

The Impact of Fatherlessness on the Way One Relates to God as Father

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ABSTRACT

Largely as a result of the breakdown of nuclear families in Western society, rates of fatherlessness are increasing. The purpose of this research is to investigate what impact growing up with an absent or dysfunctional father has on faith development and the perception of God. Although there is a large body of scholarly material which addresses the influence of one's father on the perception of God, there is no consensus as to how this influence is exhibited. Nor has there been any significant inquiry into the impact of fatherlessness on faith development specifically. Researchers have tended to ground their investigations in the contradictory views of either Attachment Theory or Projection Theory and then find support within their research for whichever developmental perspective they sought to prove. Attachment Theory suggests that in reaction to an absent father a child may exhibit a compensation response, perceiving God to be a perfect father figure and an attachment substitute. Conversely, Projection Theory posits that a negative perception of father will result in the child demonstrating a correspondence response and transmitting these negative feelings onto their view of God. This research investigates the impact of fatherlessness on the image of God as Father and seeks to demonstrate the existence of both compensation and correspondence responses within a fatherless population.

Quantitative surveys were collected from 505 respondents in seven separate church congregations of various denominations in the greater Waikato region. Additional qualitative information was collected from an open ended question on the survey form and by interviewing three survey participants as representatives of key population groups. By analysing the participants' perceptions of their father and their comparable perceptions of God, I was able to identify similarities and differences in their answers and distinguish correspondence and compensation responses.

Although I found strong support for Attachment Theory in the fatherless population, with 49.4% of those who were fatherless demonstrating a compensation response, the most significant influencing factor on the perception of God was a negative perception of father. Respondents with a negative perception of father, whether fatherless or not, had a higher rate of compensation responses (61.1%) and viewed God as more distant and less

nurturing, involved, or accepting than did participants with a positive view of father. Despite the strong evidence of attachment substitution amongst those with a negative perception of father, lower overall scores for attributes of God and larger standard deviations in those scores suggested that some who were affected by an absent or dysfunctional father exhibited a correspondence response. This was further reinforced by the interviews and the comments written on the survey forms, which suggest that although some of those affected by fatherlessness may naturally demonstrate a compensation or correspondence response, others' responses may change over time. It appears that some may begin by transferring a negative perception of father onto their image of God, but as their faith develops, evolves, and matures, they may come to view God as the perfect Father they had lacked. The thesis concludes with a discussion of some of the implications of this research for congregational ministry.

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Chapter 1

The Significance of Fathers

Growing up I was blessed with a loving, committed, supportive father who lavished his children with attention. It was unthinkable to me that other fathers might be abusive, disinterested, unloving, or absent. In this sheltered and innocent state I had no concept that negative and destructive interactions between a father and child were even possible. Despite my family running a half way house for at risk teenagers, a large portion of whom I am now aware had suffered neglect or abuse at the hands of their fathers, I was still blissfully ignorant of what is a relatively common experience for many New Zealand children. My positive experience of a father helped to provide a definition for me what the word father meant. Consequently, this loving example of an earthly father created a framework from which I was able to relate to God as Father.

At the age of seventeen, in my first year of officer training in the New Zealand Army, I remember talking to one of the other Officer Cadets who had been largely alienated by the rest of our class. I chose to befriend her, albeit somewhat in secret and away from the judgmental eyes of our classmates, and she would often tell me about her personal upbringing and experiences. From a wealthy and influential family, she had wanted for nothing. Yet the overwhelming area of concern for her was her father and his lack of affection toward both her and her mother. When she told me that she could not remember her father ever hugging her or telling her that he loved her, my perception of the world in which I lived was shattered. I was shocked, disgusted, heartbroken and disappointed. Never before had I seriously considered that my own experience of a father was anything other than the norm. I realised that the callous front which she put on and the needy way in which she entered relationships, probably stemmed at least in part from the loveless neglect of her father and how she had learnt to cope with that situation. Although her father still lived in the same house as she did, in my mind she was fatherless.

As I reflect on this time in my life, I am ashamed that I was not more open in my friendship with this young lady who so desperately needed healthy acceptance. I am also aware that my relationship with her was the catalyst for my interest in the subject of fatherhood. If, by studying the impact of fatherlessness, I can generate more awareness and

add my voice to those of psychologists, criminologists, sociologists and politicians who are warning about this phenomenon, then I will consider my time and effort well spent. I will have truly excelled if I can encourage fathers to be lovingly engaged with their children and the Church to better love those who have been unloved, accept those who have been unaccepted, and show compassion for those who have been hurt.

The Impact of Fatherlessness

While visiting a church recently I was approached by a member of the congregation in his early twenties who proceeded to tell me about the emotional abuse he had suffered as a child. He said that despite living in the same house, his father had abused him and had never really been interested in him except when he became the target for his verbal tirades. Finally, just before he began high school, the man had moved away. Despite this abuse, hurt and abandonment, it was still his tormentor who this young man thought of when he heard the word “father.” With a look of mild disgust on his face, he told me that the thought of God being a father was repulsive to him. While this reaction to the experience of fatherlessness was particularly vehement, at its core it is not uncommon. The impact of abandonment, abuse and dislocation from those who are closest to us as children has far-reaching consequences.

Over the last two decades there has been an increasing awareness of the influence of fatherlessness sociologically. In 1995 David Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, stated:

Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women. Yet, despite its scale and social consequences, fatherlessness is a problem that is frequently ignored or denied.¹

Since the publication of this comment almost 20 years ago, awareness of the issue has improved dramatically within secular and Christian academic circles alike. Author and international social activist Doug Stringer drew on the image presented in Matt 7:24-27 of the wise man building his house on the rock and insisted that “since the dawn of

¹ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 1.

civilisation, family has been the cornerstone and foundation on which all things were built.”² For this reason, he has not been surprised to see increasing social instability coinciding with the progressive erosion of the family unit. Similarly, John Sowers, a member of the White House Task Force on Fatherhood and Healthy Families, looks to the words of the prophet Malachi and asks whether we are suffering the consequences of the curse promised if we ignored the pleas of “Elijah.” He wonders if we are experiencing the results which come from the hearts of fathers failing to turn to their children and the hearts of children failing to turn to their fathers (Mal 4:5-6).³

As a consequence of increasing awareness of the danger this social trend presents, there is now a significant body of evidence internationally which confirms the legitimacy of these warnings and outlines the negative sociological and health effects of children being raised without a close and consistent relationship with their father. These outcomes include a reduction in academic success, greater instances of mental health problems, behavioural problems, delinquency, increased chances of teen pregnancy, greater risk of substance abuse, and a reduction of marital stability.

While there is data surrounding the sociological impact of children being raised in various states of fatherlessness, there is limited research which addresses the impact of this on the way that individuals relate to God. Pierre Balthazar wrote an article entitled “How Anger Toward Absentee Fathers May Make it Difficult to Call God ‘Father’,”⁴ which was published in the *Journal of Pastoral Psychology* in 2007. While this subject very closely mirrors my intended area of research, there is almost no empirical data supporting Balthazar’s conclusion that, for those who have experienced the pain of loss and separation from their father, “the thought of calling God, Father, triggers memories of mistrust, confusion, deprivation, neglect, alienation, and can even lead to despair.”⁵ Justice and Lambert noted a correlation between images of parents and one’s perception of God, particularly in those who had suffered abuse as children, but they did not specifically

² Doug Stringer, *Hope for a Fatherless Generation: Rebuilding our Foundations* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2009), 26.

³ Sowers outlines the divine nature of this prophecy and the role of John the Baptist in turning the hearts of men to God, the Father, but also suggests that it holds some ongoing relevance. He notes that there is “a current, divine expectation for its fulfilment, which is the reconciliation between fathers and their children.” John Sowers, *Fatherless Generation: Redeeming the Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 43-44.

⁴ Pierre M. Balthazar, “How Anger Toward Absentee Fathers May Make it Difficult to Call God ‘Father’,” *Pastoral Psychology* 55/5 (2007): 543-549.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 549.

investigate the impact of the father, despite opening their paper with a series of examples of issues stemming from unhealthy relationships with fathers.⁶ A number of studies have investigated the projection of parental images on one's image of God,⁷ but none have researched the impact of absent father figures on the perception of God specifically. Chou and Uata focused on the impact of parental discipline on the image of God and found that, for men in particular, "those with authoritative fathers were more likely to report perceiving God as loving, forgiving, trustworthy, and available than those with authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful fathers, or those with no father."⁸ Birky and Ball concluded that the closest correlation between one's perception of God and parental influence exists when the parental experience is expressed as a composite image.⁹

These findings, which demonstrate a clear connection between parental influence and the perception of God, lack consensus and fail to specifically investigate the impact of an absent father. Dickie et al. came the closest to discussing this phenomenon as part of a larger study on parent-child relationships and children's images of God. In contrast with Balthazar's aforementioned assertion, they found that "God is perceived as more nurturing and powerful when father is absent, thus becoming an 'attachment substitute'."¹⁰ Because of the paucity of studies on this topic and the diversity of results in the existing studies, there remains room for more specific research investigating the way that fatherlessness influences the perception of God.

Research Outline

This study consists of a quantitative survey with supplementary interviews used to augment the interpretation of the data. The survey instrument can be found in the

⁶ William G. Justice and Warren Lambert, "A Comparative Study of the Language People use to Describe the Personalities of God and Their Earthly Parents," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 40/4 (June 1986): 166-172.

⁷ For example: Lee A. Kirkpatrick and Phillip R. Shaver, "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29/3 (September 1990): 315-334. Alicia Limke and Patrick B. Mayfield, "Attachment to God: Differentiating the Contributions of Fathers and Mothers Using the Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39/2 (2011): 122-129.

⁸ Hui-Tzu Graze Chou and Dominique Uata, "The Impact of Parental Discipline on the Image of God," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 15/7 (September 2012): 680.

⁹ Ian T. Birky and Samuel Ball, "Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation," *The Journal of Psychology* 122/2 (March 1988): 133.

¹⁰ Jane R. Dickie, Amy K. Eshleman, Dawn M. Merasco, Amy Shepard, Michael Vander Wilt and Melissa Johnson, "Parent-Child Relationships and Children's Images of God," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36/1 (1997): 37.

Appendix. However, prior to presenting research methods and results, it is important to provide a context for the discussion. Consequently I begin by introducing research which demonstrates the impact of fatherlessness. A survey of studies on this phenomenon makes clear that the role and function of a father is extremely important for the sociological, developmental and psychological stability of children. I also investigate the state of fatherlessness in the New Zealand context and highlight demographic trends that project increasing rates of fatherlessness over the next 20 years. Having introduced the existing sociological research data, I outline the theoretical frameworks which suggest why and how fathers influence children throughout their development. These theories also provide some reasoning for why people's perceptions of their father would influence their view of God as Father. An extrapolation of Freud's Projection Theory and Bowen's Attachment Theory predict either a view of projection and correspondence between the images of earthly and divine paternal figures, or one of compensation, where God as Father is seen as a substitute for an absent or dysfunctional earthly father. Through analysis of the nature of metaphor and the influence of God creating humanity in His image, I demonstrate that these conflicting expectations of the result of fatherlessness are also reflected in the literary function and form of the metaphorical concept of God as Father. Rather than attempting to lend support to either Projection Theory or Compensation Theory, I suggest that both views reflect what we see in human behaviour. Human development models, the philosophy of metaphor, and the biblical account of Imago Dei all support the suggestion that, while normally one's perception of God as Father will be informed by our perception of an earthly father, where one's earthly father is absent or dysfunctional, individual responses may differ. Some will project the unhealthy image of father onto the image of God as Father and ultimately find that view of God unhelpful as a means of revealing the Divine Being. As Balthazar suggested, some may even reject the image completely because of the pain and mistrust which is synonymous with their understanding of father. However, others will look to the image of God as Father to inform their expectation of an earthly father. God will become their attachment substitute.

In order to test this hypothesis I present and analyse the data collected from 505 survey participants from seven different churches in the greater Waikato region. This analysis is separated into two major topics. The first compares those who were fatherless and those who were not, and the second analyses those who had a negative perception of father compared to those who had a positive perception of father. The data suggests that it is the

perception of father, rather than fatherlessness itself, which is the most significant determining factor in influencing the perceived image of God.

Importance for the Church

The biblical narrative reveals the compassion of God for the lost, the weak, the widowed and the fatherless. John Sowers states:

The church is called to imitate a faith that reflects the Father heart of God: ‘As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience’ (Colossians 3:12). The church is called to administer compassion to the wounded children of each generation. ... If our God is the Father to the fatherless, how can we, who are called to be imitators of him, be any less?¹¹

There is also an expectation that we seek to support and encourage the good of the communities in which we find ourselves. In Jer 29:7 God instructs the Israelites to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” If the Church is going to meaningfully engage with the increasing number of New Zealanders who are growing up without fathers and attempt to introduce a loving, caring, involved and available God who is a Father to the fatherless,¹² it is essential that we understand the way that fatherlessness can affect these individuals. We must understand their frailties, fears, and uncertainties before we can genuinely meet them with love and compassion. Paul Vitz, professor emeritus of psychology at New York University, warns that for

those whose [rejection of God] was conditioned by a father who rejected, or denied, or hated, or manipulated, or physically or sexually abused, or abandoned them, there must be understanding and compassion. Certainly, for children to be forced to hate their own father, or to be brought to a state of despair because of their father’s weakness, is tragedy. All children want to love their father – and to have fathers who love them in return.”¹³

The Church also has a mandate to make disciples (Matt 28:19). Evangelical theologian John Stott, states that “in all evangelism there is a cultural gulf to bridge. ... Only an incarnation can span these divides, for an incarnation means entering other people’s

¹¹ Sowers, *Fatherless Generation*, 131-132.

¹² Ps 68:5.

¹³ Paul Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 147.

worlds, their thought-world, and the worlds of their alienation, loneliness and pain.”¹⁴ This is the goal of this research. To begin to enter and understand the world and experiences of the fatherless and gain some comprehension about how this influences the way that they view and relate to God. By being willing to engage with the world of the fatherless, the Church will be better prepared to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those in their cities and introduce the lost to a God who is Father to the fatherless.

¹⁴ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), 337.

Chapter 2

The Role of the Father

Sociologists, developmental psychologists, theologians and many others have proposed theories about the significance of fathers in the life of children. In this chapter I provide the grounding, relevance and contextualisation for the research presented in later chapters. By investigating the sociological impact of fatherlessness and any mitigating or exacerbating factors which influence the severity of that impact, I will identify trends which correspond to the influence of fatherlessness on one's view of God. To do this I will present evidence from a number of existing sociological studies which suggest causal links between fatherlessness and impaired academic attainment, mental health, and behavioural problems. I will also survey research which highlights the importance of quality time and an authoritative parenting approach. Following this broad overview of current scholarly work I will attempt to provide some local relevance for the New Zealand context in light of a forecast trend for increasing rates of fatherlessness and alternative relationship models. At the end of the chapter, I will highlight the psychological theories underpinning some of the conversation surrounding the question of the role of father in the development of one's view of God. I will conclude by introducing research which demonstrates the outworking of these theoretical frameworks in practice.

Sociological Impact of Fatherlessness

Due to increasing rates of divorce, single parenting, and alternative parenting choices in Western countries, it is becoming increasingly common for children to grow up in households in which they do not cohabit with a biological father and biological mother. As a result, the impact of non-traditional family structures has been gaining increasing attention in academic circles. The majority of research surrounding this topic has tended to address the impact of broken families on children generically, without specifically investigating the effect of separation from fathers. For example, Huurre, Junkkari and Aro conducted a cross sectional follow-up study to determine if there was any long term psychosocial, well-being, or life trajectory disadvantages to adult children of parents who had divorced before the children were 16 years old. They found that "shorter education, unemployment, divorce, negative life events and more risky health behaviour were more

common among subjects with a background of parental divorce.”¹⁵ However, despite the fact that around 90% of children from divorce end up living with their mother and are residentially dislocated from their father,¹⁶ these studies which have not specifically noted the impact of the breakdown of paternal relationship have been omitted from the discussion below.

Despite this exclusion of a large body of research which may be circumstantially applicable to the question at hand, there remain a number of other studies that have either focused specifically on the impact of fatherlessness, or inadvertently discovered a connection between separation from father and any number of measures being investigated. Some of these studies have focused on academic outcomes; others have measured behaviour, internalized feelings, or mental health. These investigations typically assess whether the amount of time a father spends with a child, the quality of time spent with a child, the amount of financial support provided for a child, or the pre-separation relationship with a child, has any impact on them. These studies usually rely on a control of married, cohabiting biological parents and as such provide a meaningful starting point for this discussion.

Academic attainment

One of the most simple, objectively assessed outcomes of paternal separation is academic attainment. Consequently it has been a key measure in a number of inquiries on this topic. Elizabeth Cooksey and Michelle Fondell analysed data from the National Survey of Families and Households in the United States in order to investigate the impact of family structure and how fathers spent their time with children on a child’s academic performance.¹⁷ This cross sectional research separated pre-teen and teenage children in an attempt to differentiate any changes in the degree to which academic performance was influenced. Cooksey and Fondell found that regardless of the age of the child, those with two biological parents and no step siblings achieved the highest academic results.¹⁸

¹⁵ Taina Huurre, Hanna Junkkari and Hillevi Aro, “Long Term Psychosocial Effects of Parental Divorce: A Follow-up Study from Adolescence to Adulthood,” *European Archives of Psychiatry & Clinical Neuroscience* 256/4 (2006): 256.

¹⁶ Linda Nielsen, “Shared Parenting After Divorce: A Review of Shared Residential Parenting Research,” *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 52/8 (Nov/Dec 2011): 588.

¹⁷ Elizabeth C. Cooksey and Michelle M. Fondell, “Spending Time with His Kids: Effects of Family Structure on Fathers’ and Children’s Lives,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 58/3 (August 1996): 693-707.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 701.

Additionally, they found that academic performance was higher amongst both pre-teens and teenagers when their father spent leisure time with them away from home. Time spent doing activities at home and helping with homework was also significant for pre-teens. Fathers spending time with teenagers helping them with homework had little influence on academic performance. What was meaningful, however, was making time to talk with teenagers.¹⁹ By separating the predictors of time and family structure, Cooksey and Fondell also found that “time exerts more influence on grades than family structure does. However, regardless of what measures of fathers’ time are included, the direct effects of family structure remain relatively unchanged.”²⁰ While a non-cohabiting father is able to positively influence the academic performance of a child by spending time with them, this is not able to mitigate the negative effect of their absence from that child’s family structure.

Despite the clear connection between the time fathers spend with children and their academic performance, in a cross sectional study like this there is the risk of reciprocal causation. That is, it is difficult to determine if children’s grades are good because their fathers spend time with them, or if fathers spend time with their children because their grades are good. Longitudinal studies provide an answer to this question.

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) is a continuing longitudinal study of around 17,000 children born in 1958 in the United Kingdom. Data from this study has provided the opportunity for researchers to analyse correlations between parental involvement and academic attainment. Flouri and Buchanan explored the role of early father involvement and later academic achievement. They found that father involvement at age 7 “independently and significantly predicted educational attainment by late adolescence,” and that there was “no evidence suggesting that the impact of father’s involvement with the child depends on the level of mother’s involvement.”²¹ Further, they found that “not growing up in an intact two parent family does not weaken the association between early mother’s or father’s involvement and educational attainment.”²² This finding affirms the conclusions of Feinstein and Symons who also used the NCDS data

¹⁹ Ibid., 702-703.

²⁰ Ibid., 702.

²¹ Eirini Flouri and Ann Buchanan, “Early Father’s and Mother’s Involvement and Child’s Later Educational Outcomes,” *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 64/2 (June 2004): 149-150.

²² Ibid., 150.

and determined that “in contrast to what is usually found, social class, family size and parental education are not generally significant,” and that “only parental interest has a consistently strong impact” on children’s level of academic attainment.²³ These conclusions are in contrast to the earlier findings of Valarie King. In her analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth she found that there was “limited evidence to support the hypothesis that non-resident father involvement has positive benefits for children.”²⁴ However, this investigation only utilised two variables (visitation and the payment of child support)²⁵ and consequently was significantly less comprehensive than the aforementioned studies. Regardless of this contradiction, both findings agree on the fact that fatherlessness, that is paternal dislocation and non-cohabitation, statistically disadvantages the child academically.

Mental health and behaviour

Beyond the investigation into the impact of fatherlessness on academic attainment, a number of studies measure internalised mental health and externalised behavioural health, such as levels of delinquency and anti-social behaviour. Tami Videon’s analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health showed that adolescent girls who have strong relationships with their fathers are less likely to experience depression. She states that “the relationship girls have with their father substantially affects their depression.”²⁶ She also found that the better a boy’s relationship was with his father prior to parental separation, “the greater their increase in delinquent behaviour when they are residentially separated from their father.”²⁷ Videon’s finding that a positive pre-separation father relationship increases delinquent behaviour is noteworthy given that other studies tend to focus on how post-separation father relationships decrease delinquent behaviour.

In her analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Marcia Carlson investigated the effect of family structure and the level of father involvement on externalised behaviour

²³ L. Feinstein and J. Symons, *Discussion Paper No. 341: Attainment in Secondary School* (London: Centre for Economic Performance, 1997), 11-12.

²⁴ Valerie King, “Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Well-Being: Can Dads Make a Difference?” *Journal of Family Issues* 15/1 (Mar 1994): 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

²⁶ Tami M. Videon, “The Effects of Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Parental Separation on Adolescent Well-Being,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64/2 (May 2002): 498.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 494. The same correlation with pre-separation relationships with parents did not exist in girls. Videon notes that girls’ “relationships with their parents prior to separation do not moderate the relationship between parental separation and depression.” *Ibid.*, 498.

problems such as misbehaviour, aggression and delinquency, and internalised problems such as depression, anxiety, and low self esteem. She found that the greater involvement a father has in the life of a child, the less likely they are to display aggressive and antisocial behaviours.²⁸ While this data recorded the level of father involvement and not whether he lived with the child or not, Carlson also found that “[f]ather involvement is *more* beneficial when the father is coresident ... [and] for negative feelings, involvement is *only* beneficial if provided by a coresident father.”²⁹ This supports Deborah Dawson’s earlier analysis of the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health. Dawson found that children living apart from their fathers are, on average, more likely to be expelled or suspended from school, have emotional or behavioural problems, engage in antisocial behaviour, and experience peer conflict or social withdrawal.³⁰

Another area of behaviour often discussed in relation to fatherlessness is early sexual activity. Ellis’s study of father absence and daughter’s risk of early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy is noteworthy as it draws on longitudinal data from both the American Child Development Project and the Christchurch Health and Development Study. The results were almost identical for both sets of data, which lends weight to the assumption that sociological research from the United States and the United Kingdom can be applied with some credibility in the New Zealand context. Ellis found that girls who experienced early father absence (before the age of 5) had the highest rates of both early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy, followed by those who experienced late father absence (between the ages of 6 and 13). Girls with present fathers had the lowest rates of early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy.³¹ This finding is supported by Regnerus’ and Luchies’ investigation on this topic utilising data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. They found that girls who had a close relationship with their father were less likely to engage in "first sex" in the 18 month period between the two waves of their data sets.³²

²⁸ Marcia J. Carlson, “Family Structure, Father Involvement, and Adolescent Behavioral Outcomes,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68/1 (February 2006): 147-148.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149. Italics in original.

³⁰ Deborah A. Dawson, “Family Structure and Children’s Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53/3 (August 1991): 578-579.

³¹ Bruce J. Ellis, et al., “Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?,” *Child Development* 74/3 (May/June 2003): 811.

³² Mark D. Regnerus and Laura B. Luchies, “The Parent-Child Relationship and Opportunities for Adolescents’ First Sex,” *Journal of Family Issues* 27/2 (Feb 2006): 159.

Some evidence suggests that close father-child relationships can reduce the risk of drug use and also increase the hope of future marital stability. While specifically addressing intact families, Bronte-Tinkew, Moore and Carrano found that “the risk of first substance abuse is significantly lower for adolescents with more positive father-child relationships, [regardless] of the effects of other variables including the mother-child relationship.”³³ Likewise, Dorius et al. found that although peer marijuana use increased the risk of an adolescent doing likewise, this correlation was minimised by a close father relationship and a fear of getting caught.³⁴ Risch, Jodl and Eccles found that adolescent males who felt close to their fathers were more likely to anticipate a stable marital relationship for themselves in the future. This study is somewhat different to other studies because it made little difference if the father with whom they had a close relationship was their biological custodial father, biological non-custodial father, or stepfather.³⁵ The key variable was the feeling of a close relationship with that father.

Types of Fathers – Being Present is Not Enough

While these adverse sociological, behavioural, and internalised risks associated with dislocation from one’s father are significant, increasing evidence indicates that these results are not solely a result of a father’s failure to cohabit with the child. The quality of a father’s involvement with a child also appears to have a noticeable influence. Amato and Gilbreth pooled data from 63 studies dealing with non-resident fathers and children’s well-being and found that a child’s academic success improved and their externalizing problems and internalizing problems diminished where the father engaged in authoritative parenting such as providing emotional support to children, praising children's accomplishments, and disciplining children for misbehaviour.³⁶ However, they also note that paternal “contact is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a close relationship to develop.”³⁷ Because non-resident fathers tend to fear that their relationship with their child is tenuous, they are

³³ Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Kristin A. Moore and Jennifer Carrano, “The Father-Child Relationship, Parenting Styles, and Adolescent Risk Behaviors in Intact Families,” *Journal of Family Issues* 27/6 (Jun 2006): 869.

³⁴ Dassandra J. Dorius et al., “Parenting Practices as Moderators of the Relationship Between Peers and Adolescent Marijuana Use,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66/1 (February 2004): 173.

³⁵ Sharon C. Risch, Kathleen M. Jodl and Jaquelyne S. Eccles, “Role of the Father-Adolescent Relationship in Shaping Adolescents’ Attitudes Toward Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66/1 (Feb 2004): 46.

³⁶ Paul R. Amato and Joan G. Gilbreth, “Nonresident Fathers and Children’s Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61/3 (August 1999): 566.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 568.

often permissive, indulgent, and reluctant to set firm boundaries.³⁸ As such, it is difficult, but not impossible, for non-resident fathers to engage in authoritative parenting and provide their children with these benefits. However, as Tami Videon warns, “[R]esiding with two parents offers no guarantee of positive parental involvement for children [either].”³⁹

Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbush state that “studies focusing on custody arrangements following divorce tend to show that children fare better under joint physical custody rather than sole mother or father custody.”⁴⁰ This finding is consistent with Hawkins, Amato and Kings’ more recent conclusion that there is a correlation between active fathering from a non-resident father and increasing rates of internal and external health.⁴¹ However, one cannot determine that a child, who is dislocated from a father due to family break down or alternative parenting choices, will necessarily be disadvantaged compared to a child from an intact nuclear family, simply because the research shows that there is an increased risk. The findings of these studies are intended to highlight statistically significant variations in populations, not pass out sentences or predictions on individuals. Further, as Michael Lamb warns, just because the data shows that there is a statistically causal connection on average between a measure and an outcome, in complex studies involving people, relationships, and psychosocial analysis, the question of *why* these connections take place can not be overlooked. Lamb states that the question one should ask is, “What is it about the context that makes for group differences between children in father-absent and father-present contexts, and what accounts for the impressive within-group variance?”⁴² Supporting Amato and Gilbreth’s findings above, he suggests that it has to do with the amount and quality of a father’s involvement with a child. Lamb notes that “children with highly involved fathers were characterized by increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, less sex-stereotyped beliefs, and a more internal locus of control.”⁴³ While this explanation goes some way to answering the question of why variances occur, it still fails

³⁸ Ibid., 569.

³⁹ Videon, “The Effects of Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Parental Separation on Adolescent Well-Being,” 499.

⁴⁰ C. M. Buchanan, E. E. Maccoby and S. M. Dornbush, *Adolescents After Divorce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), cited in Paul R. Amato, “The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62/4 (Nov 2000): 1281.

⁴¹ Daniel N. Hawkins, Paul R. Amato and Valarie King, “Nonresident Father Involvement and Adolescent Well-Being: Father Effects or Child Effects?” *American Sociological Review* 72 (December 2007): 996-997.

⁴² Michael E. Lamb and Catherine S. Tamis-Lemonda, “The Role of the Father,” in *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, ed. Michael E. Lamb (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2004), 6.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

to unpack why a father's level of involvement leads to positive outcomes. Drawing on a plethora of studies, Lamb suggests that this correlation is due to direct paternal influences based on their behaviour, attitudes, and messages they convey, and indirect influences, which a father emits as part of the complex social system in which he reciprocally influences and is influenced.⁴⁴ Carlson explains this to some degree by indicating that beyond the higher level of involvement expected from co-resident fathers, "a high quality marital/partner relationship is likely to promote greater involvement, ... reinforces mothers' parenting and enhances social capital within families."⁴⁵

Despite these cautions on how research findings are interpreted, understood, and applied, the ramifications of fatherlessness are pervasive and alarming. Even if the exact reason for these influences may not be entirely understood, the scholarly consensus about the data on the impact of parental dislocation demands serious attention. This is all the more so in the New Zealand context, which is facing a forecasted trend of increasing rates of single parent households.

The New Zealand Context

Due to the limited research on fatherlessness that draws on data from New Zealand, interpreting national demographic trends requires applying international studies to the New Zealand context. While no available statistics deal specifically with the number of children living without their fathers, more general data sets help to paint the picture of the New Zealand landscape of fatherlessness. There are currently just under 1.1 million children under the age of 18 in New Zealand⁴⁶ and 225,000 parents who do not live with one or more of their children.⁴⁷ This parental dislocation statistic does not account for parents who are living apart from two or more children. Neither is any gender differentiation of the parents identified, but the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) data provides some information for predicting a gender split. The DPB is a financial assistance benefit for sole

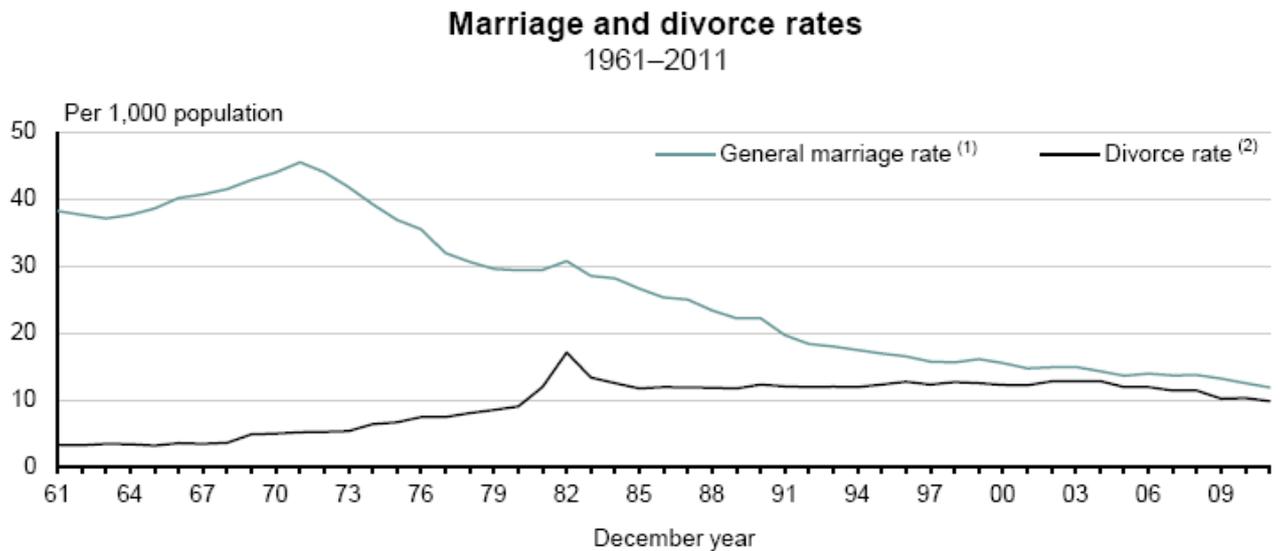
⁴⁴ Ibid., 9. This conclusion is also supported by Valarie King in her discussion on how a father can have an impact on his children. King, "Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Well-Being," 79.

⁴⁵ Carlson, "Family Structure, Father Involvement, and Adolescent Behavioral Outcomes," 139.

⁴⁶ Statistics New Zealand, Excel Spreadsheet "Population Change and Structure – Tables," *Demographic Trends: 2012*, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/estimates_and_projections/demographic-trends-2012.aspx> (14 June 2013).

⁴⁷ Statistics New Zealand, *Parents Supporting Children Not Living With Them* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2012), 1.

Figure 1.



1. Marriages registered in New Zealand per 1,000 mean not-married estimated population aged 16 years and over.

2. Orders for dissolution of marriages granted in New Zealand per 1,000 estimated existing marriages.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

parents.⁴⁸ There are 170,000 children who are cared for by sole parents on the DPB and 89% of all DPB beneficiaries are female.⁴⁹ This provides a known baseline of around 152,000 children who do not live with their fathers. The 225,000 parents who do not live with one or more of their children represent a significant number of additional children not living with their fathers, although this is more difficult to quantify. In light of these facts, it seems safe to conservatively estimate that around one fifth of all children under the age of 18 in New Zealand do not reside with their fathers.

This proportion of fatherless children in New Zealand is part of a wider trend toward increasing levels of single parent households, decreasing marriage rates, and historical increasing rates of divorce. As reflected in Figure 1,⁵⁰ although the divorce rates have

⁴⁸ The DPB also provides assistance for woman who are over 50 years of age and alone, those who care for the sick or infirm, and an Emergency Maintenance Allowance. Those on the Emergency Maintenance Allowance almost all have dependent children under 14 years of age, and the remaining two categories make up less than 10% of all DPB beneficiaries. Ministry of Social Development, *Domestic Purposes Benefit: Trends in the number of clients receiving a Domestic Purposes Benefit*, July 2011, <<http://statistical-report-2010.msd.govt.nz/main+benefits/domestic+purposes+benefits/number+of+recipients+%96+domestic+purposes+benefit>> (14 June 2013).

⁴⁹ Ministry of Social Development, *Sole Parents Receiving DPB* (Wellington: Ministry of Social Development, April 2010).

⁵⁰ Statistics New Zealand (2013), *Demographic Trends: 2012* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2013), 16.

remained relatively steady as a proportion of existing marriages over the past 20 years,⁵¹ marriage rates have also declined markedly from a 1970 high of 43.95 per 1,000 not-married individuals 16 years and over, to just 11.79 per 1,000 in 2012.⁵² It is also worth noting that as the number of total marriages has decreased, and correspondingly the number of total divorces has also decreased,⁵³ the number of children involved in a divorce has declined from 9,131 in 1990, to 6,854 in 2012.⁵⁴ Although the declining number of children caught up in divorce may be seen as positive, this societal trend away from marriage is of concern when one considers that the majority of the studies outlined above, which investigated the impact of fatherlessness on children, utilised the model of cohabiting biological parents, usually defined by marriage, as the gold standard against which all other family structures constantly fell short. Although de facto relationships between biological parents can provide the same advantages to children as married biological parents, this relationship model is inherently unstable. In her review of a number of studies on the subject, Pamela Smock notes that “only about one sixth of cohabitations last at least three years and only a tenth last five years or more.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Osborne, Manning and Smock analysed data from the Fragile Families Study and found that 49% of cohabiting parents had separated within 36 months after a child’s birth, compared to 11% of married parents.⁵⁶

Although the introduction of Civil Unions in 2005 provided an alternative legal recognition of a couple’s relationship which may lead to increased relationship stability, due to its recent introduction and the fact that people are required to be separated for two years before they can dissolve this Civil Union, there is insufficient data to accurately

⁵¹ Statistics New Zealand, *Divorce Rate (Total Population) (Annual-Dec)*, May 2013, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/infoshare/SelectVariables.aspx?pxID=2b494576-c46f-4e30-9d9f-c1434e7e6936>> (13 Jun 2013).

⁵² Statistics New Zealand, *General Marriage Rate, December Years (Total Population) (Annual-Dec)*, May 2013, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/infoshare/SelectVariables.aspx?pxID=e902754d-b978-4e4e-bddf-a5b407ed884e>> (13 Jun 2013).

⁵³ About one third of all marriages end in divorce. This is a slight increase from 1967 when around 26 percent of marriages ended in divorce. Statistics New Zealand, *Marriages, Civil Unions, and Divorces: Year Ended December 2012* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2013), 5.

⁵⁴ Statistics New Zealand, *Divorces Involving Children Aged Under 17 Years (Annual-Dec)*, May 2013, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/infoshare/SelectVariables.aspx?pxID=4c8c78a6-0f3d-4f60-b3d4-adedaf1fdae17>> (13 Jun 2013).

⁵⁵ Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States: An Appraisal of Research Themes, Findings, and Implications,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26/1 (2000): 3.

⁵⁶ Cynthia Osborne, Wendy D. Manning, and Pamela J. Smock, “Married and Cohabiting Parents’ Relationship Stability: A Focus on Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69/5 (Dec 2007): 1354.

compare Civil Unions being dissolved with marital divorce rates. Once there is a sufficient body of data to make these comparisons, it will be interesting to also analyse the number of children involved in this process. This will be of particular interest given that just under half of all civil unions are between female same-sex couples, one third are between male same-sex couples, and the remainder are opposite sex couples.⁵⁷

In addition to the trend away from marriage and its inherent security for children, the rates of fatherlessness are expected to be exacerbated still further. The number of two-parent families in New Zealand is forecast to decline from 41 percent of all families in 2006, to 30 percent of all families in 2031, “partly because of continuing trends toward single parenting.”⁵⁸ Statistics New Zealand indicates that this greater rate of single parenting is due to “increasing numbers of separations and divorces, increasing rates of childbearing outside couple relationships, and more complex shared-care arrangements with parents residing in different households.”⁵⁹ This statistic is of significant relevance to the discussion on the impact of fatherlessness, as it is far more meaningful than divorce rates at revealing families with non-cohabiting parents. Divorce rates underestimate the prevalence of nuclear family breakdown because they fail to account for de facto relationships, the majority of which end in disruption.⁶⁰

The increased risk for children from sole parent households which is apparent throughout the international research outlined above is also observable in some of the Statistics New Zealand findings. In their investigation into vulnerable children and families, they analysed family types to determine their level of risk based on a number of variables, including if they had been a victim of crime in the last 12 months, if they felt isolated, and if they had experienced poor mental or physical health. Two-parent families made up 84 percent and 71 percent of the no-risk and low-risk groups respectively. Conversely, sole-parent households made up 58 percent of the high-risk families.⁶¹ While this finding reflects the lower income that sole-parent families will often have compared to two-parent

⁵⁷ Statistics New Zealand, *Civil Unions by Relationship Type, New Zealand Residents and Overseas Visitors (Annual-Dec)*, May 2013, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/infoshare/SelectVariables.aspx?pxID=b3755f19-1460-4a18-9b17-88889c4c19a5>> (13 Jun 2013).

⁵⁸ Statistics New Zealand, *Demographic Trends: 2009* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2010), 33.

⁵⁹ Statistics New Zealand, *National Family and Household Projections:2006(base)-2031 Update* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2010): 4.

⁶⁰ Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States,” 3.

⁶¹ Statistics New Zealand, *Vulnerable Children and Families: Some Findings From the New Zealand General Social Survey* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2012), 10.

families and is not directly an indicator of the impact of fatherlessness, the circumstantial relationship is unavoidable.

In the research outlined above, one of the key assertions made by a number of researchers was that despite the family structure, the amount and quality of time a father spends with the child is a significant influencing factor on child outcomes. In the New Zealand context some data indicates the deterioration of this paternal interaction when parents separate. In an analysis of the 2009/10 time use survey, Statistics New Zealand investigated the amount of time spent in active child care by mothers and fathers. They found that partnered fathers, on average, spent around half the time in active child care that mothers did. What is particularly notable, however, is that sole mothers spent slightly less time than partnered mothers in caring for children.⁶² What this does not account for, however, is the amount of time separated fathers spend with their children. Cheadle, Amato and King investigated data from two national longitudinal youth surveys in the United States to determine patterns of non-resident father contact. They found that 38% of fathers maintain high-stable contact over time, 32% maintain minimal contact, and 23% have a decreasing level of contact over time.⁶³ High-stable contact in this study was determined as once-a-week, which is particularly alarming given that it is being promoted as the highest category of contact from a non-resident father. In light of these findings and the Statistics New Zealand time use survey, it is evident that father absence has a compounding effect on child care time. Not only is the majority of time that the father would have normally invested lost to that child, but the amount of care that their mother would have provided is also diminished.

Due to the increasing prevalence of single parent families and the significant ramifications of fatherlessness, it is important that the mass of evidence highlighting this impact be given opportunity to be presented publicly and be allowed to influence and inform policy. While there are some activist groups trying to promote awareness of family issues such as this,⁶⁴ largely the voice of warning is lost in the wind.

⁶² Statistics New Zealand, *Caring For Children: Findings From the 2009/10 Time Use Survey* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 2013), 9-10.

⁶³ Jacob E. Cheadle, Paul R. Amato, and Valarie King, "Patterns of Nonresident Father Contact," *Demography* 47/1 (Feb 2010): 216. Cheadle, Amato and King also highlight additional risks of de facto relationships, noting that "divorced fathers tend to maintain more contact with their children than do fathers who were never married to their children's mothers" (page 206).

⁶⁴ Family First and Maxim Institute and two notable organisations promoting family issues in New Zealand.

Same Sex Marriage

This conversation has successfully found new life in the public forum as a result of the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act 2013,⁶⁵ which was passed by parliament and came into effect on the 19th August 2013. As the ramifications of same sex marriage on parenting and fatherlessness have not been discussed above and the fact that it is a current issue which is promoting greater awareness of gender roles in child rearing within the New Zealand context, I will provide a brief overview of the two key views in opposition to the legislation that are most closely affiliated with the discussion of fatherlessness.

In the debate surrounding the Definition of Marriage Bill, one of the primary contentions of opponents to the legislation was that children of same sex parents would suffer similarly to those from dissolved marriages because they are also separated from at least one of their biological parents. The 2005 American Psychological Association (APA) brief on ‘‘Lesbian and Gay Parenting’’ found that ‘‘not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents.’’⁶⁶ However, in his comprehensive critique of this paper, Loren Marks found that ‘‘strong assertions, including those made by the APA, were not empirically warranted.’’⁶⁷ Small, hard to find populations are difficult to randomly sample in order to evaluate them. As such, the large number of studies which demonstrate child outcomes for same sex couples as being similar to those of heterosexual biological parents usually rely on snowball and convenience sampling often without heterosexual comparison groups.⁶⁸ These shortcomings in the research significantly undermine the results and highlight the need for good quality, child outcome focussed, longitudinal research to be conducted. The 1996 Australian study by Sarantakos went some way to correcting these problems by carrying out a comparative analysis of children living with homosexual couples, heterosexual cohabiting couples, and heterosexual married couples, which were all ‘‘matched according to socially significant criteria (e.g., age, number of children,

⁶⁵ This was same sex marriage legislation.

⁶⁶ Charlotte J. Patterson, *Lesbian and Gay Parenting* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005), 15.

⁶⁷ Loren Marks, ‘‘Same-Sex Parenting and Children’s Outcomes: A Closer Examination of the American Psychological Association’s Brief on Lesbian and Gay Parenting,’’ *Social Science Research* 41/4 (July 2012): 735.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 738-739.

education, occupation, and socio-economic status).”⁶⁹ While the measured outcomes addressed only the school environment, they were child focussed and relied on a combination of subjective teacher feedback and school grades. Sarantakos found that children of married couples were more likely to do well at school in academic and social terms than children of homosexual couples in all areas except grades in social studies.⁷⁰

Although the Sarantakos study does not directly contribute to the conversation of a father’s influence on children and child outcomes, it goes some way to discrediting the claims of other studies which show no differences in measures of child wellbeing. Combined with the significant body of research demonstrating the harmful effect of fatherlessness on children, claims of there being no causal link between father involvement and negative child outcomes are undermined. On the weight of research evidence one would have to seriously question findings such as those made by Silverstein and Auerbach, who stated “neither the sex of the adult(s) nor the biological relationship to the child has emerged as a significant variable in predicting positive development.”⁷¹

Other opponents to the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act 2013 protested it on the grounds that same sex marriages are significantly less likely to last than married heterosexual couples and that it is therefore disadvantageous to children. There is some support for this premise. In their study of longitudinal data on the Norwegian and Swedish population register Andersson et al. found that “divorce risks for partnerships of men is 50% higher than the corresponding risk for heterosexual marriages and that the divorce risk for partnerships of women is about double (2.67) that for men (1.50).”⁷² Given this heightened risk of same sex marital decay documented in Norway and Sweden and therefore probably also likely in New Zealand, an impact on the well being of children is likely. Same-sex marriage breakdown may have a similar negative impact on children as the breakdown of a marriage involving two biological parents, but there is insufficient research to prove this connection at this point. However, from the data contained in the New Family Structures Study, Mark Regnerus found that in almost every measure that he

⁶⁹ Sotirios Sarantakos, “Children in Three Contexts: Family, Education, and Social Development,” *Children Australia* 21/3 (1996): 30.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

⁷¹ Louise B. Silverstein and Carl F. Auerbach, “Deconstructing the Essential Father,” *American Psychologist* 54/6 (June 1999): 398.

⁷² Gunnar Andersson, et al., “The Demographics of Same-Sex Marriages in Norway and Sweden.” *Demography* 43/1 (Feb 2006): 93.

tested for, adults from intact biological families were advantaged over those who had homosexual parents. This included likelihood to receive welfare, likelihood to cheat in a relationship, whether they had ever been forced to have sex, educational attainment, personal happiness, and others. While there was some variation between the scores of those with a lesbian mother and those with a gay father, the results in these populations were often similar to those of adults from divorced families.⁷³

When investigating the impact of same sex families on child outcomes, conflicting opinions, political views and personal value systems make an academically objective interpretation of data extremely difficult, particularly when combined with the problems inherent in researching small, hard to find populations in a politically charged landscape. While one could speculate on the child impact of fatherlessness found in some same sex families based on a concocted macro narrative of the combined research on the subject, it would be intellectually dishonest to draw hard and fast predictions on the impact of the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act 2013 in the New Zealand context. At best, the academic landscape around this issue is murky. What the national discussion leading up to the passing of this bill has successfully managed to do, however, is bring increasing public awareness to the existence of research which indicates there is a demonstrable impact on outcomes when children are separated from their biological parents. The 2006 Statistics New Zealand forecast of increasing rates of single parent families did not take into account this legislation change. Given the significant weight of evidence demonstrating the negative impact of fatherlessness, it is important the trend of single parenting be monitored all the more closely in the coming years in order to determine what effect, if any, this amendment will have on New Zealand's demographic landscape.

While the impact of fatherlessness is of concern for New Zealand sociologically and should be of increasing priority for policy makers, for the Church it is of equally significant relevance. A number of theories point to a direct correlation between parental, primarily paternal, images and one's view of God. If these theories are correct, the increasing rates of family break down, divorce, and alternative family arrangements where

⁷³ Mark Regnerus, "How Different are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," *Social Science Research* 41/4 (Jul 2012): 762.

a child's father is not resident has the potential to change the way in which our culture relates to and understands God.

The Theory – Why Fathers Influence Children and Their Image of God

A number of theoretical models provide some structure for understanding why father absence might be expected to influence child outcomes and also provide insight into the connection between father images and one's view of God. Freud's Projection Theory, Attachment Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Systems Theory each provide explanations for the influence of fatherlessness on the child, and Fowler's Faith Development model allows these influences to be interpreted within a framework of spiritual formation.

Projection Theory⁷⁴

Although more recent theorists have refined the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, the influence of his contribution to understanding child development is unquestionable. Named after the play by Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, Freud's Oedipal complex describes the sexual attraction of a boy toward his mother, his desire to take the place of his father, and his fear of his father which represses the realisation of that attraction. Freud indicates that this identification with the father ultimately leads to an adaptation of similar character traits. He states that we give this part of the psyche

the name of super-ego and ascribe to it, the inheritor of the parental influence, the most important functions. If the father was hard, violent and cruel, the super-ego takes over these attributes from him and, in the relations between the ego and it, the passivity that was supposed to have been repressed is re-established.⁷⁵

Although this theory gives a relatively comprehensive explanation for the influence of a father on a boy, Freud's treatment of girls is less developed. Jung developed Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development further and posited a more equitable understanding of the female Oedipus complex, which he referred to as the Electra complex. Jung explained that a "daughter develops a specific liking for the father, with a correspondingly jealous attitude toward the mother."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ These are also known as correspondence theories.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion: Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 185.

⁷⁶ C. G. Jung, *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., 1915), 69.

Despite this slight disagreement between the two theorists, both find that the parental, primarily paternal, image has a significant influence on the individual's perception of God. An avowed atheist, Freud's Projection Theory appears to be a reworking of Ludwig Feuerbach's position on religion⁷⁷ and explains the God-image as a representational image concocted of empirical interactions with significant parental figures.⁷⁸ In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud states:

[T]he terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life.⁷⁹

Jung's contribution to the concept of a parental influence on the God-image was not quite as overt. He saw the God-image is an archetypal *given* in the psyche, functionally almost indistinguishable from the self. Jung differentiated between the conscious subjective psyche (ego) and "the Self," an objective centre of the total psyche. "The Self is most simply described as the inner empirical deity and is identical with the *imago Dei*. ... [It is] the central source of life energy, the foundation of our being which is most simply described as God."⁸⁰ While this understanding of a god-image relies on the centre of the individual, Neumann understood Jung's theory to acknowledge the influence of the parent in shaping this internalised god. He states that "the transpersonal and timeless structure of the archetype, ingrained in the specifically human psyche of the child and ready for development, must first be released and activated by the personal encounter with a human being [parent]."⁸¹ Edinger expands this further by explaining that "during the phase of experiencing the Self in projection, the ego-Self axis is likely to be most vulnerable to damage by adverse environmental influences. ... Therefore, inability to experience acceptance or rapport is felt to be identical with loss of acceptance by the Self."⁸² In this framework, because of the projection of the god-image ("Self") onto the parent, the

⁷⁷ Paul Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 7-8.

⁷⁸ Edward V. Stein, "The Psychological Roots of Self and Faith," *Pastoral Psychology* 33/3 (Spring 1985): 189.

⁷⁹ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 30.

⁸⁰ Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype: Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 3-4. Italics in original.

⁸¹ Erich Neumann, "The Significance of the Genetic Aspect for Analytical Psychology," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 4/2 (July 1959): 128.

⁸² Edinger, *Ego and Archetype*, 39.

rejection of a parent is felt as a rejection by God from which the individual will struggle to recover.⁸³

Compensation theories

Despite an obvious need for a father figure to be present in both Freud and Jung's theoretical frameworks in order for the child to successfully resolve the Oedipal or Electra conflicts and to understand God, until the 1970s theorists primarily focused on the mother-child relationship. In the 1960s John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth made a significant contribution to the discussion of parental influence on child development, on which later theorists would draw in their investigation into the father-child relationship. Attachment Theory focuses on the security of a principal attachment figure for a child. It suggests that when a child feels secure and protected they are able to explore the world around them and take risks in the knowledge that they have a secure base to return to.⁸⁴ When the attachment figure is avoidant, disorganised, or ambivalent toward the child, that child lacks security and “the behaviours repeating in the infant/caregiver relationship are ingrained into the neurobiology of the individual.”⁸⁵ This lack of secure attachment may lead to distress, relationship difficulties, and trust issues in adult life.⁸⁶

Although this framework provides a way in which to understand father attachment and the importance of fatherhood, until very late in his career Bowlby still saw the primary attachment relationship to be with the mother and the role of the father being to provide support and security for the mother so she wouldn't be overwhelmed.⁸⁷ Acceptance of the father playing an important developmental role in the life of a child has only been possible due to the work of theorists and researchers such as Michael Lamb. In the 1970s Lamb and his colleagues began to investigate the contribution of fathers as more than breadwinner and analysed the impact of those contributions.⁸⁸ Bowlby's son, Richard Bowlby, has carried on his father's work and built on many of the contributions of Lamb and others. He states: "I remember asking my father about the role of fathers in Attachment Theory, but

⁸³ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁴ Judith Trowell, “Setting the Scene,” in *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation*, ed. Judith Trowell and Alicia Etchegoyen (New York: Taylor & Francis Inc., 2002), 5.

⁸⁵ Dixie Meyer, Sara Wood and Bethany Stanley, “Nurture is Nature: Integrating Brain Development, Systems Theory, and Attachment Theory,” *The Family Journal* 21/2 (2013): 167.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Trowell, “Setting the Scene,” 5.

⁸⁸ Lamb, “The Role of the Father: An Introduction,” 2.

he didn't have a well thought out opinion and finished the conversation by saying: 'Well, a child doesn't need two mothers!'"⁸⁹ Richard Bowlby has since developed a model which allows for dual primary attachments. He indicates that each attachment figure has a primary role, either providing a secure base and comfort, or to explore and excite. There will be some overlap, but each parent will primarily provide one attachment relationship. He notes that "the roles may be influenced by gender, but are not likely to be gender specific."⁹⁰

A criticism of Attachment Theory is that it only provides an explanation of the influence of attachment figures during infancy and early childhood. However, when combined with views such as Coleman's Social Capital Theory, which emphasises the importance of the parent promoting the child's cognitive and community social development through to adolescence,⁹¹ Attachment Theory provides a sound starting point for further investigation. As a result, a number of researchers into parental influence on faith formation have drawn on the language and concept of Attachment Theory for their investigations. These will be discussed later in the chapter when the application of the theory is presented.

One other perspective of parental influence that deserves mention, despite its absence in much of the academic treatment on this topic, is Bowen Family Systems Theory. Born out of the work of biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, Systems Theory was developed in opposition to an increasing reductionist "cause and effect" philosophy. Bertalanffy insisted that no individual part of an organism can be understood in isolation, as any action or movement from one entity will affect the other entities also.⁹² This view became an interdisciplinary phenomenon with many models being developed, including Bowen Family Systems Theory. Bowen viewed the family unit as a system or organism which comprises component units which interact with one another. A desire for homeostasis, the importance of differentiation,⁹³ and an awareness of the impact of multigenerational

⁸⁹ Lisa A. Newland and Diana D. Coyl, "Fathers' Role as Attachment Figures: An Interview with Sir Richard Bowlby," in *Emerging Topics on Father Attachment: Considerations in Theory, Context, and Development*, ed. Lisa A. Newland, Harry S. Freeman and Diana D. Coyl (London: Routledge, 2011), 26.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Joseph H. Pleck, "Why Could Father Involvement Benefit Children? Theoretical Perspectives," *Applied Development Science* 11/4 (2007): 198.

⁹² Ludwin Von Bertalanffy, *Organismic Psychology and Systems Theory* (Massachusetts: Clark University Press, 1968), 33.

⁹³ A balance between individual autonomy and belonging to the system.

influences, are all characteristics of this model.⁹⁴ Of particular relevance to the discussion of fatherlessness, is the concept of triangulation.

Triangulation is when conflict within a system is projected onto a third party scape goat. It gives some stability within the system as it provides a method for explaining and dealing with anxiety while still maintaining a degree of homeostasis.⁹⁵ In the scenario of a father leaving the family home, the family system will clearly experience significant turmoil. A logical scapegoat in that scenario is the father. One might expect to see a mother and child, or siblings, triangulating the father, blaming him for the conflict. In this case the way that the system perceives the villainized father will project meaning onto the word “father.” Alternatively, in an attempt to return to a state of homeostasis, the system may look to alternative sources to fulfil the role and function of the missing member, creating an attachment substitute. In this scenario the family system recognises the lacking fatherly characteristics demonstrated by the now departed father. Depending on how a family system responds to the stress of a father leaving, a child may either have a damaged impression of what a father is, or they may have an idealised perception of what a father should be. This application of Bowen Family Systems Theory to paternal dislocation may go some way to explaining the variations in the findings of researchers who investigate the influence of parents on one’s image of God.

Faith formation

While the models discussed so far have provided frameworks for understanding the parental influence on the child, James Fowler’s Faith Development Model may provide some illumination as to why and how that influence relates to faith formation. Fowler’s six stage faith development model has its critics, but if it is seen as a developmental tool rather than a theological framework of justification by works, most criticisms fall by the wayside. Although Fowler provides general age guidelines for his stages of faith, it is understood that each individual is different and stage transition will differ from person to person. In this discussion of the parental influence on children, the first three stages are particularly relevant.

⁹⁴ Ronald W. Richardson, "Bowen Family Systems Theory and Congregational Life," *Review and Expositor* 102 (Summer 2005): 379-402.

⁹⁵ Katie M. Heiden Rootes, Peter J. Jankowski and Steven J. Sandage, “Bowen Family Systems Theory and Spirituality: Exploring the Relationship Between Triangulation and Religious Questing,” *Contemporary Family Therapy* 32/2 (June 2010): 90.

The first stage of Fowler's faith development model is a period from pre-school to around 7 years of age known as "*Intuitive-Projective*." As the child begins to develop a sense of self, she also looks to determine what is real and what isn't. She is strongly influenced by stories and key people in her life, from whom she will reflect foundational attitudes which will remain with her through her life.⁹⁶ The "*Mythic-Literal*" second stage is when the child becomes more integrated into her community and associated ritual and symbology. However, the child's understanding of these aspects of community life is literal and an attitude of reciprocity is also prevalent. Good people have good things happen, just as bad people get justice.⁹⁷ Fowler's third "*Synthetic-Conventional*" stage usually begins during adolescence as the individual seeks to develop a belief structure to encompass her growing social world as well as the experiences of the previous two stages. This conglomeration of beliefs and ideas is an "ideology," but the individual is relatively closed minded at this point and is unaware that this ideology exists. Significant weight is placed on groups or individuals who represent her faith.⁹⁸

It is apparent that the loss or separation from a parental figure in the first two stages of faith development could have significant ramifications for the spiritual formation of a child and could be securely concreted into the ideology of the individual if unresolved by the third "synthetic-conventional" stage. There are numerous publications that present the evidence of this being true.

The Application: Research in Pastoral Psychology, Theology and Counselling

A number of researchers and theorists have drawn on these various models, which explain why and how parental influence takes place in a child, in order to elucidate the impact of the parental influence on one's view of God. Although empirical evidence on the influence of an absent father on one's view of God is conspicuously missing, it is nonetheless important to canvass the research on the parental influence on one's view of God.

⁹⁶ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), 133-134.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

Utilising a psychoanalytic approach, Ana-Maria Rizzuto carefully reviewed 22 clinical cases for evidence of a projected object representation of the client's view of their parents onto their view of God. She found strong evidence in support of Freud's theory, with many correlations between parental images and God images. Below are three examples from Rizzuto's case studies which demonstrate this connection.

God	Father
<p>Case 1 –⁹⁹</p> <p><i>I have never felt distant from God because I feel he is always with us.</i></p> <p><i>I like everything about God because he is above all.</i></p> <p><i>I think that God provides for my needs because he watches over us.</i></p>	<p><i>He was always home and around the house.</i></p> <p><i>I wouldn't change anything about my father. I wouldn't add anything.</i></p> <p><i>The provider in my family was my father because he worked.</i></p>
<p>Case 2 –¹⁰⁰</p> <p><i>If there is a God, then I have dissatisfied him, because I have not made the best use of my abilities.</i></p> <p><i>I have never experienced closeness to God.</i></p> <p><i>If I am in distress I do not resort to God, because I have no belief in God.</i></p>	<p><i>My father always insisted I make the best of my abilities.</i></p> <p><i>I was never close to my father.</i></p> <p><i>I do not ask anything from my father.</i></p>
<p>Case 3 –¹⁰¹</p> <p><i>In my way of feeling, for me to fully please God I would have to be another person, because I don't please him.</i></p> <p><i>I don't want to feel he punishes me, because he has plenty of reason to punish me.</i></p>	<p><i>I could never please my parents. I was so concerned about pleasing them that I made myself miserable.</i></p> <p><i>The disciplinarian in my family was my father, because my mother and grandmother told him what we did and he punished us.</i></p>

⁹⁹ Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 101-102.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 161-163.

Despite the examples I have chosen to quote here, it is important to note that, contrary to Freud's Projection Theory, there were also many similarities between experiences of mother and the client's view of God. This is supported by Birky and Ball who conducted a survey of 100 psychology students and asked them to rate characteristics of God, their mother, their father, and a composite parental image. They found that the values of father and mother were generally similar in their comparison to the God image, but that the composite parental image most closely mirrored the God rating.¹⁰² While other studies found similar correlations, the work of Justice and Lambert should be mentioned because of the secondary findings of their research. In a similar survey to Birky and Ball's, Justice and Lambert found that within their population there were a number of people who had been sexually abused or felt sexually desired by one of their parents. Of that group, "every person reported a mean God image from 17 to 42 percentage points below the mean of those persons who had not had comparable experiences with their parents."¹⁰³

The findings of these studies support the concept of projection of parental images onto one's view of God. However, when researchers ground their analysis in Attachment Theory, the influence of negative parental images is not so clear cut. Although some evidence points to similar results as those outlined above, attachment substitution provides the possibility for a positive, possibly even idealised, God image, despite negative parental experiences. Alex Bierman conducted a study which investigated the effects of childhood non-sexual abuse on adult religiosity and found that "only maltreatment perpetrated by *fathers* had a significant negative effect on religiosity."¹⁰⁴ He concludes that "the negative view of paternal figures that victims of paternal abuse may form from their experiences could lead them to distance themselves from these celestial paternal figures."¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Pierre Balthazar maintains that, for those whose father has left them, "separation from that attachment figure is painful and loss can be devastating."¹⁰⁶ As a result, these people may find it hard to call God, "our father."¹⁰⁷ However, these clear portrayals of correspondence are limited in scholarly publications on the subject.

¹⁰² Birky and Ball, "Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation," 136.

¹⁰³ Justice and Lambert, "A Comparative Study of the Language People Use to Describe the Personalities of God and Their Earthly Parents," 170.

¹⁰⁴ Alex Bierman, "The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44/3 (2005): 357. Italics in original.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Balthazar, "How Anger Toward Absentee Fathers May Make it Difficult to Call God 'Father'," 546.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 544.

In 1985 Ainsworth suggested that children may have a parent surrogate to whom they may become attached, especially “for those who find in them the security that they sought but could not attain with their own parents.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, theologian Gordon Kaufman suggested that “the idea of God is the idea of an absolutely adequate attachment figure.”¹⁰⁹ The notion of God as an attachment substitute was consolidated as a concept by Kirkpatrick and Shaver, who stated that “for many people, God may be the ideal ‘substitute’ attachment figure in the sense described by Ainsworth.”¹¹⁰

Chris Kiesling conducted research into the faith journey of children of parental divorce. He found that for those who establish healthy secure attachments with religious caregivers, the development of a loving God image is enhanced and “belief emerges from a gradual process of socialisation.”¹¹¹ Conversely, insensitive or absent caregivers lead to attachment insecurity. As a result “a relationship with God is often sought as a surrogate attachment figure in the effort to regulate distress.”¹¹² Kiesling notes that amongst this group “metaphoric images of God as a safe haven (‘refuge, sanctuary’) or surrogate father-figure (‘abba’) become especially pronounced.”¹¹³ Conspicuously absent from this study is any ongoing negative influence of parental conflict on the participants’ view of God. This is not entirely surprising when one considers that Kiesling’s qualitative study was composed of 12 seminary students. However, Dickie et al. investigated images of God and parent-child relationships, and they also found that “God is perceived as more nurturing and powerful when father is absent, thus becoming an ‘attachment substitute.’”¹¹⁴

Clearly there is scholarly disagreement surrounding this issue of parental influence on one’s view of God. Pehr Granqvist conducted a study to specifically compare the question of compensation or correspondence. The results from his study supported the

¹⁰⁸ Mary D. S. Ainsworth, “Attachment Across the Life Span,” *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 61 (1985): 799.

¹⁰⁹ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 67.

¹¹⁰ Kirkpatrick and Shaver, “Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion,” 329.

¹¹¹ Chris Kiesling, “An Attachment Theory Approach to Narrating the Faith Journey of Children of Parental Divorce,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 16/4 (November 2011): 301.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 311.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Dickie, et al., “Parent-Child Relationships and Children’s Images of God,” 37.

compensation, Attachment Substitution Theory.¹¹⁵ This finding may have provided some useful guidance for the discussion were it not for the work of Angie McDonald et al. who tested exactly the same question and found that their data largely supported the view of correspondence.¹¹⁶ Rather than conducting a tit for tat comparison of various data collection methods and analysis procedures, what may be of more assistance is the recent research conducted in New Zealand by Philip Halstead. He found evidence of both projection and compensation within his study population. Halstead developed and conducted a forgiveness course to help adults process their parental wounds. Among other measures, he created “A God Scale,” which evaluated their perception of God and allowed any change in their perception of God to be noted as a result of completing the forgiveness course. Halstead found that the participants either had overly low perceptions of God, reflecting their parental experiences, or they had “erroneously high” scores as they “compensated for their uncaring and destructive parents.”¹¹⁷ Having completed the course and been able to work on their forgiveness of their parents, both groups’ “A God Scale” scores moved toward the centre.¹¹⁸ While some nuances of research design may tend to result in evidence of parental images being projected onto one’s image of God, or one viewing God as an attachment substitute, it seems most likely that within any given population there are likely to be examples of both of these responses occurring.

The work of theorists and researchers is able to demonstrate the negative impact of fatherlessness, make suggestions for why this influence exists, and suggest connections between parental images and one’s view of God. However, investigating the impact of fatherlessness on one’s view of God requires an understanding of the biblical representation of God as Father. In the next chapter I will undertake a survey of this biblical image and discuss its metaphorical relationship with earthly fathers.

¹¹⁵ Pehr Granqvist, “Religiousness and Perceived Childhood Attachment: On the Question of Compensation or Correspondence,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37/2 (June 1998): 350-367.

¹¹⁶ Angie McDonald, et al., “Attachment to God and Parents: Testing the Correspondence vs. Compensation Hypotheses,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24/1 (2005): 26.

¹¹⁷ Philip John Halstead, “The Forgiveness Matters Course: A Theologically and Psychologically Integrated Approach to Help Churchgoing Adults Process Their Parental Wounds,” *Journal of Spirituality and Mental Health* 14 (2012): 102.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3

God as Father: More than a Simple Metaphor

This study is intended to determine the extent to which the image of one's father influences the image of God as Father within the individual's own metaphorical framework. While the influence of fatherlessness and theories around why this influence exists have been introduced already, this chapter will briefly outline characteristics of metaphorical interaction between heavenly and earthly paternal figures. Some characteristics of metaphor enable us to understand elements of the nature and character of God, but also provide risks to accurate interpretation. I will highlight these characteristics which are relevant to the discussion and then provide an overview of the presentation of God as Father in the biblical account.

Father God – Characteristics and Risks of Metaphor

The landscape of metaphor is a pervasive and complex one. Far more than being a simple literary device, it colours and shapes our perception of the world around us. The role of metaphor is to project meaning onto an unknown subject through the use of comparison with a known vehicle.¹¹⁹ It creates an exciting opportunity to dynamically convey concepts, images and meaning, but also provides a framework susceptible to misinterpretation. The scope of this study does not allow for a comprehensive treatment of metaphor, but for the discussion on God as Father to progress, it is important that I explain conceptual metaphor, the dangers of misinterpretation, and the risks of interface in metaphor.

By definition the vehicle in a metaphor is not the same as the subject which is being described. In its most simple form a metaphor is a comparison between two apparently unrelated things in order to transmit some characteristic of a subject, projecting it onto a second subject as though it were the first.¹²⁰ This process allows one to communicate feeling, emotion, and sensations about a subject with which the listener or reader may not

¹¹⁹ In this discussion the term “vehicle” will be used to describe the subject which is being used to transmit meaning, and “topic” will refer to the subject upon which the characteristic is to be applied. For example, if “the man is a snake,” the man is the topic and the snake is the vehicle.

¹²⁰ Betty R. Youngkin, *The Contributions of Walter J. Ong to the Study of Rhetoric: History and Metaphor* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 14.

be familiar, without using clumsy and lengthy descriptions. In “The Translation of Metaphor,” Peter Newmark asserts that “metaphor is language’s path to the other four senses.”¹²¹ In a very real sense this is true. If “the scones are bricks,” one can imagine the taste and texture of the scones without trying them. If “the boy is a little monkey,” one might imagine the energetic and mischievous antics that he engages in and perhaps the amusing but somewhat frustrating nature of that behaviour. If God is Father, we may automatically transmit to God the comfort, emotional feelings, and security that we associate with the vehicle of “father.” Alternatively, others may attribute the characteristics of fear, indifference or ambivalence that they affiliate with the nature and function of a father. “It is only possible to transfer meaning from the vehicle onto the topic insofar as one is familiar with the subject in the role of vehicle.”¹²² If one had no knowledge or understanding of bricks, monkeys, or fathers, these metaphorical relationships would be empty. Alternatively, if one had a different experience or understanding of what bricks, monkeys, or fathers were and what characteristics they possessed, the transmitted attributes may not be what was intended. This potential hazard of metaphor is of central relevance in the discussion of fatherlessness and the way it influences one’s understanding of God as Father. The risk is exacerbated still further when one considers that the Bible was written over a range of contexts, differing cultures, and to diverse audiences. It is quite possible that the role, function, and characteristics of a father could have varied. To this extent, when considering biblical metaphors, it is critical to consider the cultural context and audience, as well as the literary content and context.

A significant advancement in the study of metaphor in recent years is the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Providing some support for Robert Frost’s hyperbolic claim that “all thinking, except mathematical, is metaphorical,”¹²³ Lakoff and Johnson introduce and demonstrate the existence of conceptual metaphors. These conceptual metaphorical frameworks are more than literary devices which are used in a specific context and then discarded, but rather underpin a significant amount of human thought, as well as speech.

¹²¹ Peter Newmark, “The Translation of Metaphor,” in *Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science IV: Current issues in Linguistic Theory*, vol. 29, *The Ubiquity of Metaphor*, ed. Wolf Paprotté and Rene Dirven (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985), 295.

¹²² Peter Dobbs, “Images of God: An Investigation of Selected Biblical Metaphors for the Three Persons of the Trinity,” (Research Essay submitted for the Postgraduate Diploma in Theology, University of Otago, 2012), 10.

¹²³ Robert Frost, *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose & Plays*, ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 720.

Lakoff and Johnson present evidence for overarching metaphorical constructs which are ingrained in cultural paradigms and of which one is often unaware. They claim that “most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured; that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts.”¹²⁴ One example they provide to demonstrate this is the idea of *time as money*:

You’re *wasting* my time.

This gadget will *save* you hours.

I don’t *have* the time to *give* you.

How do you *spend* your time these days?

That flat tire *cost* me an hour.¹²⁵

None of these statements specifically refer to a metaphorical relationship between time and money, but each are understood in terms of the pervasive metaphorical concept that time is money. The relevance of conceptual metaphor for the discussion on God as Father can not be overestimated.

Lakoff and Johnson’s ideas explain how the overarching metaphorical concept of God as a Father can influence our understanding of so many other attributes of God. If functions of provision, protection, discipline, security, unconditional love, and comfort are associated with the overarching schema of “father,” these functions will be influenced by one’s experience of an earthly father. If that experience is unhealthy, it is not only the image of God as Father that will be affected, but also all of the characteristics and functions which are affiliated with the role of father. Notably, Lakoff and Johnson comment, “*In actuality we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis.*”¹²⁶ If one’s experiential basis of a father is missing, broken or unhealthy, both the image of God as Father and all of the attributes, functions and characteristics which draw on that image, may be undermined.

Another problem with metaphor that poses a risk when one draws a comparison between an earthly father and God as Father is defining where the boundaries of that metaphor lie. One of the delightful elements of metaphor is that it does not require explanation. As a literary device it is employed specifically in order to avoid lengthy and convoluted

¹²⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 56.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8. Italics in the original.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19. Italics in the original.

descriptions. Philosopher Max Black states that “to draw attention to a philosopher’s metaphors is to belittle him – like praising a logician for his beautiful handwriting.”¹²⁷ In utilising metaphor, one allows the recipients to determine what is intended by the comparison. They become dynamically involved and engaged in the process of communication. They are allowed to determine in what capacity and to what extent to transmit the nature of the vehicle onto the topic. However, there is an intrinsic risk in this freedom of interpretation. When boundaries are undefined, one may either fail to understand the comparison and miss correlations, or press the metaphor beyond the point where it ought to be limited. If one attempts to draw comparisons and define characteristics of a topic which the vehicle is not intended to transmit, there are two possible outcomes. Either the metaphorical framework breaks down, or the characteristic of the vehicle which ought not to be transmitted onto the topic is nonetheless assigned erroneously onto that topic. For example, if “the man is a snake,” the intended meaning might be that he is cunning, unpredictable, not to be trusted, and devious. These transmissions draw on both the physical attributes of the snake and the characteristics that we assign to snakes as a result of the role of the serpent in the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3. If, however, recipients understood the reference to mean that the man had scaly skin and moved along the ground on his stomach, they have misinterpreted where the used/unused line in the metaphor lies and have drawn incorrect inferences. This risk is also present in the investigation of biblical metaphors.

If the topic is God as Father and one’s biological father is the vehicle which is transmitting meaning onto that topic, attempting to assign to God some function of sexual activity in our creation is probably stretching the metaphorical relationship beyond where it should be limited. The result of pushing this metaphor so far is that it either loses its meaning, undermining all of the helpful correlations for which it is used in the first place, or some sexual activity is erroneously assigned to God. While this specific example is unlikely to be of serious consideration to most people contemplating where the used/unused line lies in relation to God as Father, the potential for issues in the metaphorical relationship between vehicle and topic, between earthly father and God the Father, is clear, particularly if one’s understanding of the vehicle is flawed in the first place.

¹²⁷ Max Black, “Metaphor,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 54 (1954-1955): 273.

A final hazard, which must be understood when utilising metaphor, is explained by Max Black's "interaction theory," also known as interface. Whenever a comparison is drawn between two subjects of different schemas, in order to deduce what the intended correlation is, the recipient must determine the similarities between the subjects. Although it is the role of the vehicle to transmit meaning onto the topic, it is unavoidable that to some extent the topic also influences the vehicle. Black indicates that "to speak of the 'interaction' of two thoughts 'active together' (or, again, of their 'interillumination' or 'co-operation') is to use a metaphor emphasizing the dynamic aspects of a good reader's response to a non-trivial metaphor."¹²⁸ He uses his famous "wolf man" image as an example of how, within a particular metaphorical arrangement, the recipient views the vehicle in a different way than they would in another context. "The wolf metaphor suppresses some details, emphasises others – in short, *organizes* our view of man."¹²⁹ However, "if to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would."¹³⁰ In an earlier essay on metaphor, I wrote:

Interface is of particular concern in a theological setting. In any exploration or analysis of any given metaphor or metaphorical system, the temptation is to take the correlation beyond the point where it is naturally limited. An example of this may be seen in our understanding of humanity being created in God's image. If one extends this view beyond identifying the relational, loving, compassionate, and creative elements in humanity that reflect characteristics of God, there comes a point where we instead start transferring human characteristics onto our understanding of God. The net result is that we conceptually create humans as "mini Gods" or God as a "super human." It is in fact this very frame of thought which the serpent sought to exploit in Genesis 3:5 when he tempted Eve, saying "God knows that when you eat of (the tree) your eyes will be opened and you will be like God."¹³¹

The question of interface raises an interesting conundrum for the discussion of the influence of a damaged father image on an understanding of God as Father; to what extent is God the topic, and to what extent might He be viewed as the vehicle? Given that humanity is made in God's image, is it reasonable to suggest that it is God as Father which ought to transmit meaning onto the view of what an earthly father should be? It is the tension inherent within this relationship which will now be addressed.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 286.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 288. Italics in the original.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 291.

¹³¹ Dobbs, "Images of God," 10.

Made in God's Image – Who is the Image of Whom?

Because the fundamental role of metaphor is to provide a mechanism of explaining and understanding something which is unknown, it is not surprising to find the biblical account littered with such imagery. Thomas Aquinas poignantly noted that “every knowledge that is according to the mode of created substance, falls short of the vision of the Divine Essence, which infinitely surpasses all created substance.”¹³² As humanity attempts to comprehend a God who is ultimately incomprehensible in any complete sense, metaphor is often utilised to assist in bridging the gap. The comparison of God with human attributes and characteristics is expected and to some extent warranted given that God made human beings in His image.¹³³

When the first acts of God are being introduced in the opening of the book of Genesis, the author describes God's activity in anthropomorphic terms. In Gen 1:1 God is presented as *creative*. In Gen 1:3 He *speaks*. In Gen 1:9 He *sees* His creation and makes a moral judgement, declaring that *it is good*. Before the reader is explicitly told that humanity is made in God's image, this conceptual metaphor is already relied on to transmit meaning to the function and actions of God. If we rely so heavily on this construct in order to even give language to the question of God's nature and character, it is necessary to question where the used/unused lines of the metaphorical relationship lie. If we are to discuss how an earthly father transmits meaning onto the nature and character of God as Father, we must first explore to what extent we are made in God's image and how the fall has damaged that relationship and imagery.

Biblical scholars have long debated the question of how humanity reflects God and what Gen 1:26-27 actually means. In a survey of rabbinic literature, Alon Goshen-Gottstein insists that there is no rabbinic statement to suggest that God does not have a body and that “if God has a body, then obviously the creation of man in God's image refers to man's physical form.”¹³⁴ This view is supported by Ludwig Koehler, who examined the word

¹³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920), Part 1 of Part 2, qu. 5, a. 5.

¹³³ Gen 1:26-27, 5:1, 9:6.

¹³⁴ Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87/2 (April 1994): 173.

tzelem (image) and determined that it primarily refers to an upright posture.¹³⁵ Paul Humbert also concluded that the phrase *betzalmenu ki-demutenu*, “our image according to our likeness” in Gen 1:26, means that man was created “with the same physical form as the deity; of which he is a molded three-dimensional embodiment; delineated and exteriorised.”¹³⁶ However, other theologians emphasise the character of humankind rather than the physical form. Aquinas draws a distinction between the physical, animal state (*in puris naturalibus*), and the soul, the supernatural gift of grace which was breathed into humanity (the *donum superadditum*). However, he is careful to note that one does not exist without the other. He indicates that “it is inconsistent with the perfection of the production of things, that God should have made either the body without the soul, or the soul without the body. ... The soul is the form of the body.”¹³⁷ Drawing on Maimonides and Sferno, Mosh Reiss states that “the divine image is some spiritual quality of man: his self-consciousness and self-determination, his reason and understanding, his capability for thought and his desire for immortality. ... [I]t is man’s free will.”¹³⁸

Regardless of the specific way in which God’s image is manifest in humanity, scholars all emphasise the anthropomorphic qualities. Claus Westermann notes that “all exegetes from the fathers of the church to the present begin with the presupposition that the text is saying something about people, namely that people bear God’s image because they have been created in accordance with it. The whole question therefore centres around the image of God in the person: what is intended, in what does it consist, what does it mean.”¹³⁹ However, although the nature or character of God implicit within His image is quite clearly bestowed upon humanity and not the other way round, humankind is forced to look upon itself in order to gain some comprehension of the creator. Abraham Joshua Heschel states:

In a very deep and strong sense God cannot be conceived by us in complete detachment from man. God and man have to be thought of together. A prophet is a

¹³⁵ L. Koehler, “Die Grundstelle der Imago-Dei-Lehre,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 4 (1948): 12-22, cited in D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 56.

¹³⁶ D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 56, citing P. Humbert, *Etudes sur le récit du paradis et de la chute dans la Genèse*, Secrétariat de l’Université, Neuchâtel (1940), 157.

¹³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, qu. 91, a. 4.

¹³⁸ Moshe Reiss, “Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39/3 (July-September 2011): 184.

¹³⁹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984) 155.

man who holds God and man in one thought and at one time. He does not think of God without man and does not think of man without God.¹⁴⁰

Reiss also posits that the image can be seen as the access, the conduit to God.¹⁴¹ David

Clines summarises this perspective:

Man is created not *in* God's image, since God has no image of His own, but *as* God's image, or rather *to be* God's image, that is to depute in the created world for the transcendent God who remains outside the world order. That man is God's image means that he is the visible corporeal representative of the invisible, bodiless God; he is representative rather than representation, since the idea of portrayal is secondary in the significance of the image. However, the term 'likeness' is an assurance that man is an adequate and faithful representative of God on earth. The whole man is the image of God, without distinction of spirit and body.¹⁴²

While the rabbinic scholars may dispute the premise that God has no image of His own, Clines' summary highlights the interdependency of this unique metaphorical construct. The interaction and interillumination makes the relationship something more than metaphorical in function, although not in form. Humanity reflects God; the creator is made evident in some capacity through His creation. However, humanity does not completely reflect God. In the same way that an image in a mirror is a likeness of the one it reflects but is still clearly not that person, the image of God in humankind is naturally limited. David Scaer notes that "the statue has its worth because of the person it represents. Man therefore has his worth not because of himself, but because he in some way reflects God."¹⁴³

Some scholars ignore the effect of the fall on the image of God within humanity while they carry out these debates. If we are intended to be a mirror which reflects God, it would seem that sin has effectively cracked, splintered or smashed that mirror, leaving it broken in some way. It is through this corrupted reflection that we are left trying to glimpse God. What makes it worse is that we are not even certain what bits of the mirror remain intact and what bits are missing. There are numerous theologians who support this view that the image of God is damaged.¹⁴⁴ David Scaer notes that "the curses of the man and woman are

¹⁴⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 159.

¹⁴¹ Reiss, "Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God," 185.

¹⁴² Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 101.

¹⁴³ David P. Scaer, "Man Made in the Image of God," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 41/3 (July 1977): 21.

¹⁴⁴ John F. Kilner, "Humanity in God's Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53/3 (September 2010): 602.

in reality a restructuring or reordering of their original creation in God's image."¹⁴⁵ Others suggest that the image is completely broken. The 1647 Westminster Confession states, "From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions."¹⁴⁶ This position is difficult to reconcile with scripture. In Gen 5:1, 2 and Gen 9:6, God explicitly reiterates that He has created humans in His image. These words occur after the fall and the consequent corruption of humanity. Conversely, John Kilner is one of a minority of scholars who contend that the image of God remains unchanged and undamaged. Relying on James 3:9 and 1 Corinthians chapter 11, he notes that "there is no indication that any image has been lost or damaged."¹⁴⁷ However, while it appears evident from the biblical account that at least some image of God remains in humanity, I am uncomfortable with Kilner's leap to conclude that because it is mentioned and taught following the fall, the entire image remains unblemished. Scaer insists that while the "image in its shattered condition still distinguishes man from the beast (cf. Jas. 3:9), ... the image after the fall is not identical with the original image, because the basic ingredient which permeated the image, the attachment to God, has been sundered."¹⁴⁸

Regardless of what perspective is accurate, the fact that there is uncertainty and debate simply emphasises the fact that we don't know exactly what image of God is impressed upon humanity; we don't know what the implication of the fall was on that image of God. One moment we look to ourselves in order to shed light on the nature and character of God, and the very next instant we are forced to look to the biblical account of God in order to shed light on ourselves. We are inherently confused and somewhat schizophrenic as a result of both the truth and the corruption of the image of God imprinted upon us.¹⁴⁹

The question of the corrupt image of God in humanity as a result of sin is somewhat alleviated by the coming of Jesus. In him we find a human, an image of God, devoid of the frailty and corruption of depraved human nature as a result of the fall. Jesus provides us

¹⁴⁵ Scaer, "Man Made in the Image of God," 29.

¹⁴⁶ *Westminster Confession*, Ch. VI, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Kilner, "Humanity in God's Image," 609.

¹⁴⁸ Scaer, "Man Made in the Image of God," 33.

¹⁴⁹ Throughout this discussion I am focusing specifically on the influence of the image of God impressed on humanity and in turn the extent to which our understanding of humanity influences one's impression of God. This is not intended to undermine other methods of revelation of God's nature and character. It is rather simply a result of a focused investigation into one nuance of the divine/human relationship.

with an intact mirror through which to view God. I have elsewhere suggested that “the grounding of anthropomorphic metaphors for God prior to Christ was us; the grounding post Christ is Jesus.”¹⁵⁰ While there is truth in this statement, it creates some issues specifically with regard to the image of God as Father. Rather than being a reflection of God the Father, Jesus refers to God, the first person of the Trinity, as Father. Instead of looking to Jesus as an embodiment of this attribute of God, we are forced to look to his relationship with his Father. While there are some functions of a father which God is able to portray in isolation from the account of Christ, primarily the role is relational. Consequently, it is only when a father interacts with his son that we are able to determine the type of father they are. Although Jesus does not directly reflect God as Father, his Father is nonetheless revealed through His relationship with His son.

Where the image that is being used to reflect a topic is broken before humans can see it, there is an inherent difficulty in correctly viewing the topic. Even the best earthly father will fail to reflect God as Father in a complete sense. However, when that image of an earthly father is even more broken, or missing completely, the conundrum is compounded. It is natural that we may reject an inadequate father. But how do we know that a father is inadequate? Do we compare him with other fathers? Do we rely on what is presented in the media? Do we turn to the example of God as Father? While it is normal that the vehicle will influence the topic, that the image of an earthly father will influence the image of God as Father, it is possible that for some, God as Father will become the vehicle. Because of the interface within the metaphorical concept of humanity being created in God’s image, it is likely that some will develop their expectations of an earthly father from the characteristics they find in the expression of God as Father, not the other way round. This perception of God as Father is founded in the biblical account.

Father God in the Scriptures

God the Father revealed throughout scripture is more than a metaphorical image. It is also the name given by Jesus for the one who would, in later terms, be called the first member of the Trinity. Although Jesus reveals the relational attributes of a Father God engaging with His son, this title is by no means unique to the account of Jesus’ life. Throughout the

¹⁵⁰ Dobbs, *Images of God*, 16.

Old Testament God is presented as Father of Israel through His function as creator, protector and redeemer. The psalmists and prophets extend this imagery, highlighting the love that the Father has toward His children. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus refers to the one who would later be referred to as the first person of the Trinity, as Father, and teaches his disciples to do the same. Likewise, following the biblical depiction of Jesus life and ministry, Paul presents adoption theology in which the believer becomes a child of God in Christ. The biblical revelation of God through the extended imagery of fatherhood provides insight into both the nature and character of God and also what it means to be a father.

“I thought you would call me, My Father” – The Old Testament account

Although the Father God motif presented in the Old Testament (OT) is closely related specifically to Israel, it nonetheless provides an exposition of the nature and character of God as a Father. The scarcity with which it is explicitly used may also present a risk of underestimating the pervasiveness of the image. Although references to God as “Father” only occur 19 times in the OT,¹⁵¹ there are many other mentions of Israel being His son, being given an inheritance, and other activities which are specifically the domain of a parent-child relationship. The concept of God as Father, which is realised through Jesus and expanded on through the Pauline Epistles, is firmly anchored in OT theology, thought and imagery.

The first specific mention of God as Father occurs in Deut 32:6, where Moses sings a song highlighting the covenant relationship between God and the Israelites. He asks “Is he not your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” Although this is an explicit depiction of the creative function of a Father God, His creative activity is already well established in the account of Gen 1 and 2. Likewise, in Mal 2:10 Israel is asked “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?” Psalm 2:7 also notes that “[the Lord] said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” While other renderings of Ps 2:7 instead state “today I have become your father” (TNIV), the word *yālad* implies a function of fathering, of giving birth, and is in contrast to most descriptions of God as

¹⁵¹ Deut 32:6; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13, 22:10, 28:6, 29:10 (some versions interpret *āb* here as “ancestor” rather than “father”); Ps 68:5, 89:26, 103:13; Prov 3:12; Isa 9:6, 63:16a, 63:16b, 64:8; Jer 3:4, 3:19, 31:9; Mal 1:6, 2:10.

Father, which use the word *āb*, providing a more literal description of “father.” These references reveal that the meaning of “Father” is foremostly grounded in a role of creation.

Exodus 4:22-23 is an important passage for the discussion of God’s parental relationship with Israel. God instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, ‘let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.” As well as physically creating the earth, in the exodus out of Egypt God also establishes Israel, creating it as a nation and fulfilling the promise made when Abraham was called in Gen 12:2. This reference to Israel as His first born son highlights and strengthens the correlation between God as Father and the act of creation, both physically and symbolically. David Tasker believes that the legitimacy and credibility of the motif is rooted in God’s role as creator. “The purpose of the creation theme is to demonstrate first of all that God, as Father, ‘made’ and ‘established’ his people.”¹⁵² However, the OT account presents an image of a Father God who is far more than simply a creator. It reveals ongoing feelings, functions and responsibilities toward the child. Old Testament descriptions of God as Father are often used in parallel with other images. As a result there is a dynamic blending of metaphorical imagery for God in which each image to some extent influences the other.

A common presentation of God’s relationship with Israel is one of a ruler and his vassal people. Deuteronomy 32 breaks this trend and presents an image of a parent-child relationship. In verse 3 the poet indicates that he will “proclaim the *name* of the Lord”¹⁵³ and then goes on to state that He is “the Rock” (verse 4) with “degenerate children” (verse 5). This parallel presentation of Father and Rock is maintained throughout the passage and is clearly presented in verse 15 (“He abandoned God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation”) and verse 18 (“You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth”). As Tasker notes, although the image of Rock and Father are most prominent, the poet also draws on numerous other images in order to inform the view of a “father-God who is impeccably trustworthy, unbelievably tolerant, and all-providing. ... God’s fatherhood is described in terms of rock-like consistency and

¹⁵² David R. Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature and the Hebrew Scriptures about the Fatherhood of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 86.

¹⁵³ Italics added.

trustworthiness, standing by the covenant made between him and his people.”¹⁵⁴ DesCamp and Sweetser concur with Tasker’s analysis, indicating that within this literary context the image of Father reveals a God who protects, provides and sustains Israel and the land, and who possesses absolute authority and must be honoured and obeyed.¹⁵⁵ DesCamp and Sweetser also analyse other imagery portraying God in the Hebrew scriptures and find that, along with the image of “King,” “Father” is the only depiction of God which highlights all of His primary roles and functions. They state:

The most frequently used (and thus, we would argue, most important) characteristics of God in the eyes of the Hebrew scripture writers were the ability to provide protection and nurture; the ability to maintain mutual but asymmetric relationship; the ability to exert physical control over an entity, as well as the ability to change an entity’s state or essence; the capacities of authority and power; and the capacity to destroy [power to punish].¹⁵⁶

While other scholars likewise view the creative function of Father God as an anchor point for the metaphor and not the intended end in itself, some emphasise the redeeming characteristics transmitted by the image. Ralph Quere states “The designation of ‘Father’ in the Bible has to do more with God as Redeemer than God as Creator.”¹⁵⁷ Likewise, Svetlana Knobnya concludes, “As far as Israel is concerned, the fatherhood of God is linked to its redemption.”¹⁵⁸ Isaiah 63:16 notes this connection explicitly, stating “you, O Lord, are our father; our redeemer from of old is your name.” This view is by no means contradictory with DesCamp and Sweetser, but simply emphasises the macro narrative of God the Father choosing, calling, and redeeming Israel rather than focussing on the immediate literary context. The perspective of Father as redeemer highlights the covenant relationship which God enters into with Israel as His children in Exodus chapters 19-24.¹⁵⁹ God chooses Israel (Deut 7:7-8) and saves them from slavery in order that they may serve and worship Him (Ex 4:23). Joel Green notes that Israel’s redemption by their Divine Father is “emancipation and restoration of the enslaved to wholeness in relation to God.”¹⁶⁰ Knobnya summarises that “before the exodus they were slaves or aliens in Egypt

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve E. Sweetser, “Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistic Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor,” *Pastoral Psychology* 53/3 (January 2005): 228.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 229.

¹⁵⁷ Ralph Quare, “‘Naming’ God ‘Father’,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12/1 (February 1985): 5.

¹⁵⁸ Svetlana Knobnya, “God the Father in the Old Testament,” *European Journal of Theology* 20/2 (2011): 140.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ J.B. Green, *Salvation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 69.

(Deut 10:18-19) – now they are God’s son or God’s sons (Deut 14:1-2; Isa 1:2) with the intention that they serve him. In something like a formula of adoption Israel becomes the firstborn son of God; no longer a slave.” The image of a redeeming Father who chooses, adopts, and frees His child and remains faithful to that child with rock-like consistency has clear correlations to New Testament adoption theology. The parallel is strengthened still further by the psalmist noting that He is a Father to the fatherless (Ps 68:5). Pauline adoption theology will be discussed in more detail below.

An additional OT text which also reflects these characteristics of Father God is Jer 3:19. Here we hear God’s anguished voice proclaim, “I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.” In this passage there is a depiction of a bereaved father lamenting the fact that he does not get love and affection from the child whom He has chosen and wants to bless. This is not some insipid wish or hope. It is an impassioned plea from a Father to a child who is choosing that which is not in their best interest. Tasker notes that “the emphatic *וַיִּכְאֹב* (‘Indeed!’ 20a) sounds a note of despair on God’s part that the ‘calling’ and ‘not turning away’ is not happening.”¹⁶¹ While this passage is intended to highlight the failure of the child, Israel, it also reveals a great deal about the heart and desire of God as a Father. He is depicted choosing His child, wanting what is best for His child, and being hurt by lack of affection and dedication from that child.

The often implicit image of God as Father presented within the OT provides a cohesive portrayal of the role of father in a paternal relationship. The motif reveals that the role is grounded in the function of creation, but also requires unwavering commitment, love, dedication, provision, tolerance, and engagement with the child, as well as protection of the child. God’s function of creation and the action of choosing His child are particularly noteworthy in the discussion on fatherlessness. As has been highlighted above, there is an implicit right and responsibility to be “father” which is intrinsically engrained in the act of creation. In his exegesis of Isa 64:7-8, Marc Brettler notes that “the image [of father] is not merely biological – rather, the biological relationship has implications – as a result of

¹⁶¹ Tasker, *Hebrew Scriptures about the Fatherhood of God*, 153.

involvement in creating a child, a father is expected not to abandon that child.”¹⁶²

Creation is the activity which makes a man ontologically a father. However, it is when God *chooses* Israel that He makes them His child. The fundamental bedrock of fatherhood, tied up in the very act of creating life, is a desire to have a child, to choose a child, to commit to that child. If a child is not wanted it rocks the function and image of what it means to be a father to its core. The ultimate presentation of God’s Love to His child and the act of redemption inherent within this relationship, is made evident in God fulfilling His covenant commitment to Israel by sending Jesus, His son, as the means of justification and restoration.

Despite the focus of this study on the paternal imagery of God in the OT, not all of the parental depictions draw on the father motif. Although not as common, God is also presented anthropomorphically with maternal functions. Deuteronomy 32:18 and Isa 42:14 compare God to a woman in labour. Numbers 11:12, Isa 49:15, 66:13, and Ps 131:2 depict God as a comforting nursing mother. Elsewhere God is described as a protective mother bear (Hos 13:8) and mother eagle or bird (Deut 32:11, Ps 17:8, 61:4). Where the biblical descriptions of God and His activity provide names for God and insights into His nature, character and function, they do not comment on His physical form. Tension is inevitable when we attempt to define God, as any image, name or depiction will be necessarily incomplete. Janet Martin Soskice cautions that “God is not a human being, and *a fortiori* not a male human being. God is not a male, and God is not literally ‘father’.”¹⁶³ The scope of this study does not allow for a comprehensive response to the concern of feminist theologian Mary Daly who claimed that “if God is male, then the male is God,”¹⁶⁴ nor does it permit a survey of the significant contributions of Sally McFague on the issue of God, language and gender. However, Ralph Quere succinctly summarises, stating: “There are similarities and differences in the way masculine and feminine descriptions of God are used in Scripture. None is used so literally as to teach that God is male and/or female, except ... with regard to the incarnate Son. God is not a man, God is not a woman; God is

¹⁶² Marc Zvi Brettler, “Incompatible Metaphors for Ywhy in Isaiah 40-66,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78 (1998): 112.

¹⁶³ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69.

¹⁶⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 19, cited in Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 147.

not human – except in Christ. The Creator is not a creature – except in the man Jesus who is also God.”¹⁶⁵

The name of God “Our Father” – Revelation through Jesus

God as Father is revealed in much more intimate terms through the life of Jesus. However, there is still an inherent tension in naming God “Father.” The majority of OT references to God as Father are instances of self-naming, that is, God refers to himself as Father, either implicitly or explicitly. This creates a conundrum in the analysis of the image because the proper name of God revealed in Ex 3:14, is “Yahweh,” and, in Christian terms, is ontologically Trinitarian. However, through the New Testament (NT) we gain a clearer revelation of the nature of God as Trinity. For example, the NT affirms God the Father as creator (Mark 13:19, Eph 3:9) and the Son as the one through whom creation occurred (Col 1:15-20). In the light of this revelation we can see that the one Jesus spoke of as Father was called Yahweh in the OT. A noteworthy comment by Ralph Quere assists in making sense of imagery describing God: “What God reveals about his attributes, attitudes, and actions toward humanity tells us what he is *like*, but not what he *is*.”¹⁶⁶ In this survey of the Divine Father’s interaction with His son it is important to remember that the purpose of the investigation is to reveal what sort of fatherhood God models and the extent to which we may legitimately refer to Him as “our Father.”

The gospel presentation of Jesus’ life reveals a loving, intimate paternal relationship in which the Father is proud of His son (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) and the son honours (Matt 11:25; Luke 10:21) and obeys the Father (Matt 26:29, 42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Jesus’ identity as Messiah is inextricably linked to his identity as the son of God. He is who he is because of who his Father is (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 10:30). When Peter asserts that Jesus is “the Messiah, the son of the living God,” (Matt 16:16) Jesus affirms that he is correct. The identity and belonging of the son is derived directly from knowing and being secure in where he comes from.

In addition to referring to the first person of the Trinity as his Father, Jesus clearly names God as “Father.” In the Trinitarian formulation given in the Great Commission at Matt 28:19, Jesus instructs his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them

¹⁶⁵ Quere, “‘Naming’ God ‘Father’,” 7.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Joachim Jeremias indicates that at that time no one except Jesus addressed God as Father. He emphasises the “complete novelty and uniqueness of *Abba* as an address to God in the prayers of Jesus.”¹⁶⁷ However, Allen Mawhinney and others contend this claim, highlighting a number of examples where “Father” was used to designate God, including a liturgy of the synagogue which included the prayer formulae “our father, our king.”¹⁶⁸ Regardless, what is clear is that Jesus possesses an intimate, loving, comforting relationship with his heavenly Father, whom he in turn seeks to glorify, honour, and obey. In John 12:28 Jesus prays “‘Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.’” In an analysis of theological formulation of the “name of God” presented in John’s Gospel, Quere points to Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 as the climax of this name-theology. He notes that the prayer has three petitions which directly connect Christ’s mission and the name “Father” (John 17:1, 6, 11, 25-26). He concludes that “it is through Christ’s suffering that the Father’s name is revealed. It is through Christ’s suffering that we become children of God and through this the Father’s name is glorified. ... ‘Father’ has to do primarily with our salvation as adopted children of God.”¹⁶⁹

As well as exemplifying the father-son relationship and referring to God as his personal “Father,” Jesus teaches others to do the same. In doing so, he reveals functions and attributes of the Father. In the Lord’s Prayer in Matt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:1-4 Jesus teaches his disciples to pray with the opening phrase, “Our Father.” His disciples are to approach God in prayer as His children. The prayer then goes on to depict a Father whose will ought to be sought, who provides, who forgives, and who protects (Matt 6:10-13). In Luke 6:26 God is presented as a merciful Father. Descamp and Sweetser note that the gospel image of Father God possesses all the same critical elements as the OT depiction, except that there is an added implication that “God’s love for humanity is extravagant and undeserved.”¹⁷⁰ This attribute is made apparent in the three parables of Luke 15 and most specifically in the story of the prodigal son. The returning prodigal is mercifully and undeservedly forgiven and extravagantly hosted in a celebration of his return to the family (Luke 15:22-24). In Matt 7:7-11 and the parallel passage at Luke 11:9-13, Jesus highlights

¹⁶⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), 67.

¹⁶⁸ Allan Mawhinney, “God as Father: Two Popular Theories Reconsidered,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31/2 (June 1988): 186.

¹⁶⁹ Quere, “‘Naming’ God ‘Father,’” 10.

¹⁷⁰ DesCamp and Sweetser, “Metaphors for God,” 230.

the provision of a father and rhetorically asks, “[H]ow much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” Likewise, Matt 6:25-34 and Luke 12:22-31 instruct the reader to not worry about anything because whatever one needs will be provided by “your heavenly Father.”¹⁷¹

The addition of the word “heavenly” to the title of Father is noteworthy. In providing an element of transcendence to God’s fatherhood, Jesus points to the image of God as Father as being the *prima facie* template of fatherhood from which our earthly depictions of fathers are derived. In Matt 23:9 Jesus teaches to “call no one your father on earth, for you have one father – the one in heaven.” Similarly, in Eph 3:14-15 Paul writes, “[F]or this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name.” Berkhof elegantly summarises:

As God he is not less but infinitely more “Father” than those who on earth go by that name. He is thus always more than is expressed in these terms, but not essentially different. From this it follows that God’s revelational association with us is itself the ground, the norm, and the limit of the symbol language. Which of the characteristics of an earthly father we may analogically ascribe to God, we can find out from a comparison with other symbolical terms that surround this symbol. ... God is not “as it were” a Father; he is the Father from whom all fatherhood on earth is derived. ... That he is different does not mean that God is not really a father, but that we are estranged from its essential meaning.¹⁷²

This view is in contrast to Aida Besancon Spencer’s claim that “God is Father because ‘father’ in the ancient world was a helpful metaphor to communicate certain aspects of God’s character.”¹⁷³ DesCamp and Sweetster similarly note, “‘Father’ doesn’t just communicate certain aspects of God’s Character; ‘Father’ communicates the aspects of God’s Character that the biblical writers considered most important.”¹⁷⁴ Although in the context of Besancon Spencer’s quote she is attempting to provide a much needed response to the criticism that “If God is male, then the male is God,”¹⁷⁵ undermining the reality of God’s fatherhood presented in scripture risks eroding the image of adoption which is closely intertwined with the gospel message of salvation.

¹⁷¹ Luke’s account omits the word ‘heavenly.’

¹⁷² Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 76.

¹⁷³ Aida Besancon Spencer, “Father-Ruler: The Meaning of the Metaphor ‘Father’ For God in the Bible,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39/3 (September 1996): 442.

¹⁷⁴ DesCamp and Sweetster, “Metaphors for God,” 235.

¹⁷⁵ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 19.

The image of adoption by God is developed by Paul throughout his epistles (Rom 8:15; 8:23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5) and is inextricably linked to God's paternal nature and character and His redemptive plan for humanity. While the imagery has clear correlations to the adoption of the people of Israel in Exodus as has been noted above, adoption into God's family in Christ is an image which Jesus presents when he tells Nicodemus that he must be born again (John 3:3). Quere observes that "it is 'by' Jesus' teaching and preaching that we learn to call God 'Father.' It is 'through' Jesus as 'son' that we come to God as Father and become children of God."¹⁷⁶ The theme of adoption is one of the central themes of Pauline theology and draws strongly on the depiction of God as Father. Galatians 3:23-4:7 affirms that "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (3:26) and that this adoption is no longer the exclusive domain of the people of Israel, for "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). As children, the believer can cry out: "Abba, Father!" (4:6). The verb *Krazō* ("crying out") is usually translated "shouted." Mawhinney notes that a prayer which is shouted "is made with the assurance that God hears the one who cries out to Him (Ps 4:3)."¹⁷⁷ John Stott likewise notes a connection between access to God and His parental relationship with believers. He highlights Paul's emphasis on the privileges that we have as being sons instead of slaves.¹⁷⁸ One of those privileges is being heard by the Father, being able to approach Him with confidence (Eph 3:12). William Bennett comments that "'Father' implies the ever-open privilege of immediate contact with one who is knowable and approachable."¹⁷⁹

As an adopted child there are certain rights and privileges, but there are also responsibilities. Just as Pharaoh was instructed to let God's son go *so that he could worship Him*, the adopted believer is likewise required to follow Jesus' example and seek the glory and honour of the heavenly Father and the fulfilment of His will. The image of adoption is one of justification and redemption, but also one of sanctification. In Rom 8:12-17 Paul reminds his audience to maintain a pure life. "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption" (8:15).

¹⁷⁶ Quere, "'Naming' God 'Father'," 5.

¹⁷⁷ Allan Mawhinney, "God as Father," 185.

¹⁷⁸ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 226.

¹⁷⁹ William Bennett, "The Sons of the Father: The Fatherhood of God in the Synoptic Gospels," *Interpretation* 4/1 (January 1950): 15.

Mawhinney notes, “The fatherhood of God implies the responsibility of the son.”¹⁸⁰ Similarly Bennett comments, “Fatherhood is not mere ‘celestial good-nature’ but righteousness demanding righteousness in response. ... If God the Father is a great forgiver, he is also a severe judge toward those who do not come to him as true sons to a Father.”¹⁸¹

The NT depiction of Father God provides an illustration of an extravagantly loving, compassionate, forgiving, provider and protector who deserves loyalty, love and obedience in return. The presentation is cohesive with the OT account and draws language and meaning from the Jewish scriptures. In addition to highlighting attributes of the nature and character of God, the biblical explanation allows the reader to transmit the divine ideal of fatherhood onto the earthly expression. Finally and most significantly, the biblical narrative emphasises a concept of adoption by God, through Jesus, into His family.

The implications of this portrayal of God the Father for those who have experienced fatherlessness or dysfunctional fathers are significant and provide both hope and caution. The biblical account suggests that identity and belonging will be undermined when people do not have a father who wants them. If one projects the negative experiences, perceptions, and expectations of father onto God as Father, the implications could be catastrophic. More than simply contaminating the perception of God in some way, a damaged view of Father God undermines the metaphor of adoption into His family and could consequently influence the understanding of salvation. Alternatively, the biblical depiction also invites those who are fatherless to look to God to provide the role of surrogate. Regardless of whether one projects negative views onto the image of God as Father or looks to God to compensate as a surrogate Father, the experience of how to relate to a healthy father as a loyal and obedient son or daughter will likely be missing. God demonstrates authoritative parenting by guiding, loving, and disciplining His children. He is neither overly harsh, nor absent. Learning to respond and relate to this perfect Heavenly Father in a healthy way could be a significant challenge for those who have been fatherless. In our contemporary time and culture that promotes independence and is suffering increasing rates of fatherlessness, it appears that these tendencies are more than sociological trends, but also reveal an increasing divergence from the father heart of God.

¹⁸⁰ Allan Mawhinney, “God as Father,” 187.

¹⁸¹ Bennett, “The Sons of the Father,” 23.

Chapter 4

Rationale for Research and Research Methods

The object of this study is to assess the extent to which fatherlessness influences one's perception of God as Father. From a sociological, psychological (human development theory), linguistic (metaphor), and theological (Imago Dei) perspective, all disciplines point to the probability that an absent or dysfunctional father will influence the God-image. This research seeks to establish that this influence exists and determine how the perception of God as Father is affected. The study also investigates the way in which the perception of one's father influences the God-image. In addition, this research seeks to confirm conditions which affect one's perception of God and explore how this image is influenced. The data was collected and analysed in order to contribute to the academic debate surrounding the question of whether a compensation response or a correspondence/projection response takes place when the father image is damaged.

Overwhelming sociological evidence of unhealthy or missing paternal relationships leading to negative outcomes for children is not surprising, given the theories elucidated in earlier chapters surrounding the role and significance of parental influence on child development.¹⁸² Similarly, the causal connection between parental images and one's God-image expounded by some notable developmental theorists¹⁸³ make it predictable that the perception of God would also be influenced by deficiencies in the parental relationship. Studies exist which support this correlation,¹⁸⁴ but empirical evidence on the influence of fatherlessness is notably absent in scholarly research and has led to debate surrounding the way in which negative paternal images influence the God-image.

The causal relationship between people's perception of their father and their understanding of God as Father is also supported and explained from a linguistic perspective. Because the vehicle in a metaphor can only be used to effectively transmit meaning to the extent to which one is familiar with the vehicle, it is natural that one's view of God as Father should be influenced by the experience of an earthly father. If one had an absent father, or a negative experience of father, it would follow that the image of God as Father would be

¹⁸² See Chapter 2, page 8-13.

¹⁸³ See Chapter 2, page 23-27.

¹⁸⁴ See Chapter 2, page 28-32.

negatively influenced. However, if one recognizes that the vehicle of an earthly father is insufficient in communicating the intended attributes of God, one may discard the metaphorical relationship entirely. In this case, the idea of God as Father would either lose meaning, or develop some separate meaning, independent of the conceptual metaphor of biological father. In the event that a separate understanding of God as Father were developed, it would be logical to expect that this separate image of God would inform how the individual saw the role of an ideal father. The metaphorical relationship would be reversed, with the image and understanding of God as Father effectively becoming the vehicle which transmits meaning onto the function and character of a biological father.¹⁸⁵

Just as linguistics explains the inseparable connection between a view of God the Father and one's earthly father, the same interdependence between the image of God and the image of humanity is often discussed by theologians. Because God is unknowable in any complete sense and He made humanity in His image, when we conceive of God we are often forced to view Him in light of humanity.¹⁸⁶ God also reveals Himself through function, activity, and revelation in scripture. In addition to the title "Father" being one of the most significant designations for God given in scripture, a number of His other attributes and actions are interwoven with the image of Father. Most notable of these other attributes are that of Creator and Redeemer.¹⁸⁷ The role of creator is the root premise of fatherhood. Without creating, one is not a father. Similarly, in creating humanity and in creating the nation of Israel, God is Father. But it is more than *just* creation. While the act of creation allows a man to *become* "father," the role of nurturing, providing, protecting, and loving is what lets them *be* "father."

The Investigation

As has been highlighted here and explained more fully in earlier chapters, although theorists, researchers and theologians agree that the parental image influences one's view of God and the outcomes that result from a broken relationship with the father, they fail to agree on how this occurs. This study's primary objective was to extend the work of similar

¹⁸⁵ See Chapter 3, page 33-37.

¹⁸⁶ See Chapter 3, page 38-42 and Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 101.

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter 3, page 43-46.

research which has established a connection between parental images and the image of God, but has failed to provide quantitative analysis of the influence of an absent biological father. I wanted to show that this theorised correlation between an absent father and a distorted God image actually occurred within a sample population large enough to be considered at least to some degree representative.

While I designed my research primarily to investigate the impact of fatherlessness, I also assessed the quality of the paternal image. Where some individuals may have had a present father who was ineffective, abusive, or deficient in some other way, both theorists and sociological evidence suggest that this will influence the individual negatively. However, the reverse is also true. A non-resident father who engages in authoritative parenting¹⁸⁸ can positively influence child outcomes.¹⁸⁹ Therefore I wanted to determine what effect people's perception of their father, rather than just their physical dislocation from them, would have on their perception of God, irrespective of whether the participant identified themselves as fatherless or not.

The literature is unclear about how a person's perception of God is affected by inadequate fathering. While some researchers found support for a Projection Theory approach and others demonstrated evidence for a compensation response, I felt that the lack of academic consensus on the issue was telling. Rather than expecting to find evidence in support of either perspective, I hypothesised that within any given fatherless population there would be those who naturally turned to God to fulfil the role of father that was missing from their lives and others who would reject the image of God as Father. Some would project their negative perception of father onto God, while for others God would compensate for a poor father, becoming an attachment substitute and the example of what a father should be like. Consequently I expected the fatherless population's responses to be polarised with regard to how they perceived God. This position was supported by the qualitative findings of Philip Halstead in his "Forgiveness Matters Course."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Authoritative parenting is neither indulgent and permissive, nor harsh and overbearing. Instead an authoritative parent provides praise and emotional support for a child and also sets boundaries and disciplines misbehaviour.

¹⁸⁹ See Chapter 2, page 13-15.

¹⁹⁰ Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course," 102.

Additionally, I anticipated that those who rejected the image of God as Father would be likely to find other images of God more significant and meaningful as they sought to engage with God in alternative ways. In order to contribute to the debate among researchers and theorists surrounding this question, my research investigated parallel characteristics for both God and father and examined the significance of various images of God for the respondent. This allowed me to investigate any similarities between respondents' perceptions of God and their perceptions of father both in terms of specific attributes and also in a holistic sense by combining their responses. It also allowed me to analyse the extent to which the image of God as Father had been influenced by fatherlessness or the respondent's perception of father and determine if there were any trends toward finding other images of God more meaningful in light of a dysfunctional father experience.

Definition of Key Terms

Fatherlessness

Providing a definition for what it means to be "fatherless" is not easy. Does the father have to be deceased, live somewhere else, be absent for large periods of time due to work commitments, or be unavailable or emotionally disconnected? For different individuals with their own personal experiences, the criteria would likely vary. However, as the purpose of this study was to identify how a respondent's personal experience with father during their upbringing has influenced their perception of God, I felt that the personal perspective of fatherlessness was entirely valid. Rather than attempting to provide a hard and fast definition of what constituted fatherlessness, I simply asked the participants if they had been fatherless. This allowed them to determine the answer to this question themselves. If, for example, they had lived with their father but he had been away for long periods of time on military deployments and they felt that they had been fatherless during these times, then they were able to identify themselves as "fatherless." Conversely, if their father lived apart from them but they saw him every day and he remained an active and involved part of their life, if they felt that they had not been fatherless then this was an equally acceptable response. It was the individual's perception of their own upbringing and experience which provided the criteria for having been "fatherless." It was, after all, the respondent's personal feeling of fatherlessness which would influence their perception of God.

Additionally, there was the question of the duration of fatherlessness. The influence of fatherlessness was likely to be considerably different if a father left or died during the teenage years compared to in early childhood. In order to allow for these variations in experiences to be recorded for analysis, the survey asked respondents who had indicated that they had been fatherless during childhood to identify what ages they were fatherless. There were options of zero to three years, three to six years, six to 11 years, and 11 to 20 years. As many selections as were required could be made. These age brackets were selected in order to loosely parallel the first three stages of James Fowler's Faith Development Model. Fowler only makes cursory mention of infancy, which does not meaningfully feature in his faith development model. Consequently, the three latter age brackets represent the "intuitive-projective,"¹⁹¹ "mythic-literal,"¹⁹² and "synthetic-conventional"¹⁹³ stages respectively.

Correspondence and Compensation

As has been outlined above, the two primary theoretical positions which provide a framework to explain the way that fatherlessness or a negative perception of father influences the perception of God are born out of Freud's Projection Theory and John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. For those who view God in a similar way to the way they perceive father, the image of father is "projected" onto the image of God. I have also referred to this as a "correspondence response." Conversely, if a respondent has a negative perception of father and a positive perception of God, I have referred to this as a "compensation response." I have used these terms to define the overall response of the participant and also to discuss the relationship between the way that they perceived a particular attribute of father and God. The numerical criteria for defining these terms is outlined in detail in the data analysis in chapter 5.

Research Methods

This research involved a survey and interviews (The survey instrument is attached in the Appendix.). For the survey, I contacted a number of churches in the greater Waikato

¹⁹¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 133-134.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 149-150.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

region and was invited to carry out my survey at seven separate churches.¹⁹⁴ During a service I provided a brief outline of what I was researching and the importance of it, particularly in the New Zealand context, and invited those who were willing to complete the survey to do so at the completion of the service. Only one survey response was collected per participant and respondents were required to be over 20 years old. At the larger churches I attended multiple services with different start times in order to canvas a larger cross section of their congregations.

It is difficult to say what proportion of the church-going population was able to be surveyed by this self selecting event based sampling. The 2006 census data recorded 55.6% of the New Zealand population identifying as Christian.¹⁹⁵ However, this is by no means representative of the proportion of the population who actually maintain an active and personal faith or attend church. This difficulty, along with the fact that the sampling method was not random, means that the results of this research can not be considered representative of other church-going populations. Rather, it provides an insight into some of the influences which fatherlessness and a negative perception of father can have on the perception of God. It is not intended to be definitive or conclusive about the entire population of New Zealand or even of the entire church-going population in this country, but the sample size is big enough to justify drawing conclusions about the people who attend the specific churches surveyed.

The survey document itself recorded demographic data about the respondents, including their age, gender, religion/denomination, and ethnicity. Additional to the question of fatherlessness which was outlined above, participants were asked to indicate if they perceived God to be nurturing, loving, distant, interested in them, a disciplinarian, accepting, someone whose love was earned, reliable, trustworthy, a protector, demanding, involved, and a provider. Each attribute required a response on a five point scale with “yes” at one end, “somewhat” in the centre, and “no” at the other end. Respondents were also asked the same question, with the same characteristics and possible responses, about how they perceived their father. These specific attributes were selected as they represented

¹⁹⁴ Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Roman Catholic), Vision Church – Eastside (Apostolic/ACTS), Graceway Church (Apostolic/ACTS), Horsham Downs Community Church (Presbyterian), C3 Church Tauranga, Gateway Church (independent Pentecostal), Changepoint Papamoa (independent Pentecostal).

¹⁹⁵ Statistics New Zealand, *QuickStats About Culture and Identity, Religious Affiliation*, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity/religious-affiliation.aspx>> (14 November 2013).

characteristics which various researchers indicated were both meaningful in the role and image of a father and could also be damaging to that image. There were certainly other attributes that could have been included, but I felt that as long as the images were the same for God and for father, the comparison would be revealing.

The survey document also asked participants to indicate how meaningful various images of God were to them. Once again this was done on a five point scale with “very meaningful” at one end, “somewhat meaningful” in the centre, and “not meaningful” at the other end. Respondents were asked to score the images of God as Ruler, Judge, King, Potter, Father, Rock, Fortress/Strong tower, Protector, Redeemer, Nurturer, Comforter, and Warrior. The image of God as Father was clearly required in order to address the primary question of the research. The other images were selected as they represented elements of a father which a respondent who had a damaged perception of father might either be drawn to or repelled by depending on whether they had a compensation or correspondence response. The images of Ruler, Judge, and King have connotations of command and may reflect a strong dominant perception of God. The role of Protector and Warrior represent an offensive form of security where the individual may understand God to be fighting on their behalf. Conversely, the image of God as Rock and Fortress/Strong tower reflects a more defensive security where one may see God providing them shelter or a safe haven from oppression and danger. The role of God as Potter portrays His creative function and the guidance that He provides, and the image of Nurturer and Comforter reflect the more caring, motherly attributes of God. This range of images allowed me to determine if the image of God as Father was influenced by fatherlessness or a negative perception of God and also if other images held more meaning in light of any causal link.

In order to analyse the data and compare the responses of two different populations, I began by utilising a chi-square.¹⁹⁶ Cross tabulation chi-square tests allowed the values provided for each attribute to be directly compared between the perception of God and the perception of father across the entire study population. This provided the first insight into the rates of correspondence and correlation between the two values. It did not, however, differentiate between those who had fathers and those who did not. By separating these two populations I would have been able to make correlations. However, due to the number

¹⁹⁶ I consulted with a statistician from the University of Otago throughout the research design and data analysis process.

of cells on the contingency table regularly having counts less than 5, particularly for the lower perception of God values, the Chi Square became unreliable. An example of this analysis is provided at Table 4.1 below which correlates the perception of God and the perception of father as nurturing. In this example there are 13 cells with values less than 5, making the results highly unreliable.

**Table 4.1 –
Example of Chi-Square Cross Tabulation**

Perception of God Nurturing * Perception of Father Nurturing Cross tabulation

	Perception of Father Nurturing					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1	1	0	1	0	0	2
2	2	0	0	1	0	3
3	9	5	13	4	5	36
4	8	8	24	17	13	70
5	47	33	88	32	194	394
Total	67	46	126	54	212	505

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	60.642 ^a	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	59.691	16	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	26.215	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	505		

a. 13 cells (52.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .18.

T-tests provided an alternative method for comparing the mean scores from interval data for two sample population. Although this dictated the way in which I applied and interpreted the data to some extent, it also allowed for a meaningful comparison of populations which often revealed results of statistical significance. As I was investigating unequal sample sizes with unequal variance, I utilised Welch's t-test in order to calculate the p-values. This allowed me to compare the mean results of individual attribute scores and image of God scores between populations (fatherless / non-fatherless and negative perception of father / positive perception of father) and determine the significance of the results. I chose to use an alpha of 0.05, the normal standard for social sciences, so any p-value of 0.05 or less was considered statistically significant, giving a 95% confidence level.

In addition to the quantitative data collection and analysis, I also interviewed three survey respondents. In the survey responses participants were asked to indicate if they would be willing to be interviewed in person if it would aid the research. Fifty-six percent of respondents stated that they were happy to be interviewed if required. Interviewees were selected based on their responses and the sub-populations that they represented. Their comments, experiences, and stories were intended to augment the discussion on the quantitative data and provide a human face for what could otherwise become a sterile statistical analysis. When I identified individuals who I wanted to interview I contacted them by phone or e-mail and asked them if they were still willing to contribute. One participant declined to be interviewed. These interviewees were provided additional information on the research, including procedures for withdrawal from the study and complaint procedures. They were then asked to sign consent forms.

The interviews were recorded and notes were also taken. They took place either in the homes of the interviewees or at a neutral location. The questions asked during the interview roughly mirrored the survey questions, but instead of being limited to a selection of pre-determined responses, the interview format allowed for the individual's story to be told. It also allowed for follow up questions to be asked, which enabled areas of interest to be pursued as they arose within the discussion. The interviews began with these questions:

- What sort of characteristics would you assign to God?
- What images of God are most meaningful to you?
- Tell me about your father during your childhood.
- What sort of characteristics would you use to describe your father?
- How do you feel your experience of a father while growing up has influenced your perception of God as a Father, if at all?
- How has your perception of God changed as you have gotten older?

No interviewees or survey participants were remunerated or provided reward for their participation.

Additional Considerations

Despite the fact that t-tests provided the ability to determine what was statistically significant and what was not within the data analysis of my sample population, this does not suggest that it is a reliable determinant of what would or does occur in other

populations. As the sample came from within a church-going population, it is possible that this could skew the correlation between fatherlessness and the proportion of responses that demonstrated either a compensation or a correspondence response. If one tended to project an unhealthy father image onto the perception of God, I suspect it would be less likely that they would maintain a practicing Christian faith and therefore would be less likely to be represented in the church-going population. However, those who look to the image of God as Father to compensate for their inadequate or absent earthly father, viewing Him as an attachment substitute, would perhaps be more likely to have an ongoing Christian faith and would be over represented in a church population. Consequently the data collected is only representative of a church-going population. While it may provide some indication of the ways in which people respond to fatherlessness and unhealthy father images, it cannot be used to predict variances in wider society.

Chapter 5

Fatherlessness and Faith

In this and the following chapter, I analyse the results of the survey. Where relevant I have drawn on material from interviews to highlight or provide a commentary for the results. Similarly, where appropriate I have made connections between the outcomes of this study and the work of previous research. Following a description of the demographic make-up of the sample population, this chapter demonstrates that fatherlessness influences one's perception of father, investigates the effect of this on the perception of God both generically and by specific attribute, outlines the variations of correspondence and compensation responses within the population, and addresses the impact of fatherlessness on various images of God. The findings show clearly that although there was little variation in the perception of God between fatherless and non-fatherless populations, there was a strong compensation response from those who identified as fatherless. There was also some evidence to suggest that those who are fatherless may initially demonstrate a correspondence response, struggling to relate to God as Father and having a negative perception of God, but as they mature and their faith develops, they may begin to adopt a compensation response, viewing God as an attachment substitute.

Demographics

There were 505 respondents in this study from seven different church congregations of various denominations.¹⁹⁷ The ages of the respondents were recorded in intervals of 10 years, the oldest category being "71+." Each 10 year age bracket from 20 to 60 years was evenly represented with 107-128 (just over 20%) respondents in each category. The exception to this was 31-40 year olds, who were slightly under represented with 77 (15.2%) responses. The 61-70 and 71+ categories had 48 (9.5%) and 30 (5.9%) responses respectively. The gender break down was close to even, with 244 (48.3%) male and 258 (51.1%) female respondents. Three people did not indicate their gender. Ethnicity of the population was as follows: 77.6% New Zealand European/Pakeha, 5.4% Maori, 2.2% Pacific Island, 14.5% other consisting primarily of South African and various Asian

¹⁹⁷ Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, C3, two Apostolic/ACTS churches, and two separate independent Pentecostal churches.

countries of origin. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their religious affiliation. The responses included 40.6% Pentecostal/Protestant, 25% Catholic, 18.6% Apostolic, 20.4% independent evangelical, 2.8% Baptist, and 9.7% other. Respondents at times indicated more than one religious affiliation, hence the total accumulated percentages equalling 117%. Respondents were asked to identify if they would be willing to conduct a follow-up interview after the survey. Three interviews were conducted to assist in the understanding of quantitative data. The three interviewees were chosen because of their specific survey results and as representatives of their sub-populations. The demographic make up of participants in this study are tabulated below.

**Table 5.1 –
Demographic Break Down of Study Participants**

Age			Gender		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
20-30yrs	128	25.3	Male	244	48.3
31-40yrs	77	15.2	Female	258	51.1
41-50yrs	115	22.8			
51-60yrs	107	21.2	Missing	3	0.6
61-70yrs	48	9.5			
71yrs+	30	5.9			
Total	505	100	Total	505	100
Ethnicity			Religious Affiliation		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
NZ European Pakeha	392	77.6	Pentecostal/ Protestant	205	40.6
Maori	27	5.4	Catholic	126	25.0
Pacific Island	11	2.2	Independent Evangelical	103	20.4
Other	73	14.5	Baptist	14	2.8
				49	9.7
Total	505	100	Other		
			Total	591	117.0

Influence of Fatherlessness on the Perception of Father

Before being able to undertake a statistical investigation into the impact of fatherlessness on the perception of God, it was important to determine if there was a positive correlation between being fatherless and one's perception of father. The premise of both compensation and correspondence theories is that the individual has a damaged perception of father. Therefore it was important to first ascertain the existence of this causal link. If participants who indicated that they had been fatherless did not present any statistically significant link between being fatherless and their perception of a father, significant questions about my premise would be raised. By analysing the survey data I found that within church-going populations, those who have experienced fatherlessness have a more negative perception of father than those who had a father.

In order to begin analysing the data I assigned numerical values to the fields in the questionnaire which participants had completed. Answers as to whether the respondent perceived God or their father to possess various attributes were ascribed values from one to five, five being "yes" and one being "no." For example, when a participant indicated that "yes," they perceived God as nurturing, it was assigned a value of five. If they annotated that they "somewhat" perceived God to be nurturing, it was recorded as a three. The same scale was used for the question of how meaningful certain images of God were for the individual. In order for higher numbers (four and five) to be associated with positive views of God, I reversed the number values for the perception of God as "distant" and as "someone whose love is earned."

The average score and standard deviation (SD) for each population ("fatherless" and "non-fatherless") was calculated for each characteristic. The difference between the population average scores was then calculated in order to identify which attributes were most strongly influenced by fatherlessness. The difference between these scores was divided by the maximum possible score of 5 to provide a percentage difference of the total. The results of this analysis are recorded in Table 5.2. As was expected, the statistical significance in the perception of father (PF) scores of the fatherless population compared to the non-fatherless population was pronounced. A p-value of less than 0.05 is considered statistically significant and many of their results were significant to a much greater degree (recorded as $p \leq 0.001$). Every characteristic except the perception of father as demanding

(PF_Demanding) had a statistically significant p-value and each of these scores was less than 0.001 except for PF_Someone whose love is earned, which had a p-value of 0.002.

While confidence in most of these results was merited, the values for PF_Demanding were conspicuous. The similarity between the scores between populations (fatherless score of 2.718, non-fatherless score of 2.807) probably reflects variation in the way that respondents view this characteristic. The difficulty surrounds the perception of what it means to be demanding. For some a father who is demanding may be seen as highly controlling. However, others may view a father who is not demanding as permissive and weak. The larger spread in responses amongst the fatherless population (SD 1.681 compared to non-fatherless SD of 1.460) reflects the fact that they tended to perceive fathers in a more negative light. The issue lay in how the individual perceived demanding as “negative.” As a result, the responses tended to be polarised away from the centre. Despite the lack of clarity in the numbers, this negative trend was consistent with the results of the other characteristics, but the numerical inconsistency and confusion was reflected in a p-value of 0.648.

Although still statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$), the results of PF_Disciplinarian were influenced in a similar fashion to the PF_Demanding results and for similar reasons. The average fatherless PF_Disciplinarian score was 3.212 (SD 1.677), with the non-fatherless average being 3.857 (SD 1.206). This provided an average score difference between populations of just 0.645 (12.9%). It was also notable that the fatherless SD for PF_Disciplinarian (1.677) revealed the largest variation of all the statistically significant results. This polarisation possibly reveals the difference between a respondent who had an experience of an authoritarian father prior to the father leaving, resulting in a high PF_Disciplinarian score and those for whom there was functionally no father experience and therefore recorded a low PF_Disciplinarian score. Likewise, the PF_Someone whose love is earned had a very small margin between populations (0.602, 12.1%), with a larger SD in the fatherless population (1.604). The average fatherless PF_Someone whose love is earned score was 3.000 (SD 1.604), with the non-fatherless average being 3.602 (SD 1.451). The larger SD amongst the fatherless population reflects the range of experiences within this group. In addition to the lower average scores for all attributes, those who had experienced fatherlessness also had the largest standard deviation values for every characteristic.

Larger standard deviation values and similar mean scores were particularly noteworthy for the values of PF_Disciplinarian, PF_Demanding, and PF_Someone whose love is earned. This is possibly because of the negative nature of these characteristics. The responses of those with fathers had smaller SD values than the fatherless, who would have been likely to either return a very low score, because they had little to do with their father (negative or otherwise), or their perception of father would have tended to be unfavourable and be assigned a higher score (“Yes, my father was a disciplinarian, demanding, or someone whose love had to be earned”). The fatherless population was more inclined to have a strong opinion on these attributes and therefore move away from mid point bias. Regardless of whether the scores were reversed, as in the case of PF_Someone whose love is earned, or not, the consequence was polarisation in the results. The net effect was that the average scores were more similar between populations than the other characteristics, but the standard deviations within the fatherless population were also greater.

Additional noteworthy elements in these results were those characteristics which demonstrate the greatest difference in PF between populations. It was predictable that those who are fatherless would also have a low PF_Involved score (fatherless average 2.059, SD 1.238, non-fatherless average 3.779, SD 1.211, 34.4% difference). It was also unsurprising that this would extend to the perception of father as distant (fatherless average 2.329, SD 1.459, non-fatherless average 3.621, SD 1.393, 25.8% difference). Further, if fathers are not present, it may also be expected that the children would struggle to view their father as reliable (fatherless average 2.671, SD 1.599, non-fatherless average 4.329, SD 1.011, 33.2% difference) or trustworthy (fatherless average 2.824, SD 1.656, non-fatherless average 4.457, SD 0.965, 32.7% difference). What was remarkable, however, was the difference between the average perceptions of father as a protector. Although this score did not have the lowest average attribute score amongst the fatherless population, following PF_Involved, it had the greatest difference between fatherless and non-fatherless populations (fatherless average 2.647, SD 1.548, non-fatherless average 4.352, SD 1.063, 34.1% difference). It appears that despite this element not being the most sorely missed by those who were fatherless, the PF_Protector was, within the attributes tested in this study, the characteristic which was most significantly affected by fatherlessness.

**Table 5.2 –
Perceptions of Father Amongst Fatherless and Non-fatherless Populations**

	Fatherless n. 85		Non-Fatherless n. 420		t stat	p-value	Difference in Averages**
	Average	SD	Average	SD			
PF_Nurturing	2.271	1.434	3.857	1.283	-9.462	p≤0.001	1.587 (31.73%)
PF_Loving	2.800	1.438	4.229	1.073	-8.685	p≤0.001	1.429 (28.57%)
PF_Distant	2.329	1.459	3.621	1.393	-7.502	p≤0.001	1.292 (25.84%)
PF_Interested in you	2.753	1.471	4.221	1.009	-8.794	p≤0.001	1.468 (29.37%)
PF_Disciplinarian	3.212	1.677	3.857	1.206	-3.376	p≤0.001	0.645 (12.91%)
PF_Accepting	2.635	1.430	3.943	1.211	-7.879	p≤0.001	1.308 (26.15%)
PF_Someone whose love is earned	3.000	1.604	3.602	1.451	-3.208	0.002	0.602 (12.05%)
PF_Reliable	2.671	1.599	4.329	1.011	-9.194	p≤0.001	1.658 (33.16%)
PF_Trustworthy	2.824	1.656	4.457	0.965	-8.798	p≤0.001	1.634 (32.67%)
PF_A Protector	2.647	1.548	4.352	1.063	-9.701	p≤0.001	1.705 (34.11%)
PF_Demanding	2.718	1.681	2.807	1.460	-0.457	0.648*	0.089 (1.79%)
PF_Involved	2.059	1.238	3.779	1.211	-11.724	p≤0.001	1.720 (34.39%)
PF_A Provider	3.376	1.676	4.664	0.763	-6.940	p≤0.001	1.288 (25.76%)
PF_Average	2.670	1.047	4.096	0.815	-11.854	p≤0.001	1.426 (28.53%)

* Result is greater than 0.05 and is therefore not statistically significant.

** Non-fatherless average – Fatherless average = Difference in Averages (Difference in Averages / max score of 5 = % difference).

Influence of Fatherlessness on God Scores

I wanted to assess the impact that fatherlessness had on how the participants perceived God. In order to achieve this I developed a “God Score” for each respondent. This was simply the average of their responses to how they perceived God. I quickly realised, however, that the way that individuals responded to the question of if God is a disciplinarian and whether He is demanding posed a vulnerability to this measure. With no clear positive or negative response, it was difficult for both the respondent and myself to determine how to address this question. Viewing God as a disciplinarian could be viewed by some as a positive attribute, connoting caring engagement, and it may be perceived by others as negative, connoting oppression. Conversely, viewing God as not a disciplinarian could be viewed positively or negatively. Likewise, polarised responses to “demanding” insinuated that God was either domineering and oppressive, or lackadaisical and apathetic. As the optimal perception of God was probably somewhere in the middle of these two unhealthy extremes, they become difficult to quantify in a meaningful way. While these attributes have value when investigating the correlation between negative father images and the way that this influences the perception of those characteristics in God, they were nonetheless a complicating factor in this analysis. Consequently I opted to remove these values from the “God Score” calculations.

Having calculated a “God Score,” I was able to analyse the results to determine if there were any notable difference in the mean perception of those who identified themselves as fatherless compared to those who identified that they had a father. These mean results had a close similarity. Although the correlation between these populations and their perception of God was significantly weaker than the correlation with perception of father (The actual average PF p-value was 4.0489×10^{-21} ; the average PG p-value was 0.031) the results were still statistically significant. The average “God Score” for fatherless was 4.4342, and those with fathers was 4.590 (Table 5.3). However, the standard deviation was notably greater amongst the fatherless population. Fatherless respondents had a “God Score” SD of 0.621, whereas those with fathers had a SD of 0.465. This portrays a more significant variation in responses from the fatherless group, which is consistent with the hypothesis that an absent father will lead to either an overly high or an overly low perception of God and therefore the corresponding “God Score.”

**Table 5.3 –
Average God Scores of Fatherless and Non-fatherless Populations**

	n	Average God Score	SD
Fatherless	85	4.434	0.621
Non -Fatherless	420	4.590	0.465
t stat		-2.194	
p-value		0.031	

These results are also consistent with the qualitative findings of Phil Halstead in his research on the “Forgiveness Matters Course” he designed. In his research those with negative parental experiences were tested and assigned “A God Scale” in a similar fashion to this study. Prior to undertaking the course, Halstead found that his participants had either overly high or overly low “A God Scale” scores. As mentioned in chapter 2, the forgiveness course was intended to address participant’s parental issues and therefore affect their perception of God. Although the mean “A God Scale” scores remained relatively unchanged after the course had been completed by the participants, the standard deviation decreased as the polarised perceptions moved toward the centre.¹⁹⁸ The result of the average “God Scores” and the associated variation in standard deviation in my study lends quantitative support to Halstead’s findings.

Influence of Fatherlessness on the Perception of God by Attribute

Having assessed variations in overall “God Scores,” I wanted to investigate the impact of fatherlessness on the perception of God (PG) for specific attributes. The method for this comparison was similar to the “God Score” test except that rather than utilising an average overall score, this assessment looked at each attribute score independently. Because the somewhat problematic scores of “disciplinarian” and “demanding” would not confound the overall results when being assessed independently, they were able to be included in this analysis.

The perception of God as disciplinarian and as someone whose love is earned both had p-values smaller than 0.05 (0.004 and 0.044 respectively) and consequently had results which were meaningful. However, the results of the remainder of this assessment were

¹⁹⁸ Halstead, “The Forgiveness Matters Course,” 102.

largely inconclusive, possessing a lack of reliability (Table 5.4). One reason for this may be an inconsistency of responses in the fatherless population. This reflected a greater polarisation of results amongst the fatherless population, but also resulted in p-values which were too great to be considered statistically significant. The PG as disciplinarian and as someone whose love is earned were able to achieve these smaller p-values as the scores had the greatest variation between populations (PG_Disciplinarian difference of 9.7%, PG_Someone whose love is earned difference of 7.8%).

While it may not be surprising that the fatherless population perceived God as more of a disciplinarian than those with fathers (fatherless average 3.482, non-fatherless average 3.00), given that whatever experience of a father they had would have been more likely to be negative, it was remarkable that the range of responses from the fatherless population was slightly more consistent than the non-fatherless (SD 1.385 compared to SD 1.421). It seems that regardless of whether the fatherless respondent had a negative experience of father or no experience of father at all, fatherlessness tended to result in an enhanced perception of God as a disciplinarian compared to those with fathers.

The results of the perception of God as someone whose love is earned were also noteworthy. Remembering that these results were reversed, with the greater numerical value indicating that God was *not* someone whose love must be earned, it was predictable that the fatherless population would have an average lower score (fatherless average 3.706, non-fatherless average 4.098). Although this value also had the greatest variation in responses (SD 1.653), as a population those who were fatherless tended to struggle to see God as unconditionally loving, even though they perceived God as generally loving in absolute terms (PG_Loving average 4.776). Regardless of whether they tended to project their perception of father onto God, or view Him in a compensatory role as an attachment substitute, this particular attribute still tended to suffer as a result of a projection response.

**Table 5.4 –
Perceptions of God Amongst Fatherless and Non-fatherless Populations**

	Fatherless n. 85		Non-Fatherless n. 420		t stat	p-value	Difference in Averages**
	Average	SD	Average	SD			
PG_Nurturing	4.541	0.853	4.714	0.617	-1.779	0.078*	0.173 (3.46%)
PG_Loving	4.776	0.713	4.893	0.415	-1.455	0.149*	0.116 (2.33%)
PG_Distant reversed	3.694	1.310	3.983	1.167	-1.890	0.061*	0.289 (5.78%)
PG_Interested in you	4.624	0.756	4.686	0.667	-0.705	0.482*	0.062 (1.24%)
PG_Disciplinarian	3.482	1.385	3.000	1.421	2.915	0.004	-0.482 (9.65%)
PG_Accepting	4.588	0.835	4.740	0.615	-1.595	0.114*	0.152 (3.04%)
PG_Someone whose love is earned reversed	3.706	1.653	4.098	1.403	-2.041	0.044	0.392 (7.83%)
PG_Reliable	4.635	0.769	4.717	0.707	-0.901	0.369*	0.081 (1.63%)
PG_Trustworthy	4.765	0.666	4.840	0.549	-0.983	0.328*	0.076 (1.52%)
PG_A Protector	4.588	0.761	4.683	0.758	-1.052	0.295*	0.095 (1.90%)
PG_Demanding	2.482	1.509	2.271	1.353	1.195	0.235*	-0.211 (4.22%)
PG_Involved	4.376	0.988	4.460	0.880	-0.720	0.473*	0.083 (1.66%)
PG_A Provider	4.482	0.995	4.676	0.715	-1.709	0.091*	0.194 (3.88%)

* Result is greater than 0.05 and is therefore not statistically significant.

** Non-fatherless average – Fatherless average = Difference in Averages (Difference in Averages / max score of 5 = % difference).

Influence of Fatherlessness on Correspondence or Compensation Responses

As a result of the lack of statistical significance in the analysis of the effect of fatherlessness on the perception of God, a different methodology had to be undertaken to generate meaningful data. Rather than assessing total average scores for each attribute, I opted instead to compare each PG value that a participant recorded for any given attribute with the corresponding PF value. This allowed me to look for patterns arising within populations for each attribute.

In order to begin this analysis I created delineations between PF and PG scores from which I could define “correspondence” and “compensation.” The parameters for a correspondence result were self evident. If a respondent had an identical value in both the PF and PG responses for a particular attribute, this was quantified as “correspondence.” Defining what would be deemed “compensation” posed more issues due to the disproportionately top heavy PG scores. If results of both average PF and PG scores were evenly distributed, with a mean around the mid-point survey score of three, it may have been reasonable to define any result where the PG score was greater than or equal to PF plus three as “compensation.” In this situation, if one had a PF score of two for any given attribute, he or she would require a PG score of five to meet this criteria. Similarly, a PF score of one would require a PG value of at least four. However, due to the top heavy PG scores, I felt that a score of four for PG was not sufficiently strong to merit it being viewed as a compensatory response. Therefore I instead defined compensation as any result where the PF score was one, two, or three, and the PG score was five.

Although “disciplinarian” and “demanding” could have been meaningfully analysed for a correspondence response, because of the aforementioned difficulty with determining what a positive or a negative response is, determining a compensation response was not plausible. Given that the objective was to compare the number of compensation responses with the number of correspondence responses, only half of the data for these attributes would have been meaningless. Therefore I omitted them from the analysis.

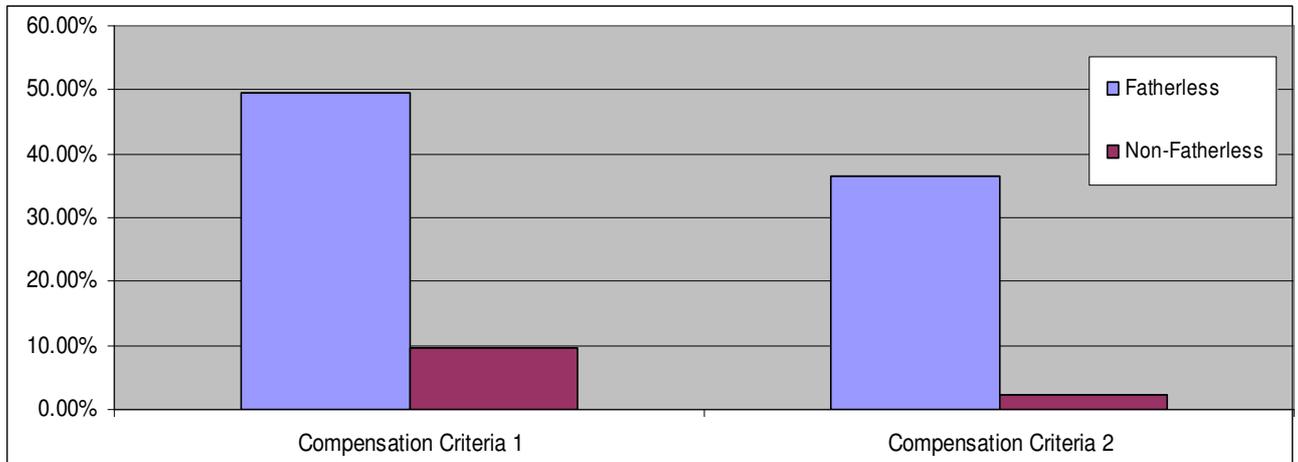
Finally, I developed a methodology for categorising individual respondents as having either an overall compensation response, or an overall correspondence response. Any individual who had six or more correspondence results out of a possible 11 was classified

as having a correspondence response. Likewise, any individual who had six or more compensation results out of a possible 11 was classified as having a compensation response. It is important to note that by utilising this criteria, not every respondent would have consistent enough results across the attributes to be determined as having either a compensation response or a correspondence response. Of the 505 surveyed, 320 participants met the requirements of one of these two designations.

Given that I had to develop the numerical basis for these classifications, these definitions limit the ability of the data to be compared to other research results, which are usually qualitative, but they remain useful as a tool for analysis. As it was the comparative rates of compensation and correspondence responses that were being investigated, so long as the same parameters were applied across both populations, the relationship remained meaningful. For example, one could not claim that 57.7% of church attendees who were fatherless would have a compensation response to the perception of God as nurturing (See Table 5.6) without first carefully quantifying the meaning of “compensation.” However, within my sample approximately twice as many fatherless church-goers had a compensation response to the perception of God as nurturing compared to those who had a father (57.7% compared to 28.3% in my sample – Table 5.6). Despite the fact that this study is not intended to be representative of all church-going populations in New Zealand, given the large sample size I would expect to see something similar to this pattern in other church-going populations.

In order to demonstrate the validity of these definitions in comparative terms and ensure that a variation of the criteria for compensation would not affect the results of the data in contrasting fatherless and non-fatherless populations, I measured average compensation scores using the two sets of criteria outlined above. Criteria 1 was the chosen methodology of $PG = 5$ and $PF \leq 3$. Criteria 2 was $PG \geq PF + 3$ (Table 5.5). The results validated my decision to define correspondence as I had. Criteria 1 rendered 49.4% fatherless respondents with a compensation response and 9.5% non-fatherless. Criteria 2 revealed 36.5% of fatherless and 2.4% non-fatherless respondents with compensation responses. As well as providing similar proportional results between populations, Criteria 1 provided a larger data set from which to carry out further analysis and also had a greater degree of statistical significance (Both p-values were $p \leq 0.001$, but actual values were: Criteria 1 p-value 2.47×10^{-10} , Criteria 2 p-value 6.64×10^{-9}).

**Table 5.5 –
Comparison of Criteria for Compensation Responses of Fatherless and Non-fatherless Populations**



	Compensation Criteria 1*	Compensation Criteria 2**
Fatherless (n. 85)	49.41%	36.47%
Non-Fatherless (n. 420)	9.52%	2.38%
t stat	7.072	6.427
p-value	p≤0.001	p≤0.001

* PG = 5 and PF ≤ 3.

** PG ≥ PF +3.

With Criteria 1 established and validated as the methodology for determining compensation responses and the definition of correspondence responses being self evident, I was then able to undertake a comparison of each of the attributes (Table 5.6). The percentage of the total fatherless and non-fatherless populations who demonstrated a correspondence or compensation response for each attribute was calculated.¹⁹⁹ This analysis revealed a high degree of statistical significance, with all characteristics possessing a p-value less than 0.001 except for “distant” (correspondence p-value of 0.009, compensation p-value of 0.023) and “someone whose love is earned” (correspondence p-value of 0.016; the compensation p-value of 0.122 was the only result which was not statistically significant). The lack of statistical significance is noteworthy and revealed inconsistency in the responses between populations. The characteristic of “someone whose

¹⁹⁹ Given that the definition of a participant having a correspondence or compensation response was binary in this analysis, that is they were either “yes” or “no” for each value, Welch’s t-test was not the most accurate method of analysis. However, the differences in most percentages are sufficiently large to reveal trends which can be interpreted. Because of the large sample size, and the fact that I was not looking to make any specific quantitative predictions representative of wider church going populations, in consultation with a statistician from the University of Otago, it was decided that the simplicity of Welch’s t-test still made it an acceptable method of analysis.

love is earned” (compensation response of 28.2%; correspondence response of 30.6%) and the perception of the father as a “provider” (compensation response of 27.1%; correspondence response of 44.7%)²⁰⁰ were the only attributes in the fatherless group for which the compensation response was lower than the correspondence response.

Regardless, this suggests that unless unconditional love is actually experienced, it may be difficult to understand and accept it. This interpretation is supported by the fact that it also had the lowest overall compensation score (28.2%, equal with “distant”). Amongst the fatherless population, it was apparent that respondents, who identified God in a compensatory role for other attributes, nonetheless struggled to relate to God as someone who loved them unconditionally.

A number of elements compared in the compensation / correspondence analysis had particularly important results. The compensation response amongst those who were fatherless was strongest for the characteristics of loving (62.4%; correspondence response of 22.4%), nurturing (57.7%; correspondence response of 17.7%), involved (56.5%; correspondence response of 11.8%), reliable (54.1%; correspondence response of 24.7%), accepting (54.1%; correspondence response of 16.5%), interested in you (52.9%; correspondence response of 21.2%), and trustworthy (50.6%; correspondence response of 25.9%). The results suggested that it was these characteristics which those who were fatherless most strongly related to as the foundational attributes that define a father. Consequently these characteristics were highlighted as the most strongly sought after traits in an attachment substitute. For over 50% of all fatherless respondents, God was perceived as an attachment substitute most clearly in His function as a figure who was loving, nurturing, involved, reliable, accepting, trustworthy, and interested in them.

The perception of God as a protector (compensation response of 48.2%; correspondence response of 24.7%) and as distant (compensation response of 28.2%; correspondence response of 23.5%) had lower compensatory results amongst the fatherless population. The non-fatherless population likewise demonstrated a low level of correlation between the

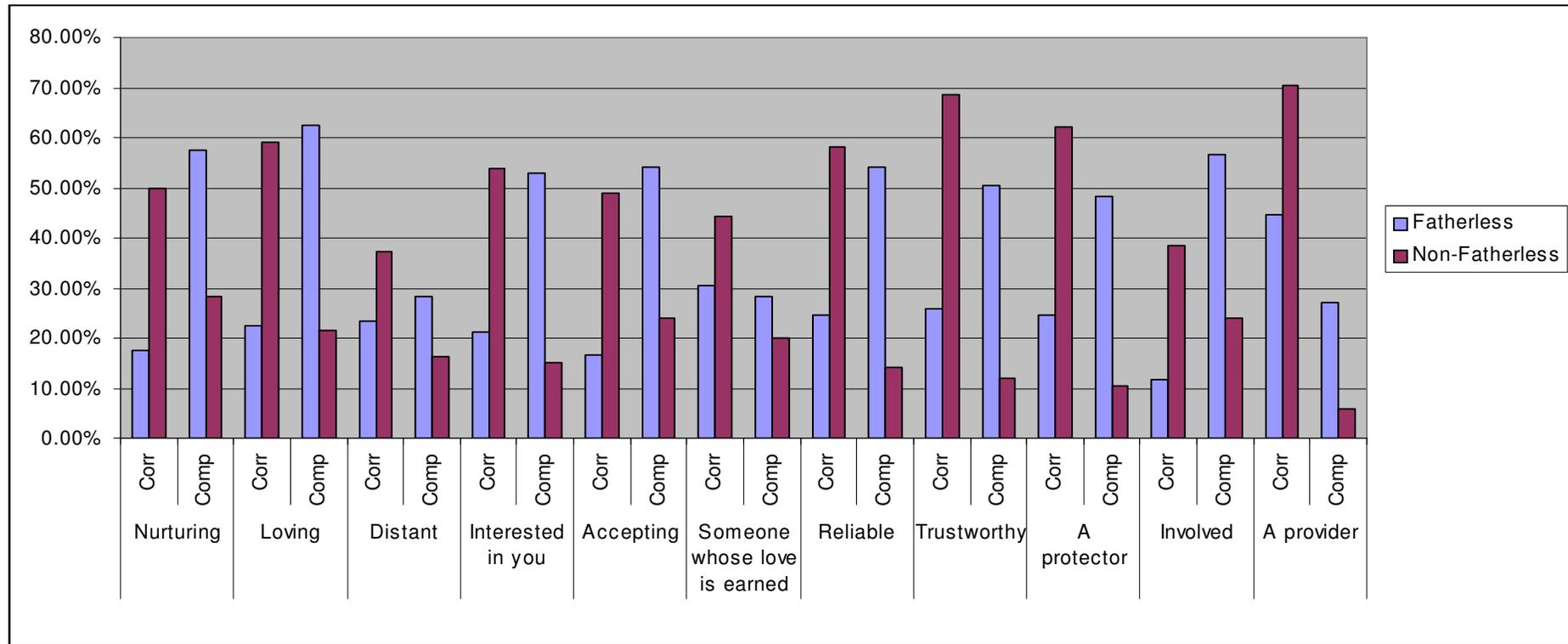
²⁰⁰ The comparatively strong correspondence response amongst the fatherless population was surprising, possibly revealing the type of support which absent fathers were still able to provide to children despite their dislocation from them. As this survey did not collect data on the level of financial or material support provided by fathers, it is impossible to confirm any causal connection between physical provision and the perception of father as provider. Alternatively this result may demonstrate a cultural paradigm in which one understands that a significant function of the father is to provide. Therefore the responses of the fatherless may have demonstrated what they knew to be the function of a father rather than what they had personally experienced.

perception of God as distant and their perception of their father (compensation response of 16.2%; correspondence response of 37.4%). Due to the relatively low overall perception of God as distant²⁰¹ (fatherless 3.694, non-fatherless 3.983 – Table 5.4), the fact that there were limited correspondence or compensation responses from either fatherless or non-fatherless populations supported the suggestion that the church-going survey population as a whole tended to struggle with the perception of God being near. Despite these minor discrepancies, however, the results of the fatherless population demonstrated a clear trend toward a perception of God which compensated for the absent earthly father.

Contrary to the fatherless respondents, a large proportion of those with fathers ranked God in a similar fashion to the way they ranked human fathers, making it likely that they were projecting their perception of human fathers onto their perception of God. Of particular note was the perception of God as provider. 70.5% of the non-fatherless population equated God as provider to their father as provider (compensation response of 6.0%). This result, along with the strong aforementioned correspondence response within the fatherless population, was noteworthy as this attribute depicts an action rather than a description. Where culturally it was understood that the job of the father was to provide, this described their function and not their nature or character. The notion of a provider reflects what the father *does* for the child, rather than describing who they were to the child. A strong correlation between the expectation of a father to provide and the corollary expectation that God would provide appeared to reflect an emphasis on what the father does for the child. Unlike nurturing or protecting, or attributes which describe an action of the father toward the child, the function of provider had material connotations. It appeared that consistently across the sample population, regardless of whether the respondent was fatherless or not, there tended to be an emphasis on what God does for me.

²⁰¹ “Distant” value was reversed so the low score reflects that God was perceived as distant.

**Table 5.6 –
Correspondence and Compensation Responses of Fatherless and Non-fatherless Populations**



	Nurturing		Loving		Distant		Interested in you		Accepting		Someone whose love is earned	
	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp
Fatherless (n. 85)	17.65%	57.65%	22.35%	62.35%	23.53%	28.24%	21.18%	52.94%	16.47%	54.12%	30.59%	28.24%
Non-Fatherless (n. 420)	50.00%	28.33%	59.05%	21.67%	37.38%	16.19%	53.81%	15.00%	48.81%	24.05%	44.29%	20.00%
t stat	-6.707	5.034	-7.137	7.193	-2.665	2.303	-6.424	6.635	-6.842	5.163	-2.454	1.558
p-value	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	0.009	0.023	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	0.016	0.122*

	Reliable		Trustworthy		A protector		Involved		A provider	
	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp	Corr	Comp
Fatherless (n. 85)	24.71%	54.12%	25.88%	50.59%	24.71%	48.24%	11.76%	56.47%	44.71%	27.06%
Non-Fatherless (n. 420)	58.10%	14.05%	68.57%	12.14%	62.14%	10.48%	38.57%	24.05%	70.48%	5.95%
t stat	-6.315	7.035	-8.070	6.764	-7.105	6.679	-6.316	5.592	-4.394	4.236
p-value	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001	p≤0.001

* Result is greater than 0.05 and is therefore not statistically significant.

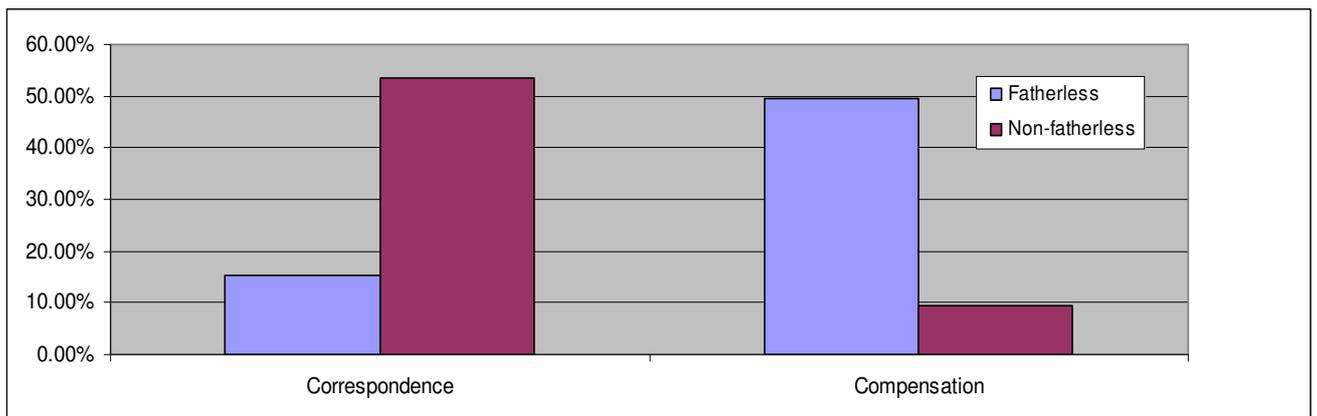
Other attribute results which revealed a strong connection between the way non-fatherless respondents perceived their father and the way they viewed God were in the perception of God as trustworthy (68.6%; compensation response of 12.1%), a protector (62.1%; compensation response of 10.5%), loving (59.1%; compensation response of 21.7%), reliable (58.1%; compensation response of 14.1%), interested in them (53.8%; compensation response of 15.0%), and nurturing (50.0%; compensation response of 28.3%). The projection of the father image onto God was slightly less significant for the perception of God as accepting (48.8%; compensation response of 24.1%) and someone whose love is earned (44.3%; compensation response of 20.0%).

The non-fatherless population's correspondence response to the perception of God as involved was conspicuous. The very low value of 38.6% (compensation response of 24.1%) mirrored the perception of God as distant (37.4%). While it was not surprising that these results should be close, what was remarkable was that there was no such similarity in the fatherless population. This suggested a difference in the way that these populations interpreted what it meant for God to be involved. It may be that the concrete, tangible way that the non-fatherless experienced a father throughout childhood led to them failing to see God as relating to them in a similar way. Conversely, the fatherless population may view any interaction with God, such as worship, prayer time, or Bible reading, as "involvement."

Having analysed the correspondence and compensation responses within each individual characteristics, I next utilised the aforementioned criteria for determining an over all compensation or correspondence response and calculated the averages within each population (Table 5.7). The results of this analysis were consistent with the pattern presented during the investigation of independent characteristics (fatherless correspondence value of 15.3% and compensation response of 49.4%; non-fatherless correspondence response of 53.6% and compensation response of 9.5%) and also displayed a high degree of statistical significance (p-values less than 0.001). Given the similarity of perception of God scores between fatherless and non-fatherless populations, it was not surprising to see the overt split between populations. However, despite the level of reliability in this data, given the theoretical and academic debate surrounding the issue, it

would have been unwise to definitively conclude from this data that those who are fatherless will display a compensation response in their perception of God approximately three times more often than a correspondence response (49.4% compare with 15.3% percent). The reason for this caution is due to the population which this study drew from. For argument's sake, if the actual distribution of compensation and correspondence responses amongst those who had experienced fatherlessness was 50/50, a large number of the correspondence population would be unlikely to be found in church. Some of those who had a negative perception of father would have a negative perception of God. If an individual had a negative God image, they would be less likely to be found in church than someone with a positive God image. Consequently this study is not able to definitively determine the proportion of such responses. This caution is supported by the fact that only one of the fatherless population respondents who demonstrated a correspondence response had a negative perception of father (an average PF score of less than 3). The remainder of the fatherless correspondence respondents had a positive perception of father (an average PF score above 4) and consequently similarly possessed a positive perception of God. What this data did communicate, however, was the proportion of fatherless within my church-going sample population who viewed God in either a compensatory role to their earthly father, or in a fashion which corresponded to their earthly father.

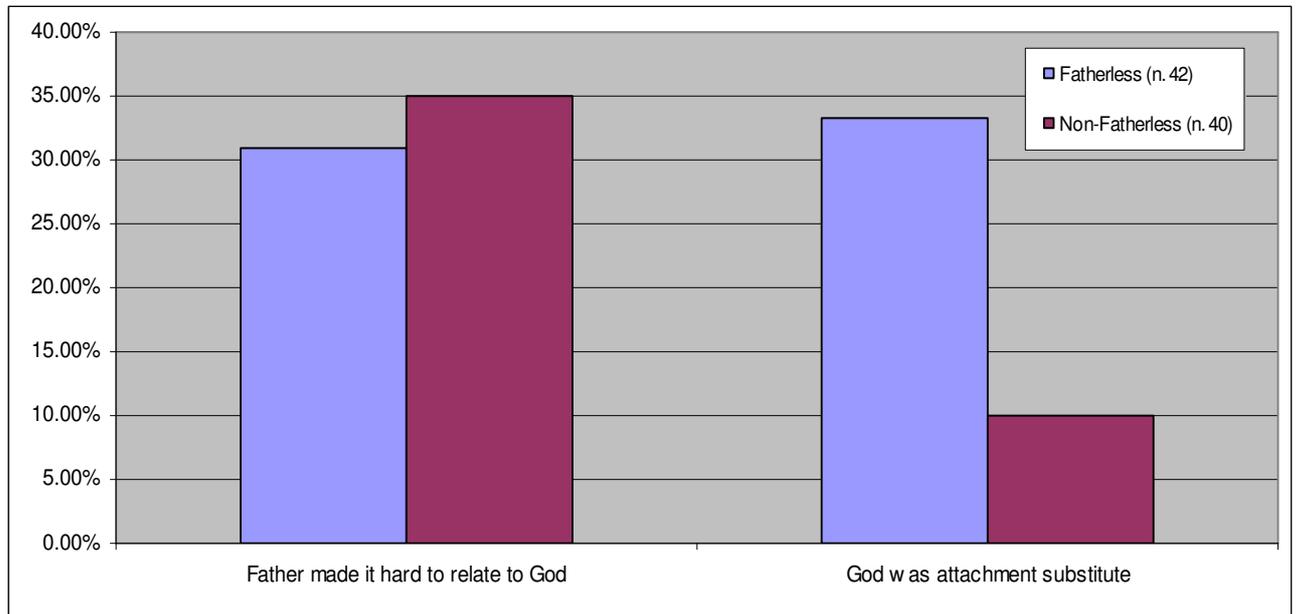
**Table 5.7 –
Average Correspondence and Compensation Responses of Fatherless and Non-fatherless Populations**



	n	Correspondence	Compensation
Fatherless	85	15.29% (n.13)	49.41% (n.42)
Non-fatherless	420	53.57% (n.225)	9.52% (n.40)
t stat		-8.282	7.072
p-value		p≤0.001	p≤0.001

Although there was a predictably strong compensation response from those who were fatherless, it was particularly noteworthy that a number of these respondents (both fatherless and non-fatherless) indicated on the comments section of the survey form that they had either previously struggled with their perception of God, or that their perception of their father had made it difficult to relate to God. This was particularly significant because the comments section of the survey did not provide any prompts with regard to the nature of the comments. Respondents were asked to identify on a five point scale from “strongly influenced” to “not influenced,” “How much has your perception of a father while growing up influenced your perception God?” Following this question was an open field with the prompt “How?” Despite the openness of this prompt, approximately one third of all respondents who had a compensation response made similar remarks. One such participant stated “sometimes I find to be loved and accepted by God I must earn His love.” Another commented that “I saw God as not trustworthy, but when He drew me to Himself and removed my hard heart, I learned to live in God’s trustworthiness.” Even though a large proportion of those who were fatherless had a positive perception of God (see Table 5.2) and revealed a compensation response, a number had indicated that getting to this point was a process. It appeared that it was not abnormal for an individual with a negative perception of father to initially struggle to relate to God due to a correspondence response, but over time mature into a compensation response. In order to see how prevalent these responses were amongst the compensation respondents I recorded each comment that implied that their father had made it hard to relate to God. I also did the same for comments that stated in various ways that God was an attachment substitute for their father (Table 5.8). I found that around a third of the entire compensation population, regardless of whether they had had a father or not, indicated that their perception of father had made it hard to relate to God (fatherless 31.0%, non-fatherless 35.0%, p-value 0.004). The slightly higher rate of non-fatherless respondents in this analysis is possibly due to the fact that their fathers were actually present. If one had an absent father they may be less aware of the negative influence that this lack of a father had on their perception of God. However, if a respondent had a present but dysfunctional father, they may have been more likely to identify a causal relationship between their perception of father and the way they related to God.

**Table 5.8 –
Comments Made by Compensation Respondents**



	Father made it hard to relate to God	God was attachment substitute
Fatherless (n.42)	30.95% (n.13)	33.33% (n.14)
Non-Fatherless (n.40)	35.00% (n.14)	10.00% (n.4)
t stat	2.972	3.808
P-value	0.004	p≤0.001

The implication of this for the Church is significant. Those who had a damaged perception of father, whether fatherless or not, may struggle to relate to God at some point in their lives as a result of their damaged father image. While this research does not quantify the proportion of those who project a negative image of father onto God and never make the transition of faith required for their perception of God to evolve into a compensatory position, there is sufficient evidence both within this data and other scholarly research, to be confident this population exists. For the Church, being aware of these individuals and the fact that their perception of God is not static has evangelistic implications. It may influence the way that it relates with the community in which it sits and the way that it attempts to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of the fatherless in that context. This is of even greater significance in the immediate New Zealand cultural context which is likely to see increasing rates of fatherlessness in the immediate future.

Influence of Fatherlessness on Images of God

One of the major components of my hypothesis was that the image of God as Father would be influenced by fatherlessness. Chris Kiesling's comments suggesting that absent caregivers lead to "metaphoric images of God as a safe haven ('refuge, sanctuary') or surrogate father-figure ('abba') becom[ing] especially pronounced"²⁰² supported this position, and it was further reinforced by Dickie et al. who concluded that "God is perceived as more nurturing and powerful when father is absent, thus becoming an 'attachment substitute.'"²⁰³ Given both Dickie et al. and Kiesling's approach to the issue from an Attachment Theory perspective and the strong evidence of compensation responses within the fatherless population in my data, I felt that this assumption remained justified. However, in order to assess the validity of both my hypothesis and these claims from other research, I calculated the average scores for each image of God surveyed, separating the fatherless and non-fatherless population results for comparison. Surprisingly, the results were very close between groups, with none of the data sets possessing sufficient variation to merit being considered statistically significant when a two tailed independent t-test was applied. Contrary to the aforementioned published findings, there was no evidence that the fatherless population within the churches I surveyed had any notable variations in the way that they perceive God as a nurturer, fortress or strong tower. Further confounding the debate was the fact that there was some suggestion within the data that the image of God as Father may be somewhat *less* significant for the fatherless population (fatherless 4.576, non-fatherless 4.757). Although the variation remains insufficient to be considered statistically significant, the image of God as Father had the lowest p-value and therefore the most statistical validity, of all the images tested (p-value of 0.066). This result suggests a correspondence response within the fatherless population that is masked by the overall perception of God scores. It suggests that despite any compensation response to God as an attachment substitute, the image of God as Father may remain adversely affected by fatherlessness. This supports Pierre Balthazar's assertion that the resulting pain and

²⁰² Kiesling, "An Attachment Theory Approach to Narrating the Faith Journey of Children of Parental Divorce," 311.

²⁰³ Dickie, et al., "Parent-Child Relationships and Children's Images of God," 37.

devastation of separation from one's father can result in those individuals finding it hard to call God "our Father."²⁰⁴

It may be that a fatherless population who had a strong negative correspondence response to God, and were therefore likely to be almost entirely absent within the church-going sample population, would have demonstrated a more pronounced variation to the images of God results. However, it would be unlikely that they would be more positive than those who maintained an ongoing Christian faith, with a generally positive perception of God. As a result, Alex Bierman, who supported Projection Theory and stated that a "negative view of paternal figures that victims of paternal abuse may form from their experiences could lead them to distance themselves from these celestial paternal figures,"²⁰⁵ was not contradicted by these results. A negative perception of father, rather than fatherlessness specifically, may reveal different results than those rendered here. This will be analysed and discussed in the following chapter.

Role Models and Age of Fatherlessness

Despite the clear connection between fatherlessness and a negative perception of father, I suspected that there may be a small but significant group within the fatherless population who still had a positive perception of father. If I was correct and this group was being obscured by the large sample size, I felt that they may be able to communicate something significant about the way that the fatherless experience affects the perception of father and consequently influences the way they perceive and engage with God.

I believed it was likely that the presence of a significant role model during the years of fatherlessness may have influenced the respondent, so I began by separating the fatherless sample into two populations, those who had indicated they had had a significant male role model and those without. By comparing average father scores, average "God Scores," and individual characteristic scores across each of these populations, I found no statistically significant variation in results. It appeared that whether the fatherless participant had a significant male role model or not, there was little influence on their perception of father or

²⁰⁴ Balthazar, "How Anger Toward Absentee Fathers May Make it Difficult to Call God 'Father'," 546.

²⁰⁵ Bierman, "The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality," 357.

their perception of God. However, due to the size of these smaller populations (34 with a role model and 51 with no role model) it would be unwise to claim this definitively. Further, during the course of the data collection I spoke to at least two individuals who specifically told me that the reason that they were able to relate to God as a Father, despite the absence of their biological fathers, was because of the influence of another significant male in their lives. Regardless of these anecdotes, the research results failed to identify this as a statistically meaningful influencing factor.

Having failed to initially identify the reason for the positive father scores amongst the fatherless population, I separated these respondents out based on their average father scores. With the average PF score for non-fatherless being 4.096 (see Table 5.1), I used this as the criteria to identify those fatherless respondents who had a positive father image. The result was 12 of the 85 participants who identified as fatherless but who had an average perception of father which was similar to those with fathers. Once this small population was identified, demographic information was able to be investigated to determine if there were any notable differences between them and the rest of the fatherless respondents. Immediately it was apparent that the ages which these respondents noted they were fatherless differed from the remainder of the fatherless population. These responses were investigated with some noteworthy outcomes (Table 5.9). Due to the relatively small population size, only the results with significantly differing data sets were statistically significant when assessed with a two tailed independent t-test.

**Table 5.9 –
Ages Fatherless Respondents Indicated they were Fatherless**

	n	0-3yrs	3-6yrs	6-11yrs	11-20yrs
Positive PF	12**	16.67% (n.2)	16.67% (n.2)	16.67% (n.2)	91.67% (n.11)***
Negative PF	73**	41.10% (n.30)	50.68% (n.37)	64.38% (n.47)	73.97% (n.54)***
t stat		-1.932	-2.681	-3.795	1.804
p-value		0.070*	0.015	p≤0.001	0.086*

* p-value greater than 0.05 and therefore not statistically significant.

** Respondents indicated all ages that they were fatherless and could therefore make multiple selections. If a respondent had a father leave when they were four years old and then return when they were 10, they would indicate that they had been fatherless from 3-6yrs and 6-11yrs. Consequently the sum of the n values by age for each group is greater than these total population n values.

*** Values less than 100% in the 11-20yrs column indicate that some respondents within these populations had been fatherless earlier in childhood, but that the father had returned to cohabit with them during these later years.

Most of those fatherless respondents who revealed a positive perception of father had only become isolated from their father later in their childhood, between the ages of 11 and 20 years old (91.7%, negative PF 74.0%, p-value of 0.086).²⁰⁶ Conversely, the much larger proportion of fatherless who presented a negative perception of father had been dislocated from their paternal figure between the age of 0 and 11 years (0-3yrs: positive PF 16.7%, negative PF 41.1%, p-value of 0.070). Of particular note were the ages of 3 to 6 years (positive PF 16.7%, negative PF 50.7%), and 6 to 11 years (positive PF 16.7%, negative PF 64.4%), both of which demonstrated sufficient variation between positive PF and negative PF populations to be considered statistically significant (p-value of 0.015 and ≤0.001 respectively), despite the very small sample size. Given the significant influence of the paternal figure developmentally during the earlier stages of life, the results were unsurprising. These findings support Fowler's faith development model, which indicates that the during these first two stages of faith development the child will be strongly influenced by key people in their lives from whom they will develop foundational attitudes that will remain with them through their lives.²⁰⁷ The less significant influence of a missing father during the teenage years is likewise explained by progressive reliance on the community rather than on one's primary attachment figures and on increasing levels of

²⁰⁶ Respondents were able to indicate that they had been fatherless in any of the age ranges provided. Therefore the total percentage of respondents in each age bracket is greater than 100%.

²⁰⁷ See Chapter 2, page 27-28.

independence. Although Fowler's faith development model suggests that during this third "*Synthetic-Conventional*" stage the individual will seek to develop an ideology, that conglomeration of beliefs is usually a composition of experiences and influences during the earlier developmental stages. The findings in this data supported Fowler's position, suggesting that in adolescence the significant influence of the father has already been made, for better or for worse.

In an attempt to synthesise these results within the broader context of the study and understand the reason and implications of this positive perspective despite a negative event, I interviewed a participant who had indicated that she was fatherless and yet had a positive perception of father and God. The personal story and perspective of this woman was remarkable and highlighted the uniqueness and the complexity which is contained in every survey response, but which is belied by the clinical analysis of data. Sarah's story revealed both the humanity of these individual stories and helped to make sense of some of the findings discussed so far.

A Case Study: Sarah's Story²⁰⁸

Sarah is a South African New Zealander in her early thirties. Her father died when she was 10 years old and her mother was not fit to look after her. As a result she was raised by her uncle and aunt, who became her adopted parents. Sarah's perception of her biological father was extremely positive and possibly somewhat idealised. She viewed him as particularly loving and nurturing, but still somewhat of an authoritative disciplinarian. This love from her father was given freely without obligation. When her uncle took on the role of father in Sarah's life, there were some difficult changes for her. Although she knew that he loved her, he was not as open and affectionate as her birth father. Largely as a result of her struggle to feel emotionally connected to him, she found it hard to accept her uncle as a true father and only ultimately resolved this in adult life. Because Sarah's uncle was not forthcoming with affection or praise, she felt she needed to earn his love. She understood that he actually loved her, but still sought physical affection and outward praise. This was exacerbated by the fact that she was "not their real child." She noted: "I did not feel

²⁰⁸ All interviewee's names were changed to protect their identity.

worthy. I was always doing things to show them my appreciation for what they did, for adopting me.”

The impact of this experience on her perception of God was surprising. Sarah saw God as unconditionally loving and emphasised this perspective a number of times throughout the interview. It was clearly a significant characteristic of God’s nature for her. Despite this fact, she initially felt that her paternal experience had little influence on her perception of God. She stated “God is my almighty Father, creator of me. My earthly fathers can not compete with Him.” At the conclusion of the interview I made an observation and asked Sarah to respond. I questioned her suggestion that there was no connection between her earthly father and her perception of God. I suggested that her description of God as her unconditionally loving creator had a clear correlation to her biological father. Sarah’s biological father was similarly unconditionally loving and likewise played an essential role in her creation. This perspective would have exacerbated the dislocation that she felt from her adoptive father, who, as well as failing to love her how she needed to be loved, was equally not her creator. Despite his sincerity, his provision, his acceptance, and his protection, Sarah’s uncle failed to be the father that she longed for in the most fundamental ways she valued, as an unconditionally loving creator. It is possibly because he lacked in these areas that they have become for her the most significant defining characteristics of fatherhood.

In response to my observation, Sarah acknowledged the connection. She indicated that when she found that her paternal experience with her adoptive father lacked the nurturing outward expression of unconditional love that she valued so highly in her biological father, she turned to God. She stated: “I had my uncle, but to fill the gap, I had a relationship with God.” Sarah’s story reveals a clear correspondence response, with the perception of her biological father informing the perception of God as Father. However, it also reveals a significant compensatory response as she turned to God to fulfil the functions of a father that she found missing in her relationship with her uncle. Moreover, this story highlights the importance of a positive paternal figure in the formative stages from 3 to 11 years of age and similarly supports the suggestion that role models fail to compensate meaningfully for fatherlessness or affect the perception of father.

The Impact of Fatherlessness

The results of analysis of the survey data revealed a strong negative correlation between fatherlessness and the way in which one perceives his or her father. However, within church-going populations this negative perception of father failed to project onto the perception of God. The notable exception to this was the perception of God as someone whose love is earned. It appears that despite the generally positive perception of God, those who were fatherless tended to have difficulty relating to God as someone who is unconditionally loving. Fatherlessness also seemed to enhance the perception of God as a disciplinarian. Likewise, despite the lack of statistically significant results, there was some suggestion that the image of God as Father may be negatively influenced by fatherlessness. Contrary to assertions by other writers, there was no evidence that any other metaphorical image or description of God was affected.

Half of the fatherless population perceived God as an attachment substitute compensating for the absent paternal figure. Correspondingly, just over half of those with fathers projected their perception of father onto their God image. Most significantly, however, was the fact that a third of those with a compensation response to their perception of God indicated that they had previously struggled with their God image because of their negative perception of father. This revealed that it is possible to mature in faith and evolve from a correspondence response toward God, to one of viewing Him as an attachment substitute.

Despite the strong correlation between fatherlessness and a negative perception of father, there were still fatherless respondents who had a positive perception of father. Surprisingly there was no evidence that a male role model made any difference to the way that father was perceived. Instead it appeared that there was a causal link between the age that respondents became fatherless and the way that they perceived their father. Those who had been fatherless before the age of 11 were more likely to have a negative perception of father than those who were only made fatherless during their teenage years. Just as there were fatherless respondents who had a positive perception of father, there were also non-fatherless respondents who had a negative perception of father. Therefore I turned my attention to further investigate the impact of the perception of father, rather than simply the

function of fatherlessness, on the way that respondents perceived God. It is this analysis to which the following chapter is dedicated.

Chapter 6

The Effect of a Negative Image of Father

As was highlighted throughout chapter 5, although the perception of father scores amongst the fatherless population were notably lower than those of the non-fatherless, there were still a number of fatherless respondents who demonstrated a positive perception of father. Moreover, there were a number of non-fatherless respondents who presented negative perceptions of father. Having analysed the impact of fatherlessness on the respondent's perception of God, I felt I needed to investigate the influence of a negative perception of father, regardless of whether they were fatherless or not. The results of this investigation are outlined in this chapter. In order to provide a point of comparison, I largely mirrored the investigations undertaken for the fatherless population, analysing the impact of a negative perception of father on "God Scores," individual attributes of God, compensation and correspondence responses, and images of God. I also investigated the extent to which respondents perceived their father to have influenced their perception of God compared to their actual responses.

In order to assess the impact of a negative father image, I had to generate a "Father Score." I used the same method and reasoning as I had in generating the "God Score,"²⁰⁹ and consequently removed the scores for the perception of father as demanding and as a disciplinarian from my calculations. Because the perception of father (PF) scores were not evenly distributed, but were instead top heavy, using a mean average PF score to create one population with a negative PF and another with a positive PF would have generated significant issues. There were two primary reasons for this. Firstly, creating a mid way, 50/50 population split would not have represented the general proportions reflected by the fatherless population. Secondly, where some respondents may have provided overly positive scores for father, others, who still had a positive perception of their father, may have been more critically honest and given a lower score, but still a generally positive one. Consequently, given that the objective was not to analyse those with *lower* PF scores, but rather those with *negative* PF scores, it seemed reasonable to use the mid score of the survey options as the delineator for determining those who had a "negative image" of their

²⁰⁹ See Chapter 5, page 69.

father. By filtering the data by those who had an average PF score less than 3, I generated a sample population of 95 individuals. This is similar in real numbers to the distribution between the fatherless and non-fatherless populations. Fatherless respondents were predictably disproportionately represented in this newly created “negative PF” group, making up 55.8% (n.53) of the population. 62.4% of the fatherless population demonstrated a negative PF, compared to just 10.0% of those with fathers.

Influences of a Negative Perception of Father on God Score

Having generated two populations which I could analyse, I began by investigating the average “God Scores.” This comparison revealed a positive perception of God in real terms, similar to the fatherless/non-fatherless comparison, amongst both populations. The high average “God Scores,” even amongst those with a negative perception of father, was possibly due to both the fact that a church-going population was likely to have a positive perception of God and also because of the tendency to want to record the “right answer” rather than what was possibly the most honest response. Those with a negative perception of father had an average “God Score” of 4.346, compared to those with a positive PF who had an average “God Score” of 4.614. These results are recorded below at Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1 –
Average God Scores of Respondents with Negative PF and Positive PF**

	n	Average God Score	SD
Negative PF	95	4.346	0.689
Positive PF	410	4.614	0.427
t stat		-3.630	
p-value		p≤0.001	

The most notable feature of the results became apparent when I compared these scores and those of the fatherless/non-fatherless comparison in chapter 5. There was greater variation in average scores in the analysis of negative and positive PF populations (SD difference of 0.262) than in the initial comparison of those with fathers and those without (SD difference of 0.156). As a result the level of statistical significance also improved dramatically,

providing a p-value less than 0.001. Additionally, the SD in the negative PF population was greater than that of the fatherless population (SD of 0.689 compared to the fatherless population SD of 0.621). Likewise, the SD of the positive PF population was less than the previous analysis of the non-fatherless population (SD of 0.427 compared to the non-fatherless population SD of 0.465). This lower average “God Score” and greater SD of results amongst the population with a negative PF, as well as the subsequently greater average “God Score” and lower SD amongst the positive PF population, supports the hypothesis that fatherlessness would lead to polarisation in respondents perceptions of God. However, the correlation was notably more pronounced in this analysis of those with a negative PF than it was in the fatherless population.

The hypothesis that those who were fatherless would be polarised in their perception of God, which was only demonstrated weakly in the analysis in chapter 5, was much clearer amongst the population with a negative perception of father. This reinforces Paul Vitz’s “Defective Father Hypothesis” which suggests that a father can lose his authority or seriously disappoint a child by being “absent through death or abandonment; he can be present but obviously weak, cowardly, and unworthy of respect, even if he is otherwise pleasant and ‘nice’; or he can be present but physically, sexually, or psychologically abusive.”²¹⁰ My data collection did not include specifics of any paternal abuse or shortcomings other than rating characteristics of the father. However, these results which demonstrate the influence of the perception of father rather than the absence of father, still point to the fact that it may have been the loss of authority or serious disappointment in the father which most strongly influenced the respondent and their developing view of God, rather than simply the absence of, or dislocation from, their father.

Influences of a Negative Perception of Father on the Perception of God by Attribute

Once the average “God Score” had been calculated and assessed, I broke down the scores of the individual attributes of God. This allowed for those characteristics which were influenced sufficiently by a negative perception of father to be statistically significant to be identified and also enabled the results to be compared to the previous analysis of the

²¹⁰ Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless*, 16.

fatherless population. All attributes of God from the survey were included in the analysis.²¹¹ The results of the comparison are summarised in Table 6.2.

Due to the high scoring results across the entire survey population, the variations of scores for the individual characteristics of God were not large. However, in contrast to the analysis described in the previous chapter, where the fatherless / non-fatherless comparison had lacked statistical significance in all attributes except the perception of God as disciplinarian or someone whose love is earned, the results of this analysis were much clearer. The comparison of the negative PF population with those with a positive PF delivered smaller p-values for each characteristic, although the perceptions of God as demanding and reliable were still not statistically significant (0.156 and 0.107 respectively). Of particular note were the p-value results for the perception of God as disciplinarian and someone whose love is earned. Where these two attributes had been the only statistically meaningful results in the fatherless / non-fatherless investigation, in this analysis they both failed to reach levels of statistical significance (PG as disciplinarian p-value of 0.126 and PG as someone whose love is earned p-value of 0.354). The average scores for these measures from the negative PF population were noteworthy nonetheless. Those with a negative PF had an average perception of God as disciplinarian of 3.284 (SD 1.427, compared to fatherless score of 3.482) and an average perception of God as someone whose love is earned of 3.905 (SD 1.474, compared to fatherless score of 3.706). As the perception of God as someone whose love is earned scores were reversed, based on these results it appears that regardless of whether one's perception of father is negative or positive, the fatherless are more likely to see God as a disciplinarian and as someone whose love is earned. In his book *Fatherless Generation*, John Sowers talks about growing up with an absent father who visited irregularly. He recounts his father's departure after one such visit:

I remember grabbing his ankles – hanging on for dear life – as he walked out the front door, dragging me as I pleaded with him to stay. I was fighting for his affection, literally. But it didn't work. It never worked. Each time he left, my heart would break and I would die again.²¹²

²¹¹ The perceptions of God as a disciplinarian or as demanding were previously omitted from the analysis of "God Score" as they there was some difficulty in defining the results for these values. This was explained in detail in Chapter 5, page 69.

²¹² Sowers, *Fatherless Generation*, 18.

Even if one has a positive perception of father, the very fact that he leaves, that he does not reside with his child, results in a tendency to attempt to earn the love, approval, affection, time, and security from an absent father. It seems that even an inadequate father who is present does not illicit the same tendencies in a child, or in their subsequent projected perception of God.

While all other tested attributes possessed sufficient variation between sample populations to be considered statistically significant, of particular note was the perception of God as involved. Those with a negative PF had an average score of 4.158 (SD 1.104), and those with a positive PF had an average score of 4.512 (SD 0.831). What makes this result significant is the fact that the negative PF population returned a lower average score than those with no fathers (average score of 4.376).²¹³ Respondents with a negative PF saw God as less involved than those with no father at all. This measure also possessed the greatest variation between the negative PF and positive PF populations (7.1%). Similarly, those with a negative PF perceived God as less nurturing (negative PF average score of 4.400 with a SD of 0.972, positive PF average score of 4.751 with a SD of 0.552), accepting (negative PF average score of 4.463 with a SD of 0.943, positive PF average score of 4.773 with a SD of 0.559), loving (negative PF average score of 4.632 with a SD of 0.839, positive PF average score of 4.929 with a SD of 0.324), a provider (negative PF average score of 4.411 with a SD of 0.951, positive PF average score of 4.698 with a SD of 0.714), interested in them (negative PF average score of 4.463 with a SD of 0.873, positive PF average score of 4.724 with a SD of 0.621), a protector (negative PF average score of 4.474 with a SD of 0.873, positive PF average score of 4.721 with a SD of 0.723), and trustworthy (negative PF average score of 4.663 with a SD of 0.807, positive PF average score of 4.866 with a SD of 0.494) than those with a positive PF or no father at all.

²¹³ See Table 5.4, page 72.

**Table 6.2 –
Perceptions of God Amongst Those with a Negative PF and Those with a Positive PF**

n	Negative PF 95		Positive PF 410		t stat	p-value	Difference in Averages**
	Average	SD	Average	SD			
PG_Nurturing	4.400	0.972	4.751	0.552	-3.397	p≤0.001	0.351 (7.02%)
PG_Loving	4.632	0.839	4.929	0.324	-3.402	p≤0.001	0.298 (5.95%)
PG_Distant reversed	3.663	1.251	3.998	1.175	-2.373	0.019	0.334 (6.69%)
PG_Interested in you	4.463	0.873	4.724	0.621	-2.760	0.007	0.261 (5.22%)
PG_Disciplinarian	3.284	1.427	3.034	1.422	1.540	0.126*	0.250 (5.00%)
PG_Accepting	4.463	0.943	4.773	0.559	-3.081	0.003	0.310 (6.20%)
PG_Someone whose love is earned reversed	3.905	1.474	4.061	1.450	-0.931	0.354*	0.156 (3.11%)
PG_Reliable	4.579	0.858	4.732	0.679	-1.622	0.107*	0.153 (3.06%)
PG_Trustworthy	4.663	0.807	4.866	0.494	-2.348	0.021	0.203 (4.05%)
PG_A Protector	4.474	0.873	4.712	0.723	-2.473	0.015	0.239 (4.77%)
PG_Demanding	2.495	1.436	2.263	1.366	1.428	0.156*	0.231 (4.63%)
PG_Involved	4.158	1.104	4.512	0.831	-2.940	0.004	0.354 (7.09%)
PG_A Provider	4.411	0.951	4.698	0.714	-2.767	0.007	0.287 (5.74%)

* Result is greater than 0.05 and is therefore not statistically significant.

** Non-fatherless average – Fatherless average = Difference in Averages (Difference in Averages / max score of 5 = % difference).

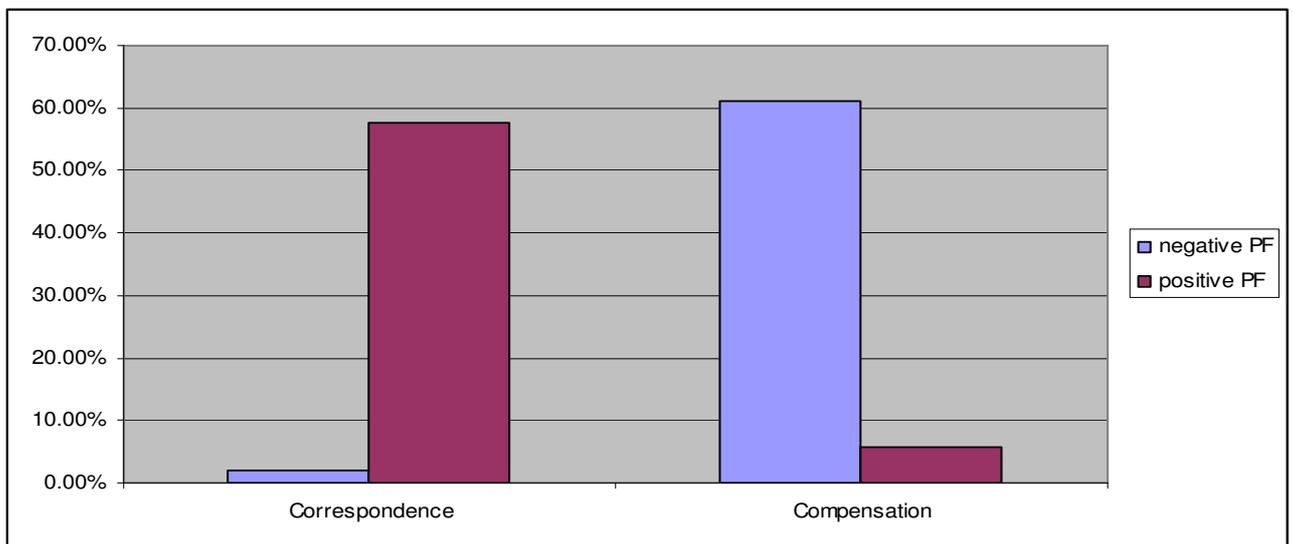
Across all of the statistically significant values, those with a negative perception of God had lower average scores and greater variation in their responses than the responses of those who were fatherless. Consequently the variation in values between the negative and positive PF populations was greater than in the previous comparison of fatherless and non-fatherless populations. The one exception to this was the perception of God as distant, which had very similar average scores to the previous assessment (negative PF average score of 3.663, positive PF average score of 3.998), but had slightly less variation in responses from the negative PF population (SD 1.251). This overall trend for those with a negative PF to have a more negative perception of God than those without a father and have more variation in their responses, as demonstrated by greater standard deviation values, provides further support for the proposal that members of this population are more

likely to have polarised perceptions of God. It is these compensation and correspondence responses which I analysed next.

Compensation and Correspondence Responses

In analysing the compensation and correspondence responses of the negative and positive PF populations, I felt that it was likely that correspondence rates would be lower and compensation rates higher amongst the negative PF group than they had been for the fatherless population. This suspicion was in spite of the aforementioned evidence suggesting increased negative projection rates amongst the negative PF population. Due to the overwhelmingly positive perception of God across the entire study population, removing those fatherless respondents with a positive PF and replacing them with other non-fatherless respondents with a negative PF would invariably lead to reported rates of correspondence declining and compensation rates increasing.

Table 6.3 – Average Correspondence and Compensation Responses of Negative PF and Positive PF Populations



	n	Correspondence	Compensation
negative PF	95	2.11%	61.05%
positive PF	410	57.56%	5.85%
t stat		-19.407	10.694
p-value		p≤0.001	p≤0.001

By applying the same criteria as I had for the fatherless / non-fatherless calculations whereby values for demanding and disciplinarian were removed and those respondents who had 6 or more responses out of a possible eleven which revealed either a correspondence or a compensation response being classified as such, I analysed the negative and positive PF populations (see Table 6.3). As predicted, 61.1% of respondents with a negative perception of father demonstrated a compensation response, compared to just 5.9% of the positive PF population. Conversely, 57.6% of those with a positive perception of father showed a correspondence response, whereas the negative PF population only had 2.1% with a correspondence response.

I next compared the correspondence and compensation responses between the negative PF population and the fatherless population. Due to the fact that a number of respondents appeared in both populations (n. 53), any variation between the two groups would have had to be notable for it to be statistically significant. I found that the correspondence rates were lower in the negative PF population for every attribute, which was predictable given that this group functionally represented the fatherless population with all of those with a positive PF removed and others with a negative PF added. Additionally I found that the variations in compensation values between these populations were not sufficient to be considered statistically significant. The exceptions to this were the attributes of “reliable” and “trustworthy.” Those with a negative perception of father viewed God with a compensatory characteristic of “reliable” 69.5% of the time, whereas the fatherless population viewed God as reliable only 54.1% of the time (p-value of 0.035). Likewise, the negative PF population had a compensatory response to God as “trustworthy” 70.5% of the time, compared to 50.3% of the fatherless population (p-value of 0.006). These results indicate that those who have a negative perception of father are more likely to view God as a reliable and trustworthy substitute than those who are fatherless.

The 2.1% of the negative PF population who had an overall correspondence response were particularly interesting to me. This represented two respondents who had both a negative perception of father and a correspondingly negative perception of God, yet were still found in church. One of these respondents was fatherless, the other was not. I felt that these individuals may be able to provide a perspective which was elsewhere missing from the

research population and results, so I decided to try to interview one of them. Brian agreed. This is his story.

Case Study: Brian

Brian is a New Zealand European in his sixties. He is retired, but was previously a Baptist minister. I met him during a Catholic Mass, which he attends from time to time for the liturgical worship. Although he used to have a particularly hierarchical perspective of God, Brian's image of God developed largely as a result of theological training. However, his feelings about God, rather than his intellectual knowledge, are an inseparable by-product of his experiences as a child.

When Brian was 6 years old his mother died. In reaction to this event his father left to go to university in Auckland. Brian noted that he felt he had "lost both sets of parents for 4 years" over the duration of his father's study. Shortly after his father's return he remarried. Brian's father completed training with the Salvation Army College and a year later the family moved to Zimbabwe in a missionary teaching capacity. They remained there for 5 years, during which time Brian attended a boarding school. While at boarding school he was lonely and felt isolated in a foreign land. During this time he felt that God was close to him and provided comfort and protection for him in his isolation. After 5 years in Zimbabwe they returned to New Zealand for 2 years, and when the family left for another 5 year missionary trip to Kenya, Brian and his sister remained in New Zealand.

Brian noted that despite his father's absenteeism, he still managed to be authoritarian. He was strict and ruled with an iron fist. He also indicated that this domineering, hierarchical image of a father was reflected in the structure of the church he attended during his childhood. "I really should have rejected the Church and all it stood for because my father did not come up to the standard that a father should, but I didn't." He suggested that a reason for why he did not reject God was in part due to the other families in the missionary contexts providing examples of what community and fathers were supposed to be. Additionally, when his family left for Kenya and he remained in New Zealand, there was

another church family that welcomed him in, giving him a place to belong. Brian indicated that the father of this family provided a model of what it meant to be father.

Brian's story revealed a tension between what he knew God to be and what he felt God to be. He noted that as a child he had an idealised perspective of what a father should be, and yet as an adult he was unable to separate the experience of a dysfunctional father from his perspective of God. The juxtaposition evident in Brian's survey comment was revealing and summarised his results perfectly: "Can one separate these two streams of very deep consciousness? I think God would be the perfect father I never had." For Brian, the idealised image of a perfect father was synonymous with his intellectual understanding of a relational God, but his experience of a flawed father created a clear disconnect between this knowledge of God and his feelings about God. Contrary to the case study of Sarah or the data on role models, in Brian's case it seems that the only reason he was able to maintain a relationship with God was due to a sense of familiar or community belonging, some key father figures in his life, and a dogged intellectual determination.

An additional noteworthy element of Brian's story was the value that he placed in stories as a way to overcome the shortcomings in his father. He considered biblical stories, such as the prodigal son, foundational in his idealised perspective of what a father should be. Consequently, when he became a father himself he consciously read Bible stories to his children every night so that the biblical portrayal of roles (including fatherhood) would influence them and provide role models for them as they grew older.

Despite the fact that Brian was only one of two participants in my research population with a negative perception of father who met the criteria for a correlation response, other surveys revealed similar struggles. One woman noted that her father had not been trustworthy, so she perceived God as untrustworthy. A Samoan lady indicated that she had remained committed to God "in spite of poverty, hidings, and violence" from her father. She saw God as an authoritarian ruler because she "perceived 'father' as the 'ruler,' the authority figure who gives and also takes away." These comments provide further evidence that the lack of overall correspondence responses amongst those with a negative perception of father belies the reality of the individual faith journeys. Despite the lack of statistically

meaningful data to confirm it, the comments on the survey forms and those of the individuals I spoke to reinforce the suggestion that for a number of people who grew up with a dysfunctional experience of father, they struggle with the image of God as a result of the projected image of their father and often only learn to separate the two images as their faith journey matures. In order to better understand this phenomenon I looked for a respondent in their twenties with a negative perception of father and an inconsistent perception of God. My hope was that I would be able to talk to someone who had been negatively influenced by their father, but had not rejected God completely and was somewhere in the middle of this transition from a correspondence to a compensation response. Eddy agreed to speak to me.

Case Study: Eddy

Eddy is a young Chinese Malaysian in his early twenties. He began his life in Malaysia and moved to New Zealand during his teens. He was not raised in a Christian home, and his father was a very intelligent, driven, and demanding man. As a young child Eddy recalled his father spoiling him and letting him get away with being naughty. However, at the age of four he remembers becoming upset with his father for not giving him something he wanted, and punching him. Usually composed and controlled even when angry, his father became very aggressive toward him. From that point on his father was demanding, harsh, and manipulative with him. He felt this particularly strongly with regard to his academic success. Eddy was a naturally talented and intelligent young man, but his father always demanded an increasingly high standard. When he was due to start high school the family moved to New Zealand. Eddy's father tricked him into moving two years ahead of where he should have been academically, and as a result his marks deteriorated, his father became increasingly angry with him, and he felt isolated, ashamed, and like he had no control of his life. During year 12 Eddy's mother began to attend a small home group and ended up taking him to church. In that setting he found friends in New Zealand for the first time and became a Christian largely as a result of the influence of those friends. However, Eddy's experience and perception of his father had a significant impact on the way that he related to God and understood Him.

Despite his negative perception of father and the correlation between that and his perception of God, Eddy still understood God to be kind. However, he found it hard to connect to that kindness. He viewed God as a watchmaker who had set the cogs of his life in motion but only engaged with him on a personal level when he made mistakes that required rebuke. Eddy felt that he had the freedom to do what he wanted but that this freedom was something of a ruse and that the somewhat disinterested, uninvolved God was still in control. In order to bridge this gap he indicated that he tended to bargain with God for acceptance and attention in a similar way to how he had bargained with his father for favour and approval. He often felt that he had to earn God's love. "You have to be good to be accepted," he noted during the interview. Despite this desire for love and acceptance from his father and from God, Eddy indicated that he had a tendency to rebel against authority. This rebellion began as he sought to establish his independence and identity separate from his father's control, but extended into his perception of God. He stated "now I rely on myself, not my father. I guess that is the same as my relationship with God. I rely on myself, not on Him."

For Eddy, the projected image of a dysfunctional father onto his perception of God made the image of God as Father distressing. On his survey he noted, "I can't relate to God being a father. God is more like a master. Our relationship is more like master-servant. The image of [God as] a father deeply upsets me." Despite this clear correspondence response, in the interview Eddy also revealed that his perception of God and his relationship with Him was in the process of growing and developing. "I used to see God as a master demanding perfection. However, I am learning to accept imperfection in myself and to trust and rely on Him. ... It's about having to let go of control." In seeking to heal his perception of God, Eddy was not attempting to replace his earthly father with God as a perfect heavenly Father, but was rather rejecting the image of God as Father in preference for an alternative understanding of God as a benevolent dictator.

While it is uncertain if ultimately Eddy will come to see God as the loving and accepting Father that he lacked throughout childhood, it is noteworthy that he showed signs of a process of reconciling his perception of God. Eddy's story reflects the reality of the faith journeys that a number of respondents alluded to. It seems that for those who grow up with

a dysfunctional experience of father, if they do not naturally view God in a compensatory capacity, or reject God completely due a strong correspondence response, there is a tension between the God they know intellectually and the God they connect with emotionally. There is a transition which occurs as their faith develops in which they may gradually learn to separate the projected image of father from their experience and engagement with God. The reason that Eddy's story is a statistical anomaly within the data set of this survey is that most of the other respondents who noted that they had struggled with their perception of God as a result of their father's influence, had largely resolved this struggle with the image of God as Father.

Images of God

The difference between the fatherless and non-fatherless populations with regard to how they related to various images of God was not statistically significant, and I wondered if the data related to a negative perception of father might produce results with a greater level of statistical significance. In light of the anecdotal evidence supporting my theory that the image of God as Father may be influenced by a dysfunctional father experience, I was confident that a comparative analysis of the way that those with a negative PF and those with a positive PF related to various metaphors for God would be meaningful. In order to carry out this examination I calculated the average scores and SD for each image of God by population and also calculated the p-value for each image using a two tailed independent t-test. These results are in Table 6.4 below.

The meaningfulness of the image of God as Father, which was weakly affected by fatherless, was influenced sufficiently by a negative perception of father to be statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$). God as Father had the largest variation between populations of all the characteristics tested (8.6%). Those with a negative PF had an average score of 4.379, compared to those with a positive PF who had an average score of 4.807. Although both populations still viewed the image of God as Father as very meaningful, the lower average score from the negative PF population, as well as a much higher standard deviation (1.044 compared to the positive PF SD of 0.532) suggests a polarising effect within this group. Consistent with the hypothesis, it appears that those with a negative PF either viewed God

as Father in a more favourable, possibly idealised light, or more negatively as a result of a projected negative perception of father. Although the hypothesis expected this statistical characteristic to be a result of fatherlessness, these results suggest that the significant influencing factor is the negative perception of father that fatherlessness can encourage, rather than the fatherlessness itself.

**Table 6.4 –
Meaningfulness of Various Images of God for Negative PF and Positive PF
Populations**

	Negative PF n. 95		Positive PF n. 410		t stat	p-value	Difference in Averages**
	Average	SD	Average	SD			
IG_Ruler	3.958	1.320	4.051	1.197	-0.631	0.529*	0.093 (1.87%)
IG_Judge	3.800	1.260	3.883	1.257	-0.578	0.564*	0.083 (1.66%)
IG_King	4.421	0.974	4.615	0.894	-1.772	0.079*	0.194 (3.87%)
IG_Potter	3.568	1.527	3.912	1.359	-2.017	0.046	0.344 (6.88%)
IG_Father	4.379	1.044	4.807	0.532	-3.886	p≤0.001	0.428 (8.57%)
IG_Rock	4.484	0.797	4.661	0.766	-1.962	0.052*	0.177 (3.54%)
IG_Fortress / Strong Tower	4.432	0.975	4.641	0.798	-1.953	0.053*	0.210 (4.20%)
IG_Protector	4.474	0.966	4.776	0.567	-2.932	0.004	0.302 (6.04%)
IG_Redeemer	4.600	0.804	4.812	0.547	-2.444	0.016	0.212 (4.24%)
IG_Nurturer	4.232	1.046	4.568	0.770	-2.957	0.004	0.337 (6.73%)
IG_Comforter	4.411	0.973	4.763	0.593	-3.392	p≤0.001	0.353 (7.06%)
IG_Warrior	3.842	1.483	3.939	1.352	-0.583	0.561*	0.097 (1.94%)

* Result is greater than 0.05 and is therefore not statistically significant.

** Non-fatherless average – Fatherless average = Difference in Averages (Difference in Averages / max score of 5 = % difference).

Similar to the influence of a negative perception of father on the perception of God as Father, every other image tested demonstrated a corresponding trend whereby the average score was smaller and the SD greater within the negative PF population. However, not all the results had sufficient variation to be statistically significant. P-values for the image of God as Ruler, Judge, Rock, Fortress or Strong Tower, and Warrior were not meaningful.

As a result, I have not found evidence within my research to support Kiesling's claim that "the metaphoric images of God as a safe haven ('refuge, sanctuary') ... become especially pronounced,"²¹⁴ either within the fatherlessness investigation in chapter 5, or in this analysis of a negative perception of father. However, my data does support his suggestion that the image of God as Father may become more pronounced,²¹⁵ but only for some of the sample population. Similarly, the statistically significant values for the image of God as Comforter (negative PF average of 4.411, SD 0.973; positive PF average of 4.763, SD 0.593), Nurturer (negative PF average of 4.232, SD 1.046; positive PF average of 4.568, SD 0.770), and Protector (negative PF average of 4.474, SD 0.966; positive PF average of 4.776, SD 0.567) are noteworthy as they lend limited support to the conclusion of Dickie et al. Although there had been no statistically noteworthy evidence within the fatherless analysis to support their claim that an absent father can lead to God being perceived as more nurturing and powerful,²¹⁶ in this negative PF investigation there is more backing for the assertion. The larger standard deviation values for the negative PF population, despite the lower average scores, again lends support to the suggestion that there is a polarisation of responses compared to those with a positive PF. Therefore, for *some* of those with a negative perception of father, it is likely that God would be viewed as more of a Nurturer, Comforter and Protector as Dickie et al. claimed.

Actual Influence of Perception of Father on the Perception of God Versus What Respondents Suggested the Influence Was

Many of those who demonstrated a relationship, either negative or positive, between the perception of father and the perception of God, were unaware of the association. During the data collection phase of this study I had a number of participants approach me at the end of completing the survey and note that they had not previously considered the connection between their father and the way they viewed God. However, in light of being prompted to think about it they realised that their father had influenced the perception of God. Likewise, in the earlier case studies of Brian and Sarah, both indicated that there was

²¹⁴ Kiesling, "An Attachment Theory Approach to Narrating the Faith Journey of Children of Parental Divorce," 311.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Dickie, et al., "Parent-Child Relationships and Children's Images of God," 37.

both a disparity and connectivity between the way they viewed father and their perception of God.

In order to investigate the way that respondents understood their perception of father to have influenced their perception of God compared to how much influence there actually seemed to be, I divided the entire survey population into those who had demonstrated an overall compensation or correspondence response and those who had not. This provided me with one population for which there was evidence to suggest that the image of father had influence the image of God (n. 320) and another population which did not have such a clear interdependence (n. 185). In the survey, respondents had been asked to indicate how much their perception of a father had influenced their perception of God on a five point scale of “not influenced” to “strongly influence.” I calculated the mean scores and SD for this value for each population, but found the results to lack statistical significance. The results between populations were very close, with an average overall score of 3.592 (SD 1.277) for the entire population. It is noteworthy that a number of respondents, who were identified as having either a correspondence or compensation response, did not recognise that their perception of father had influenced their perception of God. Some made comments such as “I find it difficult to draw similarities between my relationship with my father and my relationship with God,” and “It is just a very different relationship.” This suggests that the lack of awareness of the influence of the perception of father on the perception of God may be a result of respondents looking for the positive correlation, rather than the negative relationship. Participants who demonstrated either a correspondence or compensation response, and therefore a relationship between their perception of father and their perception of God, may not have been aware of the connection due to the fact that the relationships were different. Where they may have been looking for significant similarities, significant differences might have been equally meaningful. They may have failed to see the influence of their perception of father because that influence was negative.

The Impact of a Negative Image of Father

Despite generally positive perceptions of God amongst the survey population, a negative perception of father influenced the image of God sufficiently to be statistically significant. This finding is noteworthy as it reveals a relationship between the perception of father and the perception of God which is stronger than the relationship between fatherlessness and the perception of God. The lower average “God Scores” and individual characteristic scores for God, as well as larger standard deviation values for each measure, revealed a polarisation of responses amongst the population with a negative perception of father. Where some viewed God in a compensatory role and as such had particularly high scores for their perception of God, for others the negative perception of father influenced their perception of God negatively. These results are telling, particularly in light of the small number of respondents who demonstrated an overall correspondence response based on the selected criteria. Despite there being limited evidence of a correspondence response amongst those with a negative perception of father, the lower “God Scores” and attribute scores for God suggest that the damaged paternal image still influences the perception of God negatively for some respondents. To this extent there is still evidence of a correspondence effect within this population, if not a strong one.

There were a large number of compensation respondents in the negative perception of father population, which was unsurprising given the fact that the sample population was made up of church goers. Consequently they were likely to have a positive perception of God. However, the number of respondents who indicated that they had struggled with their perception of God as a result of the negative example set by their own father was noteworthy. This suggested that an individual response was not necessarily either one of “correspondence” or “compensation,” but may be a dynamic process in which the perception of God and His role as Father, might evolve, mature, and develop with the individual. This finding is contrary to that of most research on the subject to date, which has tended to find support for either an Attachment Theory or Projection Theory interpretation of the influence of a dysfunctional father on the perception of God.

Chapter 7

Summary and Implications

The impact of fatherlessness is pervasive throughout contemporary Western society, and it is becoming increasingly prevalent in the New Zealand Context. Fatherlessness is significant for the individual who is subjected to it. Research indicates it can influence academic success, behaviour, and mental health. Absent or dysfunctional fathers can shape the way children see the world in which they live, damage the framework by which they understand what a father is, and warp the lens through which they first view God as Father. This study has investigated the implications of fatherlessness on one's faith development and found that, although the handicap it inflicts on the individual is not insurmountable, for many, an absent or dysfunctional father will be a defining struggle of their Christian walk. In this chapter I will provide a summary of my research and findings, and suggest some of the implications of these results.

Summary of the Theory Behind the Research

Two of the more notable developmental psychologists provided the theoretical framework for this discussion. They have likewise informed most of the previous research on this topic. However, despite both theoretical models agreeing on the significant influence of the father on a child's development and, more specifically, on the way they view God, the conclusions they draw are contradictory. Freud's Projection Theory suggests that in response to a feeling of fear and helplessness, the child looks to the protection of a father, and as the child grows up and finds that the feelings of fear and helplessness remain, the image of father is projected onto the image of God. A negative perception of father will lead to a negative perception of God.²¹⁷ Conversely, John Bowlby's Attachment Theory indicates that a dysfunctional or absent parental figure will lead to distress and trust issues.²¹⁸ When children do not have a safe and secure attachment figure, they will look for

²¹⁷ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 30.

²¹⁸ Meyer, "Nurture is Nature," 167.

an attachment substitute.²¹⁹ In application to faith development, God can become the substitute attachment figure for those who are fatherless.²²⁰

This lack of consensus on the impact of fatherlessness is similarly reflected in an investigation of the philosophy of metaphor. In a traditional understanding of metaphor, where the vehicle transmits meaning onto the topic, the landscape of metaphor would appear to support Freud's Projection Theory. The vehicle of an earthly father would transmit meaning onto the topic of God as Father. If one had a positive perception of father then the image of God as Father would in turn be seen in a positive light. Conversely, if one had a negative perception of father then God as Father would similarly take on these characteristics. Although these explanations refer specifically to the image of God as Father, advancements in the understanding of conceptual metaphor demonstrate how fatherly characteristics of provision, protection, discipline, security, and unconditional love might be affected by the metaphor of father.²²¹ However, if one accepts the image of God as Father as being the vehicle by which he is able to determine the role, function, and adequacy of an earthly father, the metaphorical relationship lends support to Attachment Theory. It is only in light of the perfect example of God that one becomes aware of the shortcomings of their own father. The flexibility of metaphor means that its exact application is left undefined and the limits of the relationship are not specified. The risk is that the correlation between vehicle and topic is taken too far. In the schema of "father" we may erroneously assign to earthly fathers an expectation of divine qualities, or conversely assign to God human frailties.

The difficulty in determining where and how to separate the image of God and the image of our own father is further exacerbated by the tension of God creating humanity in His image and the subsequent fall. Anthropomorphic language relied on to depict God in the biblical account, lack of consensus about the specific way in which God's image is manifest in humanity, and ambiguity about the way in which sin has corrupted this image,

²¹⁹ Ainsworth, "Attachment Across the Life Span," 799. I have experienced the reality of this first hand. As a teenager we had two young sisters, age two and four, come to live with my family as foster children for two years. They had experienced significant trauma and violence in their lives and had been unable to form any secure attachments. The first time they met us they ran to my father and threw themselves into his arms. They were clearly seeking affection and security, particularly from a male attachment substitute.

²²⁰ Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 67.

²²¹ See Chapter 3, page 35.

all contribute to this uncertainty. God is often described in human terms, but is not human. He made us in His image, but we are not gods, nor is God human. Sin in some way influenced humanity and affected the image of God reflected in us, but we are not sure exactly how. Consequently, when we consider God as Father, or our own fathers in light of God's perfect example, we are attempting to assign meaning and understanding to an aspect of God's nature and character through this shroud of uncertainty and confusion. It is unsurprising, then, that our own experiences of a father would affect this already precarious comprehension of the Divine Creator. The question is not *if* the father will influence one's perception of God, but rather *how*?

Those who have sought to research how the influence of a father impacts the perception of God have tended to approach the discussion from either an Attachment Theory or a Projection Theory perspective. They have largely set out to find evidence in support of the developmental theory to which they most closely relate. Ana-Maria Rizzuto, Birky and Ball, and Justice and Lambert all found evidence of correspondence responses within their sample populations where the subjects projected their perception of father onto their perception of God.²²² However, Chris Keisling and Pehr Granqvist found evidence of compensation responses where the subject saw God as an attachment substitute in the place of a dysfunctional or absent father.²²³ However, Philip Halstead found evidence of both a correspondence and a compensation response as a secondary result of his research on forgiveness.²²⁴ I felt that given the lack of consensus by theorists and researchers alike, Halstead's finding was likely to be a fair representation of what I may find in my survey population.

The influence and significance of fathers expressed by developmental theorists finds support in contemporary sociological research. Numerous studies highlight the damage to academic success that fatherlessness can illicit and the importance of a father's interest and time in a child's schooling.²²⁵ Others emphasise the negative impact of fatherlessness and a damaged paternal relationship on emotional wellbeing, delinquent behaviour, and

²²² See Chapter 2, page 29-30.

²²³ See Chapter 2, page 31-32.

²²⁴ See Chapter 2, page 32.

²²⁵ See Chapter 2, page 9-11.

increased rates of teenage pregnancy.²²⁶ Additionally, the research indicates that the type of parenting that a father exhibits, whether residing with the child or not, has an influence on child outcomes.²²⁷ Consequently, the estimated one in five children in New Zealand who currently do not reside with their father,²²⁸ along with a forecast rise of fatherlessness over the next 20 years, is a significant and timely concern sociologically.²²⁹ It is of equal importance for the Church. With fatherlessness influencing the perception of God, those with whom the Church engages will increasingly have insecurities, fears, uncertainties, and doubts stemming from the influence of an absent or dysfunctional father. As John Stott challenged, if the Church is going to bridge the cultural gulf with the fatherless, “we must first enter their thought-world, and the world’s of their alienation, loneliness and pain.”²³⁰

Summary of Findings

In my investigation of 505 survey subjects from seven different churches in the Waikato region, my primary purpose was to identify those who were fatherless and those who were not and then compare their responses to the way they perceived God. I expected the results of the investigation to support my hypothesis that fatherlessness would lead to respondents having a polarised perception of God as Father, viewing Him as either an ideal Father and an attachment substitute, or rejecting the image of God as Father. By allowing the respondent the freedom to determine if they were fatherless or not, I provided them the opportunity to indicate that they were fatherless even if their father still lived with them but was dysfunctional. Alternatively, those with non-cohabiting fathers who remained functionally and actively engaged in their lives could also indicate that they had not been fatherless. However, the fact that a number of those with negative perceptions and experiences of father did not identify as fatherless, despite the freedom to do so within the survey, indicated that most respondents perceived fatherlessness to be physical dislocation from one’s father, rather than simply having a dysfunctional father.

²²⁶ See Chapter 2, page 11-13.

²²⁷ See Chapter 2, page 13-15.

²²⁸ See Chapter 2, page 16.

²²⁹ See Chapter 2, page 18.

²³⁰ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 337.

The result of foremost concern was that of the influence of fatherlessness on the perception of father. The theoretical development models which provide a framework explaining why the influence of a father has an affect on the perception of God begin with the premise that an absent father leads to a negative perception of father. In my survey population, those who were fatherless had an average perception of father score 28.5% lower than those with fathers. This supports the premise that fatherlessness leads to a negative perception of father. However, other results indicated a difference between the outcomes of those with a negative perception of father compared to those who were fatherless. They suggested that it was the negative perception of father, rather than fatherlessness itself, which most significantly influences the perception of God. Consequently, although fatherlessness can lead to a negative perception of father, it does not preclude a negative perception of father from those who have fathers. Similarly, although less frequent, it does not preclude one who is fatherless from having a positive perception of father.

Image of God

The investigation of the significance of various images of God revealed that fundamentally the hypothesis was incorrect about the image of God as Father. Fatherlessness did not result in a perception of God as Father which was statistically significantly different from that of the non-fatherless. However, when applying the same analysis to populations with a negative perception of father, there was a strong influence on the perception of God as Father. The results indicated that for those with a negative perception of father the image of God as Father polarises, becoming either more meaningful or less meaningful than those who had a loving and engaged father. This finding suggests that the hypothesis was in part correct, but that the determining factor is not fatherlessness per se, but rather the negative perception of father which fatherlessness so often generates. Additionally, a negative perception of father was also found to polarise the images of God as comforter, nurturer and protector.²³¹ This demonstrates the application of conceptual metaphor, where images associated with the function of father are similarly influenced by the metaphorical relationship.

²³¹ See Chapter 5, page 83-84 and Chapter 6, page 103-105.

God Score / Attributes

In addition to the analysis of images of God, I also investigated the way that respondents perceived God. I found that those who were fatherless had a combined average “God Score” which was lower than the non-fatherless score, but with a higher standard deviation. Once again, the population with a negative perception of father had more significantly varied results, with a still lower average “God Score” and standard deviation. This result also supported the hypothesis that the perception of God would be polarised amongst those who were fatherless or who had a negative perception of father.²³² Despite the statistical significance of these results, the variation in real terms was relatively small. This is a result of the survey respondents consistently returning very high scores for the way that they perceived God. This is possibly due to the fact that the sample population were church-goers, they would therefore have been more likely to idealise their perception of God. The tendency to want to provide the “right answer,” intentionally or not, undermines the validity of survey research to some extent. However, the variation in results between populations was still sufficient to reveal statistically significant trends. Also, as was demonstrated through the presentation and analysis of case studies, survey data fails to account for the individual experience, contextualization, and complexity found in each respondent’s life and development. Consequently, the application of survey results, such as those included in this research, ought not to be dogmatic. Regardless, quantitative analysis provides an effective tool for generalizing the fatherless and the way they perceive God.

Most attributes of God that were assessed demonstrated similar trends to that of the overall “God Score.” For most measures the differences between fatherless and non-fatherless populations were not statistically significant, but for the population with a negative perception of father the variations were sufficiently different to be meaningful. For these values, the average scores were lower and the standard deviations greater, again suggesting a polarisation of results. However, a significant exception to this trend was the results for the perception of God as someone whose love is earned. For this attribute the average score amongst the fatherless population was lower than that of those with a negative perception of God. Likewise, the result was statistically significant for the fatherless population, but

²³² See Chapter 5, page 69-70 and Chapter 6, page 92-93.

not for the population with a negative perception of God. The implication of this result is that regardless of whether one's perception of father is negative or positive, if you are fatherless you are more likely to see God as a disciplinarian and as someone whose love is earned. This trend is contrary to all other characteristics assessed. It appears that an absent father, regardless of whether they are perceived positively or negatively, simply by not residing with the child may illicit a reaction which leads to a feeling of needing to earn love. The projection of this perspective onto the perception of God is apparent in these research findings.²³³

Role Models

An investigation into the influence of role models produced surprising results. When I began investigating this subject a number of people spoke to me about the positive influences of role models for those who are fatherless. A number who had been fatherless insisted that the only reason that they had a meaningful relationship with God was because of the positive influence of another significant male role model. Books by John Sowers and Donald Miller explain the importance of role models for them personally and for meeting the needs of a fatherless generation. On the back of their personal experiences they began a ministry called "The Mentoring Project," where they facilitate, train and empower role models for fatherless children. I expected to find significant empirical support for the positive influence of role models. However, when I identified those who had been fatherless but maintained a positive perception of father, I found that whether they had a role model or not made no statistically significant difference. Instead I found that the major contributing factor was the age with which the respondent became fatherless. Those who were made fatherless before the age of 12 were more likely to have a negative perception of father than those who became fatherless in their teenage years. Although this result clearly highlights the importance of a father particularly through early childhood, I am uncomfortable in claiming that role models have no influence, given the wealth of anecdotal support which champions their value and positive affect.

²³³ See Chapter 6, page 94-95.

Compensation / Correspondence

The hypothesised outcome of this study was that those without fathers would have a polarised response to God, viewing Him as either an attachment substitute and therefore returning overly positive values for their perception of God, or having a negative perception of God as a result of a projected damaged paternal image. In the analysis of the scores returned for the attributes of God I found evidence to support this trend. However, although the sample size allowed me to identify these statistically meaningful variations, they were still quite small in real terms. When I created criteria to determine individual responses of correspondence or compensation, I found further evidence for the existence of this trend. However, as has been discussed, it was most strongly apparent in those who had a negative perception of father, rather than those who were specifically fatherless.

Despite overwhelming evidence of compensation responses from those who were fatherless or had a negative perception of father, this does not undermine the results of those researchers who have discovered correspondence responses, because in this study all the participants were church-goers. It does, however, provide a more holistic understanding of the different ways in which these individuals respond to a dysfunctional paternal figure during childhood. The empirical data, qualitative interviews, and survey comments each demonstrated the existence of both compensation and correspondence responses within the study population. Moreover, although many survey comments suggested that the natural response may be one of projection, in which the individual struggles to relate to God because of a dysfunctional or absent father, this research also reveals that it is possible for those affected by fatherlessness to transition to a compensation response.

The findings of this study suggest that the transition from a correspondence response to a compensation response comes with a level of faith maturity. For some the natural response is compensation. They intuitively look for an attachment substitute. For others, however, it is apparent that the natural response is to project a negative perception of father onto the image of God. The implication of this for the Church is that in order to reach an increasingly fatherless generation it is important that the messages, the evangelistic method, and the way in which God is projected as a loving Father, reflects this potential faith journey within individuals and helps to facilitate and progress it. For an increasing

portion of society it is important to emphasize God as the ideal father, the substitute father, the father that will never make the mistakes an earthly father makes, the father who will never abandon them like an earthly father, the father who will never abuse them like an earthly father, the father who will always be available and interested in them, who loves them unconditionally, who nurtures, protects, and provides. This is the message that the Church needs to know, communicate, and demonstrate. The importance of this can not be overstated in a cultural context in which rates of fatherlessness are increasing consistently.

God Gets Bigger

Despite the developmental theories and research into the topic, it appears that the influence of fatherlessness is secondary to the influence of having a negative perception of father. However, fatherlessness often leads to a negative perception of father, particularly in those who were made fatherless before 12 years of age. Consequently, it stands to reason that studies which draw on large populations would find statistically significant correlations between fatherlessness and any range of measures being assessed. Regardless, the results of this study support the hypothesis, demonstrating that fatherlessness and a negative perception of father result in a polarised perception of God where the individual either relates to God as an attachment substitute, or projects negative attributes of father onto the perception of God. However, it appears that this response is not a static state. Rather, the way in which individuals relate to God and view and understand Him evolves and develops as their faith journey matures. Some are able complete a journey where they begin by rejecting God as a projected image of their father, and ultimately accept Him as the divine substitute who is Father to the fatherless. How this occurs and if there are any similarities in the stories of those who change the way they view and relate to God is an area for further study. This dynamic process of God working in us and at the same time seemingly growing with us reveals to a small degree the mystery of an immanent God who engages with us at the most personal level, but is still ultimately incomprehensible. C. S. Lewis summarises the reality of this relationship beautifully in his children's book, *Prince Caspian*. Lucy talks to Aslan, Lewis's Christ character:

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

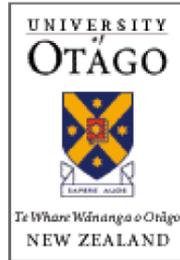
“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”²³⁴

As the Church seeks to engage the fatherless with understanding and compassion, my prayer is that we will increasingly be able to walk alongside these individuals and help them to see a God who is bigger, more loving, more accepting, and more interested in them than they ever thought possible. As we wholeheartedly commit to selflessly love those around us and increasingly imitate the compassion of Christ, I trust that we too will find God bigger than we have before.

²³⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 155.

Appendix A: Survey Instrument



The Effect of Fatherlessness on the Way One Relates to God as Father

Thank you for choosing to complete this survey. For your response to be of value to the researcher you must be over 20 years of age and only complete this survey once.

1. Do you perceive God to be:
- | | Yes | | Somewhat | | No |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. Nurturing | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. Loving | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. Distant | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. Interested in you | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e. A disciplinarian | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f. Accepting | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g. Someone whose love is earned | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| h. Reliable | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| i. Trustworthy | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| j. A protector | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| k. Demanding | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| l. Involved | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| m. A provider | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| n. Other: _____ | | | | | |

2. How meaningful are the following images of God to you?

	Very meaningful		Somewhat meaningful		Not meaningful
a. Ruler	<input type="checkbox"/>				
b. Judge	<input type="checkbox"/>				
c. King	<input type="checkbox"/>				
d. Potter	<input type="checkbox"/>				
e. Father	<input type="checkbox"/>				
f. Rock	<input type="checkbox"/>				
g. Fortress/Strong tower	<input type="checkbox"/>				
h. Protector	<input type="checkbox"/>				
i. Redeemer	<input type="checkbox"/>				
j. Nurturer	<input type="checkbox"/>				
k. Comforter	<input type="checkbox"/>				
l. Warrior	<input type="checkbox"/>				
m. Other: _____					

3. Do you consider yourself to have been fatherless during your childhood? YES NO (*Go to Question 6*)

4. At what ages were you fatherless? (Check as many as required)

0 – 3 years 3 – 6 years

6 – 11 years 11 – 20 years

5. Did you have other significant male role models during these fatherless years? YES NO

If yes, who? (their relationship to you): _____

(Go to question 7)

6. Was your father your biological father? YES NO

If no, describe the relationship: _____

7. As a child, did you consider your father to be:

	Yes		Somewhat		No
a. Nurturing	<input type="checkbox"/>				
b. Loving	<input type="checkbox"/>				
c. Distant	<input type="checkbox"/>				
d. Interested in you	<input type="checkbox"/>				
e. A disciplinarian	<input type="checkbox"/>				
f. Accepting	<input type="checkbox"/>				
g. Someone whose love is earned	<input type="checkbox"/>				
h. Reliable	<input type="checkbox"/>				
i. Trustworthy	<input type="checkbox"/>				
j. A protector	<input type="checkbox"/>				
k. Demanding	<input type="checkbox"/>				
l. Involved	<input type="checkbox"/>				
m. A provider	<input type="checkbox"/>				
n. Other: _____					

8. How much has your perception of a father while growing up influenced your perception of God?

Strongly influenced		Somewhat influenced		Not influenced
<input type="checkbox"/>				

How? _____

9. Demographic information:

Age: 20 – 30yrs 31 – 40 yrs 41 – 50 yrs
 51 – 60 yrs 61 – 70 yrs 71 yrs +

Gender: Male Female

Ethnicity: _____

Religion: _____ Denomination: _____

10. Are you willing to be interviewed in person
about this topic if it would aid the researcher?

YES NO

If yes -

Name: _____

Ph: _____

e-mail: _____

Thank you for your time! 😊

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