment theory would suggest that there are fundamentally two ways that we can experience a breakage of union in relationship: by what is done *to you* ("How could you let this happen to me? You don't love me, I don't trust you"), or by what *you do* ("How could I let this happen? I'm unworthy, you shouldn't love me"). In the case of Adam and Eve, both occurred. When Adam and Eve 'sinned', they acted out of mistrust and self-preservation. This plunged them – and all of humanity – into a world of disconnection, mistrust, which further perpetuated the very need for self-preservation. After the fall, Genesis 3 recounts that they became ashamed for what they did ("How could God still love us?"). Surely they must have also felt abandoned ("How could God exile us? Does he really love us?").

A soteriology of secure attachment would posit that Jesus on the cross is God's movement *toward* humanity, making way for the relational repair of trust (which is at the heart of secure attachment) between humans and

God. This echoes LaCugna's own language of "God turning toward the creature in love, through Jesus." The "unanimous salvific decision on the part of the Trinity" through the lens of secure attachment, therefore, would be to send Jesus to *overcome humanity's estrangement from God once and for all by becoming estranged from God himself for sake of being with, and therefore reconciling, humanity in their estrangement*. We are estranged in relationships through either our own shame and/or the sense of abandonment when we suffer. It is through Jesus' forgiveness (resolving shame) and his compassion (resolving aloneness in suffering) that humanity's relationship with God – our trust in God – could finally and truly be restored.

**Solidarity through Compassion:** How can you explain undeserved suffering? How can we reconcile unfair pain or persecution or injustice with a God who *loves* us? How can we trust a God who permits the horrible things in this world to happen? While the problems of evil and suffering are beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is clear that Jesus offers *solidarity* through his *compassion* with all people experiencing estrangement from God because of what has been unfairly done to them. In his life, Jesus experiences the radical vulnerability of coming into this world as a baby and requiring dependence on humans like the rest of us, but on the cross he also assumes the greatest kind of human vulnerability one can experience: unrighteous persecution, physical pain, humiliation, betrayal and abandonment by dearest friends, and worst of all even the experience of estrangement from the Father himself. Jesus' famous final words on the cross, "God why have you forsaken me?" and the fact that he *truly* felt abandoned and alone in a merciless world all the way unto death is the ultimate compassionate gift to humanity. His words in that moment create a paradox. Because God in Jesus experienced estrangement from the Godhead, we don't ever have to – there is no harm that could be done to us that God himself hasn't touched with love. He has felt estranged by God *unto death* for what was done to him too. He suffers with those who suffer. Connection and companionship and relationship with God is possible even in the face of the world's greatest horrors and losses.

**Solidarity through Forgiveness:** Second, he offers *solidarity* with all people experiencing estrangement from God because of what they've done, and the distance that their own sin has caused, through his *forgiveness*. In spite of the treachery imposed upon him, Jesus offers forgiveness and mercy towards his crucifiers, saying in Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do." On the cross, Jesus forgives us for anything and everything we could ever do – unto murdering God himself! There is nothing we could do that could separate us from God's love because Jesus has already forgiven us. He forgives our ignorance. He forgives our fear that leads us to hurt him and others and ourselves. We are still loved and we are still lovable.

As we've defined already, a securely attached relationship is one that is marked by *trust* and not *fear*: trust in the goodwill of the other, trust that the loved one will return when separated, trust that breakages can be repaired, trust that one need not hide themselves in shame for fear of rejection from the other, trust that we won't be alone in our suffering. So how does Jesus' compassion and forgiveness on the cross actually repair trust between God and humanity, once and for all? This solidarity in both compassion and forgiveness covers every possible human experience – every possible form of estrangement. When we've been hurt and lost our trust in a good God, God is with us. When we've lost our trust in ourselves and want to hide in shame, God forgives us and is with us. It resolves any and all barriers to a trusting, secure relationship. We never again have to be alone in our suffering, because of Jesus. No matter what happens we can rest secure in God's witness, our belovedness, and our place in the divine family.

Balthasar asserts that any metaphor of salvation requires that it include Jesus *taking our place* in the moment of the cross (Biro 1997, pg 269), and this is what we find in a soteriology of secure attachment and in the solidarity of Jesus. "In the Incarnation, the Son makes the tragic character of human life his own. He assumes not just our creatureliness, but rather the concrete human condition of sin and mortality. Since this human

condition lies primarily in the loss of loving communion with God, in the Incarnation, the Son sets out to experience this forsakenness himself,” writes Steffen Lösel summarising Balthasar’s own soteriology in his article, “A Plain Account of Christian Salvation: Balthasar on Sacrifice, Solidarity, and Substitution” (Lösel 2004, p143). The “unanimous salvific decision on the part of the Trinity”, as we mentioned before, is God’s own willingness to experience estrangement from *himself*, to come alongside our own suffering in every way possible – and it is this that makes trust in God and unity possible once again. “What we see in Christ’s forsakenness on the Cross, in ultimate creaturely negativity, is the revelation of the highest positivity of trinitarian love,” says Lösel emphasising this point, “Only the Son, who experiences the most intimate relationship to the Father, can also experience a form of forsakenness which lies ‘far beyond Sheol and Gehenna” (Lösel 2004, p149). He takes upon our estrangement from God so that we don’t have to. The only way Godself could make known and give away the profundity of an eternally secure attachment to the Trinity was for the Trinity to allow Jesus to become utterly forsaken himself.

We do find a significant difference in Balthasar’s notion of solidarity, however, where he focuses exclusively on the cross “as a redemptive event for human sin,” says Lösel in her own critique of his soteriology. He leaves out, “the equally important question of what the cross means in light of innocent human suffering” (Lösel 2004, p166). While Balthasar’s salvation is rooted in Jesus’ solidarity with the sinner, Willard and Wilder’s soteriology expounds solidarity with both the sinner through his forgiveness (self-inflicted suffering), *and* with the suffering of the innocent one through his compassion. It’s this capacity for God to be with his children in *all* human experience that reconciles all possible estrangement from him. It’s this capacity that restores trust in God’s love. This nuanced difference is essential. While Willard and Wilder do not cover this ground explicitly in the book, an expanded upon soteriology of secure attachment would certainly encompass this dimension.

### *3: The Result of the Event of Atonement (Negatively: liberation from sin, deliverance from darkness)*

*“The law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” (Rom 8:2).*

If we recall Fiddes’ description of sin itself, he describes it as a failure in relationships between humans and God, as well as each other, due to human ‘rebellion’. This rebellion, he says, is a failure of *trust*. Our sins are the actions we take when we don’t *trust* in God’s goodness or in our belovedness, when we are afraid and self-preserving, when we are greedy and hoarding, or lustful or seeking of power or domination – when relationship with God and others is not sought as the highest Good because we don’t *trust* it actually is.

“Could loving attachment to God be how salvation saves us from our sins?” asks Jim Wilder in *Renovated* (Renovated 2020, pg 50). With Fiddes’ definition of sin in mind perhaps we could rephrase Wilder’s question: could secure attachment with God – knowing that there’s nothing that could happen to us or that we could do that could permanently estrange us from God’s love – save us from taking action rooted in fear and shame? The actions that lead not to further unity, but to destruction and isolation? Willard and Wilder profess how attachment to Jesus is indeed how we are delivered from sin. They emphasise again and again that it is through secure and loving relationship with the all-loving Other, never through our willed choices or intellectual beliefs, that we ourselves have the chance to truly and permanently transform into its likeness, into maturity. “Spiritual maturity is indicated by the ability to love our enemies spontaneously from the heart,” says Willard (Renovated 2020, pg 50).

Describing how we actually *change* into such a person, Willard continues: “We read ‘Love is patient, love is kind,’ and more often than not, we wind up frustrated and discouraged. But the text doesn’t say, ‘I do all these wonderful things’; it says love does. And so 1 Corinthians 13 is in fact a proposition: If you will receive love into your life, over time, out will come the things that 1 Corinthians 13 says are true of love.” He continues, “We don’t try to do those things—we become the kind of person who does those things. If you try to do those things, it will just kill you. But if you receive love as the principle of your life in all dimensions of your being, then you will see love: Love is kind, love does not envy, and so on all the way down the line. And having received love, you will be transformed into a person who loves” (Renovated 2020, pg 17). What does this mean? It illustrates again how we are actually changed through relationships, not knowledge. As we bring our hearts and selves before God and each other – the ways we feel unfairly treated, the ways we feel ashamed by our own behaviour – and we are open to receiving the compassion and the forgiveness of Christ, open to receiving love there, then we begin to *trust* that we really can be and really are loved as we are. We really are beloved children of God. “The strength of attachments directly ties to the strength of our identities in our brain. The more secure our attachments (“Nothing can break our relationship”), the less our character changes under pressure from feelings, emotions, desires, relationships, threats, or world cultures,” says Wilder (Renovated 2020, pg 118). In our receiving of such secure love, we also become people who can give it away.

Balthasar claims that the event of the atonement is understood as a ‘liberation’ from sin. Wilder and Willard’s soteriology of attachment love would say that it is through the deepening bond with Christ, the deepening knowledge of our eternal and unconditional belovedness, that we are delivered from a life of fear into a life of *trust*. As our bond deepens, our fear diminishes, our trust increases, and we become people whose hearts naturally respond in love, kindness, generosity, and compassion and forgiveness. “You were probably taught that God would love you if and when you changed. In fact, God loves you so that you can change,” says Richard Rohr (Rohr 2019, pg 18). Wilder and Willard’s soteriology certainly encapsulates Balthasar’s third dimension.

#### *4. The Result of the Event of Atonement (Positively: an introduction into the divine life)*

“God sent his Son to redeem those subject to the Law, in order that we might receive filial adoption” (Gal 4:5)  
“The Spirit dwells within us” (Romans 8:10)

We have discussed clearly what Jesus on the cross saves us *from* – estrangement, from not meeting our potential as humans, and from the actions that lead to destruction (Fiddes 1989, p7). But what are we saved *for*? Recalling theologian Edward Schillebeeckx from before, he says, “we are freed for the healing and making whole of each and every individual; to be ‘imitators of God as beloved children’” (Schillebeeckx 2014, pg500) – for sake of relationship and harmony among all creation. What does Willard and Wilder say attachment to God frees us *for*?

Referring to a conversation with Dr. Allan Schore, American clinical psychiatrist and biobehavioral scientist, Jim Wilder says, “Joy is the celebration of attachment love.” He continues, “What joy would Jesus have seen from the garden? His joy was attaching to us and restoring God’s family. [...] Jesus saw joy ahead because, after the Cross, nothing could ever separate the family. Tribulation, sword, famine, things above and below, none of it could separate God’s children from the love of God. This is secure attachment with joy” (Renovated 2020, pg 76). Secure love is inherently a matter of connection, belonging and identity. A soteriology of attachment would extend Fiddes’ description of salvation as resolving the human predicaments and Schillebeeckx’ emphasis on being freed for relationship to add that we are freed as well for joy. For the joy that comes from secure love, from belonging, from knowing one’s place and playing one’s part and for the delight that comes

from being beloved and extending that love to others who long to have it too. Balthasar would call this the “vocation to trinitarian love” (Barry 2017, pg 18) – we are loved that we might give back God’s gift of love to all creation.

“God would expect anyone with an attachment to Himself to exhibit the same attachment to all God’s family. Those attached to God will offer attachments to their enemies because God offers attachment” (Renovated 2020, pg 121), says Wilder. As with the Trinity itself, when one is securely attached and living securely within the joy of the divine community, it is only *natural* to want others to have the same kind of unbreakable union, the same kind of deeply beautiful belonging as well. For the sake of joy and with the help of the Holy Spirit we are invited to follow in Jesus’ steps, invited into a life of giving away what he’s given to us. Or in Jesus’ own words, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15: 11-12).

This beloved life is life in the Spirit, says Steffen Lösel, summarising Balthasar’s views as well: “In baptism, the believers thus rise to a new life and a new creation in the Spirit. They become children of God who are invited to participate in both the Son’s life, death, and resurrection and his eternal generation from the Father” (Lösel 2004, p154). Catherine LaCugna emphasises in her own trinitarian theology that we aren’t meant to only think about God, but to know God relationally, to receive the gifts of his love, and to thereby live in union with him and all of the Trinity. This trinitarian community of divine love, marked by secure attachment, self-sacrifice, interdependence, mutual respect, and inclusivity, was made known through Jesus – and through his life is meant to be shared by all (LaCugna 1992, p 682). This is the divine life on offer.

This divine life of joy, as described by Willard and Wilder according to their theory, clearly meets the criteria for Balthasar’s fourth dimension.

##### 5: *All Done in Light of God’s Merciful Love (Overcoming wrath)*

“You will eat and drink at my table, in my Kingdom” (Luke 22:30)

Summarising Balthasar’s fifth dimension, Birot emphasises the essentiality that “everything [must] take its origin in trinitarian love” (Birot 1997, pg 256). In other words, a proper, acceptable soteriology must begin and end with trinitarian love – and a love that is big enough to be inclusive of anger itself. We’ve explored already how a soteriology of attachment aligns with a trinitarian theology of secure love willing to go to *any* length for the sake of reunion. But where does God’s wrath come in? And how does Willard and Wilder’s soteriology of attachment love make sense of it?

If we pause and consider poet David Whyte’s lyrical description of anger itself, highlighting the profoundly *protective* nature of righteous anger, perhaps we can understand the importance of *anger* as a necessary component of secure relationship. In his book *Consolations*, Whyte writes, “Anger is the deepest form of compassion, for another, for the world, for the self, for a life, for the body, for a family and for all our ideals, all vulnerable and all possibly about to be hurt. Stripped of physical imprisonment and violent reaction, anger is the purest form of care, the internal living flame of anger always illuminates what we belong to, what we are willing to protect, and what we are willing to hazard ourselves for.” These two sentences highlight how inherently *relational* anger really is when fueled by love and not by fear or shame, and is one of the most powerfully motivating forces of action that can be mustered. An attachment-based soteriology integrates God’s wrath as a form of God’s love: “What we call anger on the surface only serves to define its true

underlying quality by being a complete but absolute mirror – opposite of its true internal essence” (Whyte 2015, pg 9).

God was angry and saddened to see us fall from a life of trust. “He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever,” says God in Genesis 3:22. Willard and Wilder’s soteriology of attachment is easily extended to include an understanding of Adam and Eve as sent out from the garden by God in anger out of *protection*, to keep humanity from living forever in estranged lives of distrust and the need to self-preserve. Jesus’ reconciling act on the cross was about the possibility of restoring such trust once again – not by taking upon our punishment to satisfy God’s wrath (an atonement theology known as penal substitution) – but rather through the sacrificial act of coming alongside us in our fallenness and taking upon our estrangement in its fullness so that we can be freed of it.

Through this lens, we find Balthasar’s fifth dimension well aligned within a soteriology of attachment love.

### Soteriological Acceptability in Light of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

*We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19)*

“These five groups are irreducible and must be held together,” says Birot (Birot 1997, pg 265). While this is in reference to Balthasar’s criteria for *any* acceptable soteriology, we must also acknowledge that these five dimensions are also the foundational pillars of *his own* soteriology. And so how does Willard and Wilder’s soteriology of attachment, as expanded upon here, compare not only against Balthasar’s criteria for any acceptable soteriology but to his own proposed soteriology of sacrifice, solidarity and substitution? How might Balthasar disagree with the aforementioned soteriology of attachment?

Balthasar defines sin as *choosing the self as the absolute good* and not God. For Balthasar, humanity is made for communion with God – who is Beauty, Goodness, and Truth – and for participating in the furthering of such Beauty and Goodness and Truth in the world (Barry 2017, pg 18). This participation is what Balthasar calls the ‘theo-drama’ – the Trinity’s prerogative to free humans from the bondage of sin so that they can then choose *freely* to participate in life with God. His soteriology of course also includes his five dimensions.

We have found in our analysis that many of Willard and Wilder’s ideas are found in Balthasar’s soteriology as well. We find resonance in a mutual understanding of the “unanimous salvific decision on the part of the Trinity.” We also find overlap in the definition of sin, as well as its deliverance through solidarity – which Balthasar later replaced with a theology of substitution (Lösel 2004, p150). We find resonance in the invitation into participation in the divine life of the Trinity in both. But we also find differences. These differences are both the strength of this soteriology – as well as the possible source of potential critique.

In Balthasar’s first dimension, we denote ‘the handing over of the son’ as part of the Trinity’s shared decision to save the world. However this seems to assume that Jesus *foreknew* what his mission was in the world. This nuance could bring about potential criticisms of this soteriology – are we saying that Jesus decided *before* the incarnation that he was willing to go to his death? This soteriology as it stands here does not address this particularity and surely would require greater clarity.

We already mentioned above the difference in Balthasar’s notion of deliverance in his second dimension, where Balthasar focuses exclusively on Jesus’ solidarity with the sinner on the cross. An attachment-based

soteriology includes this but goes further, expressing the significance of Jesus' solidarity both in compassion (innocent suffering) *and* in forgiveness (self-inflicted suffering) – inclusive of all human suffering. A soteriology of secure attachment would say it's God's witness with *all* his children in *all* human experience that restores trust in a loving God and absolves *all* possible estrangement. That this restored relationship – truly living with the acceptance and belonging of the Trinity which naturally brings about an invitation into participation – is the resolution to every human anxiety. For Willard and Wilder, freedom would be a result not of belief but of the *experience* of attachment to God – love and belonging with God is the *mechanism by which* we move from fear/bondage into a transformed life in trust/freedom. Their ideas, therefore, could be seen as an *expansion* and not a dissonance. That said, Balthasar might disagree. Is Jesus' action primarily for the sinner, for Adam and Eve and all creation that follows in their stead, or for everyone? Scripture seems to highlight the former more than the latter. More detail would surely be required on this front to bring greater confidence to this soteriological perspective.

“[Human finite freedom] can only be itself by being oriented beyond itself, to the absolute good... If created freedom chooses itself as the absolute good, it involves itself in a contradiction that will devour it” writes Barry, quoting Balthasar himself (Barry 2017, pg 18). Willard and Wilder would surely agree that our salvation is in being freed from a focus on self-preservation to a focus on life in partnership with God (although they might call it from immaturity to maturity). They would agree with Balthasar that participation is the ultimate reward. But the essential point of an attachment-based soteriology is that receiving the love of the Trinity *precedes* participation. Belonging *precedes* participation. One must first experience Beauty and Goodness and Truth – incarnationally, in relationship – to transform into people who can give it away. “Recall our essential idea: You don't become spiritually or emotionally mature by willpower,” says Wilder (Renovated 2020, pg 54). You become mature through attaching to more matured people: through growing a secure bond with Jesus, with the Trinity as persons, and in relationship with the living body of Christ today. Here too we might find critique. This soteriology would posit that grace, therefore, must proceed our will to change. There are countless theologians through the centuries that would disagree with this notion, arguing that humans have more agency than this soteriology might suggest.

With regards to his fifth dimension, we might also come upon critique from Balthasar. Steffen Lösel in describing Balthasar's perspective writes, “On biblical grounds, Balthasar contends, divine wrath is the other side of divine love. A God who loves God's own creation cannot simply turn away from it when it is endangered by sin. A faithful and truthful God must be angry about sin because it destroys God's good creation. God must *reject* the sinners as such, in order to see God's beloved creatures in them and turn God's grace toward them. God's wrath is thus the divine judgement over the sin of humankind” (Lösel 2004, p146). In this description, we find wrath rooted in *rejection* that is overcome by love – but is rejection coherent within a soteriology of secure attachment? While this might align to the *protective* anger we discussed above, more detail would be required to fully unpack how God's rejection is or is not coherent with a soteriology of attachment.

While we do find avenues for coherence in all five of Balthasar's scripture dimensions for an acceptable soteriology, we see here that there are a number of avenues that would also invite deeper exploration.

### Soteriological Acceptability in Light of David Ford

How does this soteriology stand against David Ford's criteria? To recall, Ford says that any soteriology must be able to account for the following questions: (1) Do we have here an approach to salvation that helps us to focus

the gospel story in its biblical setting, and yet have universal implications? (2) Can this theology of salvation be widely accessible today, and be related to imaginative, intellectual, emotional, and practical concerns? (3) Do we have here a theology of salvation which offers a key image or cluster of key images? (4) How conceptually rich is this understanding of salvation? (5) Does this theology have practical promise of fruitfulness in the three main dynamics of Christian living, namely worship and prayer, living and learning in community, and speech, action and suffering for justice, freedom, peace, goodness and truth? And (6) is this theology defensible against diverse attacks, and is it able to anticipate and deal with the main criticisms and alternatives?

Willard and Wilder's theology of attachment love is built atop on the foundational idea that people do not transform into Christlikeness – or what they call spiritual or emotional maturity – through effort (Renovated 2020, pg 54), but through deeply bonded relationships that transform our sense of self and character over time. They make a case for this scripturally in their book, citing countless examples where the word 'attachment' could easily be replaced with the words in scripture used to describe God's relationship with his children in the biblical setting, and especially in the relationship between Jesus and the Father. They also denote the accessibility of this idea through its relatable imagery – even without a psychological background – as each person has a family and knows the nature of familial relationships. Further, in light of the rise of a more mainstream understanding of attachment psychology, they make it clear that the relationally-rich imagery of secure attachment provides a deeply experiential and personal way of understanding God's love intellectually, emotionally – but also practically. Very practically speaking, understanding salvation through the lens of attachment means that after the profession of faith in Jesus, Wilder writes, "to work the way a brain is designed, Christianity [or rather, discipleship to Christ] would require extensive practices that promote a loving attachment with Jesus and develop loving attachments with the rest of His family" (Renovated 2020, pg 46). Worship and prayer, living and learning in community, and promotion of justice, freedom, peace, goodness and truth should all therefore be oriented toward a practical deepening of relational connection with God and each other through this lens. Therefore, we find Willard and Wilder's theory meets Ford's first five criteria. But is their soteriology defensible against attacks, criticisms and alternatives?

There are three broad categories of atonement theories within which most (although not all) soteriologies would reside: the Christus Victor theory, the Moral Influence theory, and the Satisfaction theory. We find that a soteriology of attachment would resonate with the first two of the above, and not the third.

The Christus Victor atonement theory was the predominant atonement theory in the early centuries, and has recently been revived in the 20th century by theologians such as Gustaf Aulén as well as René Girard. It focuses predominantly on humanity's enslavement to 'the Powers', and that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is about freeing humanity once and for all from 'the snake'. A soteriology of attachment could fit within this atonement category, especially in light of Rene Girard's revived theory, positing that Jesus defeats the demonic through his "Scapegoat Theory", freeing humankind through revealing once and for all the *inefficacy* of the snake's ways, and inviting humanity into Jesus' new way of being.

The Moral Influence theory has roots in the 4th century in Augustine's Confessions, but was popularised in later church history with the rise of the Enlightenment and its focus on truth and reason (Fiddes 1989, p10). Instead of focusing on only Christ's death, this theory teaches Jesus as the supreme example and teacher, modelling to us through his life the highest form of God's love. A soteriology of attachment denotes Jesus Christ as the most matured and most loving Other with whom we can attach – this emphasised Christological maximalism highlights how this soteriology easily could fit within a model of moral influence as well.

The Satisfaction theory was established by Anselm in the 12th century and is rooted in the idea of God's justice. This theory focuses on being saved from humanity's guilt, penalty, and judgement from their own sin. During the Renaissance, however, Reformation leaders such as Calvin and Luther modified this theory into what is commonly known as 'Penal Substitution Theory.' The Penal Substitution Theory extends from but also contrasts with Anselm's theory of Substitution because it says that the Father's satisfaction is achieved through God's *punishment* of Jesus. In a soteriology of attachment, the Father is not demanding retribution, payment, or justice through Jesus on the cross. The Father is rather acting in mercy alongside the Son in a profound act of highest love that ultimately absolves all roots of fear and shame once and for all – and anything that could come between God and his creation. That said, Willard and Wilder's theory would *not* work within the framework of an atonement of Satisfaction and would incur criticism from any theologians who align with this theory. This theory, however, has become less popular in recent years.

### Synthesis

We have examined Balthasar's five dimensions in terms of their relevance and applicability to Willard and Wilder's proposed soteriology of attachment; we have looked at each of the events of the Bible through the lens of their proposed theology of attachment love. We have found that Willard and Wilder's extended ideas in the analysis above could sufficiently meet both Balthasar's five dimensions – although they might also invite some critique requiring further exploration. We've also looked to Ford's questions in detail, asking whether adoption into God's family (i.e. a newly formed secure and loving attachment to the entirety of the Trinity made possible through Jesus) is an acceptable metaphor that can help us to understand salvation in Jesus more completely. In light of its universal implications, its accessibility, its conceptually-rich metaphors, its practicality and its alignment to historical atonement theories our answer at this point can sufficiently argue yes, it could.

At this point we can posit that Willard and Wilder's soteriology of attachment love – expanded upon as we have done here – is sufficiently theologically acceptable. If so, then what *are* the implications? How would we securely attach to Jesus and the Trinity, not only as an idea, but truly to transform into a people of love? In the next chapter we will explore what an attachment-based soteriology – one that emphasises secure attachment to God as the source of our salvation – might mean for the church and for spiritual formation practices.

## Chapter 3: Implications for Discipleship

### The Church as Icon of Secure Love

The work of the church, LaCugna says in *The Practical Trinity*, “is to mirror God’s life, to be an ‘icon’ of God’s life.” She shares a vision where the church not only preaches of God’s nature but where its corporate life, its structure and practices, actually *embodies* ‘the very nature of God’. “The church,” she says, “in other words, should exist as the mystery of persons who dwell together in equality, reciprocity and mutual love” (LaCugna 1992, p 682). But what does this mean? She says for the church to model trinitarian flourishing, it must recognize the uniqueness of its members, the diversity that brings about its life, as well as to live together in harmony and unity – just like the Trinity. The point of all trinitarian theology is relationship, she says, “God’s relationship with us, and our relationships with one another” (LaCugna 1992, p 682). In LaCugna’s eyes, the church is to be in and of itself an incarnation of the Word – the Word made Flesh, the living body of Christ today.

But how does the church *become* this? In her essay, she briefly posits that the church becomes an ‘icon’ of relational flourishing and hope in the world by way of the sacramental life. Sacramental life to LaCugna represents tangible communion (LaCugna 1992, p 679). In addition to sacramental living, she asserts that we enter the divine life of the Trinity by imitating Jesus, or “living as Jesus Christ did” she says, “with total confidence in God [the Father], as a peaceful, merciful, healing, forgiving presence; praying and praising God constantly; welcoming the outcast and sinner. Living God’s life means living according to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit – becoming holy and virtuous, and contributing to the unity of the Christian community and harmony among all [...] creatures” (LaCugna 1992, p 678). She paints a beautiful picture with these statements of salvific flourishing in the church through the imitation of Jesus and the practice of sacraments; it would be hard for anyone to argue that she could be *wrong* in her suggestions. Yet we must remember Willard and Wilder’s key point: people don’t change by willpower. It is essential not to ignore the fact that the church has been surrendering itself to the sacraments and attempting to imitate Jesus for the last two millennia and yet remains still radically relationally disintegrated. What is missing here? LaCugna writes herself that the root of Jesus’ action was rooted in trinitarian love. Could there be a deeper ‘imitation of Christ’ and living out of the sacraments that does not look like merely *behaviour* imitation or going through the motions, but rather focuses on learning to first *receive* the same kind of trinitarian love that Jesus himself was rooted in, sourced, and formed by?

Dallas Willard and Jim Wilder in their book *Renovated* would say yes. They would say our freedom to participate in the life of the Trinity should not look like ‘sin management’ or merely cognitively controlling our behaviour (Renovated 2020, pg 2). It shouldn’t be a matter of ritualistic checkboxes. Rather, they would say it is about receiving the truth of our belovedness in the deepest parts of our being through Jesus, receiving the truth of our rootedness in divine love, and then as a byproduct of a deepening secure bond, we might live out of this as the truest thing – living as a merciful, healing, forgiving presence just as Jesus was.

Wilder claims that a focus on attachment would have profound implications for our understanding of human character, fellowship, and spiritual formation. “What delightful harmony emerges between neuroscience and theology if building attachment love is the central process for both spiritual and emotional maturity,” he says (Renovated 2020, pg 7). What if churches focused more on spiritual exercises and human-relationship exercises to build attachment with God and all people, and less on changing belief or superficially moralistic choices? What if the *goal* of the church was to live out the way of Jesus and the life of the Trinity by practising secure attachment with Jesus and each other? Willard and Wilder posit that it would create a whole different

kind of church community entirely – people who actually *grow* into Christlike maturity. LaCugna's illustration of the church to mirror God's life is both doctrinally sound and a refreshing vision. Might Willard and Wilder's attachment exercises be the means by which LaCugna's trinitarian vision of the church could come to life?

### Discipleship toward Secure Love

Dallas Willard emphasises the distinction between two different forms of spiritual life. There are Christians who focus on their beliefs about God, but live mostly unchanged by their faith. Then there are Disciples who have lives *with* God and mature through the deepening of relationships. He says that when people's normal human attachments are improved – when people are living more harmoniously in forgiving and compassionate relationship – they are better able to connect with and receive from God. He also notes as people's attachment with God strengthens, they are better able to manage emotions, connect with others in significant ways, and even resolve trauma. Their primary hypothesis is this: to experience more secure attachment with God, our human relationships must also become more secure. To experience more secure attachment with each other, our relationship with God must become more secure (Renovated 2020, pg 107). What does scripture say about this? And what does it require of us to actually grow in attachment?

There are many places in scripture where we find the invitation into receiving the love of God, and the invitation to practise loving others. Paul's book of Ephesians especially emphasises this sentiment throughout its chapters. In chapter 3 he prays that the Ephesians might know the depth of the love of Christ by “being rooted and established in love” (Eph 3:17), and in chapter 4 he urges readers to be humble, gentle, and to bear with one another love, seeking unity unto maturity (Eph 4:2-3). In chapter 5 he directly instructs the congregation to “Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” As we deepen our relationship with God as ‘dearly loved children’, we are to ‘walk in the way of love’ (Eph 5:1-2)

But what does being a dearly loved child of God and walking in the way of love actually look like? How do we deepen our relationship to God as beloved children, and how do we practise loving each other well? We mentioned previously that at the heart of a soteriology of attachment we find Jesus' solidarity – profound all-encompassing compassion and forgiveness. We found that there was no possible experience of suffering that Jesus could not be with us in. But to be *with* God in our experiences of suffering means choosing to be vulnerable and bring them before God and before one another. There is no *striving* for holiness here. Neither is there a call to self-flagellate for our mistakes. There is only truly the practice of honesty, empathy, and humility – with God, and compassionately with one another.

### *Honesty, Empathy and Humility*

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr affirms the simple heart of this invitation: “All God appears to want from us is honesty and humility (and they are, finally, the same thing).” He says indeed there is no other way to read the stories of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11–32) or the publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18: 9–14). In each example, the individual who was in the wrong ends up being right—merely because of his honesty and humility about it. The other who technically did the right thing ends up being wrong because of his pride (Rohr 2019, pg 347). This is not, however, the paradigm we find in most churches today, and throughout time.

“In the divine economy of grace, sin and failure become the base metal and raw material for the redemption experience itself,” says Father Richard Rohr. “Salvation is not sin perfectly avoided, as the ego would prefer. In

fact, salvation is sin turned on its head and used in our favour. That is how *transformative* divine love is” (Rohr 2019, pg 309). In Rohr’s opinion, church is not to be a place where people are practising ‘perfection’ together. Rather, it’s a place where ‘imperfection’ is integrated – a community intending to live as individuals and in unity, but where the reality of mistakes, confusion, apparent contradictions, fear and self-preservation are allowed to emerge and be met with the compassion and forgiveness of Jesus. Rohr would likely agree with Willard and Wilder in saying that the *purpose* of church cannot be about merely evangelising beliefs and actions. He would also likely add that it cannot be about *perfection*, or an imagined social harmony that comes from perfect order. Rather, his theology profoundly emphasises this point: that the path of union is different than the path of perfection. “Perfection gives the impression that, by effort or more knowing, I can achieve wholeness separate from God, from anyone else, or from connection to the Whole” writes Rohr (Rohr 2019, pg 375). But the reality is we can’t be ‘Whole’ on our own. We actually need each other and each other’s fallenness to practise honesty, empathy, and humility – and know the love of God.

Let us recall Bowlby and Ainsworth’s theory of secure attachment. The theory suggests that young children must establish relationship with a minimum of one primary caregiver for healthy, stable emotional development and to be able to be at rest and peace. We mentioned already that if a child has at least one stable caregiver that was near, attentive and responsive as the child grew up, the child would feel ‘securely attached’ and therefore could feel confident, playful, uninhibited, smiley, sociable, and free of fear. But perhaps most significant in a securely attached relationship is the knowing that relational rupture (i.e. mistakes, errors, rebellion, *sin*) can, and will, be repaired.

We’ve said above that through the lens of a soteriology of attachment, Jesus on the cross represents a solidarity with all humanity in both our own transgressions and the transgressions done unto us. That there is no persecution that can separate us from the love of God, nor any mistake that is unrepairable with God. It would also be coherent with a soteriology of attachment to also say that our very sins, mistakes, mess-ups and the sins, mistakes and mess ups of others become the *fodder* for our true knowing of God and the deepening love within his church. Our sins create rupture that require repair and bring us closer to our forgiving God. The sins of others create rupture that bring us closer to our God who stands with us in our suffering. It is through our very ruptures and our repair with God and with one another that we truly can *know* the God of love – of unending compassion and forgiveness. An attachment model of discipleship would therefore actively and unashamedly welcome the messy throes of relationship with the hope and goal of reconciliation – seeking always to practise honesty, humility, compassion, forgiveness, mystery in all things, with God and with each other.

It is important to note that welcoming the messy throes of relationship would not mean the *condoning* of sin (recall: actions taken in fear and self-preservation), but rather invites a willingness to bring our pain before God and each other – including how we have hurt others and how others have hurt us. It truly requires profound courage to admit our mistakes in humility, to empathise with others’ hurt, to forgive each other and ourselves. The reality of this is almost impossibly difficult. Our ego does not like to be confronted, or wrong, or feel small, as Father Richard Rohr says. And relationships *are* messy. Communities fall apart. Systems oppress entire people groups. As humans and *not* God we are limited in our capacities for compassion and forgiveness, as hard as we try. Paul knows it himself when he says, “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18). Growth and healing are not linear, ruptures won’t always be repaired immediately, and systems of injustice cannot be deconstructed quick enough. But there is nothing more profound than weeping over the pain you’ve caused those you love because of your own sin and fear and impulse to preserve your own life – and knowing you *are still loved by God*. There is nothing more profound than being burned by those you love and knowing that *at least* God too knows the profundity of betrayal and

unbearable disappointment in God and in humanity, that you are never alone in your suffering. There is nothing more profound than giving and receiving forgiveness when it's not deserved, or receiving and giving presence and compassion to another in pain. *These encounters are how we are transformed. Not creed or theory. If a community of disciples are oriented toward growing in trust with God and with each other, if people are willing to continue to show up honestly and humbly with the willingness to see and be seen with love, God's transformative grace will be at work.*

Father Richard Rohr puts it beautifully, "Christ Crucified is all the hidden, private, tragic pain of history made public and given over to God. Christ Resurrected is all suffering received, loved, and transformed by an all-caring God," he says, "How else could we have any kind of cosmic hope? How else would we not die of sadness of what humanity has done to itself and what we have done to one another? The cross is the standing statement of what we do to one another and to ourselves. The resurrection is the standing statement of what God does to us in return" (Rohr 2019, pg 81). It truly is this choice to live into honesty, humility and empathy in the midst of it all that could then form churches and communities built atop *experiences* of grace, and not only knowledge.

*Please note: there is a necessity of further nuance on this topic. Truly reconciling between humans requires an intentional choice, the willingness, of both parties to step into humility, honesty, empathy with God and with one another. If that yes toward honesty, humility and empathy is not mutually chosen, direct reconciliation at that moment in time is not possible – although healing with God and alongside the broader body of Christ is still possible.*

### *Grace and Truth in the Body of Christ*

Edward Schillebeeckx, a well-known theologian during Vatican II and in the years to follow, advocated for the transformation of the church's relationship to *experience* in salvation, often avoiding creedal statements in his work and focusing more on the subjective experience of Jesus' first disciples. He defines grace to be, "The benevolent and merciful love of God for [people]," a gifted reality which beckons humanity into "a new way of life prepared for us by God in Jesus Christ, and offered to us on the level of our own earthly history, freely and to make us glad" (Schillebeeckx 2014, p451). Grace, he says, is a gift, and it is received – it cannot be taken nor earned. Grace is the love of the Trinity for humanity, it is Jesus' solidarity on the cross in compassion and forgiveness, and it is what we give and receive from one another in the Holy Spirit. Encountering grace has the power to change one's entire view of what is most true in the world.

"Truth comes near to us by the alienation and disorientation of what we have already achieved and planned," Schillebeeckx says, "the disclosure of reality is not the self-evident, but the scandal, the stumbling block of the refractoriness of reality" (Schillebeeckx 2014, p17). Until we have experienced grace, forgiveness, and compassion, we live under the reality of shame and fear. Or in other words, we live fallen from the garden and *estranged* from God and one another. But it was the encounter and relationship with Jesus – his love, grace, forgiveness, compassion, everything – that shook his disciples and changed the course of their lives. And they did not seek it, it just happened to them. This is the heart of what Schillebeeckx calls 'revelation' – new divergent realities of grace that shepherd in new possibilities, new models of truth. Schillebeeckx' claims here highlight Willard and Wilder's propositions above: that one can only come to know the possibility of secure attachment with God through experiencing secure attachment incarnationally. One can only know the possibility of secure attachment with others through experiencing secure attachment with God. Grace can become Truth only once it has been *experienced* in the flesh.

Dallas Willard himself hammers these points home, calling out how often tradition and doctrinal statements actually *keep* Christians from working together and practising honesty, empathy and humility with one another. He suggests that, “the true ecumenicism is discipleship to Christ—that churches should focus on discipleship instead of the doctrinal issues that probably gave rise to their particular brand of Christianity” (Renovated 2020, pg 132). The way to overcome the arrogance and pride that diminishes other denominations or other faith traditions is to base the Christian identity in *practice*. “Churches at their best [should be] like hospitals,” says Dallard, “where people are drawn in to be helped and sent out with a wholeness that they didn’t have before” (Renovated 2020, pg 22). A wholeness that comes from the unexpected experience of grace and truth – that surely they too will long to give away.

### Secure Love Through Time

It follows naturally to ask are these ideas *new*? What does church tradition say about this? While perhaps the terminology of ‘attachment’ and ‘repair’ used in psychological circles are new, it is certainly evident that the idea of loving attachment with God echoes through the centuries. We find this kind of relational love often in the writings of the saints and mystics across denominations – individuals officially recognised by the church as living from a profundity of freedom, love, and self-sacrificial compassion.

Perhaps most famous for his writings about his own relationship with God is Saint Augustine, the 4th century bishop of Hippo. His famous *Confessions* is considered to be the first Western Christian autobiography ever written, and was written as a dialogue of prayer to God. Augustine writes in Book X, chapter 39: “You see how my heart trembles and stains in the midst of all these perils and others of a like kind. It is not as though I do not suffer wounds, but I feel rather that you heal them over and over again” (Pine-Coffin, 2015). Peter Brown, author of *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, writes of Saint Augustine not as a cured man, holy and virtuous above all others, but rather highlights Saint Augustine’s self-portrait as a convalescent. He says that Augustine’s *Confessions* are a way by which he *receives* grace and mercy from his God (Brown 2000, pg 170). In Augustine’s own words he says, “For behold, You have taken delight in truth: and he that does truth comes to the light. I desire to do truth in my heart, before Thee by confession: with my pen, before many witnesses” (Pine-Coffin, 2015). His *Confessions* are the living out of grace *experientially* received when one dares to look beneath the hood and bring that before God and one another. By looking to Saint Augustine, we are confronted with the *importance* of our own misgivings and misunderstandings and disordered desires in bringing a greater sense of security in relationship with our God of love. It is through confession that Augustine encounters such eternal, patient, faithful love – the greatest love of his life for which he thirsts and hungers endlessly, and the only love that can satisfy his longing heart.

Nearly a thousand years later we find a similar kind of radical prayer in Julian of Norwich’s writings, a great English anchoress and one of England’s most important mystics. She is often quoted: “For we are so preciously loved by God that we cannot even comprehend it. He did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted, but he did say: You will not be overcome.” She writes of such compassionate companionship in light of her *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first work in the English language written by a woman which details the visions she experienced of Jesus with her in her near-death experiences. “[Jesus] in this vision informed me of all that was necessary to me,” she writes, “answered by this word and said, sin is necessary, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (Walsh 1973, ch. 27). While these words have sparked controversies over the centuries by theologians afraid of any reading that might *condone* sin, it stands that her experiences speak of an assurity in God’s care for her

and his omnipresence in all things, and the ultimate goodness both at the source and at the end of all creation. Despite being near death in sickness in her early thirties, her honesty and humility and received assurance in God's unending love is an example of profound secure attachment.

But there is no other saint or mystic known to preach God's unconditional love and the mystery of "God in all things" more than Ignatius of Loyola of the 16th century. Founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), Saint Ignatius was one of the most influential figures in Western Christianity – and some even consider him to be the world's first psychologist! His 'Principle and Foundation' is at the heart of his spiritual teachings, which posits that human beings were created to be in relationship with God, and given this, that they might desire and choose in their lives only that which leads to deeper communion with God. His 'Spiritual Exercises' are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed with the intention to guide people into greater honesty and humility, helping them to become free of disordered attachments that inhibit the greatest flow of love – all for the sake of deepening relationship with God. Throughout the exercises, different kinds of prayerful disciplines are introduced such as imaginative contemplation, discernment of Spirits (identifying the difference between inner movements of 'the Good Spirit' versus the 'bad spirit'), and an examen of consciousness through daily reflections. Saint Ignatius insisted profoundly that each and every person had the capacity to hear from God themselves, talk with God, and be guided into a life of ever greater communion and thus into everlasting happiness. His spirituality is profoundly marked by trust in God and the joy of companionship. Indeed, he would call sin simply "unwillingness to trust that what God wants for me is only my deepest happiness." The experiential, relational spirituality of Saint Ignatius so deeply aligns to a soteriology of attachment love – and his exercises have been a practical tool for deepening attachment over the last 500 years!

One thing is clear: these ideas are not new. Jesus' call into divine relationship is as old as the faith itself, and the church has been fighting theological heresies such as Manichesism (salvation through knowledge), against Donatism (salvation through perfection), against Pelagianism (salvation through self-willed effort) since its inception. Saints, mystics, and reformers through the centuries have rejected time and time again these same heresies, and a soteriology of attachment – salvation through attachment to an all-loving God of grace and mercy – does as well.

### Practical Invitations

*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)*

And so where does this leave us? Father Richard Rohr insists that 'the Reign of God' has much more to do with what he calls 'right relationship' than with being privately right. "It has much more to do with being connected than with being personally correct," he says. "Can you feel the difference between these two? One encourages an impossible notion of individual salvation and creates individuals; the other introduces cosmic salvation and creates humans, citizens, caretakers, neighbours, and saints" (Rohr 2019, pg 166). Attachment is *entirely* about healthy connection and *entirely* about right relationship.

Willard and Wilder suggest there are two avenues to practise healthy connection and right relationship – one directly with God, and the other with each other. For the former, we can look to the saints and mystics as our guides – especially to the brilliance of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. We can follow their lead in learning how to find God in all things, how to discern and follow the promptings of the Spirit, and how to courageously, honestly, humbly bring our full suffering selves before our loving God in dialogue. It is the journey of the mystic to seek relationship with God. We must not be afraid of this term. “Mysticism is simply when God’s presence becomes experiential and undoubted,” says Rohr (Rohr 2019, pg 42). It is simply when we seek to share our minds and hearts with God in honesty, humility, and empathy, and open ourselves up to receive in response. Perhaps Karl Rahner SJ was right when he said, “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will cease to exist.”

But what about right relationship with one another? We are *not* God, and cannot expect each other to respond always as kindly and compassionately as Jesus might’ve, even if we would like. Here rather, Willard and Wilder suggest we look to contemporary therapeutic models for attachment repair that teach us the practical skills for how to bring our full selves into relationship, as well as how to fully receive one another (Renovated 2020, pg 5). It is no simple task to learn how to articulate our experiences with courage, honesty, and humility as well as to learn how to actively listen to each other well with empathy, and kindly articulate what we hear. But this willingness to learn to communicate, to reconcile, is *how* we truly love “not in word or speech, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18) – how to forgive, to stand alongside, to repair what has been broken. To trust that grace will indeed be at work as we look toward our loving God *together* in the midst of it all.

At this point it suffices to say explicitly that Willard and Wilder’s soteriology of attachment, and a discipleship model rooted in the practise of honesty, empathy and humility with God and one another, could indeed very well be the *means* by which LaCugna’s vision for the church could come to life. *This* is the kind of discipleship that can allow the formation of a richly diverse yet united church community to actually *become* an emblem of inclusive equality and love – an incarnation of the Grace and Truth, the Word made Flesh in our own times. “Discipleship is not for the churches,” says Dallas, “The churches are for discipleship. And discipleship is for the world” (Renovated 2020, pg 132). We love because he first loved us.

### Possible Critiques

But what are the limitations of this kind of radical discipleship to Jesus in humility, honesty, and empathy, where people are bound together for sake of love in community? René Girard, anthropologist and interdisciplinary scholar mentioned above, might suggest some. While securely attaching to Jesus can indeed evolve our very desires, purpose, belonging and identity – it can also easily go awry. Girard’s research alludes to a reality in which we are biologically and culturally driven to turn against each other, and that any rigid community of belonging is bound to devolve into a ritualistic membership club given enough time and with the inevitable rise of tension.

As we’ve briefly noted above, Girard is known for his theory of mimetic desire: that people more or less learn what to desire from each other. However, built upon this reality, Girard explains, “is the marvellous paradox that the closer you are, the more your goals will be the same,” and therefore, “the closer you are to someone, the greater the possibility of conflict” (CBC 2001, p3). He says imitation soon creates tension, and this tension is the root of all conflict and rivalry. Such rivalry, he says, will also be mimicked until tension ‘runs away’ and increases so much that it becomes unbearable in a community. At this point, to resolve the tension, the

community will find a common enemy to unify around and to sacrifice together. He calls this the scapegoat mechanism (CBC 2001, p6).

While unifying around the giving and receiving of love of Jesus in humility, honesty, and empathy is indeed God's invitation in light of a soteriology of attachment, Girard's theory would suggest it isn't so simple – he might even suggest it isn't possible. A soteriology of attachment posits that we are growing in secure attachment to God by being in deeper relationship with each other, and vice versa. His theory posits that it is only inevitable for a community in deep relationship with one another (therefore mimicking each other) to rise in tension and conflict. And that the eventual need to release such tension would turn a community *away* from uniting in God – and instead actively turn against one another. Such shared belonging found in practising the love of God with Jesus at the centre would soon devolve into false belonging that only persists with the existence of having a shared enemy. We've seen this time and time again in the church: a praxis of love turned into ritualistic moralism where the scapegoat (other religions, divorced people, gay and lesbian people, any other 'othering' in times past) becomes the unifier. This answer dictates certain rhythms and rituals to maintain a sense of peace, belonging, and safety. This, according to Girard's theory, is his definition of 'religion' (CBC 2001, p7).

Girard's theory does not necessarily push back against a soteriology of attachment love itself – of attaching to the person of Jesus and seeking to imitate him and each others' imitation of him. But it perhaps might push back against an *ecclesiology* of attachment – any theory of church structure or ritual that could promise a sense of predictable order within a community. As soon as a community is more *attached* to the existence of itself over attachment to God and each other, it will devolve from 'right relationship' into 'being right', to use Rohr's language above.

Does this mean a community of disciples shouldn't even try? Not necessarily. But Girard's theory does highlight the pitfall of forecasting any idealised order – even an idealised reality of not having an idealised order! Perhaps an appropriate ecclesiology of attachment (which is beyond the scope of this dissertation) would incorporate 'imperfection' not only at the individual human level, but at the institutional level as well. Perhaps it might even incorporate the *necessity* of the rising, the falling, and the reforming church through time as a body that negotiates closeness, estrangement, lostness, and returning unto Christ just as we do too.

# Conclusion

“I’ll tell you what freedom is to me. No fear.” –Nina Simone

How do the people of God actually become a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18, 20), and truly known in our world today as disciples by our love (John 13:35)? This dissertation set out to assess whether a soteriology of attachment – a theology of salvation that professes freedom found in an ever-deepening bond with Jesus, the Trinity, and the Body of Christ – was theologically valid. It also set out to explore the ecclesiological implications that such a shift in metaphor might have.

We began by unpacking what Paul Fiddes’ calls “the three predicaments of the human condition” – the existential sense of estrangement, lostness, and inclination toward self-preservation from such disconnectedness. We explored how these three predicaments remain the same through time while taking on unique expressions of the particular culture moment. We then looked to *our* cultural moment and the epidemic of loneliness and meaninglessness plaguing western culture today – and the ways in which psychological language and particularly *attachment theory* speaks to the issues of our times in freshly poignant and receptive ways.

In the second chapter, we looked at Willard and Wilder’s proposed soteriology of secure attachment and rigorously explored its theological coherence. We found its theology to align closely with Balthasar’s himself – a theology rooted in an all-loving Trinity willing to go to any length for the sake of reunion with all creation, and our atonement received in Jesus’ all-encompassing compassion and forgiveness. We explored a theology of salvation rooted *in the restoration of trust* in God’s unending love through Jesus that resolves any and all estrangement humans can have from God – truly nothing can happen to us and there is nothing we can do to separate us again from the love of God. We found a theology boasting that this generous act of repair, the love we receive from God, is what ultimately provides the basis and ability for us to repair trust with one another. It is this all-encompassing *witness* that is unique to this soteriology – the call into a divine life that is free from fear and shame for our mistakes, free from the fear of loneliness and abandonment in anything life could throw our way, and free to joyfully love others with this same compassionate *witness* too. We finished chapter two by exploring some possible critiques in response to these ideas.

With this theological foundation in place, we explored the implications of this soteriology for the church and its models of formation. We unpacked the impact of a discipleship model posed by Wilder and Willard focused more on relationship-building exercises rather than changing beliefs, and imitating Jesus by learning to *receive* the love of God first and foremost over behaviour imitation. But perhaps most importantly, we named the vulnerability required of such a discipleship model in *actually receiving* the love of God – the willingness to allow God and others into our pain, suffering, and to step into the pain and suffering of others. We noted Franciscan priest Richard Rohr’s notion that it is our (and others’!) very mistakes, errors, *and sin*, which open the doorway to *encounter* the very love of God we long to know and live from. But this radically flips the notion of church on its head. It calls out the messiness, the non-orderliness of actually showing up to God and one another in the reality of our broken world and with our broken hearts.

We also saw how these ideas – bringing our messy selves before God and one another, seeking to both give and receive the compassion and forgiveness of Jesus – aren’t actually new, but have echoed through the centuries in the lives of saints and mystics. We highlighted Augustine’s radical transparency in prayer and Saint Ignatius’ formational exercises dating back to over 500 years ago, and their continued relevance for

today. We also allowed room for the voice of the critic to question humankind's ability to really live this way, and the potentially inevitable corruption that any institutional endeavour might face.

And so, at the end of all our exploring, what have we learned? While there are some expansions in this particular soteriological metaphor, the idea of trinitarian love, the notion of solidarity in Christ's love, and mystical prayer have all gone before. But that said, the *language* of attachment, and *language* that is accessible to the particular, poignant issues of our times is indeed new. The tools of psychotherapy and the increasing social receptivity to sharing our pain vulnerably with a compassionate other is also new. And the notion to become disciples practising healthy connection and right relationship over any notion of 'being right' is freshly ripe at this point in church history once again. Might the church today be freshly poised to become a place of gracious encounter, where imperfection is learned to be integrated instead of rejected? Might it become a place known for its humility, honesty and empathy – ambassadors of repair, reconciliation, and secure love in our world today? Might it even be not only okay but *necessary* for churches to fall, to rise, to reform as they forget and remember the essentiality of *relationship* to Christ and each other again and again?

We've heard that in the love of Christ there truly is nothing to fear. But these words mean nothing to a soul until they have become Flesh, afresh in every generation and in every life. A theology of salvation rooted in secure love puts forth a vision of salvation that isn't only something to experience after death, but rather something to be experienced *here, now*, in the calming of our nervous systems and the strengthening and restoration of the relationships before us. It implies that we – as individuals, and as the church – are both *in need* of the hands and the feet of God to meet us in our real lives and real brokenness, and are also the hands and the feet of the Lord to others in theirs. We are in need of God with us, and we have God in us to be with others. We are both sinners and saints, both broken and already healed – *the problem and the resolution*.

A soteriology of attachment reminds us that salvation is not static or one-off but rather developmental and ever-increasing – as we enter into relationship with God and our security in God's unbreakable love for us deepens, so does our life of trust, peace, hope and faith – if only we dare. If only we dare to knock, to seek, to learn, to be wrong, to be humbled, to repent, to ask for forgiveness, to lament, to forgive, to grow, to rejoice, to desire God all the days of our lives. The result? In time and unto eternity we are freed evermore from fear, we are freed from the need to self-preserve, we are freed to love others – we are *transformed* as persons into the new creation of which Christ speaks. We are freed to take part in the cultivation of beauty, and in doing so, to become beautiful ourselves.

Or in the words of Saint Teresa of Avila of the 16th century, "All the way to heaven is heaven."

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