WE ARE ALL THOMAS NOW: MILLENNIAL CHRISTIANS AND
THE NEED FOR NEW THEOLOGICAL WORLDS AT
THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF AUGUSTA, GEORGIA

by

THOMAS WILLIAM DYER, JUNIOR

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Approved:

Graham B. Walker, Jr., Ph.D
Faculty Supervisor

Reverend Mimi Walker
Ministry Coach

David G. Garber, Jr., Ph.D
Faculty Reader

Graham B. Walker, Jr., Ph.D
Interim Associate Dean, D.Min. Degree Program, McAfee School of Theology

C. Gregory DeLoach, D.Min.
Interim Dean, McAfee School of Theology
DEDICATION

To Sara,
whose endless support made this entire project possible,
and to Miriam, Evie, and Naomi,
whose lives inspire me to see the handiwork of God in the world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have dreamed of the day when I would sit at my desk and express my gratitude to all those who played a role in this journey. The English poet John Donne once said that “no man is an island.” After three and a half years of academic work, I know this saying to be true in a way that almost leaves me at a loss for words. This work would not be possible without giving thanks to the following:

*The Resurrected Son of God, our Lord, Jesus Christ:* The heart of this work is aimed at introducing people to you. My life is exponentially greater because you are at the center. I consider it the great honor of my life to call myself a follower of Christ. You love us enough to meet us where we are and, for that, I am grateful.

*The First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia:* You took a chance when you called me as your Senior Pastor in early 2017. Most congregations of your size and stature would never dream of calling a thirty-three-year-old to lead them into the future. But you did, and the first two years have been amazing! Honestly, I still cannot believe that you let me get up and preach every Sunday morning. I am having the time of my life. I hope that you are as well. Thank you for all the encouragement and interest you have shown for my work. My hope is that the fruit of this project will help our church be the “light of world” in our wonderful city.

*The First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Georgia:* I would be remiss if I did not give my thanks to the church where I began this program. You gave me the freedom to do ministry that was outside of the box for the First Baptist Church. It was my five years in Gainesville that gave me the space to think deeply about how we communicate the good news in a pluralistic world. You gave me freedom to try new things and more importantly, you taught me that grace is always enough. Thank you.

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with greater joy because I was able to spend my nights in the comfort of your home. Your friendship means the world to me. For the love of God, do not ever forget that there were raptors on the Ark.

*Ed and Tara O’Neil*: The dining room table in your beach house will forever remain in my mind as the place where most of this thesis came to life. I cannot begin to thank you for giving me the peace and quiet that were necessary to get this work on paper. More importantly, you have shown me that it is possible to raise three beautiful daughters who brighten the day of everyone they meet. They love Jesus and people. I do not think you could ask for more. I am glad to be your pastor.

*Vampire Weekend*: Along with a few other bands, you provided the soundtrack to this project. When I wonder about what life feels like in our Secular Age, all I needed to do was to put on one of your albums. You will never read this acknowledgement, but I thank you, nonetheless.
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ABSTRACT

THOMAS WILLIAM DYER, JUNIOR
WE ARE ALL THOMAS NOW: MILLENNIAL CHRISTIANS THE NEED FOR NEW THEOLOGICAL WORLDS AT THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF AUGUSTA, GEORGIA
Under the direction of Graham B. Walker, Jr., Ph.D., Supervisor

According to the Pew Research Group, the fastest growing religious identification in the United States is “None.” This trend is particularly strong with the generation known as “Millennials,” where more than thirty-five percent reported that their religious affiliation is “None.” This report has been widely reported on and has generated incredible anxiety in churches. While many in the church blame culture for a rapid decline of religious faith, it is the purpose of this thesis to show that one reason for the precipitous drop in religious identification in the United States is that the church has ceased to speak about God in a way that connects to the lived-experience of Millennials. If the gospel is going to spread in a post-Christian culture, then the church must learn to use variegated language to speak about how God is to be found in the world.

This thesis uses the Five Theological Worlds from W. Paul Jones as a launching point to offer a better way to connect the lived-experience of Millennials to the way they understand how God is at work in the world. Six Millennials were chosen to participate in this project, which began with each individual taking the Theological Worlds Inventory. After completing the Inventory, participants took part in one-hour long experiences of
each of the five Theological Worlds. After the completion of the experiences, they were invited to take the Theological Worlds Inventory for the second time, with the hope that any change in Theological World could be measured by their responses. Follow up interviews were done with each of the six participants with questions geared to measure how each of the experiences impacted their lived-experience and their theological understanding of how God is at work in their lives. It is important to note that there were also four people who acted as a control group. They were invited to take the Theological Worlds Inventory on two separate occasions, but they did not take part in the experiences of each Theological World. The intent of the control group was to see the power of experience in offering a variegated understanding of Theological Worlds.

After introducing the background problem in detail, this thesis traces the biblical, theological, philosophical, and historical foundations for why new understandings of how God is at work in the world are often times necessary in the life of the church. It then details the central findings of the project, which concern how Theological Worlds are formed and shaped in the lives of individuals. The three primary themes that emerged are the centrality of childhood experience in shaping Theological Worlds, the role of trauma/experiences of loss in changing Theological Worlds, and the importance of experience, and not cognition, in helping people align their lived-experience with their understanding of how God is at work in the world. Finally, this thesis concludes with ideas for future development, which includes how liturgy can shape Theological Worlds and how preaching is best practiced as a theatrical experience.
There are certain moments that imprint on your brain and late one evening in August of 2016, I experienced something that would make me re-imagine how I should communicate the gospel. My wife and I had gone on vacation to the beach with our closest friends. After a long day at the beach, I was sitting on a balcony with Wes. Overlooking the ocean with a Sazerac in our hands, the evening was almost perfect and all we needed was a little music. Wes and I both share a love for music, so it was no surprise when he pulled out his phone and put on the new album by Sturgill Simpson. Prior to that evening, I had never heard of Sturgill Simpson, but once that night was over his lyrics would haunt me for years. The first track on his 2016 album *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music* is a haunting piece called *Turtles All the Way Down*. Written by Simpson, the song charts Simpson’s existential anxiety and leaves us in a place where he declares “Marijuana, LSD, Psilocybin, DMT, they’ve all changed the way I see, but love is the only thing that has ever saved my life.” While the whole song is interesting, there are two verses that grabbed me. Toward the end of the song, while talking about meaning and purpose in the world and in our lives, Simpson declares:

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1 Sturgill Simpson, *Turtles All the Way Down*, (Nashville; High Top Mountain Music, 2014)
Every time I take a look, inside that old and fabled book, I am blinded and reminded of the pain caused by some old man in the sky... So don’t waste your mind on nursery rhymes, of fairy tales of blood and wine, it’s turtles all the way down the line.²

According to Sturgill Simpson, meaning is not found by looking to the God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ. Rather, meaning is found by embracing the world around us, and in particular, in the love of others. While the song was haunting, what really gripped me was watching my friend sing every word of this tune. Wes is a devoted Christian and had recently been elected as a deacon at his church, which is a very conservative mega-church in his city. He is a member of a church that is constantly and consistently telling people that the only way to find meaning in life, and also avoid eternal damnation, is to believe that Christ died for your sins. Yet, there we sat, drinking Sazeracs, and singing songs about how Love is the thing that can change our lives. It was in that moment that I realized we need a better way to talk about God, a way that better connects with the lived-experience of people, because the old way is not working anymore.

Description of Ministerial Context

On Easter Sunday of 2017, I preached my first sermon as the new Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia. The First Baptist Church of Augusta (FBC) is a historic Baptist church with an average Sunday attendance of 800 and an estimated 1100-1200 unique worshippers in attendance at least once a month. FBC is a multi-generational congregation with members that come from multiple counties around the

² Ibid.
Central Savannah River Area (CSRA). The primary demographic makeup of the church is upper-middle class Caucasian, with a small number of African American as well as Chinese members. The church is made up of both urban residents as well as increasing numbers of suburban families. The church is dually aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) (20% SBC and 80% CBF), however, the majority of the congregation has little to no interest in denominational affiliation with either SBC or CBF. The church has a national profile in that FBC was the “birthplace” of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned in the introduction, FBC is a multi-generational church, however, we are finding that the most significant demographic expansion in our church is coming from the generation popularly known as “Millennials.” While this statistic is something that is celebrated, if the church is going to sustain growth with this coveted demographic, we need to re-examine way the church presents the faith of Jesus to our community. This is because the lived-experience of Millennials in post-modernity no longer fits with the theological language of our church.

The philosopher Charles Taylor speaks about how in the post-modern world, we have been conditioned to make sense of reality through “the immanent frame,”\(^3\) which does not leave room for transcendent conceptions of religion or any sense of divine

activity. While very few Millennials at FBC would be able to verbalize a conception of the “immanent frame,” most, if not all, make sense of their experience of the world through this “immanent frame.” There are still moments, however, where individuals catch a glimpse of divine activity in their lives, and it is in those spaces where the church is called to help people to see the gospel.

There has been a marked shift for Millennials, where the evangelical framework they were raised with, whether in a different church or in FBC Augusta, no longer helps them connect the gospel to their lived-experience. To use the language of Miroslav Volf, there has been a shift in the presentation of the Christian faith, which is now focused on “flourishing” in the present age. FBC Augusta, and the Church in a general sense, has done a poor job of helping congregants connect their daily lives with the good news of Jesus Christ. For far too long the implicit, as well as explicit, content of discipleship material, prayers, music, and sermons have communicated that the heart of the Christian faith is the eternal destination of the individual. In particular, the traditional expression of the Christian message in the Bible Belt is that a person is a sinner in need of a salvation that only Christ can offer. People are deserving of hell and it is only through the work of Christ on the cross that we are saved from eternal damnation. It should come as no surprise that as we now live in a “Secular Age,” as Taylor would say, the traditional evangelical presentation of the gospel is increasingly irrelevant to Millennials.
Research Question

In a 2014 poll, the Pew Research Group noted, with great fanfare, that 35% of Millennials identify as “None” when asked about their religious affiliation. It is clear that the classic evangelical presentation of the gospel is no longer connecting with people of this demographic. It is increasingly the case that Millennials who stay in the church experience a disconnect between their lived-experience and the traditional ways churches talk about how God is at work in their lives. If Millennial Christians at the First Baptist Church of Augusta were presented with an experience of alternative Theological Worlds that better connected with their lived-experience, would they be better equipped to see how God is at work in their everyday lives? Would helping Millennials develop a new theological paradigm give them a more consistent way of experiencing how God is at work in their lives? Answering this question could help the church better communicate the gospel to a demographic of people who are consistently leaving the church because of a lack of relevance to their lives. It is for the purpose of seeking answers to these questions that this research and project have been conducted.

Procedure

To accomplish this task, I gathered qualitative data through ethnographic analysis. As an ethnographic study, my data collection was a combination of interviews, observation, and the completion of a Theological Worlds Inventory as presented in W.

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Paul Jones’ *Worlds Within a Congregation*. Because of the nature of my subject, Millennial Christians at FBC Augusta, I performed this as a participant observer. Even though I am the Senior Pastor of the church, I fall within the parameters of the study and have also struggled with connecting my lived-experience with how the church traditionally talks about God.

Participants for the project were chosen based on three different criteria. First, they are regular attenders of the First Baptist Church, which means they are present in worship two weeks out of each calendar month. The second requirement was that the participants are older Millennials, between the age of 30 to 38. The final criterion is that the participants had children who are between the ages of birth and five years. This subset of Millennials was chosen because we have the largest number of those present in our church and they are also the most likely group of Millennials to be engaged in the life of a congregation due to the age of their children. The process for enlistment is that I personally asked each individual to participate in the project.

I began by having participants take the Theological Worlds Inventory that is found in *Worlds Within a Congregation* by W. Paul Jones. Jones work was essential because it provided a tool that helped participants realize that the traditional evangelical picture of Christianity is not the only valid way of seeing how God is at work in the

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6 Ibid.
world\textsuperscript{7}. After taking the Inventory, I led a five-week experiential course on Wednesday nights that guided participants through each of the five Theological Worlds.\textsuperscript{8} The goal of these experiences was to provide participants with the ability to find a Theological World that aligned with their lived-experience of daily life.\textsuperscript{9} When the sessions were completed participants took the Theological Worlds Inventory again. By conducting the same test, before and after, I was be able to see if there was any measurable shift in the Theological World of the participants. Finally, I conducted follow up interviews with each participant to see if the experiences gave them better way to think about how God connects with their lived-experience.\textsuperscript{10}

In order to see the impact that the ritual experience of each Theological World had on participants, I enlisted a second group that participated in this project in a much more limited capacity. This group met the same criteria as the primary participant group regarding age, participation in the church, and children, but did not take part in the structured experience of each Theological World. This group simply took the Inventory and later took the Inventory again. This second group provided a contrast between people who experienced the Worlds and those who only engaged the Worlds on a cognitive

\textsuperscript{7} A full description of the five Theological Worlds can be found in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{8} See Chapter 4 as well as Appendix D for the description of these experiences.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 143-158. See Appendix D for further explanation on the five experiences.

\textsuperscript{10} See Appendix E for list of the interview questions.
level. The second group better equipped me to answer the question of how experience plays a role in determining a Theological World.

The primary sources that guided me in forming the content of the interviews were Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses\textsuperscript{11} by Tim Sensing; Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction\textsuperscript{12} by Mark Clark Moschella; and The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers\textsuperscript{13} by Johnny Saldana. After the data was coded and interpreted, a number of themes emerged that both confirmed my hypothesis and also took me by surprise. This project will show that the Theological World of an individual is formed from an early age and is often times changed only as a result of an experience of difficulty or trauma in the life of an individual. This research also points to the importance of story in helping people connect their lived-experience to how God is at work in the world. It is also the case that those who experienced the Theological Worlds had a much better self-understanding of their theological orientation than they did prior to their participation in the experiences.


\textsuperscript{12} Mary Clark Moschella, \textit{Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction} (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

Limitations and Delimitations

One significant possibility regarding limitations is that the Theological World in which the participants were raised is so ingrained in their social imaginary that providing them with alternative Theological Worlds by which they can view their faith simply was not possible.

Another limitation is that I could not guarantee the honesty and transparency of those who participated in the study. It is entirely possible that people responding to the Senior Pastor felt as though there were “right” and “wrong” answers to the questions we addressed in my research. In an effort to ensure open dialogue and trust amongst participants, I limited the size of the group to six people. I held the meetings in an updated area of church property, designed with young families in mind, with the hope that people will feel more relaxed in a neutral environment. On the front end of this study, I made sure that participants understood that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers to the questions we considered and that all five Theological Worlds were valid approaches to Christianity.

The definition of Millennial varies depending on the literature. In the course of my research, I adhered to the definition provided by the Pew Research Center, which defines Millennials as individuals born between 1980 and 1997. It is not possible to give adequate focus to such a large and diverse group of people, so a delimitation of the project is that I focused on older Millennials, ranging in age from 30-38. This is in part a practical consideration, as this is the age group that is experiencing growth at FBC.
Another delimitation will be that participants in the project have children between the ages of newborn and five. In my work as a pastor, it is this subset of Millennials that are experiencing the greatest disconnect between the faith in which they were raised and the lived-experience of their families. This is more than a theoretical question for me, as I am a Millennial Christian who is asking these very same questions.

Definition of Terms

Theological Worlds: In his work *Worlds Within a Congregation: Dealing with Theological Diversity*, W. Paul Jones defines a typology of five theological Worlds that give voice to the experience of individuals within the church. Each of these Worlds, or perspectives, is rooted in scripture as well as the history of the church. Jones claims that once an individual can locate themselves in a theological World, they can “explore what it means to live more faithfully in one’s World, help sense if one’s World is stifling and in need of abandonment for another one, and help enter into dialogue with members of other theological Worlds.” The use of Jones’ Theological Worlds inventory will play a central role in my research.

Immanent Frame- James KA Smith defines the immanent frame as “a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than a supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes


\[15\] Ibid., 46.
transcendence.” Millennials in post-modernity live almost entirely within the “immanent frame,” where they seek to make sense of the universe with virtually no reference to transcendence. There are moments, however, where they do experience echoes of the divine in the world. This will be an important definition in the course of my work, because I will introduce individuals to Theological Worlds that will help to better make sense of the moments of when they do experience glimpses of the divine in their lives.

Millennial- According to the Pew Research group, a Millennial is anyone who was born between the years 1980-1997, which includes ages from 21 to 38. As mentioned earlier, this is the group that I will be focusing on in my research. In particular, I will be looking at older Millennials, 30-38 who have children in pre-school.

Assumptions

There are some assumptions that I made as I began my research. The first, and most important, is that the lived-experience of Millennials is no longer matching up with the way the church talks about God. I believed there is a radical disconnect between cognition and experience, and this is part of why Millennials are leaving the church in record numbers.

The second assumption I made is that most, if not all, of the participants in my study would find themselves firmly situated within the fourth Theological World. This is the

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World that most of the participants would have experienced growing up in the Bible Belt. It is the classical language of evangelicalism and the primary version of Christianity they have heard in their churches, whether it is presented in the sermons preached or in the music they sing. This also means that I assumed that they had little to no exposure to the four other Theological Worlds.

Purpose and Significance

There is a disconnect between the lived-experience of Millennials and the Theological World that traditional Baptist churches like FBC Augusta reference in their presentation and understanding of the gospel. “Nones” are the most rapidly growing religious affiliation in the United States for a good reason. The church continues to speak and reference a Theological World that has little or no impact on the lives of Millennial families. While at the current moment, this disconnect has led to decreased church attendance, at some point this could lead to a mass exodus of a generation from the Christian faith.

Providing a broader and more diverse Theological World vocabulary for life in post-modernity, this project introduced new and varied Theological Worlds into the lives of people who see the world through the immanent frame, thereby creating a new space for thinking about the Christian faith. It provided a way for Millennials to better understand their lived-experience in relation to the Christian faith that they want to embrace but continue to ask how to do it. This project introduced new conceptions of the Christian faith to participants, which at one level could transform their understanding of
who God is, but also could transform their understanding of who they are as people living in the world. There is also the possibility that this project was dis-conformational, in that it possibly disrupted and unsettled the theological understanding that a person has lived with for their entire life. It is my great hope that this project will help others to see the need to have a better way to speak about God, one that better aligns with the lived-experience of those who will carry the faith of Christ forward into the next generation. It is now fitting that we look at the philosophical, Biblical, and historical background that led to this work being done.
CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

As I stated in Chapter one of this paper, one of the great problems that the Church in post-modern America faces is that we, collectively, have ceased to speak a language that helps individuals connect their lived-experience to their thinking about God. As more and more people continue to leave the institutional church, the time is ripe for Christians of all types to reconsider the way we talk about God, particularly on Sunday morning, but also all throughout the week. If we can help people better connect their theological language, their God talk, with their lived-experience, then the faith of Jesus will be more effectively passed down to men and women who are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. A popular example of someone who has taken this task on for themselves is Rob Bell, who in 2013 published a book titled, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, where he seeks to find better ways of communicating the central message of Jesus to those who have left, or were never involved, with traditional church.

It is far too often the case that when people, for the sake of this project Millennials, go to church on Sunday morning, they find that the church is increasingly

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17 Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2013). Interestingly, in his quest to present a more compelling picture of Christianity to those outside traditional evangelical circles, Bell has been labeled a heretic by the most popular evangelical pastors and leaders. Rob Bell continues to articulate a refreshing portrait of the Christianity, through new media such as his podcast, *The Robcast*. 
irrelevant in assisting them along their journey through life. As a prime example, the church continues to use language of transcendence, even though, as Charles Taylor tells us, society now makes sense of the world within the “immanent frame,”\(^\text{18}\) where many people find little use for talking of something beyond what we can experience here and now. Part of the task of the church in our culture is to find a more effective way to communicate the gospel in such a way that it help individuals find ways to experience the kingdom of God, as the Lord’s Prayer says, “on earth as it is in heaven.”\(^\text{19}\) In this chapter I will lay the groundwork for the theological, biblical, and historical groundwork for offering people new ways of thinking about God that better aligns with their lived-experience, but first it is necessary to say a few words about incarnation as this will lay the groundwork for why this project is necessary in our cultural environment.

**Theological Foundations**

**A Hermeneutic of Incarnation**

In the Prologue to the Gospel of John, the writer states:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning…The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) Matthew 6:10. All Scripture references will be from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

\(^{20}\) John 1:1-2;14.
At the center of the Christian faith is the idea that God took on flesh and became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. The theological name for this belief is called the incarnation. God, who is beyond our ability to comprehend, came among us so that we might know the true God and see the full depth of God’s love for humanity. As the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says, “If you want to know what love looks like, look at Jesus. If you want to know God, look at Jesus.”

This is a central tenant of the faith and should be at the center of any conversation about how we seek to talk about God in the world.

If we put the Incarnation of Christ at the center of our conversation, it should come as no surprise that the majority of our talk about God should be rooted in the experience of human existence. When the church speaks about the God made known to us in Jesus Christ, people should be able to see places where this God is at work in the context of their everyday lives. Unfortunately, we have reached a moment in the history of the Western church where the vast majority of churches use theological language that no longer connects with the lived-experience of most people. In particular, millennials have left the church at an alarming rate. In a 2014 poll, the Pew Research Group noted, with great fanfare, that 35% of people under forty identify as “None” when asked about

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their religious affiliation.\textsuperscript{22} If the Church is to continue providing faithful witness to the Gospel, then the time has arrived for us to think differently about how we communicate the message of Jesus to an increasingly post-Christian culture. To put it succinctly, the church has lost the ability to put flesh on the Gospel message of Christ.

Charles Taylor’s \textit{A Secular Age}

The philosopher, Charles Taylor, in his magisterial work \textit{A Secular Age}, speaks about how in the post-modern world in which we live, people have been conditioned to make sense of the world through “the immanent frame,”\textsuperscript{23} which does not leave room for transcendent conceptions of religion or any sense of divine activity. According to Taylor, we are living in what we can accurately call a Secular Age. When most hear this term, they think of a world that is areligious, where faith in God no longer has a place in society. Taylor, however, asserts that the truth of our Secular Age is far more nuanced. According to his definition, which is central to this project, our epoch can be defined as secular in so far as there has been “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among other, and frequently not the easiest to embrace…belief in God is no longer

\textsuperscript{22} Pew Research Group, online: \url{http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/} (accessed November, 18, 2018).

axiomatic. There are alternatives. As foremost interpreter of Taylor’s work, James K. A. Smith says it like this, “Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don’t believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting. We’re all Thomas now.”

While very few Millennials would be able to verbalize a conception of this secular age, much less any notion of the “immanent frame,” most, if not all, make sense of the world in which they live through these lenses. This presents a problem in the church, because most Christian churches still use traditional and transcendent language when preaching, teaching, singing, etc. about God to their congregations. Our language no longer connects to the lived-experience of the thirty-something in our churches, to say nothing of those who are completely disengaged with faith. This is a problem we must consider!

There has been a marked shift for these Millennials, where the Christian framework they were raised with no longer helps them connect the Gospel to their lived-experience. This is particularly true in a place like the First Baptist Church of Augusta, which is steeped in the evangelical tradition of the Deep South. There are still moments, however, where individuals catch a glimpse of divine activity in the world, and it is in those spaces where the church is called to help people to see the work of the Divine in

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24 Ibid., 3.

their lives. So, if the church is to continue to provide ongoing witness to the
transformational power of the gospel, then we must rethink the way we present the faith
of Christ so they may better connect their understanding of God with their lived-
experience of the world.

Miroslav Volf’s *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*

If there is someone in our day and age who can be labeled a public theologian in
the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr, it would undoubtedly be Miroslav Volf. He is a
professor of Theology at Yale University and the director of the Yale Center for Faith
and Culture. In 2015, Volf wrote *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized
World*, which is his attempt to show the importance of religious life, of all kinds, for the
world in which we live. According to Volf, in our current cultural milieu,

> a life of work and family, a life of health, wealth, and longevity, a life of ease and
> absence of pain - that’s what human striving should primarily be about, modernity
> urges upon us, not a higher life of religious contemplation, philosophical
> reflection, or public deliberation. Ordinary life isn’t a mere infrastructure for a
> higher life. It is the other way around.\(^{26}\)

If this in fact true, then it should come as no surprise to us that increasing numbers of
people will see no relevance in a Christianity that only speaks about a transcendent God
who has no connection to the lived-experience of ordinary life. To say it again, something
must change and we need to consider this problem.

\(^{26}\) Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in A Globalized World* (New
Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 42.
In an attempt to affirm the ordinary life, one version of Christianity has sought to align the faith with the attainment of “health, wealth, and longevity.” It is known to us as the Prosperity Gospel. While preachers of this ilk are quick to speak about the affirmation of the ordinary, they do so at the cost of any reference at all to the Transcendent. Surely, there is a better way forward. Luckily, Volf suggests that, “according to the world religions, the connection to genuine transcendence is the lifeblood of authentic humanity, of human solidarity across cultural and national boundaries, and therefore of the search for the global common good.”27 Rather than abandon our God talk altogether, the time has come for us to find a way of connecting the immanent and the transcendent so that people will see just how vital a robust view of God is if they are to truly experience flourishing in this life. Again, to quote Volf on the importance of religion,

> Central to these visions (of the good life) is the paramount importance of transcendence, of the invisible realm, of God - not as a mysterious power outside the world. Relation to that transcendent realm fundamentally shapes how we understand and relate to our world and ourselves. For world religions, the key to the good life in the mundane realm is in the transcendent realm.28

Statements like these are central for thinking about how we communicate the Gospel in our time. God is not that which is only to found outside the immanent frame, but individuals can catch glimpses of divine activity in their lived-experience. If the church is to have a future, then it has to find a better way to talk about God, and Volf is an

27 Ibid., 50.

28 Ibid., 13.
important voice in how to better connect our lived-experience to our language of how we talk about God.

Peter Berger’s *Praise of Doubt* and *The Many Altars of Modernity*

If Charles Taylor provides the essential philosophical framework for what faith looks like in post-modernity, then it is safe to say that Peter Berger provides the same sort of framework, although through a sociological lens. In particular, his two books, *In Praise of Doubt* and *The Many Altars of Modernity* give credence to the ideas that are presented in this project. While many in our time believe that there is a decline of religious life that gives way to world free from religion, according to Berger,

   It cannot be plausibly maintained that modernity necessarily leads to a decline of religion. Some late descendants of radical Enlightenment may feel that it should. But, too bad, it doesn’t. If modernity, then, doesn’t necessarily lead to secularization, what does it lead to in the area of beliefs and values? The answer, we think, is clear: *it leads to plurality.*

One of the primary out workings of this shift to a pluralistic world, is that faith, which was once taken for granted, now becomes a matter of choice. There was once a time when faith was a matter of *fate*, but in our time, faith is, and will always remain a *choice*. The distinction is crucial because once a person *chooses* a religion, then they will always remember that they are free to *un-choose* faith, or rather, to *choose* something

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else. The locus of authority moves from God to the mind of the individual, a condition Taylor refers to as the “modern social imaginary.”

There is a real consequence to this shift in terms of how the Christian Church talks about God. People, particularly Millennials, are leaving the church at record rates. This is in part because we are now in a cultural milieu, due to plurality, where they recognize that their faith is a choice. If the Christian faith no longer speaks to their lived-experience of the world, then for the first time in Western history, they are free to leave and find a different way of making meaning in the world. There are some in the church who will simply curse the pluralizing impact of modernity, dreaming for the return of a bygone era where cultural Christianity thrived.

However, a more effective course will be to rethink the way we talk about God. If it is true, as Berger suggests, that

the contemporary world is full of religion; but there is a very important secular discourse, which has led to religion being replaced by ways of dealing with the world etsi Deus non daretur. The modern individual can develop, and in many cases has indeed developed, the capacity to manage both religious and secular definitions of reality, depending on which is directly relevant to the issue at hand, then Christianity has an opportunity to reframe our God talk to better align with the lived-experience of daily life. If people are able manage both secular and religious definitions

\textsuperscript{30} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, p.171.

\textsuperscript{31} Peter Berger, \textit{The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralistic Age} (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 57.
of reality, then it is incumbent upon the church to help them see the divine movement in even the most “secular” of experiences. We have created a false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular and it is time that our talk about God better reflect the immanence and the transcendence of God. As Rob Bell is apt to say, “You don’t have a spiritual life, you are a spiritual life.”\(^{32}\) If we can make this shift, the church will be far better positioned to share the Good News of the Kingdom of God with those who are leaving the church because it doesn’t speak to their lived-experience.

**Slavoj Zizek’s *The Fragile Absolute***

Zizek is a controversial figure in the world of philosophy and this is to say nothing of his role in Christianity! If someone takes the time to read Zizek, however, they will find an affirmation of the immanence of God. If God is to be found anywhere in the world, according to Zizek, it will be in the everyday life that we live. Is it possible that Christian pastors and preachers can learn from this Slovenian philosopher? The answer, I believe, is yes! To echo language that has been used over and over again, if the Christian faith is to have a future, it will be, in part, because Christian pastors are able to connect the lived-experience of individuals to their understanding of how God works in the world. When we talk about God in the church, we should ask the question, “Where do we see God?” According to Zizek,

> Something that appears to us in fleeting experiences—say, through the gentle smile of a beautiful woman, or even through the warm, caring smile of a person who

\(^{32}\) Rob Bell sermon, online; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT09JbaEh_l](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT09JbaEh_l) (accessed September, 25, 2018).
may otherwise seem ugly and rude: in such miraculous but extremely fragile moments, another dimension transpires through our reality. As such, the Absolute is easily corroded; it slips all too easily through our fingers and must be handled as carefully as a butterfly.\(^\text{33}\)

There is a question for us to consider regarding where God is to be found and if the faith is to be passed along to the next generation, Christianity needs to take a cue from Zizek and see that the Absolute is found in the intimate moments of daily life.

**Brian McLaren’s *The Great Spiritual Migration***

If the Christian faith has proponents, on a popular level, of the need to think about new ways to be Christian, then Brian McLaren is one of the most articulate guides along the way. The author of more than a dozen books, his most recent work, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, is a clarion call for seeking better ways to be Christian in a world where exclusive talk about a transcendent God is no longer working. McLaren is convinced that the way of Jesus is more concerned with the here and now than it is with what happens after people die. He tells readers,

> What I care about is whether they (churches) are teaching people to live a life of love, from the heart, for God, for all people, and for all creation. These churches would aim to take people at every age and every ability level and help them to become the most loving versions of themselves possible.\(^\text{34}\)

According to McLaren, the aim of the Christian faith is to help people be the people that God created them to be here on this earth. This is not a transformation that

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will take place after death, but this way of Jesus teaches us to be fully alive on earth, in the rough and tumble of life Monday through Sunday. McLaren is seeking to help people connect their talk about God with their lived-experience. There are many Christians that might not agree with his social platforms, but they should see that he is right in line with Taylor, Berger, and others as we seek to think more deeply about how we connect our talk about God with our lived-experience. If the way of Christ does not make us more loving, caring, and open human beings, then according to McLaren, we are missing an opportunity to present the gospel in a way that connects to the lived-experience of people who are hearing about Jesus. It is hard to disagree.

James K.A. Smith’s *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*

How do we make our way through life? Are we primarily thinking things, or do we feel our way through the world? How one answers that question will have significant impact on how worship is done in the church. James K.A. Smith wrote a powerful book titled *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.* In that book, he makes the case that human beings are shaped and formed, not by what we think, but instead by what we desire or love! As he says in the text, “to be human is to have a heart. You can’t not love. So, the question isn’t whether you will love something as ultimate; the question is what you will love as ultimate. And you are what you love.”

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36 Ibid., 10.
The ideas presented in his book have the potential to change the way that we talk about God, but more importantly, how we engage in worship as an act of re-formation of desire! These ideas matter for this project because many churches still speak about God in a way that has no reference to the lived-experience of people, particularly Millennials. If Smith is correct, and I believe he is, then the church needs not only to use better language when we talk about God, but also reconsider the liturgy of the church to enable experience to reshape the love and desire of people in the congregation. As the world continues to experience reality through the immanent frame, Smith suggests,

What Christian communities need to cultivate in our “secular age” is faithful patience, even receiving a secular age as a gift through which to renew and cultivate an incarnational, embodied, robustly orthodox Christianity that alone will look like a genuine alternative to “the spiritual.”

In other words, how can we help people to have a genuine experience of God that will lead to the reformation of character and desire? These are questions that should inspire leaders in the church to think more creatively about how the faith is passed down and communicated to the next generation. Experience matters more than we credit, and as people navigate their way through the world, it is the task of the church to reconsider how we do the work of sharing and spreading the gospel.

W. Paul Jones *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*

Until I arrived at the McAfee School of Theology, I was unaware of the theologian, W. Paul Jones. Uncovering his writing was a seminal moment in my quest of

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37 Ibid., 103.
trying to decipher how I could more effectively speak about God in a post-Christian setting. In particular, his work on the five Theological Worlds has helped guide my project as well as my preaching and teaching. Early in his book *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*, he lays out the challenge of the church in our age. He says, “The church of the future must be committed to a pluralism of alternatives, sufficiently viable to touch creatively the individual and social diversity operative in modern life.”

In the pages that follow, Jones introduces readers to the five Theological Worlds that he believes are operative in all faith traditions. The first World is “Separation and the Cosmos,” where Christ is the revealer who leads you back home. The second World is “Conflict and History,” where Christ is the liberator of history and our lives. The third World is “Emptiness and Fulfillment,” where Christ is the model who brings wholeness and purpose to life. The fourth World is classic evangelical “Condemnation and Forgiveness,” and Christ is the one who brings forgiveness and adoption. Finally, the fifth World is “Suffering and Endurance,” where Christ is companion who walks alongside people in their difficulty in life, ultimately helping us to survive. Each of these Worlds is rooted in Scripture and each of them has proponents throughout the history of the church. Interestingly, many people will have only experienced exposure to

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39 Ibid., 42-43.
one particular world, and in Augusta, Georgia, it is easy to see that most people would be familiar with the fourth World! This text is important because at the heart of what Jones teaches is that every person can find their primary identity within one of these five worlds, although it is important to note that we are never only one world, instead we are a combination of all five. The Theological Worlds Inventory was a critical component in my research, as it helped to present a pluralistic picture of the way that Christ is at work in the lives of individuals.

At the heart of this project is the call to provide better ways to talk about, and experience, God because the traditional way is not working. In a church like the First Baptist Church of Augusta, the dominant way of understanding Christianity is that you are a sinner who needs a Savior. God is angry with you and the only way to appease that anger, and save you from hell, is through the death of his Son, Jesus. This classic evangelical portrait of Christianity is almost entirely concerned with issues of transcendence. People are left with little to no room for why the way of Christ can impact and change their lives here and now! We should not be surprised when we find that people leave the church, if this is the only message they hear.

But this is only one picture of the Christian faith, and Jones provides readers with four other ways of understanding the impact of Christ in the life of a person. If the faith of Christ has a future, then Millennials need to see a compelling reason to consider Christianity as way of life that can help them to have joy, love, and purpose in life. To use the language of Taylor, we need to provide a lens by which people can see the
transcendent God at work within the immanent frame. Jones is an apt guide that assists in helping to provide a variegated understanding of how God is at work in the world and in the lives of individuals. Jones’ work is an important step in that direction.

Biblical Foundations

Any conversation about the legitimacy of finding a better way of speaking about God that matches the lived-experience of the people will need to be rooted in scripture. Luckily, there are a multitude of examples, particularly in the New Testament, where the revelation of God in Jesus Christ evoked a new understanding of who God is and how God was at work in the world. We see these conversations happening at an alarming rate of regularity as we journey with the Apostle Paul and he spreads this news of Jesus to a Gentile audience, as many of them would be hearing about the God of Israel for the first time. There is also a wonderful example in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus provides a new way to think about God. This way is one that was more in line with the new revelation of God that was taking place because of Christ. Finally, we see a shift in the way that Peter thought and lived the way of Jesus because of an incident that happened to him in the book of Acts. It is most appropriate to begin with Jesus, who is the One that inspires both Paul and Peter to show a better way of talking about God.

Deconstructing the Old and Reconstructing the New

There is a section in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus gives the people a new way of understanding how God is at work in the world, and particularly in their lives. In
Matt 5:21-48, Jesus begins each section of instruction by saying “You have heard that is was said.” He then goes on to show the crowd, who have gathered to hear this sermon, that the old way of understanding how to live well before God is no longer operative in the kingdom of God being launched by Jesus. He tackles issues of hate, marriage, truth telling, non-violence, and who we pray for as God’s people. Each time, Jesus shows the old way of thinking and then follows up with a new and better understanding of how God is calling people to live in the world.

One of the best examples of showing this new way of understanding God’s work in the world is found in Matt 5:38-42, where Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

The people hearing this story would have heard from the Pharisees and other popular level leaders that the best way to remain loyal to God was to stay pure and keep away from Gentiles (especially Romans). Yet, in this passage, Jesus tells listeners that the old way of understanding how God is calling them to work in the world is no longer effective, and he proceeds to give them a better understanding of who God is and how God would have them to live in the world. As N.T. Wright comments,

The antithesis does not, then, focus on the contrast between outward and inward keepings of the law. They are not retrojections into the first century of a nineteenth century romantic ideal of religion in which outward things are bad and

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40 All Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
inward things are good. They emphasize, rather, the way in which the renewal which Jesus sought to engender would produce a radically different way of being Israel in real-life Palestinian situations…the way forward for Israel is not the way of violent resistance, not the way of zeal that Shammaite Pharisees would encourage, but the different, oblique way of creative non-violent resistance.41

Jesus takes the lived-experience of first century Palestinian Jews and he shows them how God is working in and through them. Their old way of understanding was no longer operative now that his presence had come into the world. As the church seeks to find better ways of teaching about how God is at work in the lives of people, it could do no better than to look at this teaching of Jesus. He deconstructs the old way, “You have heard that it was said,” but he does not stop with deconstruction. What makes the Jesus movement so compelling is that he continues on to show a better way, “But I say to you”! When people are trying to see where God is at work in the midst of their lived-experience, it is never enough to simply point out how ineffective the old model was as a guide. Taking the example of Jesus, one should always be prepared to offer a better way moving forward, which is why this project is necessary.

The Evolution of Peter’s Understanding of God

    In Acts 10, we read about Peter going up on a roof to pray when he falls into a trance and has a vision. The content of his vision was

    He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up,

Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘by no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane and unclean.’

The voice goes on to tell Peter that nothing God has made is unclean and that he is free to eat food that did not meet Jewish dietary restrictions. Not soon after this incident, Peter goes to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, which is an unthinkable act prior to his experience earlier in the chapter.

It was in this moment where Peter had to change his understanding of God. Because of his faith in the resurrected Christ, the old way of understanding God’s work in the world was no longer operative. The Judaism that he had known was no longer going to be an effective guide to help him navigate his way through the world of the Greco-Roman Empire. Another way to say it is that his theological commitments no longer matched his lived-experience, and Peter was shown a better way to live. The old understanding was deconstructed and, in its place, a new way of seeing the world was instituted. Peter was now able to better align his understanding of the work of Christ with how he lived his life. Ultimately, he has to decide about choosing the way of his vision or continuing to live with an older, but ineffective, way of seeing the world. Luckily, Peter walked through the doors of Cornelius’ home and, as they say, the rest is history.

Is There Common Ground Where We Can Begin?

The clearest articulation in the Bible of the need to find a better way of speaking about God, that more closely aligned with people’s lived-experience of the world, comes

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from Paul in Athens.\textsuperscript{43} While many have assumed that this is a story where Paul leaves behind the Judaism that shaped him, this story, in reality, is an example of how Paul can change the way he speaks to better meet an audience where they are, without forgetting the essential elements of the Christian faith. In a story that needs no introduction, Paul finds himself immersed in the pagan landscape of Athens as he is waiting for his friends to join him. After a brief stop in the synagogue, Paul finds himself in the Areopagus, where he presents an argument for the validity of the Christian faith to a group of men who had never heard of the resurrected Jesus Christ. This story presents us with a prime example of the Apostle seeking to ground the Gospel in the Athenians understanding of the world. We find ourselves in just that sort of cultural moment again in twenty-first century America.

Paul was presented with an interesting problem, because the Athenians would not have comprehended the Judaism that gave birth to the Jesus movement. However, if Paul was going to remain faithful to the Gospel proclamation, then he could not talk about Jesus without reference to the one true God that Jews claimed was the creator of all things. How was he going to talk about God in this center of pagan culture? According to N.T. Wright “Paul steers a thoroughly Jewish course, acknowledging the half-truths of the ruling philosophies, but seeing them all within the larger whole he is advocating.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{43} Acts 17:16-34.

\textsuperscript{44} N.T. Wright, \textit{Paul: A Biography} (New York: Harper One, 2018), 204.
Paul was able to enculturate the Gospel in the language of the Athenians while maintaining the essential Hebraic character of the Jesus story. He was able to do this because Paul “possessed a great deal more in-depth knowledge about the various deities and cults than do specialists in comparative religion in the twenty-first century.”\textsuperscript{45} Paul sought to establish common ground with the Stoics and the Epicureans, even quoting from some of their poets. To use language that has been used throughout this paper, his talk about God made sense within the lived-experience of the people he was addressing.

Undoubtedly, there will come a moment when the strangeness of the gospel proclamation, that the world’s true Lord was crucified and resurrected, will not align with people’s lived-experience. But what Paul teaches us in this section of the book of Acts is that when we seek to talk about God, it is in the best interest of everyone that you try to find common ground, so that the hearer might identify God’s activity in their daily ritual and routine. In post-Christian America, where many churches are still using language to talk about God that has no relevance to its hearers, it would be a good lesson to reread Paul’s interaction at the Areopagus in the city of Athens.

\textbf{Historical Foundations}

According to the historian of religion Phyllis Tickle, “about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and

new growth may occur.” While there are a number of examples throughout the history of the Church where the lived-experience of people no longer matched the theological language of the Church, there is one example in particular that is helpful to highlight for the sake of this project.

The Great Reformation

While there are many issues that led to the great eruption of Martin Luther and the other Reformers, there were two in particular that have relevance for this project. The first issue that speaks to the inability of the Church to speak to the lived-experience of the individual is the issue of the Bible. As we all know, the central thesis of Luther was sola scriptura or the sole authority of Scripture on the life of a Christian. Part of the issue that Luther had with the Catholic Church is that the Scripture could not be understood by the laity, as the official language of the Scripture was Latin. Part of the genius of the Reformation was that it sought to put the Bible in hands of ordinary people so that they could read the Bible for themselves. While there had been other Bible translations into common language prior to the Reformation, the advent of the Printing Press allowed for the mass distribution of the Bible into the language of the people. This is the first and most important example of reconnecting the lived-experience of individuals to the way the Church talks about God.

A second aspect of the Reformation worth considering is brought up by Charles Taylor. According to Taylor, the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages had firmly established a divide between the sacred work of the clergy and the ordinary work of the laity, what Taylor calls a “social imaginary.” Part of the impetus of the Reformation was to help reconnect the work of the people (i.e. their lived-experience) to an understanding of how God is involved in their everyday lives. This led to a concept known as the priesthood of the believer, where each person finds that not only do they have direct access to God, but also that their work is just as sacred as the clergy.

According to Taylor,

(Western Christendom) needed to make God more fully present in everyday life and all its contexts, which led people to invest these contexts with a new significance and solidity. The irony is that just this, so much the fruit of devotion and faith, prepares the ground for an escape from faith into a purely immanent world.

Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann was one of the most important New Testament scholars of the 20th century. Part of the significance of his work was in part because of his willingness to try and make sense of the Christian faith in the light of modernity. He was, at the heart of his teaching, trying to reconnect the lived-experience of modern people with the language that was used to talk about God. In particular, he asserts that the resurrection of Jesus was


48 Ibid, 145.
not really about an historical event, but rather Easter was about an experience of faith that was had by the early Jesus movement.\(^\text{49}\) The impact of Bultmann on New Testament scholarship can be seen in the thought of men like Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and others who seek to better align the faith of Christ with life in the modern age.

Pentecostalism and the Movement of the Spirit

In 1906, in the City of Angels, Los Angeles, William Seymour began to preach on Azuza Street, and as the saying goes, the rest is history. By 2006, the number of Pentecostal Christians was over five hundred million, making it the second largest group of Christians in the world, only trailing the Roman Catholic Church.\(^\text{50}\) By the time the Pentecostal movement emerged in the early 1900’s, the locus of authority in culture had moved from the church or the bible, and had now been replaced by the individual. The timing was perfect for a new movement where authority was now found through the experience of the individual. As Tickle is quick to point out, “stated practically, Pentecostalism assumes the ultimate authority is experiential rather than canonical.”\(^\text{51}\) Ultimately, what Azuza Street, and the entire Pentecostal movement, was trying to do was to connect the Christian faith to the lived-experience of people who are trying to connect with God.

\(^{49}\) Marcus Borg, \textit{Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship} (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1994).

\(^{50}\) Tickle, \textit{The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why}, 84.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 85.
There are many other examples of how the church has sought to find better ways to connect its rhetoric to the lived-experience of men and women who are seeking to live out the faith of Jesus in the world. Another prime example is the Second Vatican Council, where the mass ceased to be held in Latin and was henceforth held in the language of the people. Yet another, while not as consequential, is the Jesus People movement of the 1960’s, where Christians sought to better connect with the counter-culture environment that had begun to take root on the West Coast of the United States. Each of these is an effort to better connect the gospel message with the lived-experience of individuals who are seeking to connect with God. At the heart of each of these movements is an attempt to fit the story of Jesus into a unique context of both time and location. This is a quest that is as alive in our present day as it was when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg over 500 years ago. We now turn our attention to the unique dynamics at play faced by churches across the United States, but in particular, the First Baptist Church of Augusta.
CHAPTER 3
MINISTRY CONTEXT

The CSRA

Every year in the first full week of April, more than two hundred thousand people descend upon the Garden City, also known as Augusta, for the Masters. The annual golf tournament is the pride of our city, and is considered by many to be the Super Bowl of golf. When people think about Augusta, Georgia, they undoubtedly think about the Masters Tournament. But having lived in the city for two years, it is safe to say that Augusta is so much more than just a golf tournament. In part it is because of the tournament, but also through a thriving medical, banking, and cyber security industry, Augusta is an economically vibrant city with all the amenities that accompany life in a mid-sized city.

Augusta is the center of what is known as the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA), which is made up of Richmond County, Columbia County, Edgefield County, Aiken County, and several smaller counties around this area. The total population of the CSRA is just above 600,000 people, with the majority of those living in Richmond and Columbia Counties. It is important to note that these two counties are where the majority of the church finds its membership and regular attenders. Augusta is part of a consolidated government with Richmond County and the total population is right at
The church is located on forty acres that sit just on the edge of Richmond County and half of its membership is located within the city limits.

When many people think of Augusta, Georgia, the first thing that comes to mind is Old South. If there is an embodiment to this thought, then it would be found in Richmond County, and in particular in Augusta. The city is racially divided with sections of town being primarily reserved for white people and others reserved for African American. The County Commission is an accurate reflection of the make-up of the city, with a ten-member board being made up of six African-Americans and four Caucasians. The city is approximately 56% African American with the rest of the population being Caucasian with a very small number of Asians. The median income in Richmond County is $37,424, which is noteworthy because there is incredible wealth within the city of Augusta.

The other county where the majority of the church members and attenders live is Columbia County, which is northwest of Augusta. In recent years, Columbia County has experienced tremendous growth and has gone from rural farmland to a suburban hotspot filled with chain restaurants and congested main roads. The total population of Columbia County is approx. 140,000 with 76% of those people being Caucasian. The median income of Columbia County is $71,021 and they have a significantly higher proportion of the population who have obtained at least a bachelors degree. A significant percentage of

\[ \text{http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml} \] All demographic information that follows was found through this website, which is maintained by the government. (November, 10. 2018).
the young families in our congregation live in Evans, which is at the heart of Columbia County’s growth, in part because of the affordability of homes, but also because of the highly rated school district. In the past few years, as the Army has relocated its Cyber Command Center to Augusta, an increasing number of people have moved to Columbia County and radically changed the makeup of this place. But not only has it changed the county, it has also given occasion for the First Baptist Church to rethink how they will be the people of God in the coming years.

The First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia

I arrived at the First Baptist Church to great celebration and fanfare. It was not so much because of my arrival, although I hope it was celebrated, but there was celebration going on throughout the church because 2017 was their bi-centennial celebration. The church was founded on March 25, 1817 as the Baptist Praying Society with 11 people who making up the original membership. My arrival as Senior Pastor coincided with a yearlong celebration for what God had done in and through that church for 200 years. It is also worth noting that the First Baptist Church of Augusta is also birthplace of the Southern Baptist Convention, as the founding meeting of the SBC took place at the church in 1845.

While the church began with 11 members in 1817, today the congregation has a total membership of 3,732 with 1,900 of those being resident members. Those numbers seem large, and it is common for me to meet people in the community who tell me they are members of the church, although they “don’t come much anymore.” A far more
accurate look at the state of the congregation can be found by looking at the number of people who attend on Sunday morning. As was mentioned in chapter one, the average worship attendance at FBC is 800 with 1100-1200 unique worshippers who come to worship at least once a month. The church has an annual Sunday morning offering budget of $3,100,000 and total receipts for 2018 at just over $4,000,000. We have eight full time ministerial staff members and 14 full time assistants/directors. We are dually aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, with approximately 80% of our mission funds going to the CBF. The church is situated on forty acres at the edge of Richmond County, which makes it positioned well to be a regional church that attracts from multiple counties.

The life of the church follows the typical rhythms of a large First Baptist Church. We currently have two Sunday morning worship services. A contemporary service is held at 8:30 A.M. and the traditional service is at 11:00 A.M. in the Sanctuary. The church has been a fixture on Augusta television for more than fifty years and we have currently streaming our 11:00 A.M. service through our website. On Wednesday evening there is a meal, which is attended by approximately 200 people, which is followed up by Bible studies throughout the campus. Sunday morning is the primary vehicle for discipleship, with Sunday School being a fixture in the life of our congregation.

Demographically, the church is primarily Caucasian, although we have seen a recent trend of Latino worshippers on Sunday morning, particularly at 8:30 A.M. While we are beginning to see more racial diversity on Sunday morning, the common
denominator in the congregation is the socio-economic status of our members. The overwhelming majority of our congregation is well educated, with most people having obtained at least a bachelor’s degree. It is a diverse group of people with regards to age, with the median age of the congregation being 44. We are currently experiencing growth with young families, a subject to which I will return later in this chapter.

The Role of the Senior Pastor

For more than five years, I served as the Associate Pastor at the First Baptist Church in Gainesville, Georgia. I often remark to people that FBC Gainesville and FBC Augusta are probably more alike than any two churches in the state, both in terms of membership as well as the physical makeup of the campus. My time at FBC Gainesville prepared me well to step into the position of Senior Pastor in Augusta. My role in Gainesville was, in fact, similar to that of a Senior Pastor. I preached on a regular basis and led a large Bible Study on Wednesday evening. I represented the church on a number of boards in the community. But the thing that best prepared me for the role I currently occupy was that my time in Gainesville was marked by a significant focus on the coveted “young adult” demographic. In my time in Gainesville, I spent the first three years of my tenure there primarily focused on reaching people in their twenties and thirties with the message of Jesus. I was able to do events in local bars where people could come and ask questions about life, faith, and any other issue. It was that time in Gainesville that ignited in me a passion for reaching disconnected people with the message of Jesus.
At the First Baptist Church of Augusta, my role as Senior Pastor is primarily made up of three tasks. Most importantly, I am expected to preach on Sunday morning. In a church our size, most people do not interact with me outside of the Sunday morning worship hour. It is not uncommon for me to invite people to come visit with me, only to be told that they know how busy I am and they do not want to take up my time. Both our 8:30 A.M. and 11:00 A.M. worship experiences are expected to be done with a degree of excellence that requires both significant investments of time and resources. Almost everyone who becomes a part of our church will do so because they found their entry point through Sunday morning worship.

Second, my role is to represent the church in the community. I am currently involved in a number of boards in Augusta and I am routinely asked to speak at events in the community, whether they are civic organizations or other Christian groups. Part of my work is to maintain a public platform to represent our church, and I currently maintain an active social media presence and write on occasion for the Augusta Chronicle. It is not uncommon for me to be out in the community and be stopped by people who tell me how much they appreciate me and the church. It is a weird experience to be recognized in public. It has even happened twice where our nanny has been stopped at the store because people recognize my children and they want to say hello. Augusta is not a small town, so the reality of the public platform can at times be overwhelming.

Finally, and most importantly for the sake of this project, my role is to set the vision for where the church is headed in the next few years. While I do not do this in
isolation from the other members of the pastoral staff, particularly the Associate Pastor, Dr. Jim Walls, I am expected to be able to articulate to church members where I believe the church needs to focus our time and energy in order to more effectively spread the gospel in our city. Currently, this is the area where I am spending a great deal of time and energy. As I have articulated throughout this project, I believe there is a radical disconnect between the way people think about God and their lived-experience of daily life. As a church, we are spending the majority of our time and energy asking the question of how we can better reach “disconnected” people with the gospel. How can we help people who have left the church find a better way of connecting their experience of the world with the way the church helps them navigate think about God?

The Most Significant Challenges Needing Attention

It is the common lament of most churches in America that it is difficult to reach “young people.” The First Baptist Church is no different than other churches in this regard. It is their wish to grow in this coveted demographic that, at least in part, led them to call me as their Senior Pastor. I was thirty-three years old when I began my work at FBC, which makes me the second youngest pastor in the history of this hallowed congregation. My work at FBC Gainesville uniquely positioned me to see the inner workings of a large congregation and also gave me space to spend time with Millennials, who are leaving the church in record numbers.

Over the past two years at FBC Augusta, there has been an uptick in the number of Millennials who are attending worship on Sunday morning. Most of them are coming
from other churches, because they prefer our music or my style of preaching. I have told
the leadership in the church on more than one occasion that I did not come to the church
to take people from other congregations (they are often more trouble than good!), rather I
came to FBC Augusta to reach people who feel like they are disconnected from the
church and, also, God. It is a significant task in an institutional behemoth like FBC
Augusta, but I believe this is why I am there.

FBC Augusta is steeped in the evangelical culture of the Bible Belt. The language
that many in the church grew up with was firmly rooted in the style of Billy Sunday and
Billy Graham. As more than one of our older adult members has told me, “I wish you
preached a little more about sin.” My favorite reply is that I do preach about sin, just not
the ones that they want to hear about. But that rhetoric of sin and forgiveness, hellfire and
damnation, it was the bread and butter for many of the people who are members of the
church. While it was certainly not the preaching style of my predecessor, Dr. Greg
DeLoach, older Millennials would have experienced their formative years under the
leadership of preachers and youth ministers who were far more rooted in the classic
evergical world. That is to say nothing of those who grew up outside of FBC, where it
is all but certain that they would have learned the classic evangelical expression of faith.

The theological language of both the larger church and of FBC, no longer
connects with the lived-experience of Millennials. If the church is trying to re-connect
people to God then the time has arrived for us to rethink the way we talk about faith. If I
tell most Millennials that they are sinners who need forgiveness, then they will simply
laugh in my face. As one participant in the study told me, “If you don’t talk more about emptiness and fulfillment, you won’t have a congregation, because that is what people need, or want, to hear.”

How do we reimagine what it looks like to talk about God to Millennials in 2019? It is seeking the answer to this question that we now turn our attention.

The Project

Framing the Challenge. I was looking for a guide who could help me find theological language that better connects with the lived-experience of Millennials, and it was precisely at time that I was introduced to the five Theological Worlds of W. Paul Jones. A former professor of philosophical theology at Yale, Princeton, and Saint Paul School of Theology, Jones is an ordained Catholic priest who works as an “ecumenical liaison” to other denominations. Two of his books, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* and *Worlds Within A Congregation: Dealing With Theological Diversity* proved to be incredibly important in the context of this project.

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53 Beth, interviewed by the author, January 18, 2019, First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia.


In the beginning of *Worlds Within a Congregation*, Jones sums up the plight of the Church well when he proclaims, “How can the church any longer claim to provide the answer, when all absolutes and universals are being dissolved by a diversity of options, within both culture and the church?”\(^{56}\) While many in the Church would insist that the answer is always to remain the same, Jones insists that life in the post-modern situation gives the church an opportunity to reflect on the way we have talked about God and hopefully come to a startling realization. According to Jones,

> there has never been either a unified Christian church or a common theological position, in the light of which diversity can be faulted. What is new in our era, then, is not the fact of diversity, but the call of the church to celebrate this diversity in a gesture of rare and expectant honesty.\(^{57}\)

While it is true that the way the church talks about God has ceased to connect to the lived-experience of people, the good news, according to Jones, is that we have a variety of ways that the church has historically been able to connect God to the lived-experience of people.

Jones writes about five Theological Worlds that are all rooted within the Christian tradition and have a firm grounding in the scripture. Each person will find their primary theological identity in one of the five Worlds, although we never simply exist in only one World. Each of the five Worlds “emerges from a contrasting feeling of existence which orients a fundamental life posture. Although these Worlds can be characterized by a host

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 36.
of images, they point toward five fundamental rhythms capable of being stated as themes.”\(^{58}\) It will be essential that each of these five Worlds is briefly explained, with scriptures and hymns that align with each World\(^{59}\).

World One. The first World has an essential rhythm of separation and reunion. A person experiences reality as though we are separated from God and the work of Christ is that through him we are brought back into reunion with God. There is a mystical quality to this World and books like the Gospel of John are key texts for those who find themselves in this World. One of the most famous hymns that would align with World one is “All Creatures of Our God and King.”

World Two. The second World has an essential rhythm is oppression and liberation. A person experiences reality as a space of conflict and it through Jesus that the victory is won. People who find themselves in the second Theological World are often committed to justice and often ask about how to get things done in their lives. Scriptures that are particularly important to the second World are the Exodus story and the book of Revelation. Liberation theology is at home in the second World and the music of this World is best summed up by songs like “A Mighty Fortress” and “Go Down, Moses”.

World Three. The third World has an essential rhythm of emptiness and fulfillment. A person experiences life as an empty search for meaning and ultimately

\(^{58}\) Jones, *Theological Worlds*, 18.

\(^{59}\) For a Theological Worlds teaching chart, see Jones, *Worlds Within A Congregation*, 94.
fulfillment is found in a life with Christ. This World is about an existential quest for purpose and meaning where one finally finds a place to belong in the embrace of Christ. The most popular hymn for a person who is in the third World might be “Be Thou My Vision.” A person who inhabits this World would most likely find that they could relate to the figure of Paul in the New Testament or Moses in the Hebrew Bible.

World Four. The fourth World has an essential rhythm of condemnation and forgiveness. This is the classical evangelical expression on the Christian faith, and for many in the context of Augusta, the only World they have ever heard explicitly states. It can be summed up by a feeling of guilt and it is only through Christ that you can experience forgiveness and adoption as a child of God. The Baptist hymnal is filled with songs that attest to this World, with “Amazing Grace” being the most noteworthy. Romans 7 is a classic example of the fourth World.

World Five. Finally, the fifth World has an essential rhythm of suffering and endurance. For people who live in this World, life is filled with pain and in Jesus we find the ability to endure. It is even possible that we can emerge from the pain with meaning and purpose. The Gospel of Mark or Isaiah 53 is a perfect Biblical text for those in this World. A few hymns connect to this World are “The Servant Song” or “I Want Jesus To Walk with Me.”

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, each person finds a primary Theological World where they feel at home. In order to help locate an individual in a Theological
World, Jones provides what he calls a Theological Worlds Inventory. The Inventory consists of sixty-three questions that are made up of both religious and non-religious content. The Theological Worlds Inventory was an essential tool that I used to both set up my research and also to evaluate the effectiveness of my project. Having laid out my primary question for this project and the primary research tool that guides the research, it is now time to shift focus to the purpose and design of this project. The goal was to find a better way to talk about God that more closely aligned with the lived-experience of Millennials who are finding the church increasingly irrelevant to their quest for purpose and meaning in life.

Process and Procedures

Seeking People Who Fit the Project. If the goal of the research is to find a better way of talking about God that more closely aligned with the lived-experience of Millennials, there were a few things that I needed to do before I began research. First, I needed to choose six participants who were willing to take part in a five-week study that walked them through an experience of each of the five Theological Worlds. The participants were chosen because they met the criteria for selection that was laid out in Chapter One. Participants were informed about the minimal risk that was involved with the project and how the purpose of the study was to introduce them to the Theological Worlds as a way to see if a variegated understanding of Theological Worlds could lead to

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60 See Appendix C for the Theological Worlds Inventory. Also reference Jones, *Worlds Within a Congregation*, 45-69.
a shift of their understanding of how God was at work in their lives.\textsuperscript{61} I did not mention that I believe the classic evangelical expression of faith no longer matches with their lived-experience. I also chose four other participants who took only took the Theological Worlds Inventory but did not take part in the experience of the five Worlds, as this provided a way to measure the impact of experience on our theological understanding.

Data Collection. Once the participants were chosen, they each took the Theological Worlds Inventory. I was trying to see if their experience of the Theological Worlds would lead to a change in their understanding of how God was at work in their lives, so it was necessary to know where they were prior to the study. The Inventory consisted of two key elements. There was the Inventory itself, which located them in a Theological World, but just as important there was also a section prior where each participant would give a self-rating of where they believed they would be on the Inventory.

For the next five weeks, the six participants met with me on Wednesday night, from 6:00-7:00 P.M., in a newly renovated space at the church. The goal each week was to expose them to a new Theological World. In his book \textit{You Are What You Love}, James K.A. Smith says that “we learn to love, not primarily by acquiring information about what we should love but rather through practices that form the habits of how we love.”\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61} See Appendix B for Informed Consent.

With that in mind, the goal each week was not simply to expose participants to information about each Theological World, rather the goal was to have them engage in a structured experience of each World, as this is a key component to helping people see how God is at work in their lives. Each week, participants were introduced to music, scripture, and an experiential element that helped them to identify with each of the five Theological Worlds.

After the completion of the five-week study, participants were asked to once again complete the Theological Worlds Inventory, complete with the self-rating. This gave me the ability to see if there had been any noticeable change in their Theological World. To put it another way, did their experience of the five Theological Worlds help them to connect with a new Theological World that better aligned with their lived-experience of daily life? It was also during this time that I sat down for individual interviews with each of the six participants. The times and locations of those interviews varied, depending on the availability of the participant. I wanted to know what they thought of the Theological Worlds and, more importantly, I wanted to see if the study was beneficial in helping them see how God was at work in their daily life. Did having a new theological lens help them better connect God to their lived-experience?

Coding and Interpreting the Data. The interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of coding and interpreting my

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63 For a full description of each of the five experiences, see Appendix D.

64 See Appendix E for the complete set of interview questions.
findings. As mentioned in Chapter One, the primary sources that guided this process were *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Projects*,\(^{65}\) by Timothy Sensing, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*,\(^{66}\) by Mary Clark Moschella, and *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*,\(^{67}\) by Johnny Saldana.

After coding the data, I looked to find themes that emerged from the interviews as well as from the scores on the Theological Worlds Inventory. I was surprised by what I found in the process of coding the data. A few of the important themes that emerged were the importance of your childhood experience, the importance of music in shaping our theological identities, the role that our jobs play in shaping our Theological World, the role of trauma/pain in helping us reconsider how God is at work in our lives, and finally, the importance of hearing other stories to help us see where God is at work in our own lives. Some of the ideas I brought to this project were affirmed, but quite a few of my expectations were overturned. It is to these ideas that we now turn our attention.

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\(^{65}\) Sensing, *Qualitative Research*.

\(^{66}\) Moschella, *Ethnography*.

\(^{67}\) Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 
CHAPTER 4
THE PROJECT

In the first three chapters of this thesis, I have been able to lay the biblical, theological, and historical groundwork for why a new way of thinking about God is necessary in our current cultural milieu. From my own experience, it is certainly the case that the church needs a better way to speak about God, one that more closely aligns with the lived-experience of Millennials. The question was what sort of resource could guide the process of exploring alternative ways of speaking about God. In Chapter Three, I laid out the five Theological Worlds that were developed by W. Paul Jones\textsuperscript{68} as a perfect guide to help Millennials find a different way to think about God would help them see how God was at work in the world. Each World has an essential rhythm, explored in greater detail in the previous chapter, and they are as follows. The rhythm of World One is “Separation and Reunion.” The second World’s rhythm is “Conflict and Vindication.” In the third World, the essential rhythm is “Emptiness and Fulfillment.” The fourth World is the classic evangelical framework of “Condemnation and Forgiveness.” The fifth and final world consists of an essential rhythm of “Suffering and Endurance.”

\textsuperscript{68} Jones, Theological Worlds.
Participants

Knowing that these five Theological Worlds would provide the necessary tools to give Millennials a variegated way to think about God, I then identified six individuals to participate in the study who fit within the parameters of the study. While the First Baptist Church has a good number of people who fit the demographic profile, I wanted to have a broad range of experience with the Christian faith that was represented in the group. I have been at the church for almost two years and spend a good deal of time with this demographic of people. Each person was personally asked by me to participate in the five-week session and they all agreed. Below is a brief sketch of each person who agreed to participate in the study, as this will help in understanding the outcome of some of the research.69

John

John is thirty-eight years old. He is married with three children, two of whom are in early elementary school. He is married to a school teacher who is now a stay at home mom. John has a bachelor’s degree in engineering and a master’s degree in a related field. He grew up as a Presbyterian and only became a Baptist when he and his wife moved to Augusta for his work with a local company. Notably, he is a deacon at FBC. He is introverted by nature and when he speaks, it is clear that he has thought through what he says.

Amy

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69 Names have been changed in accordance with IRB protocol.
Amy is thirty-seven years old. She has two children and is married to Dave, who works in cybersecurity. Amy is a medical doctor who has been in private practice for eight years. She grew up at the First Baptist Church and her family has multiple generations present. She is very active in the Children’s Ministry and is a constant presence on the church campus. During the course of our interviews, she disclosed that prior to going to Medical School, she had seriously considered a career in ministry.

Beth

Beth is thirty-five years old. She is married to Ted, who is a stay at home dad. The two of them have three children who range in age from seven to one year. She works in human resources for a large data processing company in Augusta. She and her husband moved to Augusta in 2014 and they have been members at FBC for just over three years. She grew up in a Presbyterian church where the message each week was that those who do not accept Jesus will burn in hell. She has expressed that there are times that she does not feel at home at FBC, due to the fact that she is not from “old Augusta.”

Heather

Heather is thirty-seven years old. She is married to John, who is in the construction industry. They have two children, one who is in kindergarten and the other in preschool. Heather is a medical doctor who has been in private practice since 2011. She moved to Augusta when she was a child and has spent the whole of her time in Augusta as part of the First Baptist Church. She is an incredibly busy person and would
often times fly into the sessions with only seconds before the turn of the hour. A very thoughtful person, it is clear that her faith plays an important role in her life.

Rick

Rick is thirty-four years old. He is married to Michelle, who stays at home with their children. They have four kids. Two of them are in elementary school and the other two are still at home with their mom. Rick works in the financial services industry and has been successful in his business. He grew up at a Southern Baptist church about twenty miles outside of Augusta. His wife was a lifelong Methodist until they were married, at which time she was baptized as a member of the First Baptist Church. They have been at the First Baptist Church for right around a decade and are in worship three times a month.

Sarah

Sarah is thirty-eight years old. She is a divorced mother of two. Both of her children are in early elementary school. She works with a floral designer in the Augusta area. She grew up as a Jehovah’s Witness and started attending the First Baptist Church because of her ex-husband. Even after their divorce, she has remained at the church and is an incredibly invested figure in many different areas. Her family is located in a different state on the East Coast, so the church has become a de-facto family for her and her children.
The Theological Worlds Inventory and the Structured Interviews

Retrieval and Coding the Data

Having chosen the six candidates who would participate in my study, I then had them take the Theological Worlds Inventory, to see where each person found their theological home. The Inventory not only gave me an idea of their primary Theological World, but it also gave me an understanding of their self-awareness of their theological orientation. Each person took the test at home, preferably in one sitting, and when they were finished they returned the Inventory to me, so that I could make notes. As I mentioned in Chapter One, I assumed that most of participants would find the fourth Theological World to be their home. As will become apparent, I was surprised by the results of the Inventory.

After completing the Inventory, participants experienced each of the five Theological Worlds on Wednesday evening, in a newly renovated space in on our campus.¹⁰ As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the goal of the experiences was to have participants engage their intellects as well as their bodies in each Theological World. After the completion of the five-week sessions, participants once again took the Inventory, as this enabled me to see if there had been any noticeable shift in their Theological Worlds. I was able to answer the question that I asked at the beginning of the paper. Does providing different ways of thinking about, and experiencing, God lead to the possibility of seeing how your daily life is connected to God’s work in the world?

¹⁰ See Appendix C for a full layout of the Experiences.
As the final piece of the project, each person sat with me for an approximately 45-minute structured interview in my office where they answered questions that fell broadly within three categories. First, I wanted to know more about the way they were raised and how it impacted the way they thought about God. Second, I wanted to know more about how they processed the five Theological Worlds that they experienced each week. What made an impact them? Was there a particular experience that led them to feel differently about a particular Theological World? Finally, I wanted to know if walking through the Theological Worlds was an effective way for them to better see how God was at work in their lives. I used these three questions as a way to help in the coding of the data.

Each of the six interviews was audio recorded for the purpose of transcription at a later date. While I sat in each of the interviews, it became apparent to me that certain themes were going to emerge in the process of coding the data, and that is exactly what happened. The process of coding took place over the course of two days at a beach house in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina. I began by going through each interview with a highlighter and when a word or phrase stuck out to me, I marked it in on the paper. Once that process was complete, I arranged large sheets of paper (8.5x14) on a table and put each of the questions from my interview at the top of a page. At that point, I began to write the words and phrases from each interview on the page corresponding with each question. After completing that process, I was able to chart the data on an Excel spreadsheet to see what themes emerged from the coding process.\footnote{See Appendix F for Tables.}
Weaknesses in Methodology

The coded data, along with the scores from the Theological Worlds Inventory were the key measures that allowed me to measure the effectiveness of this project. I am confident that these two instruments allowed me to accurately assess the effectiveness of the project. The interviews were free flowing and relaxed. Participants shared about their experience and felt honest enough to tell me when they did not connect with the material. The five experiences flowed well and from my observations, the participants were engaged in the material in every session.

However, are a few things that could have benefitted the study. First, some of the Worlds were easier to experience than others. To walk the Stations of the Cross is to actively engage in the first World, but I found myself struggling to find an adequate representation of World Two. Given the constraints of time, I was not able to fully immerse participants in what it felt like to really fight injustice by, for example, going to a protest. Also, it would have been nice to have more time to experience each world. By the time the participants were in the room and ready to engage, it was often 6:15 P.M., and the sessions were to end promptly at 7:00 P.M. There was more than one night when the conversation was still going strong but we had to end because they had to pick up their children. Even taking into consideration the weakness of my methodology, I still believe that the research was effective in helping me answer the main problem that this project hoped to address.
Interpreting the Results

Pre-Experience Inventory and Self-Rating

Having gone through the process of coding and interpreting the data, it is now time to take a look at the results that emerged from the research. It will be most effective to walk through each of the steps in the study and explore the results that both contradicted and confirmed the assumptions that I brought to the research.

Pre-Experience Theological Worlds Inventory and Self-Rating

Going into the project, I assumed that most of the participants would primarily find themselves in the fourth Theological World, which is Condemnation and Forgiveness. When given the opportunity to choose where each person thought they would land on the Theological Worlds Inventory, or give a self-score, the results were surprising to me. It was interesting to discover that only one person, Sarah, thought that her primary Theological World was “Condemnation and Forgiveness.” Three of the participants, Amy, Heather, and Rick, thought that their primary Theological World would be found in the fifth World, which is “Suffering and Endurance.” Two participants, Beth and John, believed that their primary Theological World would be “Separation and Reunion.” Outside of Sarah, not a single person considered that “Condemnation and Forgiveness” would fit within their top two Worlds.

These results are particularly surprising because, as the interviews will show, the overwhelming majority of these participants considered the core content of the Christian faith to be that people are sinners in need of forgiveness. It would seem to be the case that
if they believed that to be true, then their Theological World would be firmly rooted in the fourth world! In this important sense, it is plain to see that the lived-experience of individuals is not lining up with their thinking about God. What is also shocking about the pre-experience self-rating is that the three people who chose “Suffering and Endurance” as their primary Theological World are all incredibly successful in their respective fields as physicians and a financial advisor. These three are living the American Dream, yet their experience of reality is one of suffering and endurance. It is incredibly clear to me that the church needs to do a better job of speaking a language that its people can understand.

Once they had given a self-rating, participants scored the results of their Inventories. It is notable that two people, John and Heather, had a high level of self-awareness and correctly predicted where they landed on the Inventory. As John remarked in our interview, “I am a deeply reflective person and I guess I have some internalization and realize who I am.”72 Amy simply flipped her first and second World, although her scores were close enough to not represent a significant variance. Rick, who was raised in a Southern Baptist Church, after taking the test found that his primary Theological World was “Condemnation and Forgiveness,” which was his third choice on self-rating. When I asked him why he thought there was such a shift, he remarked, “I kept thinking back to my childhood and to R.A’s. I was a Royal Ambassador as a boy, and it is what I learned,

72 John, interviewed by the author, January 14, 2019, First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia.
more than anything else (the fourth World), all along the way.” It turns out that the way we talk about God to our children has a greater impact on their adult understanding than we might imagine.

With the Pre-Experience material being completed, I now want to turn attention to the interviews and themes that emerged from the conversations with each of the six participants. There are six themes that continued to arise in every conversation. First, our childhood experiences in church play a significant role in our adult understanding of how God is at work in the world. Second, experiences of trauma and pain have the power to shift our understanding of how God is at work in our lives. Third, music plays an incredibly important role in how we understand God. Fourth, hearing other people tell their stories is a fantastic way to see how God is at work in the world. Fifth, our work does as much, if not more, to shape our theology than the church. Finally, experience plays a crucial role in helping people to understand how God is at work in the world.

Themes that Emerged from the Interviews

_The Role of Childhood Experience on Theological Understanding._ While this should not come as a surprise, I was shocked at the number of times participants referenced their childhood experience of faith when talking about how they thought about God’s activity in the world. Each person, at various parts of the interview process, talked about they learned things as a child that helped them to figure out not only who God was,

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73 Rick, interviewed by the author, January 17, 2019, First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia.
but also how God interacted with the world. As Sarah noted, “this (World 4) was shoved down my throat. You know, you better not do bad, you better not do wrong, because if you do then you are going to die.” What is interesting is that her experience echoed those of others who participated. Each one of them had similar things to say with a particular focus on “Condemnation and Forgiveness.” The fourth Theological World cut across denominational lines and was the consistent rhetoric that stuck with people.

Even people like Amy, who was raised at FBC Augusta, noted “when I was young, everything was black and white…so it was a lot of condemnation and forgiveness and the key to heaven is being saved from your sins.” It is worth noting that according to the way she was taught as a child, and in ways that she admits continues to stay with her, the point of Christianity is not to connect with your lived-experience, but instead to save you from eternal damnation. It should come as no surprise that people who live entirely within the immanent frame are leaving the church.

She also referenced the impact that children’s ministers and other associate pastors had on her faith formation. It is interesting to see that even if the fourth Theological World is not being preached from the pulpit, that does not mean that it isn’t being internalized through other interactions in the life of the church. That being said, for

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74 Sarah, interviewed by the author, January 16, 2019, First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia.

75 Amy, interviewed by the author, January 11, 2019, First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia.
three of the participants, the fourth World was the exclusive paradigm that was preached on Sunday morning. As Beth said,

I mean, that’s how I was raised, with a little bit of pulpit pounding, you are a sinner, you need Jesus, and I didn’t realize how that shaped me…18 years of, formative years too, it wasn’t a choice. I mean, it was a requirement to be there and listen to that and I didn’t realize how much it shaped me.76

The whole of the church’s ministry needs to be able to speak about all five of the Theological Worlds. The result of not doing so is that we produce an understanding of faith that doesn’t align with people’s lived-experience, and God doesn’t appear to be at work in the world.

The Role of Trauma and Grief in Helping Produce a Theological World. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, three of the participants found that the fifth World was their primary orientation in the pre-Inventory, and for those three, their primary World did not change for the post-Inventory. “Suffering and Endurance” was the way they experienced reality. Beth, who scored low on World Five in her pre-experience Inventory, joined the others with “Suffering and Endurance” as her primary World after walking through the experiences. Why would this World be so high for each one of these people? They are successful, driven, and beautiful. Each one of these people are living lives that others could only dream about having, and yet, the way they experienced the world was through the lens of “Suffering and Endurance.”

76Beth, Interview.
When I asked each of them this question, their responses were almost uniform. Each one had experienced loss or trauma in their lives, and those experiences left an indelible mark on their understanding of God and their experience. In 2010, Heather’s husband was diagnosed with a very serious illness and had to undergo a very dangerous medical procedure. There was even a conversation with another doctor about how this illness could very well end her husband’s life. Couple his illness with the fact that she had just given birth to a new child, and it is easy to see that this produced an incredible trauma in her life. Reflecting on her experience, she remarked that “it made my faith stronger. Suffering and enduring, that kind of thing. Yeah, that is how I view Christianity, you suffer as a Christian, you endure as a Christian. You are blessed.”

Heather is like many others in the Church, who have experienced pain that shaped them in more profound ways than they can imagine. I often wonder if preachers are willing to give voice to that expression of pain, to validate the fifth Theological World as an important voice of truth in the church. As Henri Nouwen said, “No body escapes being wounded…When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.” If we are willing to give voice to the

77 Heather, interviewed by the author, January 16, 2019, First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia.

pain that Heather experienced, then we have the ability to connect our lived-experience
with how God is at work in the world through Jesus.

*The Importance of Music.* Each week during five Theological World experiences,
I asked participants to listen to a song that was an example of the World for the night. I
was intentional to choose music that was a familiar song but done in a way that they
maybe had not heard prior to that week. We listened to a blues version of “I Want Jesus
To Walk with Me” as we explored World Five. On the evening we looked at World Four,
we listened to a folk version of “Nothing but the Blood.”79 I intended the music to
provide a gateway into the experience of prayer each evening, but it turns out that the
music was one of the more significant factors in helping participants to relate with each
Theological World.

I have heard it said that “anyone who sings, prays twice.” I am not sure where this
phrase originated, but in the case of trying to experience each of the Theological Worlds,
music was a key component. For some, the music was something that enabled them to
center themselves, or as Amy said, “quickly calm down.”80 John remarked that “Music is
really important to me, and I appreciate a wide variety of music. I can’t say if it is the
music or is it the amount of time that is held by the music that forces me to be present.”81

79 The full list of music can be found by looking at Appendix D.

80 Amy, Interview.

81 John, Interview.
Either way, the music was a key that helped them to have a better experience of the World each week.

For others, the music reminded them of songs that they grew up with, although heard in a new light it forced them to think about why certain songs struck a deep note inside their souls. When talked about the hymn selection one evening, Beth said “I wasn’t ever thinking about why I was singing, and for it to be put in this light, looking at the World, I wondered, like, why did that song ever even resonate with me.”

Songs have the power to make us think, and more importantly, to feel and I wonder if we give enough time to singing in our current expression of being the church.

_The Role of Testimony_. On the evening where we explored the third Theological World, “Emptiness and Fulfillment,” I invited participants to tell stories about they had felt God at work in their lives. This idea is given as an example of how to incorporate the third World into Christian discipleship. While I could tell on the evening that we explored stories that it was an effective exercise, I did not realize the impact it had on participants until I conducted the follow up interviews. Each person, without exception, mentioned how nice it was to hear other people share their stories. It was in the process of hearing others’ stories that many in the room were able to see how God was actively working in the lives of others. They were able to connect their understanding of God with

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82 Beth, Interview.

83 Jones, _Worlds Within A Congregation_, 131-140.
the daily experience of life! While it may have fallen out of favor in most churches, it appears as though testimony might be an incredibly effective way for people to see that God is still at work in the world.

Many of the people in the group knew each other on a cursory level, they see each other dropping off children, and maybe sit near each other in Sunday School. But prior to engaging in these experiences, they did not really know their stories. As Heather commented,

This is the most reflective thing I’ve probably ever done. As far as experiencing God and looking at how God is at work from different angles, I really loved hearing other people in the group. It was a fun group and, outside of Amy (the other doctor), I did not know anyone well.\(^{84}\)

Walking away from the experience of World Three, I wondered how it would be possible to incorporate storytelling, or testifying, into the rhythm of Small Groups. Even better still, how can you equip people to tell their story to the eight hundred others who are gathered together in worship on Sunday morning. If it is true that we see God at work by hearing others tell their stories, then we need to do a better job of making that happen in the life of the church.

*The Role of Work.* Five of the six people who took part in this project are employed in a professional setting. There was an engineer, a financial advisor, two doctors, and manager of human resources. They all work long hours and spend a significant amount of time thinking about work, even when they are not in the office.

\(^{84}\) Heather, Interview.
Each of them, when speaking about God’s work in their lives, expressed that their jobs are one of the primary ways that they see how God is at work in their lives. Beth struggled with this idea, as she remarked, “Work is a bigger part of my identity than it should be. Here is a third of my life, and one third of it is sleeping, and then a huge portion of the other third is commuting and winding down from work.”

Keep in mind that Beth leaves her job and then goes home to three children and a husband. Her comments reminded me of Heather, who would run into the sessions each night having just left her office, often times still not having eaten dinner.

Yet, for all the time that these five spent at work, they also still managed to find God working in their jobs. A few of them found the Theological Worlds to be a helpful guide for why they enjoyed their work and how God might be involved in it as well.

Rick, a financial advisor who scored high on World Five, noted that his work, actually isn’t about money at all; I mean, in some ways it is, but the focus is about not actually about money, it is about helping people, helping them to move forward and make good decisions. I have felt an extra good feeling about what I do since experiencing these Worlds.

As Christ walks along with him through his suffering, so he is able to walk along with others as they seek to make their way in the world.

On the third session, where we explored “Emptiness and Fulfillment”, Heather remarked that there is woman who comes into her practice every week, just so she can

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85 Beth, Interview.

86 Rick, Interview.
talk. She doesn’t need any procedures to be done, she just wants to talk about life. While her practice is incredibly busy and she is constantly stretched for time, Heather noted that these fifteen minutes she spends listening to her story is a way for her to let this woman connect with someone. It should come as no surprise that Heather’s highest score in the post-experience Inventory was in World Three.

But perhaps my favorite story of how work connects with our understanding of God’s work in the world comes from Beth. As I mentioned earlier, Beth works in HR, and in particular her job is to investigate complaints that have been made in the office. Her role is to investigate the claim and then “bring down the hammer,” What is fascinating is that on her pre-experience score, Beth’s last Theological World as “Conflict and Vindication.” After walking through an experience of the Theological Worlds, however, Beth’s second highest score (almost her primary World) on the post-inventory was “Conflict and Vindication.” When I asked her why there was such a marked shift in her Worlds, she replied, “I go to my job and I see people who have been done wrong and so it’s not me personally, but I’ve experienced a lot of it on the part of other people.” Because of her experience of the Theological Worlds, she was able to see that God is the one who brings justice in the world, and part of her work is to participate in the ongoing work of God in the world. This is a wonderful example of how the

87 Beth, Interview.

88 Beth, Interview.
Theological Worlds can help people find a way to better connect their experience with the way they think about God.

The Role of Experience. The final theme that needs to be discussed is the role of experience in opening up a better way to connect to God. As was the case with music, each person mentioned how much they appreciated the structured experience of the five Worlds. The moments that stuck in the minds and hearts of the participants were not the ten-minute segments where I talked about the Worlds, instead the moments that they remembered weeks later were the experiences of each World. As James K.A. Smith remarks, “Discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing.” 89 One of the lessons that I learned through this experience is that we do not primarily think our way through the world, we feel our way throughout our lives.

Every experience had a different impact on people, but one that was mentioned by five out of the six participants what the experiential element of World 4, “Condemnation and Forgiveness.” On that evening, after teaching about sin from Paul’s letter to the Romans, I invited each person to take a sheet of paper and write down something in their lives that they were struggling with at the moment. After a brief period of prayer, they were then invited to burn that paper with the flame from the Christ Candle, signifying that God had forgiven them of their sins. John, who did not score high on World Four on either Inventory said, “Writing our sins was especially poignant, burning them in that

89 Smith, You Are What You Love, 2.
session, it stayed with me for a few days. I felt an emotional shift that stayed with me for a while.”

There is something that is transformative about engaging in a ritual action, rather than simply sitting for an hour as we typically do in Baptist worship services. What would it look like to burn your sins as an act of confession to God on Sunday morning, or even in a Sunday School class? How could the church do a better job of engaging not just the mind, but all of our senses in worship? Amy commented,

You remember things better if they have a smell, a taste, you know, something that helps us to put a flavor on the Worlds. When you walk through an experience of the World, it’s like, Whoa I can relate to that.

There are multiple other moments that stuck with people. One experience was walking the Stations of the Cross, which we did on the evening of World Five, “Suffering and Endurance.” Another that was mentioned by a few people was taking communion together, which we did each evening. In particular, a few people noted how nice it was to take real bread and dip it into real wine, as opposed to the tiny cracker and thimble of juice they receive on Sunday mornings. Each evening we began our sessions by lighting a candle to represent the presence of Christ in the room, and I was surprised in my interview with Sarah when we said that she has begun to incorporate that rhythm into her daily life with her kids. When I asked why she is doing this with her children, she said “kids are experiential, to make things tangible for them is really helpful so they can

90 John, Interview.

91 Amy, Interview.
After walking through the five Theological Worlds with these six people, I am convinced that not only are kids experiential, but so are adults. If we are going to do a better job of connecting the lived-experience of Millennials to the way they see God at work in the world, then it will happen because we are more willing to create spaces of movement and engagement in our worship and discipleship environments.

Post-Experience Inventories and Self-Rating

As we turn attention to the post-experience inventories and self-rating, it will be most helpful to look at each person and see if there was any change in their Theological World. Just as important as any change that may have occurred, looking at self-ratings provides further insight into how each person understands their Theological World and how God might be active through that particular lens.

Amy. Amy showed incredible self-awareness on the pre-experience self-rating. What she thought and what she scored were consistent. After walking through the experiences, her Worlds remained essentially the same, with the only change being that her top two Worlds flipped. Regarding her self-rating on the post-experience, she correctly predicted each of the five Worlds in the order in which they ranked.

Rick. In his pre-experience self-rating, Rick thought that he would score high on World Five and World Three, only to find out that his primary Theological World was, unsurprisingly given his background, World Four. After walking through the experiences, Rick’s Inventory scores and his self-rating much more closely aligned. He was able to

92 Sarah, Interview.
successfully predict his top two Worlds, as well as the World in which he ranked last. It is clear that walking through the experiences played a significant role in helping Rick to have a better understanding of how he sees the work of God in his daily experience.

*John.* On the pre-experience Inventory and self-rating, John was able to accurately predict his top three Worlds. When asked about this fact, he was not surprised, as he mentioned that he is a reflective introvert who loves to think about things like the Theological Worlds. After going through the experiences, John remained true to form. His scores remained almost exactly the same, with the only shift being that his top two Worlds flipped, although they remained incredibly close.

*Heather.* During the experiences there was one evening where Heather clearly connected more than others, and that was during the World Three, “Emptiness and Fulfillment.” On her pre-experience self-rating, she wanted that as her fourth World choice, although her scores revealed that it was her second World. Interestingly, after going through each of the experiences, her primary Theological World was “Emptiness and Fulfillment.” Close behind was World Five. While her scores did remain fairly consistent, it was telling that her primary World became the one that she most closely related to during the experiences. She was able to connect her lived-experience to the way she thought about God, and the scores reflected that movement. Also, after the experiences, her self-rating was spot on, with four of the five Worlds being correctly predicted.
Sarah. In part because of Sarah’s upbringing, she assumed that her primary World would be “Condemnation and Forgiveness.” In fact, her primary World was Five, which is not surprising given her life situation, as she remarked on multiple occasions throughout the interview. In the pre-experience self-rating and Inventory, she did not accurately predict a single World. What is astonishing is that on her post-experience scores, Sarah was able to choose all five Worlds in their correct order. Her self-awareness could not have been any more accurate. Walking through the experiences was a transformative experience for her own self-understanding, which I will come back to in the next section.

Beth. In the pre-experience self-rating and Inventory, Beth was only able to accurately select her last World, which was “Conflict and Vindication.” On her Inventory prior to the five-week study, World Five was also near the bottom of her list. Earlier in the chapter, I wrote about how Beth’s work required her to look for justice for those who had been wronged in the workplace. It is also worth noting that Beth also experienced a difficult childhood on an Indian reservation in Oregon, which is something she spoke about in the interview.

After walking through the five Worlds, Beth’s scores were completely different. Her top two were World Five and World Two, which are both closely aligned with her experience of reality. Giving her a different way to think about, and experience God, helped her to see that God was indeed at work in her life. It is also worth noting that her
self-rating after the experiences accurately predicted that she felt like World Two and World Five would be her primary orientations.

The Four Who Only Took the Inventory

It is worth noting briefly the scores and self-rating of those who only took the Inventory but did not walk through the experiences. Three of the four individuals who took the inventory thought that their primary Theological World would be “Condemnation and Forgiveness” but were surprised to see that each landed on a different World as primary. When they took the follow up test three weeks later, their scores remained almost exactly as they had been when they took the test for the first time, on both the self-rating and the Inventory score.

What this shows is that the role of experience is vital in helping people to understand why they feel, and believe, the way that they do. All six people who walked through the experiences emerged with a better self-understanding of why they inhabited a particular World. This is an important insight because if the goal of the project was to connect the lived-experience of Millennials to how they conceptualize God, then experiencing the five Theological Worlds proved to be a helpful tool in guiding them to deeper understanding.

Did this Project Achieve the Objective?

The final question in each interview was simple. I asked each person, “How has this experience helped your understanding of God better align with your lived-experience of the world?” Five of the six people who took part in the project said after walking
through the five-week study, they feel a much better connection with God and how they experience the Divine in daily life. Each person remarked how they were able to see their work in a different light because of the experience, they were able to empathize with others because of the experience, and they found it refreshing to learn about other ways that God can be experienced in daily life. Amy summed up the opinion of others when she said, “the door has been opened for you to see God in a way that is different from what you already knew…you are seeing God in a little different way and you pick up on things once you have been reminded.93”

This project was designed with the intent of seeing if experiencing variegated Theological Worlds could help Millennials better connect their lived-experience with their understanding of God. It is clear to me that after walking through this five-week study, each individual left with a better understanding of how they experienced reality and how they could find God at work in their lives. This was the goal! While some of their Theological Worlds did not change, they each emerged with a clearer understanding of God’s work in their lives. Some still held close to “Condemnation and Forgiveness,” while others discovered that Jesus will walk alongside them as they “Suffer and Endure,” but for each person they left feeling different about their experience of life. Now, it is time to think about how we can create these experiences for others in our communities of faith.

93 Amy, Interview.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

This Doctor of Ministry project began in earnest when I was still on staff at the First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Georgia. In my role as Associate Pastor to Young Adults, I was routinely confronted with questions about how religion, and the church, were still relevant in the lives of people under forty. Unfortunately, I found myself far too often listening to other Millennials lament their experience in church and its seeming irrelevance for their lived-experience. As I began to dream about doctoral work, I found that I continued to return to the question of how the church can do a better job of talking about God in a way that better aligned with the lived-experience of Millennials. When I was introduced to the work of W. Paul Jones, I knew that I had stumbled upon a partner who would guide me along the path. At the conclusion of this project, I believe that it is possible to speak about God in a way that better aligns with the lived-experience of Millennials by using the five Theological Worlds.

By spending significant time with six older Millennials, I was able to get a vantage point into the way that they think about faith and how the church connects the gospel with their daily lives. This group was particularly important to me because they are making decisions about how they will engage with the church, not only for themselves, but more importantly, their children. Spending time with this group was also
meaningful for me because I fall within this generational category. The gospel can speak hope into our lives, but only if the message of Jesus can somehow connect to our lived-experience. After the conclusion of this thesis, I am convinced that W. Paul Jones’ work is a fantastic way to think about how to better engage with a post-Christian culture.

The process of how I came to this conclusion is well documented in Chapter Four of this thesis. It is necessary, however, to note three of the primary takeaways from this research. The first takeaway from this thesis is the importance of experience in helping people see how God is at work in their lives. As each of the six people walked through an experience of the five Theological Worlds, they were able to better connect their lived-experience with their understanding of how God is at work in the world. The results from the pre-experience and post-experience confirm these insights. Also, when you compare the Inventory results of those who walked through the structured experiences with those who simply took the Inventory, it is clear that experience plays a significant role in helping people understand where they fall on the Theological Worlds Inventory.

Whether it was talking about injustice in the world or walking through the stations of the cross, for each of the six participants, it was helpful to see the Worlds in action as they sought to see how God was working in the world.

For many of the participants in the study, their childhood experience played a significant role in determining their understanding of Christianity well into their adulthood. In fact, it is appropriate to say that many of them found it difficult to transcend their childhood experience of Christianity. This realization helps me to see that children’s
ministry in the church is far more important than we often understand. While many value children’s ministry for the potential growth it provides for a congregation, the research I conducted shows that children’s ministry is important because it will be the primary reference point that people will refer to well into their adult lives.

For others, the experience of trauma and loss played a central role in their understanding of how God is at work in the world. As participants talked about their lives and the moments that shaped them as followers of Christ, it was the moments of trauma that shaped how they see God’s hand at work. When stories were told during the experience of the third Theological World, it was clear that moments when people face difficulty are most often the places where God is most readily seen in their lives. It is worth exploring how churches can do a better job of speaking about pain and loss in the context of worship. Far too often, people gather together for Christian community and pretend that life is sunshine and rainbows. Part of what this project has shown is that if the church is continue to connect with the lived-experience of Millennials, then we must be willing to acknowledge the role of pain and trauma in helping to see God.

While these are three of the primary outcomes of this project, there are a few other items worth mentioning before moving toward the conclusion. While it is true to say that music has always played an important role in the Western Church, I was surprised to see how much the music resonated with the six individuals who walked through the structured experiences. Each person remarked on more than one occasion how they enjoyed a particular song that we heard on an evening. In a conversation that
seemed to sum up the feeling of the entire group, Beth said, “I wasn’t thinking about why I was singing and so for it to be put in this light, I thought, that’s why I love this song.” Again, what is clear is that walking people through the Theological Worlds allows them to better understand how they can see God at work in the world.

Another area where this research introduced and provided a critical insight was in showing the importance of hearing the stories of other people’s faith journey. In past generations, this was known as testifying, but a new era in culture often demands a new language. In all six of the interviews, participants mentioned how wonderful it was to hear other people talk about their experience of the Christian faith. The reason why this is so important was two-fold. First, hearing the stories of other people gave license to hear how God is at work in the lived-experience of other people. Far too often, lay people only hear stories from “professional” Christians, and to hear from folks like them enabled them to see how God is doing things in their lives as well.

Second, hearing the stories of other people allowed participants to connect with each other. From the five weeks of structured experiences, new friendships were made in some of the most unlikely places. While John and Sarah are the same age, they are in completely different situations and were not friends prior to participating in this study. After walking through the structured experiences, however, and hearing each other’s story, John remarked, “my wife and I talked and we continue to talk with her and share

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94 Beth, Interview.
life with her since these experiences.\footnote{John, Interview.} In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us that the second half of the greatest commandment is “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”\footnote{Matt 22:39.} Hearing the stories of other people allows the possibility of connecting with them in a way that enables people to live out the greatest commandment of Jesus. If John had never had the opportunity to hear Sarah’s story, then he would more than likely never made a new friendship that enabled him to better connect the lived-experience of someone else with God’s work. With these things in mind, it is time to consider how the fruit of this project can help impact the way that worship is orchestrated at the First Baptist Church of Augusta and many churches in similar contexts.

Possibilities for Further Development

Preaching the Five Worlds

One of the primary takeaways from this research is the reality that there is no one size fits all approach to preaching. As you can see from the results of the Theological Worlds Inventory, people find themselves in each of the five Worlds. The task of the preacher is to effectively communicate the five Worlds in a way that shows each of them to be deeply rooted in scripture and the history of the church. By the end of the structured experiences, each of the participants was able to see how Jesus acts through the five Theological Worlds to bring about a genuine connection with God. If pastors only speak
about the world of condemnation and forgiveness, then those who identify with World Three will never hear a word that can connect them to Christ.

A possible strategy is to preach a five-week series that explains the Theological Worlds. All throughout this work, the goal has been to explain how God connects to the lived-experience of Millennials, so a title for such a series could be “God at Work: Seeing How God Connects to your Life.” Another option would be to preach a series centered around the five Worlds, but use music from each World as the launching point into the sermon. Finally, it is also a possibility to preach a series titled “How Does It Feel?” where the preacher could explore the feeling that is associated with each World and then take a deep look at how Christ meets the needs of his people. Many of the participants in this project were only aware of the classic evangelical presentation of the gospel, World Four, and were deeply enriched by being introduced to other rhythms of the Christian tradition. As Beth noted in her interview, “I don’t know if it is right to just give Jesus whatever identity you think is convenient for you at the time but when I need, you know, fulfillment or when I need forgiveness or when I need endurance, those are different periods where this was the Jesus I needed.”

Preaching is the primary area of Christian education in a post-Christian world, so it is imperative that sermons help people to understand that Jesus meets them where they are on the journey of life.

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97 Beth, Interview.
A final note in the area of preaching that will serve as a movement into the next possibility for further development is the realization that change in Theological Worlds does not come through simple engagement with the mind, but instead change comes through engagement with the heart. For many pastors, preaching is an art form that is intent to change the mind of congregants. But this research has shown that change really happens in the Theological World of people when their hearts are engaged in something. What does it look like for pastors to engage both the head and the heart? This is an essential question to ask as we live in our post-Christian context. I believe that it is time to reclaim preaching as a theatrical experience where people feel their emotions stirred by hearing and feeling how God’s work connects to their lived-experience. If we are going to communicate the gospel to Millennials who are disconnected from Christ, it will come from sermons that create an experience in the listeners.

Experience in Worship

In his remarkable work *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, James K.A. Smith tells readers, “Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passionate orientation to the world…we live into the stories we’ve absorbed; we become characters in the drama that has captivated us.” To use more colloquial language, it is appropriate to say that we are not shaped by what we think, we are shaped by what we love. Far too many worship services, as well as

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Christian discipleship, is geared to primarily engage the mind at the expense of engaging the heart. At the conclusion of this research, it is clear that the most effective way to engage the heart of Millennials is to allow them to have experiences in worship and discipleship. Each of the six participants in the project mentioned how meaningful it was to have participated in the five Worlds, not to simply heard lectures about them. Walking the Stations of the Cross and actually taking communion from a common loaf and chalice were effective ways allowing these individuals to have an experience that connected their lives with their understanding of how God is at work.

How can the church do a better job of allowing for experience in worship? I think about the way that FBC Augusta takes communion. In the current setting, plates are passed down each aisle where a tiny piece of bread and small vile of grape juice are taken. Congregants sit and wait to be given the cue and at that point they take the bread and the cup. It is a passive experience where they do not engage anything other than their minds. Imagine a service instead, where members of the congregation are invited to come forward and take a chunk of bread, hearing a word spoken directly to them, “The Body of Christ, broken for you,” followed by dipping that bread into a common cup and hearing the words spoken again. This makes communion an experiential moment, engaging all the senses of the people in the room. Communion done in such a way engages more than the mind, it engages the heart. There are many other examples of how this could be done, although I believe this gets to the heart of how worship needs to be more experiential in orientation.
Creating Worship for Children

The conversations that have taken place throughout this project leave the distinct impressions that childhood experience of faith is essential in helping to connect the lived-experience of individuals with their understanding of God. While it is possible to lament a Christianity where people do not go beyond their childhood understanding of faith, I think a more productive avenue would be to think deeply about the way that faith is presented to children. What would it look like to present the five Theological Worlds in the context of children’s ministry?

In churches like FBC Augusta, once a child enters grade school, they attend worship with their families. That means that they are sitting in a sanctuary with music and a message that are designed with adults in mind. Standing from the vantage point of the preacher, it is all too apparent that this way of teaching children faith is not an appropriate way to grow their relationship with Jesus, as I see the bored and bewildered look on their faces. Instead, a better way of developing the faith of children is to engage them in a worship service on Sunday morning that is designed with them in mind. Children, like adults, are impacted by experiencing worship and not just sitting in a room and being told to keep quiet. It is time for the church to imagine a worship time for children where they engage in the five Theological Worlds by engaging their senses in an interactive environment created for them. If childhood experience plays a significant role in developing an understanding of how God connects to lived-experience, then the church
owes it to the next generation to create experiences where they can better understand the work of God in the world.

Reclaiming the Art of Testimony

Hearing other people tell their stories was a key element in the structured experiences. Each participant left with a better sense of how to connect their lived-experience with their understanding of God’s work in the world when they heard other people express their faith journey. While we are in a cultural moment when words like testimony get negative press, people need to hear from others as they seek to understand how God is working in peoples’ lives.

Imagine sitting a worship service each week and being able to hear a three-minute video that highlights the story of how God is at work in the life of an individual. The video would be produced to ensure quality and each week it could highlight a different Theological World, thereby showing the different ways that God is to be seen in the lived-experience of a person. It is one thing to hear a preacher talk about God’s activity in the world. It is something entirely different to hear from other people who are not in ministry for a career. Both are necessary voices, but one has been neglected for too long in churches like First Baptist Church of Augusta.

Future Writing Projects

One of the outcomes of this project is that I hope to write a popular level work on how to connect the language the uses to speak about God with the lived-experience of Millennials. Many church members have asked to read this work, and although I am
happy to share the work with them, I believe that the heart of this research can be distilled into a popular level work that would find an audience with churches that are seeking to speak a new language better geared for a post-Christian world. Using a line from one of the participants in the project, a title for this book could be *That Isn’t Who I Needed Jesus To Be: How God Meets Us Where We Are*. It is time for moderate Baptists to begin publishing popular level work that speaks about the complexity of faith in the post-modern age. I believe that there are people, both Christian and not Christian, who would find a work like this to be a helpful guide as they seek to discover if God is still at work in the world.

On a level geared for pastors and churches, I think this thesis could be distilled into a guide for how to walk small groups of people through structured experiences of the five Theological Worlds. In my own context, I have already begun using these experiences on other groups of people in the church, both Millennial and significantly older populations. Churches could benefit from a source that gave them practical guidelines for how to better connect their language about God with the lived-experience of members.

**Impact on Ministry**

Researcher

On a personal level, this research has given me a clearer sense of how important it is to use variegated language when I talk about God. The goal of this project was to see if it was possible to better connect the lived-experience of Millennials to their
understanding of how God is at work in the world. I am convinced that the Theological Worlds provides an avenue for this work to effectively happen. While I have unintendingly used many of the Theological Worlds in the way I talked about the gospel, after this research I am now better equipped to relate the message of Jesus to those Millennials who need a better way to think and talk about God.

This project has inspired me to think through the creation of worship experiences in an entirely new way. Each week I gather together with my worship team and I consciously consider how to speak to each of the five Theological Worlds through the experience that takes place on Sunday morning. While I am most deeply connected with World Three, through my project I know that there are many Millennials in the room who need to hear about World Five and the struggle of daily life. I have been challenged to be a more well-rounded minister because of the structured experience of the Theological Worlds.

There were moments for learning in a constructive way throughout this process. While I assumed that most participants would have a negative reaction to World Four, someone like Rick found that World Four was a home that had served him well throughout his life. In fact, when participants went through the structured experience of the fourth World, many of them remarked how much the act of burning their sins as an offering to God stuck with them throughout the week. I do not resonate with classic evangelical expressions of Christianity, however, there are many Millennials who still
connect to language of forgiveness, and I need to be aware of this fact when I plan sermons and worship series.

The First Baptist Church of Augusta

On a routine basis, I am asked by the people of the First Baptist Church when they will get to hear more about the work I have done in my doctoral work. Beyond hearing sermons that present the five Worlds on Sunday morning, there will be concrete ways for people to engage and interact with the work that I have completed. On Wednesday evenings, I will be teaching the Theological Worlds material to the Pastor’s Bible Study, which is a group of sixty men and women who gather in the Storey Chapel to hear from the Senior Pastor. The nature my project was limited to a group of six people, so I will have to make necessary adjustments to compensate for the lack of intimacy in the room, but it is my plan to present roughly the same material in the Chapel that I did to the six Millennials who participated in the project.

If the staff is aware of their Theological Worlds, then it will be easier to relate to each other and determine why some think the way they do about their work in the church. It is my plan to present the structured experiences to the staff, walking them through each of the five Worlds. The intent behind this is twofold. First, going through this process will enable the staff to have better and deeper relationships with each other. The church will benefit from increased cohesion by the pastoral staff. Second, for some on my staff, this will be the first time they have been exposed to a few of the Worlds. It will be an
enlightening experience for the staff to see that there are variegated ways to understand who Jesus is and how he works in people’s lives.

Finally, it is my intent to continue teaching this material to small groups of Millennials in the church. I would love to begin by going through the structured experiences with the control group that only took the Inventory. The more that this material can become part of the DNA of the church, the better positioned we will be to communicate the gospel in a way that better connects with the lived-experience of Millennials in our community.

Wider Community

There are a number of avenues where this research could be applied in the life of the larger community of faith. For example, I will be presenting the heart of this material at the national CBF General Assembly later this year in Birmingham, Alabama during a session on how to reach Millennials in our culture. Also, I hope that this material, if distilled into a popular level book, could be a resource for churches to begin thinking about how they communicate the gospel in a way that better connects to the lived-experience of their audience, whether they are Millennials, Boomers, or the Greatest Generation.

Ultimately, the entire goal of this project was to look at how the church can speak about God in a way that better connects with the lived-experience of Millennials. It is true that this group has become the primary target for growth in many churches, but my passion for this project ran much deeper. I am a Millennial who has always struggled
with the church. In my own experience, there have been too many times where I sat in church and wondered how what was happening had any relevance to my own life. It is selfish and self-centered, but it is true. I was looking for something that connected me to a life well lived within the immanent frame and even though I wasn’t hearing about it in my church, I knew that Jesus had something to say about how to live here and now. Discovering the Theological Worlds was just what I needed to set me on the course that led to this project. It is my great hope that everything I have done will lead people, not just Millennials, into a deeper relationship with Jesus. After all, he came so that we might have life, abundant life that is deeply connected to God, as we walk through our daily lives.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

MERCER INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
Friday, November 30, 2018

Mr. Thomas William Dyer
3001 Mercer University Drive
James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology
Atlanta, GA 30341

RE: We Are All Thomas Now: Millennial Chris ans and the Need For New Theological Worlds at the First Bap st Church of Augusta (H1811296)

Dear Mr. Dyer:

On behalf of Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application on submitted on 16-Nov-2018 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations 21 CFR 56.110(b) and 45 CFR 46.110(b) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 06, 07 per 65 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 30-Nov-2018. The protocol expires on 19-Nov-2019. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:
New application for a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry research study using small group interaction, interviews, and the Theological Worlds Inventory to provide vaniuged theological understandings for how God is at work in the lives of participants in the study. The object is to see how experiencing each of W. Paul Jones’ five Theological Worlds might be er help par cipants connected their lived experience to their understanding of who God is and how God is at work in the world. The research will help pastors in local churches develop a be er undemanding of bow their Millennial congregants think and feel about God. The project will measure bow experiencing alterna ve Theological Worlds outside of their primary World can help par cipants be er see how God is at work in their lives.

NOTE: You MUST Report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and ALL accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our Sq. daq on Survey and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIRM.
Director of Research Compliance
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the Interna onal Conference on Harmoniza on's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Prac ces."

Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance
Phone: 478-301-4101 | Email: OSP.Mercer@Mercer.edu | Fax: 478-301-2329
1521 Mercer University Drive, Macon, Georgia 31207-0001
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
WE ARE ALL THOMAS NOW: MILLENNIAL CHRISTIANS AND THE NEED FOR NEW THEOLOGICAL WORLDS AT THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF AUGUSTA

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators
The Reverend Thomas William Dyer, Junior, M.Div. McAfee School of Theology, Doctor of Ministry Degree
3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, 706-414-6744 thomas.william.dyer@live.mercer.edu

Dr. Graham B. Walker, Ph.D., McAfee School of Theology, 3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, 678-547-6027, walker_gb@mercer.edu

Purpose of the Research
This research study is designed to provide space in the local church for conversations about how to better connect the lived experience of Millennials in post-modernity to their theological understanding of God.

The data from this research will be used to measure how exposure to W. Paul Jones five Theological Worlds can affect people’s ability to see different ways of understanding the Christian faith in relation to their life in a pluralistic age.

The results will contribute to my studies of how the church in a pluralistic age can better connect people’s understanding of God to their lived experience in the world.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to take two Theological Worlds Inventories, one at the beginning of the study and the second at the conclusion. You will also participate in one personal interview, at the conclusion of the study. You will also be asked to attend five sessions where you will experience the different Theological Worlds as presented in W. Paul Jones Worlds Within a Congregation.

Your participation will take approximately six weeks with the following time commitments each week: 1 hour for the five sessions on the Theological Worlds and one 1-1.5 hour interview at the conclusion of the study.

Potential Risks or Discomforts
There are no foreseeable risks with this study. The questions used in the personal interviews and topics discussed in the sessions are non-invasive.

Mercer IRB
Approval Date 11/30/2018
Protocol Expiration Date 11/29/2019
However, when talking about how you see yourself as a human being in relation to God, strong emotion can be evoked. Learning about the five Theological Worlds can bring with it an experience of new theological awareness as well as disorientation.

If your experience becomes overwhelming, and you feel unable to continue in the study, you may withdraw at any time.

Potential Benefits of the Research
There is no guaranteed benefit from this study, but your contributions in the sessions and individual interviews could help pastors have a better understanding of how to talk about God in the local church. Individual interviews and group discussion will include opportunities for you to talk about how you have experienced God in your daily life. You will also be able to see different ways of understanding the Christian faith that you did not know prior to taking part in the study.

Confidentiality and Data Storage
Because the project consists of group interaction and discussion, there is no guarantee of confidentiality. However, your name will be kept confidential in the research and reporting of this study with the use of pseudonyms. The names of your friends and family members that arise in discussion will also be kept confidential and identified by their relationships to you (e.g. the father of “Joe”).

Audio recordings will be used and stored in my office for three years.

The only persons who will have access to the recordings are a hired transcriber and me at the conclusion of the project. The transcriber will use the recordings to accurately transcribe dialogue and conversation. I will view them to note themes and sub-categories for data analysis.

Participation and Withdrawal
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Rev. Will Dyer at 706-414-6744 or Thomas.william.dyer@live.mercer.edu

Questions about the Research
If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Rev. Will Dyer at 706-414-6744, Thomas.william.dyer@live.mercer.edu or Dr. Graham Walker at 678-547-6027, walker_gb@mercer.edu

[Incentives to Participate]
There are no incentives for participation.

[Audio or Video Taping]
By participating in this study, you are agreeing to be audio recorded for the purpose of gathering data. Your name will not be used.

[Reasons for Exclusion from this Study]
You may not participate in this study if you are under the age of 18.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

________________________________________

[Signature of Participant]

Mercer IRB
Approval Date 11/30/2018
Protocol 11/29/2019

Rev. January 2017 Page 2
I. INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF A THEOLOGICAL WORLD

Because we alone of all creatures can ask "Why?", we are unique. But because our answers are often unclear, we never know with certainty who we are or what we are to do. This is what makes life a struggle for meaning. Whether we recognize it or not, then, we are functional theologians, beginning months before our birth.

Rather than reflecting a perspective decided in advance, most often our answers are working assumptions carved out unconsciously through the process of living. Thus the "World" that results as home from their configuration is often unknown to the self. There are as many Worlds as there are persons. Yet these individual Worlds overlap, forming communities--latent and manifest. Those with whom we share a World are those whom we can understand almost intuitively, able even to finish their sentences for them. There are other persons, however, with whom we live "Worlds apart." These are not only the ones we have difficulty understanding, but with whom it is difficult to find a point of contact. Our research has identified five such Worlds, serving as a typology of pure possibilities.

A World results from the interaction between two poles. The first is one's obsessio, that lived question, need, ache, or dilemma which has its teeth into us at the deepest level. Other concerns are variations on that basic theme, standing in line behind its importance. The second pole is one's epiphania, that which through one or more events, moments, and/or persons brings sufficient illumination, satisfaction, or healing to provide a lived answer worth wagering one's life upon. One's epiphania is what touches promisingly one's obsession either as fact or as hope.

The dynamic establishing one's World, then, is this ongoing interaction of obsessio and epiphania. One's disposition is determined by whether this dynamic is seen more from the perspective of one's obsession or the epiphania is the more weighted pole. Whichever, each knows itself only in relation to the other.

Christianity does not create yet another World. Rather, those who affirm Jesus of Nazareth as epiphania for their World do so because of the healing pattern of meaning resulting from its unique engagement with one's concrete obsessio. Thus there are as many Christian Worlds as there are Christians. But they also converge in communities, resulting in five Christian variations on the themes of the universal theological Worlds.

One's theological World, then, tends to be unconscious, unknown, and/or unrecognized. Therefore theological growth begins first with discerning the World in
which one is living. This Theological World Inventory is designed to assist in that task. As a vehicle for articulating one's theology self-consciously, to can lead one to explore what it means to live more faithfully within one's World, help sense if one's World is stifling and in need of abandonment for another one, and help one enter into dialogue with members of other theological Worlds.

There are five parts to this Inventory: I. Introduction; II. Inventory; III. Self-Rating Description; IV. Self-Scoring Sheet; V. Evaluation of Each World. Instructions will be given in each part.
II. THEOLOGICAL WORLDS INVENTORY

Instructions:
For each of the following questions, choose the answer which fits you best--put a "3" next to that answer. For the same question, choose the answer that is second best for you--put a "2" next to that answer. Then choose the answer that fits third best--put a "1" next to that answer. Respond honestly to as many as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. An answer is correct if it reflects your own feelings. It is wrong if it reflects either what you think you should prefer, or what you guess may lead to a particular outcome for the Inventory. In answering, let your mind roam quickly over your life experiences. Remember your own struggles, as early as you can. Let your answer characterize the "feel" of life for you over the "long haul." If a question, or its options, makes no sense, omit it.

1. My uneasiness increases when I feel:
   ___ a. out of control
   ___ b. tempted
   ___ c. disconnected
   ___ d. exhausted
   ___ e. empty, rootless

2. Life for me is a:
   ___ a. mysterious pilgrimage
   ___ b. basic right
   ___ c. courageous act
   ___ d. new gift
   ___ e. quest for self-fulfillment

3. My spiritual life is best characterized as:
   ___ a. requesting forgiveness with empty hands
   ___ b. meditating on ideals for my life
   ___ c. praying for others
   ___ d. contemplating, centering, uniting with
   ___ e. ascetic, strength for the dark night

4. A scripture passage with which I can identify is:
   ___ a. "We can rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance."
   ___ b. "For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son."
   ___ c. "Thou hast made us but a little lower than the angels."
d. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . . , and a little child shall lead them."

e. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

5. I tend to view death as:
   _a_ a. a reality to be faced steadfastly
   _b_ b. deserved and rightful
   _c_ c. a foe to be resisted
   _d_ d. opening to another world
   _e_ e. part of life's rhythm

6. The human condition Is most characterized by:
   _a_ a. alienation
   _b_ b. pain
   _c_ c. personal guilt
   _d_ d. injustice
   _e_ e. invisibility

7. I am renewed when I experience:
   _a_ a. awe, wonder
   _b_ b. exoneration, justice
   _c_ c. fullness, self-worth
   _d_ d. humility, forgiveness
   _e_ e. compassion, integrity

8. When things are not going well, I sometimes feel:
   _a_ a. condemned
   _b_ b. powerless
   _c_ c. isolated
   _d_ d. shutout
   _e_ e. victimized

9. Who is Jesus?:
   _a_ a. suffering companion
   _b_ b. disclosure of that which is not recognized
   _c_ c. a definitive human word about who God is
   _d_ d. God's definitive word about who we are
   _e_ e. foretaste of what is promised to be

10. When I experience limitations, I tend to:
    _a_ a. feel overwhelmed, passive
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b. become arrogant, self-serving
c. act judgmentally, sometime violently
d. feel impotent, hollow
e. feel exiled, separated, rejected

11. To improve things, my efforts should focus on changing:
   a. structures
   b. attitudes
   c. beliefs
   d. relationships
   e. perspectives about the whole

12. That which I find painfully real in life is:
   a. conflict
   b. disappointment
   c. shallowness
   d. isolation
   e. judgment

13. "Center stage" for making sense out of my existence is:
   a. the cosmos
   b. the self
   c. the demonic
   d. history
   e. life itself

14. What is most likely to disrupt life?:
   a. seduction
   b. institutions
   c. weariness
   d. homelessness
   e. self-doubt

15. I tend to focus on:
   a. elsewhere
   b. past
   c. future
   d. expansive present
   e. each day as it comes

16. I have been haunted by a sense of:
   a. emptiness, worthlessness
17. Life is a joy when I feel:
   ___ a. vindicated
   ___ b. loved
   ___ c. at rest
   ___ d. harmony/unity
   ___ e. cleansed

18. An image for "home" is:
   ___ a. tomorrow
   ___ b. spring housecleaning
   ___ c. a day off
   ___ d. a room of my own
   ___ e. the ocean

19. In my life I have struggled most with feeling:
   ___ a. unimportant, worthless trivial, undeveloped
   ___ b. guilty, sinful, incompetent, wrong
   ___ c. separated, homeless, adrift, lonely
   ___ d. used, hopeless, fragile, futility
   ___ e. competition, injustice, inequality, exploitation

20. What tends to give you hope?:
   ___ a. changes in this world that will make it better
   ___ b. support that encourages me to become who I am
   ___ c. experiences that hint of the meaning of the whole
   ___ d. trust in God's graciousness
   ___ e. Divine companionship to see it through together

21. I can best contribute to the Reign of God by:
   ___ a. fighting for the oppressed
   ___ b. being obedient to God's will
   ___ c. standing with the rejected
   ___ d. maximizing the potentialities in me and others
   ___ e. striving for harmony between nature and humans

22. When I am not at my best, I can feel:
   ___ a. trapped
23. The rhythm that best describes conversion for me is:
   ___ a. from guilt to pardon
   ___ b. from suffering to integrity
   ___ c. from alienation to homecoming
   ___ d. from nothingness to self-identity
   ___ e. from oppression to liberation

24. I invest much time in efforts to:
   ___ a. discover myself
   ___ b. forgive myself
   ___ c. realize myself
   ___ d. give of myself
   ___ e. be true to myself

25. The words best describing the human condition are:
   ___ a. wanderer, orphan, stranger
   ___ b. victim, wounded, undone
   ___ c. self-doubt, impotence, ache
   ___ d. duplicity, selfishness, forbidden fruit
   ___ e. enslaved, oppressed, violence

26. Freedom means:
   ___ a. no hunger or thirst for anyone
   ___ b. going home
   ___ c. a chance to start over
   ___ d. to outlast
   ___ e. to lose self-doubt in becoming who I am

27. How does reconciliation with God occur?:
   ___ a. By entering the world, God conquers the forces opposing us.
   ___ b. Christ pays the price for our sin.
   ___ c. In following Jesus, we come to a closer relationship with God.
   ___ d. There are moments in which the veil is lifted, and we belong.
   ___ e. God identifies with us as companion through it all.

28. Which pair of words best describes the dynamic of living?:
   ___ a. emptiness/fulfillment
29. In reflecting on my past, I remember times of feeling:
   ___ a. invisible
   ___ b. tempted
   ___ c. engulfed
   ___ d. powerless
   ___ e. lost

30. Evangelism is effective if someone:
   ___ a. is awakened to try
   ___ b. encounters the plight of the oppressed
   ___ c. finds the courage to persevere
   ___ d. senses the priority of being over doing
   ___ e. is brought to belief

31. God is the One who:
   ___ a. brings into deeper harmony
   ___ b. takes sides
   ___ c. lures forth possibilities
   ___ d. atones for us
   ___ e. experiences our needs with us

32. Why do good?:
   ___ a. to make amends for my actions
   ___ b. in response to the kindness and encouragement I have received
   ___ c. power and energy overflowing from deep within
   ___ d. empathy with others
   ___ e. to fight injustice

33. I am afraid lest in the end:
   ___ a. I might give up.
   ___ b. There won't be anything more.
   ___ c. Things will not have been made better.
   ___ d. I will be unliked/unwanted.
   ___ e. I will be found wrong.

34. I identify with:
   ___ a. Israel's forty years braving the desert
b. Sara who was barren  
c. Adam and Eve who became homesick for Eden  
d. Peter who betrayed  
e. Moses who ran away from taking the hard stands

35. A noble purpose for my life would be to:  
a. evoke harmony  
b. obey God  
c. fight the good fight  
d. persevere with integrity  
e. respect each person as sacred

36. Jesus is best understood as:  
a. pioneer, prophet  
b. threshold, model  
c. companion, sympathizer  
d. illuminator, evoker  
e. savior, Lord

37. The problem with so many of us is that we don't:  
a. risk  
b. last  
c. care  
d. know  
e. confess

38. Who is the Christ?:  
a. redeemer  
b. Messiah  
c. revealer  
d. suffering Servant  
e. teacher/example

39. One needs to focus:  
a. the long run  
b. depth  
c. breadth  
d. motivation  
e. goal

40. As I understand suffering:  
a. It can become an instrument in personal discover.
b. It is wrong, to be fought.
c. God’s ways are not our ways.
d. It is part of life.
e. It can be a testing or penance.

41. Faith is trusting in:
   a. the future as coming
   b. the unknown
   c. a new beginning
   d. me
   e. the inevitable

42. I could be faulted for expecting:
   a. too much
   b. to lose
   c. to be inadequate
   d. to be wrong
   e. too little

43. I am drawn by picturing Jesus:
   a. alone with God in the mountains in prayer
   b. with the woman at the well
   c. overcoming temptation in the desert
   d. casting out the money-changers
   e. agonizing in Gethsemane

44. Life entails:
   a. guilt to be removed
   b. victory to be won
   c. mystery to be unveiled
   d. duty to be lived
   e. fulfillment to be realized

45. Which of these activities would make you feel alive?:
   a. experiencing reconciliation after a bitter fight
   b. helping a homeless family
   c. doing a retreat in the mountains
   d. having deep meal conversation with a friend
   e. being acknowledged by friends at work

46. Redemption for me comes from experiencing Jesus as:
   a. nurturer
47. When things get difficult, in order to survive I sometimes:
   ___ a. turn secret
   ___ b. turn away
   ___ c. turn off
   ___ d. turn inward
   ___ e. go away

48. I live life as if it has about it the feel of:
   ___ a. fantasy, mystery
   ___ b. tragedy
   ___ c. lyric poetry
   ___ d. pathos
   ___ e. "comedy" (successful resolution)

49. Relationships sometime become strained because of:
   ___ a. intensity, heaviness
   ___ b. reluctance to venture
   ___ c. failure, selfishness
   ___ d. factors external to the relation
   ___ e. misunderstandings in communication

50. God is the One who:
   ___ a. identifies with us
   ___ b. forgives us personally
   ___ c. promises a new earth
   ___ d. draws us into union
   ___ e. adopts us as family

51. One must learn how to deal with:
   ___ a. one cause at a time
   ___ b. one world at a time
   ___ c. one day at a time
   ___ d. one life at a time
   ___ e. one episode at a time

52. A Biblical image that appeals to me is:
   ___ a. Jesus and the woman accused of adultery
b. Job's patient strength in adversity

c. The Emmaus reunion

d. Exodus to the promised land

e. The thief forgiven on the cross

53. I need:
a. approval
b. strength
c. to experience myself as part of a greater Whole
d. to become worthy
e. to have a cause

54. I can identify with the Psalmist who said:
a. "As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, 0 God."
b. "Parent of the parentless and protector of widows, you lead out
   the prisoners to freedom."
c. "In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the
   storms pass by."
d. "Too heavy for us are our offenses, but you wipe them away."
e. "You have made us little less than a god; with glory and honor
   you have crowned us."

55. Sin is:
a. a condition that defines us even before we act
b. misdirected good
c. part of life's struggles
d. closing one's eyes to the mystery
e. compromising too soon

56. The ideal Christian is a:
a. martyr
b. saint
c. witness
d. visionary
e. Spiritual mentor

57. My experience of sin is:
a. unrealized potential
b. separation
c. indifference
d. perversity
e. weakening
58. The Gospel means:
   _____ a. remaining faithful to the end
   _____ b. denying myself for others
   _____ c. giving myself for a cause
   _____ d. learning to love myself
   _____ e. losing myself in God

59. It is fine to:
   _____ a. enjoy
   _____ b. try
   _____ c. begin again
   _____ d. soar
   _____ e. win

60. A worthy end for my life:
   _____ a. to be reunited with all of life
   _____ b. to change the way things are
   _____ c. to endure, with integrity
   _____ d. to become a whole person
   _____ e. to look good

61. Christian experience centers in:
   _____ a. “mystic” oneness
   _____ b. focused growth
   _____ c. strength to persevere
   _____ d. common cause
   _____ e. new birth

62. It is important for persons to:
   _____ a. get in touch with their feelings
   _____ b. keep on keeping on
   _____ c. confess their shortcomings
   _____ d. risk the unknown
   _____ e. get involved

63. A group of words that characterizes Christ's work is:
   _____ a. vision, victory, completion
   _____ b. justification, reprieve, salvation
   _____ c. survival, sojourner, companion
   _____ d. unity, homecoming, oneness
   _____ e. model, wholeness, freedom to be
III. A THEOLOGICAL WORLDS DESCRIPTION AND SELF-RATING

Instructions:

Before scoring the Inventory you have just taken, read the descriptions of the five Theological Worlds below. Then put the number "1" next to the World that best fits your perspective, a "2" next to the one that fits second best, and so on, through all five descriptions. This will give you an opportunity to select a World, and give an order of preference for the other Worlds. A comparison of your choices with your scores as determined in Section IV will help indicate your degree of theological self-awareness.

____

WORLD 1: SEPARATION AND REUNION. For inhabitants of this World, there is often a sense of abandonment. Within this huge cosmos, we feel isolated, small, lonely—a speck in a vast and staggering space. At times we seem to be aliens, or orphans. Life tends to be a quest to understand the mystery of this Whole. Our longing is to find our way home, as it were. We yearn wistfully for a harmony to all things, while being haunted by the sad thought that there may be nothing behind it all.

Resolution as the promise of homecoming can begin through experiencing the fact of our existence as itself a gift. In sensing this mystery of being, one can be touched with awe. Such sensitivity often comes in sacramental moments in which we are grasped in oneness with the Ground of our being. It is as if a veil is lifted, if only for a moment, and we know that we truly do belong. Such moments serve as center point for the turning, wheel, the unchanging in the changing, the eternal in the flux.

The cycle of nature reflects, almost liturgically, the cycle of life itself: birth, death, rebirth. Experiences of this ongoing rhythm are foretastes of a hoped-for cosmic harmony, that final reunion of everything that is separated. Even on this side, touches of paradise can be sensed around us. It is when we do not understand this, or forget, that we get in the way. But we are nonetheless bitten by eternity, so that neither this life nor this earth can ever really feel like home. The meaning of our craving is to return from whence we came, losing ourselves in God. Day by day authenticity is in becoming transparent to that God, so living that we point beyond ourselves to the Power of Being in which we are all grounded.

____

WORLD 2: CONFLICT AND VINDICATION. In this World, history and its various institutions are tainted with self-interest. Conflict seems to be at the heart of life, even of nature, with many persons deprived of the means needed for living. Wherever one turns, the scene is a drama of winners and losers. Death is the final enemy, symbolizing the hostility which resists the crucial goal of humanizing this world. The foe is widespread, for even the cosmos is beset by entropy, so that such hemorrhaging seems
to give to each part a sense of being violated. Thus threatened by the possibility of chaos, persons are tempted to grasp for power, escalating into the threat of nuclear destruction. Nations seem willing to "bring it all down" rather than lose. At one level or another, then, one keeps being pushed into being a "warrior." Our reaction to often one of anger, sometimes even of rage. Reform is called for, even rebellion. Yet even though one is determined to change the world, such efforts sometimes feel like a never-ending defeat.

Hope for resolution is rooted in the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, to be realized as liberation within history. In Shakespeare’s words, “All's well that ends well.” Otherwise history is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Since death in all forms is God's foe, resurrection then provides promise, not only to the individual but to history itself. In behalf of that goal, God takes sides, being committed to the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed—and so must we. God calls us to be co-creators in this completion of creation. History will be vindicated by its completion, flowing back to give meaning to each part as means to that end. "Thy Kingdom come on earth, as it already is in heaven." One way to work toward that vision is live as if the end is already here. Such hope in the God of the future makes us never satisfied with what is. This is why the prophet believes in a hope worth dying for.

_____

WORLD 3: EMPTINESS AND FULFILLMENT. Those who inhabit this World are concerned with the self, for the dilemma that has taken hold of them is self-estrangement. One is uneasy that if people really knew me, they wouldn't like me. It isn't so much that I'm bad; it's as if there may not be much there. If my mask were to slip, it would be all over. But perhaps that wouldn't change things much after all, since often no one seems to care. The problem for many of us in this World is that often we are made to feel invisible, impotent, unheard, or insignificant. We are afterthoughts, like outcasts, as it were. And inside there is this emptiness, a void, an ache that resides in one's midsection--the fear of being nobody, which in turn hinders action for fear of being rejected. So I try to be who others want me to be, until I don't know who I am. And yet still I don't belong. My life seems like a deception, as I become increasingly alienated even from myself. The result is a paralysis, an aimlessness, a floundering--trapped by myself within myself. My reward is a strange comfort in inertia--where it is too late for action, too soon for regrets.

Resolution begins by being awakened to one's possibilities, usually by the support and promise of a caring friend or group. In being accepted, one is lured toward wholeness and fulfillment. For the Christian, such meaning emerges not only through the nurture of a Christian community, but through the One who in scripture models life as giving and receiving love. In being loved for who I am, I can be and become my true self. Knowing from within that real selfhood means to love and be loved, I am empowered to realize my potential. Such faith involves so believing in myself that I dare
feel again, unable to love others if I do not love myself. The delicious mystery of living is growth, expansiveness, fulfillment--the dynamic of redeemed life. It entails a cycle that nature models for us. Death is part of the life process, just as re-birth is part of the death process. Throughout, the focus is self-discovery, self-growth, self-risk. Therein God is not distant, but experienced as present in a world that becomes friendly in its orderliness and hospitable in its potentiality.

_____ WORLD 4: CONDEMNATION AND FORGIVENESS. This world is characterized by the struggle with temptation and sin. Within each of us is a tendency toward arrogance, to play “God” by idolizing who we are and what we possess. While we prefer to see our questionable behavior as rooted in ignorance, more often than not we deliberately choose what is wrong, often because it is "forbidden fruit." In the quiet hours, it is hard to quiet a sense of guilt, evoked often by fear of judgment. We can feel like fugitives. This condition has to do not simply with what we do, but with an inner disposition. In trying to change, we experience an impotence to be otherwise, as if we are diseased. It is as though there is a deep need within me to justify my life, to convince myself and others that I am worthy of living. Thus life becomes an unending chore to be done. Yet I can never do enough, and so this drive flirts heavily with self-deception--in regarding myself as being far better than I am. But the truth is that the good I want to do, I don't do; and what I shouldn't want to do is precisely what I end up doing. So I am caught with even my efforts at selflessness being selfishly motivated.

Since I cannot get out of my own way, resolution becomes possible only through God's intervention, centering in the gift of forgiveness. Repentance, leading to conversion, exhibits faith as trust that we have received reprieve, even though in no way do we deserve it. In spite of our unacceptability, God adopts us, not simply as children, but as heirs of life eternal. This is why the word "grace" is so important, for the Gospel is the miracle of the empty hands. The Christian's life is one of paradox--in which God forgives the unforgivable, loves the unlovable, and accepts the unacceptable. Our call is to respond in faithful obedience to this proclamation. Emphasis is not on self-realization but on self-sacrifice. Good works are not done in order to receive, but are spontaneous and joyous responses to being already justified by God's graciousness. Thus life becomes the ongoing pendulum between repentance and forgiveness, characterized by thankful humility.

_____ WORLD 5: SUFFERING AND ENDURANCE. The dilemma which focuses life for citizens of this World is life itself, the way things are. There is a heaviness to daily living, so that it seems that whatever can go wrong will. And whatever was troublesome yesterday will surely happen again, and again. while the characters and settings change, the plot remains basically the same--as variations on the theme of
"victim." Whether the examples are a poor person who knows deprivation from without, or a successful one who is being eaten by cancer from within, there is the same sense of being engulfed, controlled, wronged, as if a refugee. Suffering is the one constant, the sign of living near the edge. Unable to exist without being scarred, life often feels like a predator. So one is tempted not to feel anymore, to trade in trying for a cynical fatigue. Worn down in one's courageous fortitude, distrust is often the best defense against being done in. This is a hard world, one not readily chosen, for sadness edges even the joys.

Although one cannot really change the way things are, one does have a choice as how to live it. Resolution, ironically, can come through suffering, as a refining fire, as it were. Travail, rightly faced, can bring healing, in which integrity is birthed. Integrity is a determined willingness to outlast, to persevere, no matter what. Spirit is that strange power which strengthens one to press on, even when one can think of no better reason than just keeping on keeping on. For the Christian, such faithfulness, no matter what the consequences, is rooted in the belief that we are not in it alone. Because the companion God is suffering with us, we can endure to the end. On Golgotha, God screams in agony with us, drinking deeply of all that we too go through; therefore nothing can separate us from such a God. Redeemed life has little to do with grand designs or miraculous reversals. It is the integrity born of tenacity on the daily road, respecting the small and the commonplace. A knowing glance and a sharing hand are the manna which feed. What gives dignity to life is the quality of never quitting, so facing without deception whatever happens that it becomes a "moral victory." What matters is not the quantity of life but the quality of living. Thus life is to be drunk to the dregs, for one only goes around once. This can be done if one takes "one day at a time."
**IV. SELF-SCORING THE THEOLOGICAL WORLDS INVENTORY**

Transfer your responses to each question onto this page. Note that the letters a, b, c, d, e are not in alphabetical order. For some questions the letters appear more than once. Then total each column. The highest number indicates the Theological World which most fits you; second highest indicates the second best, etc. Compare the results with your “Self-Rating.”

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V. THEOLOGICAL WORLDS: AN EVALUATION

Each Theological World can be a valid arena in which to live, move, and have one's being. No one world, as such, is better than another, nor more true. Nor can these worlds be arranged so as to view some as elementary, others as more mature. The first task enabled by this Inventory was to identify the world in which you already live. The result may be a feeling of satisfaction, for your self-identity may be as you would want. Thus you are ready to understand that World more coherently, furnish it more fully, articulate and share it more fluently, and live it more faithfully. On the other hand, you might be receiving the description of your self-identity with negative feelings. This might mean that you are living an inherited world rather than residing in your own home. Or you may be living your world at its weak edges. Or in seeing your world rendered self-conscious, you may begin to experience it suffocating or inhibiting, inviting the honesty of crisis.

Whichever your reaction, the next task is to explore the alternative Worlds. This may be done for several reasons. It can enrich your own World by incorporating coherently dimensions of the others. It may well test its viability as the beginning of your own conversion. It can help you understand better other persons, and why you and they interact as you do. It can help to provide a profile for a concrete congregation, giving clues to its inner dynamics. Or it may provide the base for restructuring your congregation. What follows is an invitation to begin such a dialogue, indicating a few of the strengths and weaknesses possible within each World.

WORLD I. SEPARATION AND REUNION.

**Strength:** Persons inhabiting this world are attracted by wholeness and harmony, valuing the inclusiveness of all. The cosmos and nature share this organic and mysterious totality. There is a quiet and often patient acceptance of human foibles by placing things within this larger perspective. There is a tendency to be sacramental, whether in the formal sense or through delight in participating in the rhythms of nature. Whichever, meaning is celebrated in the simple gift of existing. While life is often experienced in terms of polarities or dualities, ultimately these are unreal. Unity is rooted in God, in whom we live and move and have our being. Because God, as all in all, grounds and holds all things in being, it is possible to transcend the separation of subject and object in contemplation and the mystic experience. This may make one sympathetic to Eastern thought in particular, and the unity of all religions in general. The basic posture in this world is to stand before life as mystery, invited to live as reverent guest. The Reign of God means the unifying of all things in God, experienced now in foretaste, as moments of transparency. In such timeless moments, one is touched by the still point of the turning wheel. Ethics emerge from this organic vision, ecologically sensitive that "in as much as you do it to the least of these you do it to Me."
Weakness: Mystic experience can undercut the passion for action. Becoming resigned to the rhythms of separation and reunion, one can overlook destructive problems by seeing them as relatively insignificant from the perspective of Eternity. Socio/economic/political dimensions of life can be treated as if they are not fully real. Since harmony is intuited as cyclic rather than linear, history can take on an uneasy status, or reduced to inevitable pattern. Furthermore, the propensity to see things symbolically, can undercut the concreteness of life with transparency, sacrificing the uniqueness of each thing. Individuals in this world tend to feel alone, and as a neglected minority in modern society can be encouraged to adopt an individualistic posture toward life and others.

WORLD II. CONFLICT AND VINDICATION.

Strength: Persons who reside in this World tend to be committed to issues of justice and freedom. They are often willing to risk personal security and gain in order to join God in the fight for vindication of what is right. This leads many to protest against the individualism and privatization characterizing current life in the USA. They appreciate the physical ingredients of common day existence, which accounts in part for their anger when the necessities of life are denied to anyone. There is a firm awareness of the corporate nature of life, and thus of the degree to which evil is systemic in nature. These people tend to have a finely honed social conscience, and are committed to the cost of discipleship.

Weakness: Often such persons have a hard time enjoying life, drawn to "doing" far more than to "being." Not only are they often driven people, but there is a tendency to regard things more as means than ends. They live more for the future than the present. As a result, there can be a shallow and non-spiritual activism, on the one hand or, on the other, a sacrifice of relationships in behalf of results. Ironically, passion for one's particular cause does not always bring with it a sensitivity to other oppressions. Anger against death can lead to an avoidance of death. There can be a cleavage between humans and nature, bringing an insensitivity that sacrifices the ecological whole to a rectification of economic impoverishment. Further, the emphasis on corporate and systemic injustice can be made so central that sin as residing deeply in the self may be neglected. Likewise, concern for people can lead to a neglect of the person. Self-righteousness can also be a temptation, leading one to simplify issues by dividing groups into "good" and "bad." This can result in "crusades," where the means for victory can contradict the values entertained as goals. Finally, this emphasis on goals can lead to utopianism, both in program and in personal calling, leading to burnout and/or capitulation.
WORLD III. EMPTINESS AND FULFILLMENT:

**Strength:** There is a keen sensitivity in this World to how socialization can scar and marginalize the person. The individual tends to be lost in any structure, resulting in the self being alienated from itself. Inhabitants of this world tend to have a healthy regard for eros: for vitality, for feelings, for deep sharing for a lyric love of living. Dualism is opposed, insisting, for example, on integrating right and left brain thinking, and regarding mind and body as a whole. This world is populated with persons whose eyes are honed to see possibilities, becoming awakened to one's environment as positive and hopeful. "Becoming" is the key term, with growth regarded as the natural state of things. The precious moments are often characterized by a lyric child-likeness, fascinated with the new and imaginative.

**Weakness:** In the passion for fulfillment, there can be a tendency to neglect or even exclude persons who are not part of one's support. There can be excessive pride in one's stage of "maturity," needing the "less enlightened" with whom to compare oneself. Because citizens of this world are often from more privileged classes, there is a tendency to overlook the negative impact of systems and the need to use power in changing dehumanizing systems. Seeing life in terms of potential, there can be a tendency to identify "winners" with personal effort, "losers" with failing to try enough. Finally, the optimism often characterizing this world can lead to a discounting of one's shadow side, blind to one's own motivations for advantage even when denying all interest in power.

WORLD IV. CONDEMNATION AND FORGIVENESS

**Strength:** Residents of this World have the courage to look at human duplicity without illusion. They see a powerful case for God in the destructive spectacle of humans playing "god" in the very act of denying God. Evidence of the "fall" is this universal human pretentiousness. What needs to be heard is the good news that God's grace is free and available to those who repent of their arrogance and ask for it. While conversion can be once and for all, there continues to be a need for confession and forgiveness, over and over. Christian life is characterized by humility, in knowing that one is sustained by grace. The response called for is one of faithful obedience, rooted in a strong distinction between good and evil and in a committed discipleship of self-denial.

**Weakness:** There can be a tendency for the individual in this world to be guilt-ridden. Thus one may be tempted to put guilt-trips on others. Either way, poor self-images can result. Stress on sin can be so strong that it blurs whatever motives, capacities, and degrees of goodness may be present, undercutting morality in society. In portraying the new birth in terms of a heavy contrast between "before" and "after," one's inevitable shortcomings can be driven inward, creating a secret life of deception, sometimes from oneself, but certainly from others. Relatedly, the distinction between
believer and non-believer can be so graphically drawn that rather than confessing one's shortcomings, one may be tempted to project them onto others, in acts of righteous superiority. This can occur not only in personal living, but in establishing political, economic, and national dualisms which too easily identifies one's own position with God's. Such idolatry can encourage use of force to keep the "unrighteous" from prevailing. Emphasis upon response can render justification by faith, ironically, into a new form of works-righteousness, known as the "Protestant work-ethic," in which one is driven to prove one's worth. There can be a tendency to surround the offer of God's free and unmerited grace with so many conditions that it is no longer free.

**WORLD V. SUFFERING AND ENDURANCE**

**Strength:** Residents of this World have a keen discernment of the way things are, and what it means to live as the leftovers of others. This sensitivity can bring a deep empathy for others. There is a tendency to be tenacious, strong, and shrewd, committed to living with a special brand of "homey" integrity. Deep loyalty and dependability for its own sake can become second nature, with a capacity to outlast with long-suffering. These are the ones who remain for the long-haul. They are often surprisingly open to share what they have, being more concerned for the quality of the little than the quantity of the much.

**Weakness:** While these are the salt of the earth, the salt can lose its savor--by becoming strung out, overextended, or burned out. Thus around the edges can lurk the shadows of depression or immobilization, even a tinge of masochism. For inhabitants of this world, closure and resolution are difficult to effect. Also apathy toward change can become a defense mechanism. There can be a tendency to squander "everything" in an irrational moment, either of respite, or gambling on a miraculous reversal. Because this World rests on life as unchanging, remaining basically what it was, is, and always will be, a resident can be undone if a reversal does occur. In finding oneself in the "up position," one can be tempted to become judgmental, even intolerant, against those with whom one had formerly identified so deeply.

*[NOTE: This inventory, which you are free to use, was developed by W. Paul Jones, based on the material in his book *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989)]*
Theological Worlds Experience Guide

Experience of World One

A. Explain the night and prepare your heart for the evening.
B. Leaning on the Everlasting Arms by The Hillbilly Thomists
C. Lectio Divina on Romans 8:18-25
   a. In this passage, Paul is reflecting on the promise of God to restore and redeem all of creation. Are there any words or phrases that stick out to you in this passage?
   b. Paul tells the Roman church that God isn’t just redeeming them, but God is redeeming the entire Cosmos. This is a much bigger picture of God’s redemption than we usually hear in our churches. How does this make you feel, knowing that God will redeem all things?
D. Read the passage again.
   a. You are part of a plan to restore the whole of Creation. How does that make you feel?
   b. Paul is telling you that you are a part of a cosmic story that God is orchestrating. We are not alone in the world, but part of something much bigger than ourselves. Speak to God about how you might find your place in this unfolding drama.
E. Conversation about World One and the movement from isolation to unity as part of the Christian journey.
   a. Isaiah 6:1-8
   b. The story of the Prodigal Son
   c. Neal DeGrasse Tyson- “Not only do you live among the stars, the stars live within us.”
   d. Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front by Wendell Berry
F. Invitation to walk a prayer labyrinth as a way of going home to God and coming back to world as a changed person.
G. Communion that is centered on the common elements of bread and wine that God uses to change the world.

Experience of World Two

A. Explain the night and have them prepare their hearts.
B. “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder” by Johnny Cash
C. Lectio Divina on Revelation 21:1-7
   a. This is a picture of Creation being renewed by God. What words or phrases stick out when I read this passage?
   b. In this passage, we hear that God is victorious over all evil and injustice in the world. Try to imagine a world where there was peace and justice for all people.
D. Read the passage again.
   a. “Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” Where in life do you see the need to experience freedom from these things? How about in your own life?
   b. The Christian tradition believes that Jesus defeated death/chaos and launched the Kingdom of God/New Creation here on earth. Our calling is to work for this Kingdom. Where are places in the world where we can work for justice so all might experience this Kingdom that Jesus launched through his death and resurrection?

E. Conversation about World 2 and the idea of God as the God of the Oppressed.
   a. The Book of Exodus as the starting place for all talk about God who is a liberator.

F. Take time to talk about the places of injustice in the world and how the Church is called to be on the side of the oppressed. Give participants time to call out places of injustice where God is asking the church to work for justice.

G. Communion reflecting on the Victory of God achieved on the cross and the call to action.

Experience of World Three
A. Explanation of the evening and prepare your hearts.
B. Be Thou My Vision by Van Morrison
   a. Many of us grew up with the story of Zacchaeus. Are there any details to this story that you do not remember, that were new to you? What sticks out to you when you heard the story anew?
   b. The story says that Zacchaeus was called a sinner by the crowds who are gathered, who would have hated him because of his dealing with the Romans. Imagine how Zacchaeus must have felt as he was alone in the crowd of people who hated him. How would that make you feel?

D. Read the passage again
   a. Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from the tree and shares a meal with him. Jesus goes into his home. While others call Zacchaeus a sinner, Jesus calls him a Son of Abraham. How do you think Zacchaeus must have felt in the presence of Jesus?
   b. In response to Jesus’ love, Zacchaeus offers to give away half of his possessions. Imagine yourself in the place of Zacchaeus, tell Jesus what you are willing to give away as a response to his love for you.

E. Explanation of what is at the heart of the Third Theological World. How Jesus takes our existential loneliness and invites us to have purpose and meaning in the world.
   a. The Prodigal Son in Luke 19
b. Jesus invites Peter to walk on the water. Jesus expected Peter to walk with him. Peter sank, not because he took his eyes off of Jesus, but he sank because he didn’t believe in himself. God believes that, with Christ, we can do miraculous things.

c. A conversation about how Christ invites us to be human in a new way as “The Glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

F. Invite participants to share their own stories of how God has worked in their own lives to help them discover who they are in the world. Also give participants a chance to talk about how God is working through their lives today.

G. Communion as a family meal where all are welcomed at the table as beloved members of the family.

Experience of World Four
A. Explain the Night and invite them to prepare their hearts
B. Nothing but the Blood from Page CVXI
C. Lectio Divina from John 8:1-11
   1. What word grabs your attention as you hear this passage? Why does it draw you to it?
   2. Can you imagine what it feels like to be the woman caught in sin? Can you imagine feeling the condemnation from those around her? Have you ever felt that way in your life?

D. Read the passage again John 8:1-11
   3. Imagine that it is you standing before the crowd. Hear Jesus calling your name and asking where are the people who condemn you. Hear his voice telling you that you are not condemned, but loved by Jesus, and invited to live in a better way.
   4. How do you want to respond to Jesus as he gives you grace and shows you forgiveness. Speak to Jesus now.

E. Discussion on the concept of sin and forgiveness using Romans 3:21-26
   1. What is sin?
      a. Missing the mark.
      b. A disruption of shalom in the world.
      c. A break in the relationship between God and other people.
      d. Missing an opportunity to be who God created you to be.
   2. Types of sin.
      a. Individual and Corporate
      b. Omission and Commission
   3. The restoration that is made available to us through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.
F. Invitation to write their sin and burn it in the basket. (Amazing Grace from Page CVXI)
G. Communion centered on Forgiveness of Sin.

Experience of World Five
A. Explain the night and have them prepare their hearts.
B. “I want Jesus to talk with me” by Eric Bibb
C. Lectio Divina on Isaiah 52:13-53:12
   a. What characteristics of the Servant stick out to you?
   b. There is a great loneliness in this passage. He was “despised and rejected, a man of suffering filled with pain.” Have you ever felt this way?
D. Read the passage.
   a. The Christian tradition says that this Suffering Servant is Jesus, who suffered in a world that is often unjust. Think about Jesus as this Suffering Servant.
   b. At the heart of Incarnation is the idea that God took on flesh and came among us through Jesus Christ. Anything we experience, God has experienced that as well. Jesus can sympathize with your loneliness, fear, and suffering.
   c. Talk to Jesus about how you are feeling. Ask him to walk with you through your anxiety.
E. Conversation about World 5 and the idea of Suffering and Endurance found in the Bible.
   a. Psalm 23
      i. Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. (When, not if)
   b. Discussion about the Incarnation and how Jesus walks with us in the suffering of the World.
F. Invitation to walk through the Stations of the Cross and reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus.
G. Communion centered on Suffering and Endurance.
Interview Questions

At the conclusion of the experiences, I met with each participant to ask questions about their experience of the five Theological Worlds and if they experienced anything that better helped them to align their lived-experienced with their understanding of who God is and how God is at work in the world.

1. Prior to taking the Inventory, which of the Theological Worlds best describes your experience of Christianity? Please expand on why you think this is the case?

2. How did feel about the scores on your Theological Worlds Inventory? If so, why were you surprised at how you scored?

3. Please expand on how the structured experiences resulted, or did not result, in a change in your Theological World? How did these experiences impact your understanding of how God is at work in the world?

4. After going through the five Theological Worlds, how has this experience helped your understanding of God better align with your lived daily experience of the world?
APPENDIX F

CODED DATA TABLES
## Theological Worlds Inventory Results

**Theological Worlds Inventory Results for John**

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Guided Interview Questions

1. Prior to taking the Inventory, which of the Theological Worlds best describes your experience of Christianity? Please expand on why you think this is the case?

2. How did you feel about the scores on your Theological Worlds Inventory? If so, why were you surprised at how you scored?

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<th>Trauma or Difficulty</th>
<th>Childhood Experience</th>
<th>Work Life</th>
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3. Please expand on how the structured experiences resulted, or did not result, in a change in your Theological World? How did these experiences impact your understanding of how God is at work in the world?

4. After going through the five Theological Worlds, how has this experience helped your understanding of God better align with your lived daily experience of the world?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Exposure to new Worlds</th>
<th>Experiencing the World</th>
<th>Stories from other people</th>
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