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Deconstructing Patriarchy, Reconstructing Faith:  
How a Bible Study Critiquing Patriarchy Increased Connectedness

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## **Abstract**

### **Deconstructing Patriarchy, Reconstructing Faith: How a Bible Study Critiquing Patriarchy Increased Connectedness**

By Kendra G. Plating

This project centered around a bible study I composed and taught over a 4 week period in 2023 at a Baptist church in the South. The bible study was entitled, *Finding Freedom: Releasing the Bible from Patriarchy's Grip*, and it sought to create a resonance of the problem of patriarchy in our lives and in our churches, and to give ways to imagine living faith differently than we do under patriarchy's influence. The question that I sought to answer in writing a bible study offering a critical education around the notion of patriarchy was how such an understanding would affect the faith of those who chose to participate. Knowing that patriarchy has been present in every era of Christian history made me wonder how hard it would be to disentangle patriarchy from a practical Christian faith. In essence, it made me wonder if a believer could both "deconstruct" faith and "reconstruct" faith at the same time; in essence, to remove the harmful ways patriarchy has been centralized in Christian faith, while rebuilding new understandings and connections to central elements of faith. To measure the bible study's effect on participants' faith, attendees were asked to fill out an online survey after our first meeting and after our last meeting. The surveys asked participants to self-report their connectedness to God, Christ, the Bible, the local congregation of First Baptist Greenville, and the Christian Tradition. The results of these surveys revealed that over the course of the bible study "connectedness" increased on average across every demographic (age, gender, and number of years of attendance) and in every category (God, Christ, the Bible, First Baptist Greenville, and the Christian Tradition) measured. The demographics reporting the most positive change in connectedness were males and those under 60 years old.

Deconstructing Patriarchy, Reconstructing Faith:  
How a Bible Study Critiquing Patriarchy Increased Connectedness

By

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## Introduction

“What if this is the source of our scarcity?” As I looked around the room, I saw heads nodding in agreement, and others with mouths agape.

“Wow, that explains a lot” one person responded.<sup>1</sup>

“This makes so much sense,” another said.<sup>2</sup> For many, I could tell this idea resonated with their own personal experience, and I had put words to something they hadn’t quite identified yet—something at the tip of their understanding. We were in week three of four in our bible study, focusing on how the teachings and actions of Jesus were directly in contrast with the patriarchy of his day. This was the moment I had hoped for in writing a bible study focused on critiquing patriarchy in our sacred scriptures: to create a resonance of the problem of patriarchy in our lives, and in our churches, and to give ways to imagine living faith differently than we do under patriarchy’s influence.

The question that I sought to answer in writing a bible study offering a critical education around the notion of patriarchy was how such an understanding would affect the faith of those who chose to participate. Knowing that patriarchy has been present in every era of Christian history made me wonder how hard it would be to disentangle patriarchy from a practical Christian faith. In essence, it made me wonder if a believer could both “deconstruct” faith and “reconstruct” faith at the same time; in essence, to remove the harmful ways patriarchy has been centralized in Christian faith, while rebuilding new understandings and connections to central elements of faith. To measure the bible study’s effect on participants’ faith, attendees were asked

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom: Releasing the Bible from Patriarchy’s Grip*, November 29, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom*, November 29, 2023.

to fill out an online survey after our first meeting and after our last meeting. The surveys asked participants to self-report their connectedness to God, Christ, the Bible, the local congregation of First Baptist Greenville, and the Christian Tradition. The results of these surveys revealed that over the course of the bible study “connectedness” increased on average across every demographic (age, gender, and number of years of attendance) and in every category (God, Christ, the Bible, First Baptist Greenville, and the Christian Tradition).

## The Church

First Baptist Church in Greenville, SC, is a congregation of about 2,000 members with a Sunday morning worship attendance of 400-500 people in the years following COVID-19. The church was founded in 1832 as the first Baptist congregation in the burgeoning town of Greenville. Established by nine women and one man, the church has a history of strong female leadership, yet it was not until early 2024 that the church welcomed its first female senior minister. Shortly after the church's founding, its first pastor became the president of the newly formed Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).<sup>3</sup> The SBC was founded in response to the will of many northern Baptists wishing to place a moratorium on missionaries receiving funding if they were in ownership of slaves. Not only was slave ownership widely accepted within the congregation (and region), some of its most noteworthy nineteenth-century members were Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professors who wrote extensive theologies legitimizing slave ownership.<sup>4</sup> It wasn't until the 1990's, some 170 years later, that First Baptist Greenville finally and formally broke ties with the SBC, over the decision reversal disallowing females to be ordained, something that had been practiced since the 1960's within the SBC. Throughout my nine years of service to the church, I viewed these practices of racism and sexism in the church's history and present to be closely tied, relying on the same kinds of dehumanizing theology. As I began writing the bible study, I kept these entwined histories top of mind, with the help of many feminist, womanist, and black theologians and historians who have pointed over and over to the

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<sup>3</sup> Glen Clayton, "Who We Are," First Baptist Greenville, last modified October 2016, <https://firstbaptistgreenville.com/who-we-are/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, "Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary," accessed November 3, 2021, <https://sbts-wordpress-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/sbts/uploads/2018/12/Racism-and-the-Legacy-of-Slavery-Report-v4.pdf>.

insidious and complex nature of oppression—that is, how systems of oppression can easily build upon each other using similar types of dehumanizing practice.<sup>5</sup>

The demographics of the church are overwhelmingly white, middle- to upper-class, and college-educated. Historically, the church has had close associations with Furman University, a formerly Baptist college, which has imbued the congregation with a scholarly approach to scripture, especially from the pulpit. But, because of where the church is located, there have also always been members who skewed more conservative, politically and theologically. The demographics of the congregation have changed slightly since 2015, after the church discerned to become “non-discriminatory” toward LGBTQ persons in all areas of church life. Following that decision, the church has had more diversity of membership in terms of economics, education and age, all skewing slightly lower. Interestingly, this slight demographic shift also brought folks into the church who, while progressive in terms of LGBTQ acceptance or were LGBTQ themselves, had been raised in more conservative Baptist or fundamentalist traditions. Many of these newcomers would self-describe their faith journey to me as their pastoral care minister, as one of “deconstruction.” Most of these people have been raised in churches that held a literal reading of scripture, restricted church leadership to males, and described same-sex relationships as sinful. In 2022, an evangelical Christian magazine, *Christianity Today*, devoted an entire edition to this term “deconstruction” because so many Christians raised in fundamentalist settings are beginning to adopt the term. Their description of the word describes the experience of many congregants I have pastored throughout my time serving this church. They write that

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the intersection of racism and sexism in religion and the church, see Delores Willaims, and Katie G. Cannon, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. 20. anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) 2013., bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press) 1989., James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion, vol. 1. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books) 1984.



many “remain Christian, but are disturbed by discovering how institutional conditioning and cultural assumptions have shaped many of their beliefs. Once you see how insidious and pervasive racism, sexism, and consumerism can be, Paul’s command to test all things (1 Thess. 5:21) takes on special urgency.” The article continues to add this clarification of the word, deconstruction: “‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (Rom. 12:2). That’s not deconstructing faith. That is Christian faith.”<sup>6</sup> Many at First Baptist Greenville have taken to the word and process of “deconstruction” as a kind of badge of honor, indicating they are not forsaking their faith, but instead strengthening it, using deconstruction as a “set of tools” allowing them as believers “to see often hidden, oppressive dynamics that structure thought patterns” within the church and within their own faith.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, this is a troublesome experience for many; a crisis of faith. Many described a feeling of distance in their faith experience in pastoral conversations with me— distance from familiar community, from past understanding, and from God and/or Christ. In my time serving as a healthcare chaplain before serving this congregation, I had used spiritual assessment tools as a regular intervention in patient care. Many spiritual assessment tools ask the patient about social “connectedness” or “connections” because the presence of community can often help a person be resilient in a time of trauma and crisis.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, I wondered what role “connectedness” would

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<sup>6</sup> Ted Olsen, “Defining Deconstruction: Why Attempts at a Synonym Fail,” *Christianity Today* 66, no.2 (2022): 7.

<sup>7</sup> Serene Jones, “Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 1 (January 2001): 49–59.

<sup>8</sup>See for instance, Elizabeth Higgins, Hannah L Coyne, Catherine K Mahrer Rogers, James Infanzon, Nicholas Velez, and Patrick Coyne, “The CASH Assessment Tool: A Window into Existential Suffering.” *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 28, no. 4 (2022): 482–96., Mark LaRocca-Pitts, “Four FACTs Spiritual Assessment Tool.” *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 21, no. 2 (2015): 51–59.

play for these church members in a season of deconstruction. In feminist biblical studies, I've encountered this concept of reliance on community and connectedness during times of trial, many times over. The feminist ideal of mutual connectedness—relationships built on mutuality—flies in the face of patriarchal hierarchies, where relationships are built upon mastery, ownership, and power. Elizabeth Johnson says it best, connecting Jesus' own lifestyle with that of feminist mutuality:

Made concrete in Jesus' preaching, lifestyle, and relationships with others, this idea of God is subversive of any form of domination. Jesus' Abba, in other words, is not a patriarchal figure who can be used to legitimate systems of oppression, including patriarchal rule, but a god of the oppressed, a god of community and celebration. Everyone related to the one Abba stands in a relation of mutuality with one another.<sup>9</sup>

I had noticed not only an impetus within these church members to “deconstruct,” but also to “reconstruct:” to pursue new ways of believing. I wondered, then, if this idea of connectedness through mutuality could be an important piece of reconstructing faith, of rebuilding faith in the areas where distance and disconnection was being felt. Therefore, I chose five areas of faith to measure “connectedness” (God, Christ, Bible, First Baptist Greenville, Christian Tradition), because these areas of faith had been brought up in many different pastoral conversations over my time serving the church, as areas where congregants were seeking less distance, and more closeness. Patriarchy is something that necessarily divides communities into differing levels on the social hierarchy, therefore, I hoped for this bible study to not only reveal the insidious work of patriarchy in our lives and faith, but also to build a different kind of connectedness with faith for each participant and a different connectedness among the participants, one built on mutuality and trust, rather than distrust and division.

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th anniversary ed (New York: Crossroad, 2002): 85.

## **The Innovation**

In order to offer a critical education around the concept of patriarchy in the bible and church, I decided to write and teach a bible study. In creating the bible study, there were three things that I felt were very important, given the history of this specific church and what I hoped this bible study might help to teach or reinforce. First, it was important that the study was bible-based. In order to make a strong argument against patriarchy, I knew I had to build my case on biblical evidence, because even though many congregants may be struggling in how they relate to the bible, they still tend to hold it in esteem. Second, I wanted the study to communicate complex, critical, and historical understandings developed by feminist and womanist theologians in a clear and concise way. In essence, I wanted this study to bring all the best learning I'd had access to in my formal education to the congregation as a whole. Thirdly, I wanted the study to set a foundation for conversations not only on the inclusion of women in leadership of the church, but also people of color and LGBTQ persons. None of these groups had ever been represented in the role of senior minister of the church, and people of color had never even been a part of the pastoral leadership at any level except as pastoral interns. While I was in the process of writing the bible study, the search committee recommended, and the congregation voted in, its first female senior minister. Therefore, I wanted this bible study to provide a space to talk about how to support women in the highest levels of leadership in the church and to openly examine the obstacles she may face being the first woman in that position. What's more, I wanted to invite congregants to connect the issue of leadership access for women to broader questions of access for people of color and LGBTQ persons, particularly given the majority white, cis-gender,

heterosexual demographic of this congregation. In essence, I wanted the bible study to be intersectional.

In 2020, I preached a sermon that first introduced this congregation to the word “patriarchy” and how I saw it affecting the composition and interpretation of our sacred scriptures and our practice of church here and now. In this sermon, I highlighted some of the central concepts that I also built into the bible study: the idea that liberation from systems of oppression is intersectional in nature (advocacy for women compels advocacy for other under-represented groups within the church), the fact that I stay in service to the church because I believe the true nature of Christianity means liberation from systems and mindsets that devalue us and others, and the idea that God expands and frees us while patriarchy limits and creates scarcity for humanity. The reception of this sermon was overwhelmingly positive. Many congregants thanked me for helping them see and understand the workings of patriarchy in ways they had never been able to articulate themselves. Many congregants wanted to talk more about what the sermon had made them question and inspired within them. These reactions helped me to realize that this topic of patriarchy still had much value for learning and conversation within this congregation. I also received contacts from folks outside of my congregation who wanted to know more or share a word of thanks after a friend or colleague had shared a recording of the sermon with them. I noticed that these responses both within the congregation and from outside the congregation were diverse in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. It was clear that something struck a chord across a broad range of Christians. One male church member highlighted the line, “The opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy, it is love.”<sup>10</sup> Another man talked about the experience of being seated near a young male same-sex couple with a baby

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<sup>10</sup> Email message to author, December 13, 2021.

and how he and the couple were “bouncing in their seats and clapping” during the sermon.<sup>11</sup> A female member wrote this:

I just wanted to let you know that today's sermon was - and this is no exaggeration - the best sermon I have ever heard in my life. It was so powerful, and perfectly communicated many of my feelings in the present moment -- as an American, as a woman, as a mother. God is so vast and mysterious and loving, and to hear your words was affirming, like a hug through the television in our living room where we watched the service. You have given me such a gift. My relationship with God is complicated and changing and expanding, so much so that I rarely have adequate language to discuss it. The sermon today gave me that language, gave me the words to communicate my heart.<sup>12</sup>

It was feedback like this that made it clear to me that helping to give language to changing faith was something I felt inspired and called to do. It led me to dive deeper in constructing a bible study that would offer more understanding and avenues to help congregants reconstruct faith, even as they deconstructed.

In constructing the bible study, I hoped to make a clear argument for how Jesus’ own teachings and actions were in direct conflict with the patriarchy of his day. If we call ourselves “Christians,” I argued, we should stand against patriarchy, as Jesus the Christ did. We had four brief hour-long classes to complete this study. I knew we would be crunched for time, as I had always envisioned the bible study taking six weeks to complete, but I needed to work with the church’s schedule, which required us to wrap up by the last Wednesday night meeting of 2023. We met in the church’s library, arranging the chairs so that we could form a semicircle with rows so that participants could see and hear one another and I could be centered in the front with the white note-board I was using to illustrate the concepts we discussed. I titled the bible study, *Finding Freedom: Releasing the Bible from Patriarchy’s Grip*.

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<sup>11</sup> Email message to author, December 14, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Email message to author, December 12, 2021.

In the first class, we began with a focus group so that I could ascertain the level of understanding of the term *patriarchy* and how participants would describe its effects on their lives. I asked two questions to the group and invited open-ended responses: 1) How would you define “patriarchy”? and 2) How does patriarchy affect your faith, if at all? Right away, it was clear that some of my participants already had a deep understanding of patriarchy. To the first question, responses included “men in charge,” “*white* men in charge,” “male domination,” “entrenched system,” “the way things have always been done,” and “often invisible.”<sup>13</sup> To this wealth of knowledge in response to my first question, I responded, “Wow, would you all like to teach this class?!”

To the second question, respondents began by enumerating specific examples of how patriarchy has affected Christianity, such as God typically being given masculine pronouns, the bible being composed and edited by men, and the majority of biblical interpretation throughout history being from an androcentric point of view. Others named specific experiences in their life. One woman was questioned by her co-worker when she said she served as a deacon of the church. Another woman named the ways in which she has had to “unlearn” what she was taught as a child “because women weren’t allowed to do much in the church I grew up in except cook and watch the children.”<sup>14</sup>

To solidify understanding for the rest of the participants, I read aloud twice my favorite textbook definition of patriarchy, asking afterward what participants heard in that definition:

The term patriarchy refers to an organization, institution, or society in which power, social control, material wealth, and high social status accrue predominantly to males

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<sup>13</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom: Releasing the Bible from Patriarchy’s Grip*, November 8, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom*, November 8, 2023.

rather than females. Patriarchy is one of the most enduring and pervasive of all social patterns. It appears in all eras, among all races, social institutions, and economic classes, and in virtually every known culture. Rising initially in early family and kinship structures, hierarchical patriarchal patterns are found today around the globe not only in family and kinship groups but also throughout the major social institutions, including language, family, economy, government, religion, law, education, science, and medicine.<sup>15</sup>

Each week we reviewed this definition, focusing on how patriarchy is both a *system of oppression* (lives within our social institutions, so we need to be aware of more than just our individual action/interactions) and a *social hierarchy* (defining those who have more value in the society) that still exists today. We looked at the time period in which many scholars believe patriarchy was formalized in society, the Greco-Roman period, reading aloud an excerpt from Aristotle's *Politics* which clearly laid out the social hierarchy of patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> This allowed the participants to help me in drawing on the white note-board the "hierarchy of humans" that patriarchy assumes and requires. I used the term "hierarchy of humans" to describe both the levels of value given to different people within the hierarchy and also to reinforce my own theological claim that this hierarchy in fact comes from humans, not from God. This hierarchy has the master/father/husband/male at the top, followed by mother/wife/female, then child (with male over female), and then slave, at the bottom. Our group took some time to define who would be the "slaves" of modern-day American culture (those with little or no legal protection) and that list included immigrants, refugees, trafficked human beings, the homeless, mentally ill, incarcerated, addicts, and Black Americans (because of the long-standing effects of chattel

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<sup>15</sup> Michael R. Hill, "Patriarchy," in *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, edited by Jodi O'Brien, Vol. 2 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009) 629.

<sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion of Patriarchy's Greco-Roman provenance, see Johnson, *She Who Is*, 160 and Carol Gilligan and David A. J. Richards, *The Deepening Darkness Patriarchy, Resistance, and Democracy's Future* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 18.

slavery in our country). Upon reflection, the participants were able to see the ways in which this hierarchy is still very much at play in our current context. I encouraged the participants that any time they see a hierarchy at play in their lives, they should be suspicious and question its necessity, introducing the idea of a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” as coined by feminist biblical scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.<sup>17</sup> Next, we read over an example of a household code in the New Testament to compare to Aristotle’s hierarchy. After reading aloud 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, I joked that we should “sage the room” to a round of laughter, and participants were immediately able to draw the parallels between the hierarchy in these verses and Aristotle’s hierarchy. I noted the dominant philosophical traditions of the time and place were Greco-Roman and have a great effect on the composition of the New Testament. I also noted that there is more “mutuality” or “consideration” in the Christian household codes but that the level of hierarchy established in the name of Christ was “dangerous” in my opinion, as Christ never set that hierarchy during his ministry. But, to humanize the early Christians adoption of Greco-Roman patriarchal hierarchy, we talked about the idea of a “politics of respectability” as is discussed in Black Studies– how marginalized cultures will often adopt some aspects of the dominating culture in order to gain social mobility within that dominating culture.<sup>18</sup> I argued this is one way to understand early Christians’ adoption of Greco-Roman patriarchy. Participants drew parallels not only with Black Americans’ experience but also with assimilation within Native American tribes and were able to name the complex nature of such behavior and such moments of time– understanding that some level of adopting the dominating culture is often necessary for survival for marginalized groups. I

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<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2006), 169-180.

<sup>18</sup> This term was first coined in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).



ended the first class by asking, “What hierarchies does Jesus set up in his ministry?” This was answered by the participants, after a pause, with a resounding “none!” Rather, one participant offered up this language that we returned to many times during the study: “Jesus flipped the hierarchy upside down like he flipped the tables!” Another said, “Jesus told his followers that if they want to be first, they must be last.” Another said, “Jesus doesn’t set up a hierarchy, he sets up a flat line between humans.”<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, I was *very* pleased with all the responses given during this first class and it set an incredibly forthright and clear course for the rest of the bible study meetings to come.

In the second class, I realized from feedback on the first survey that participants were indeed struggling in their hearts with the ways in which patriarchy forms their lives and affects their faith. I decided to begin and end the second week with a prayer, the same prayer we used for every class that followed:

*Shalom: A prayer from many spiritual sources to begin and end the day*  
by Elizabeth Kaeton

Let me be at peace within myself,  
Let me accept that I am profoundly loved and  
need never be afraid.

Let me be aware of the Source of Being that is common to us all  
and to all living creatures.

Let me be filled with the presence of the Great Compassion  
toward myself and toward  
all living beings.

Let me always be an instrument of my own liberation and  
not of my own oppression,  
Let me see the face of Jesus in others.

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<sup>19</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom*, November 8, 2023

Let me be the face of Jesus for others.  
 Let me be at peace within myself. Amen.<sup>20</sup>

This prayer set an ethic of encounter with the material, giving permission for each participant to bring their full, conflicted selves into the study, and to allow God to move, changing hearts and minds as God does.

I opened our second class by sharing an insight that I felt needed to be shared: that not all of our Christian beliefs or traditions come from Christ. I felt it reflected a latent idea touched on in the first class that needed to be stated clearly. From this understanding, I encouraged participants to use the Gospels as a litmus test for the rest of the New Testament—how do the teachings and actions of Christ, most clearly evident in the gospels, stack up to the teachings of the rest of the New Testament? I felt this gave an easy hermeneutic for folks to begin to use their hearts and minds to interact with scripture. In the second week, our focus was on how we decide to interact with scripture as either descriptive (simply describing what happened) or prescriptive (telling us how things “ought to be”), or both.<sup>21</sup> With this understanding, we read through the two creation accounts of Genesis with special emphasis on human creation. Relying heavily on expanded understandings of the Hebrew language from the Womanist scholarship of Dr. Wilda Gafney, we explored new understandings of the creation stories—ones that allowed an understanding of the human creation in the first creation story to be Yahweh forming the human from the diverse forms of the divine court (“Let us create humankind in our image”) and from the second creation story to understand the creation of female and male to be “simultaneous, not sequential” when “adam” the genderless human is split down the middle to create male and

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, *Women’s Uncommon Prayers: Our lives revealed, nurtured, celebrated* (Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA, 2000): 23.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Richard Schlimm, *This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015): 93.

female, to understand Eve as an “ezer”-- a mighty helper (like God in Psalms 33, 115, and 121, for instance), and to view the “punishments” Adam and Eve received for eating from the tree to be “descriptive” not “prescriptive.”<sup>22</sup> Many participants noted how differently they heard the creation stories when different language is used or when different interpretations are offered.

I ended this class by asking, “Given the new understandings and new language you heard today, what do we learn about who God is and who humans are? What’s redeeming in these creation stories?” The responses from the group included “We should be humble, not try to be like God” and “there’s a special relationship between God and humans” which we explored further with the intimate relationship between God and humans as God breathes into the human’s nostrils.<sup>23</sup> We also explored this idea of the relationship between God and humans in that humans are a part of creation, and yet, are also made in the image of God. One of the last comments from a participant was, “How is it okay for us to believe that someone is made in the image of God, and believe they are less than us on the hierarchy?”<sup>24</sup> We closed the class, as we did all classes, with the prayer from Elizabeth Kaeton.

In the third class, we “complicated the hierarchy” we had constructed from Aristotle and the Christian household codes in week one. We did this by exploring how patriarchy continues to exist into modern day by our enforcement of it upon one another as humans, therefore giving the opportunity for every person in the room to see how they may be enforcing or being complicit in

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<sup>22</sup> Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2017): 15-25.

<sup>23</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom*, November 15, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom*, November 15, 2023.

patriarchy rather than challenging patriarchy in their everyday lives.<sup>25</sup> We enumerated the ways men enforce patriarchy upon other men, women, and children, and those with little or no legal protection, such as domestic violence, poverty shaming, or discipline when patriarchy's rules aren't followed. Then we talked about how women enforce patriarchy upon men, other women, children, and those with little or no legal protection, such as holding other women down in the workplace, social conditioning of male and female children to gender specific "success," and social shaming and ridicule when one bucks the hierarchy's preferred social deference. And so on and so forth, with participants naming specific ways they've seen these enforcements happen within their own lives. What is central to this understanding is the notion of "derivative status"--the state of "lesser" men, women, children and slaves being dependent upon a male "head of household" in order to access status within a patriarchal society.<sup>26</sup> This is why those of lesser status may enforce (or be complicit in reinforcing) patriarchal standards upon those of higher status, if their own livelihood or status could be affected. With the hierarchy "complicated" in this way, I asked the participants to name the qualities of a society built upon patriarchy. Competition, stress, jealousy, and frustration were all named. With this understanding, I introduced the word "scarcity" as the experience of living in patriarchy—feeling like there is not enough, feeling like we have to compete with each other to get what we deserve.<sup>27</sup> And that's how we arrived at the moment that begins this paper, an "aha" moment for many. To solidify the ways in which Jesus refused to live by the rules of patriarchy that create competition and

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<sup>25</sup> Much of complicity comes from our social conditioning based on our gender as discussed in Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Pr, 1974): 49.

<sup>26</sup> Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century* (March 24-31, 1999).

scarcity, we looked at biblical stories that show abundance and generosity as a Jesus ethic— a way that Jesus chose to live in the world. Participants were quick to name these stories in the bible: feeding the five thousand (Matt 14:13-21), the sparrow and the lily not worrying what they would reap or sow (Matt 6:25-34), the wedding banquet bringing in people off the street (Matt 22:8-10), turning the water to wine— and saving the best wine for last (John 2:1-11). Then we read from Mark 9:33-27 and Mark 10:35-45— the stories where the disciples are arguing among themselves who is the greatest and asking to be seated at the left and right hand of Jesus “in his glory.” This story highlighted the idea of scarcity and competition, even within the disciples. Jesus responds by “putting a child among them” and by informing them they must become “slave of all,” a clear reversal of the patriarchal hierarchy. Those on the bottom—children and slaves—become the model of how to be most Christ-like.

In the fourth class, we began our discussion talking about who is left “outside” of the hierarchy of patriarchy in America, namely those within the LGBTQ community, single/unmarried persons, widows, orphans, and non-whites. This led into a discussion of how Jesus, in his own life, chose to practice building family, namely the scriptures that demonstrate Jesus’ preference for building an egalitarian family based on faith and belief, over and above ties of blood, household, and familial kinship (Mark 3:31-35, Matthew 10:34-39, Matthew 19:1-11), completely flying in the face of patriarchy . We agreed that in the end, we believed that Jesus maintained one hierarchy: that of God above humans, with all humans on the same level. But we talked about the ways that even this hierarchy, depending on how one conceives of God and humanity, can be one built on mutuality, love, and respect. We then concluded the planned portion of the bible study with a look at the stories of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25), the father of Jesus, both figures that I argued lead lives that

challenged the patriarchy of their day. The story of the Syrophenician woman shows Jesus as an example of what good can come when men listen to women and when we as humans are willing to change our minds and actions as a result of someone calling us to be better, as the woman does for Jesus. In Joseph, we have an example of a man who does not follow the letter of the law in stoning or dismissing Mary when he finds out she is pregnant, but rather listens to the angel in his dream, leading him instead to take Mary as his wife and to claim the child as his own. Joseph chooses to forego his own decision-making power over the wife and soon-to-be child, whom he in essence owned as property, and instead follows a more graceful way, a more faithful way, giving up his control as patriarch and head of household, instead choosing to follow God and let God make the decisions.<sup>28</sup>

I was aware that the subject matter of this bible study could be very challenging to the ways in which participants understood the bible and practiced their faith; therefore, we reserved the last twenty minutes of class for practical, open-ended discussion of what participants had learned and how their thinking or faith had changed or been challenged. I wanted this to be a time of sharing and problem-solving in case anyone was feeling “stuck” in some way, working through the cognitive dissonance created by the study. This proved to be a fruitful time. Participants asked questions of one another such as, “How do I challenge patriarchy within my own family?” and “What are the best ways we can support our first female senior minister?”<sup>29</sup> We ended our last session with a reminder to fill out the survey once it arrived in participants’ inboxes, and with the prayer that had become our guide during our time together.

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine Wessinger, *Theory of Women in Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 33.

<sup>29</sup> Author’s Personal Recording, *Finding Freedom*, December 6, 2023.

## The Survey

In order to collect data on the effects of the bible study on participants' faith, two online surveys were conducted, one after our first meeting and one after our last meeting. The surveys were conducted through an online platform called AYTМ (Ask Your Target Market). This tool was chosen because the survey interface was simple, no account creation was required of users, and tools for data analysis were included for free within the platform. The survey after the first meeting (referred to as "pre-study" survey) sought to establish a baseline for self-reported connectedness to five main aspects of Christian faith I had chosen: God, Christ, the Bible, First Baptist Greenville, and the Christian Tradition. I did not at any point define these categories for the participants but instead allowed them to interact with the categories as they saw fit. Participants had five options for self-rating their connectedness in each category: not connected, slightly connected, moderately connected, connected, and very connected. This first survey also sought to establish the demographics of the participants, asking age, gender, and how many years they have attended First Baptist Greenville. The last question also asked an open-ended question about what the participant hoped to learn in the bible study, so that this feedback could be taken into account in the material for the following three classes. The survey was sent by email the day after our first meeting to all the participants who provided an email address at the first meeting. The email also provided information about using the survey tool and instructions for creating a pseudonym to be associated with their data that would protect their confidentiality. These instructions were also given in person at our first meeting, where I explained the reason for collecting this data in the first place, to be used within this project for my Doctor of Ministry degree at Candler School of Theology. Participants were also encouraged in person and in the

email to be honest in their feedback and responses, for the sake of receiving feedback that would make the bible study better for future iterations. This is also why I stressed the importance of using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and encourage honesty. The participants were told the survey should take around ten to fifteen minutes to complete and to reach out to me should there be any technical questions. The questions used in the pre-study survey can be found in Appendix 1.

The second (“post-study”) survey sought to measure the change in “connectedness” from the beginning of the bible study to the completion of the bible study. Therefore, most of the questions remained exactly the same as the first survey. Participants were asked to use the same pseudonym they had created for the first survey, so data could also be measured individually, as well as collectively. They were also asked to report the number of weeks they were able to attend the bible study, in case this might influence the results. The last two questions of this survey sought to collect feedback on the general learning of the participants as well as opening a space for ways to improve the bible study for future iterations of teaching. This survey was emailed to the participants the day following our last meeting, and the participants were given two weeks to complete their survey. The questions used in the post-study survey can be found in Appendix 2.

Fifty people received by email the pre-study survey sent after the first bible study meeting. Of that fifty, forty-three people filled out the initial survey. The post-study survey was sent by email to the same fifty people, and twenty-eight people filled out the survey. However, two sets of data had to be thrown out— one because it couldn’t be connected to the first set of data by pseudonym (the names didn’t come close to matching) and the other was filled out by a person who did not fill out the pre-study survey. Therefore, twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey connected by pseudonym) were used to make the calculations below.



The demographics of the survey sample included six men and twenty women. Most respondents were over sixty years old (61.5%). About half of the respondents had been attending First Baptist for under ten years; the other half had attended for over a decade. I chose to measure “attendance” over “church membership” because many will attend the church for a number of years before joining as a member. This survey sample was mostly representative of the larger group that participated in the bible study, though did skew slightly more female. Graphs displaying the demographic breakdown of the respondents can be found in Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 on the following pages.

### Age Distribution of Respondents

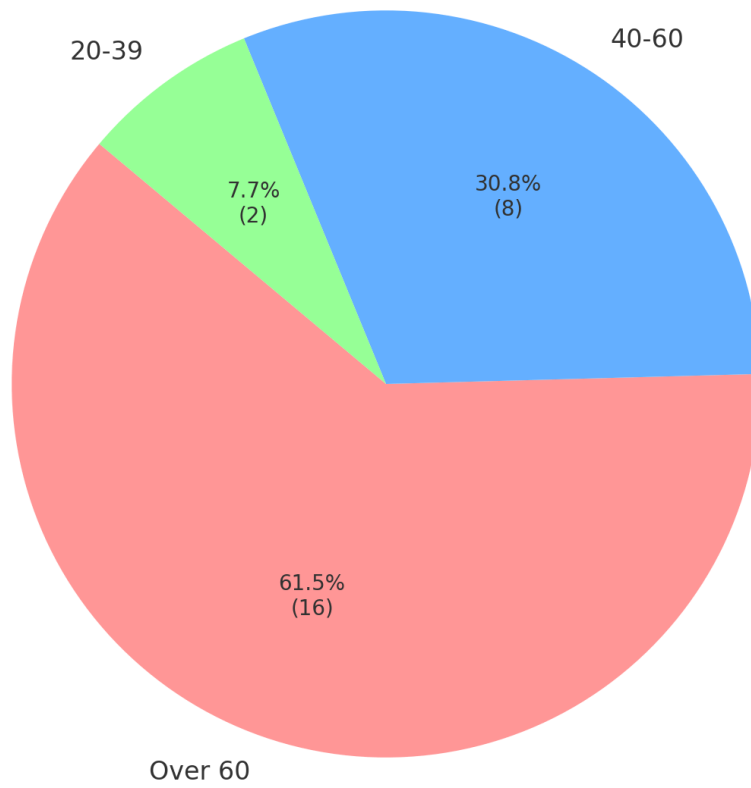


Figure 1.1. *Age Distribution of Respondents in Years*. For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

## Gender Distribution of Respondents

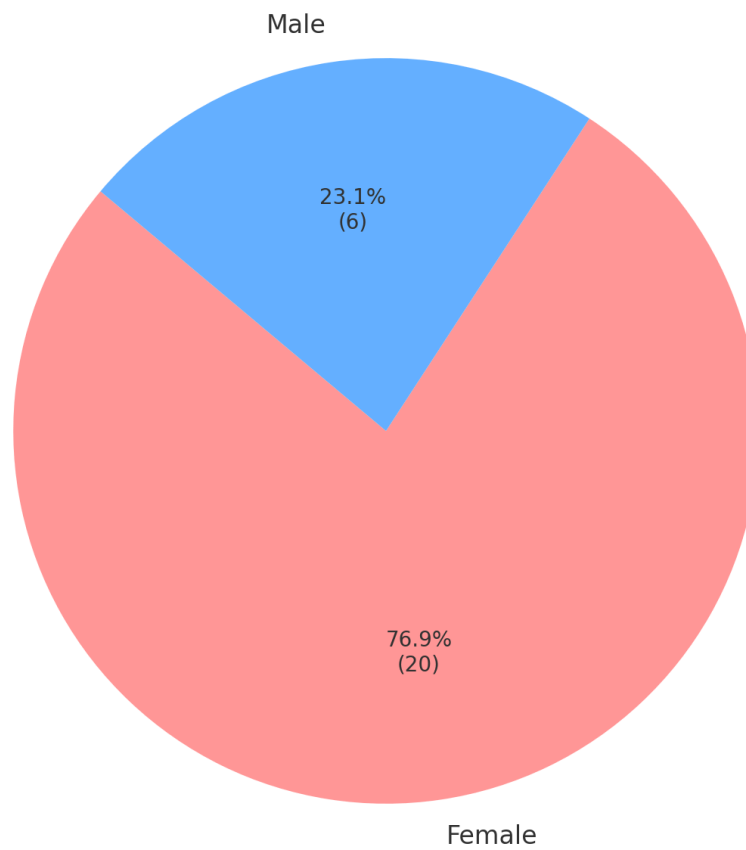


Figure 1.2. *Gender Distribution of Respondents*. For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

## Attendance at First Baptist Greenville

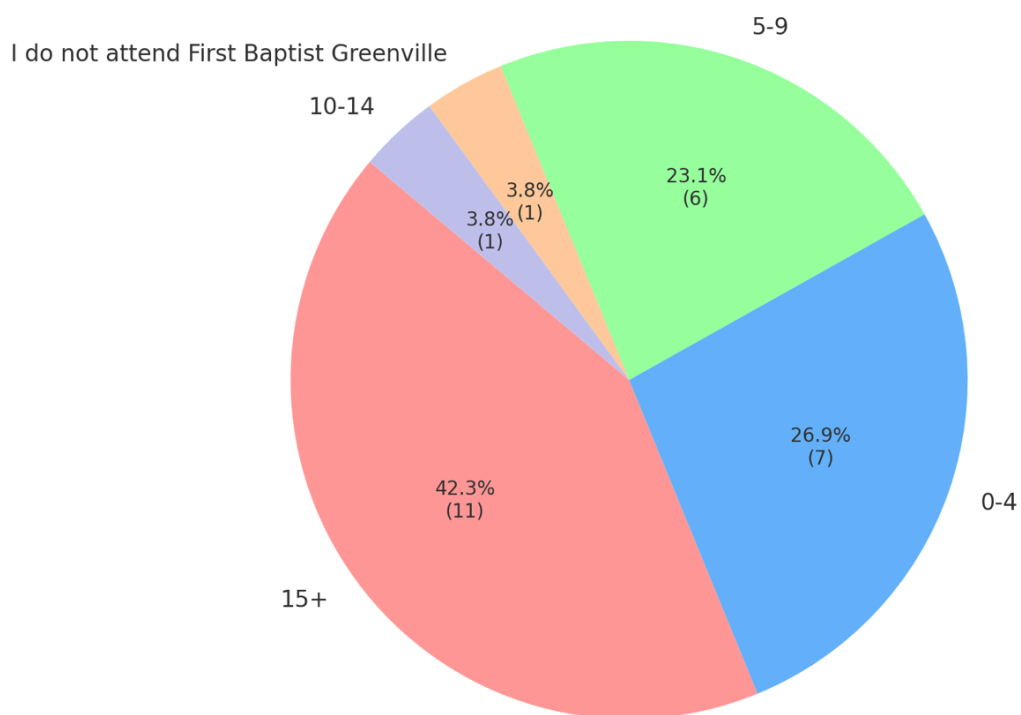


Figure 1.3. *Attendance at First Baptist Greenville in Years*. For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

## The Data

An overview of the data reveals that 88% (23 out of 26 respondents) increased connectedness in at least one category (God, Christ, Bible, First Baptist Greenville, Christian Tradition) over the course of the bible study. The other three respondents reported no change (positive or negative) in connectedness in any category over the course of the bible study. The average respondent increased connectedness by almost three (2.7) categories of measure, across all categories over the course of the bible study, for instance increasing by one level of connectedness in three different categories. Participants who self-reported feeling “very connected” across the categories also doubled after completion of the bible study. At the beginning of the study, respondents strongest connectedness was to First Baptist Greenville and weakest connectedness was to the Bible. At the completion of the study, both of these categories strengthened overall, but continued to be both strongest connectedness and weakest connectedness, in the same order.

## Connectedness to God

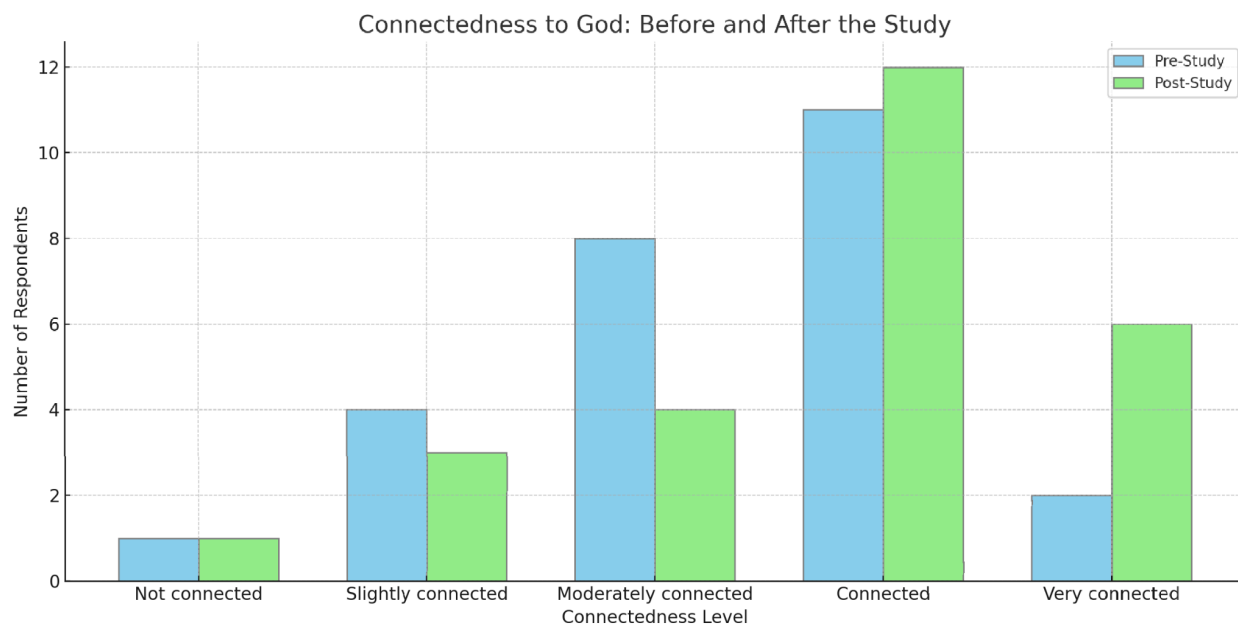


Figure 2.1: *Connectedness to God, before and after the bible study.* For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

In the pre-study survey, the largest group of respondents describe their connectedness to God as “connected.” This remains the most popular self-reported connectedness descriptor after the bible study, increasing by one person. Also of note, is the growth of post-study bars toward the end of the graph showing highest connectedness, meaning growth in connectedness over the course of the bible study. This growth in self-reported connectedness results holds with all the categories (God, Christ, Bible, First Baptist Greenville, and Christian Tradition) over the course of the bible study.

In the participant’s written responses in the pre-study survey, when asked to explain their chosen level of connectedness to God, there is some ambivalence in defining “God.” One male, over 60 years old with over 15 years of attendance says they’re not sure of their connectedness to

God, writing that it “depends on how God is defined.”<sup>30</sup> Three respondents specifically name their difficulty or ambivalence in defining God as related to “deconstructing” their faith.<sup>31</sup> One more recent attendee of the church (0-4 years of attendance), an over 60 female, said, “I’m deconstructing my faith and am no longer sure what God looks like.”<sup>32</sup> Another more recent female attendee of the 40-60 age range said, “I have deconstructed to the point that I don’t know if I believe god is real. If there is a god, I don’t know if a relationship is possible with them.”<sup>33</sup> A 40-60 year old male who was a recent attendee had a more hopeful assessment of their deconstruction: “Growing up where everything was so black and white, I feel the more layers I peel back, the more my faith gets shaken. I’m holding onto hope though that God is real and he will not let me go even though I have so many doubts now.”<sup>34</sup> Other obstacles to connectedness to God named included theological problems of theodicy. “I feel so much doubt because of all the pain and suffering present in the world,” wrote a 20-39 year old female recent attendee.<sup>35</sup> Others pointed to more practical reasons they felt less connectedness to God: not reading scripture or participating in a bible study regularly, or feeling busy or distracted because of things happening in their life. In the pre-study survey, about half of the participants noted that they felt

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<sup>30</sup> Kendra Plating, *Finding Freedom: Releasing the Bible from Patriarchy’s Grip (pre)*, AYTM Survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

a strong connection to God as they felt they received “guidance” and “comfort” from God, or felt connected to God in “prayer” and “thanksgiving” regularly.<sup>36</sup>

After the bible study, there was much less ambivalence in descriptions of God in participants’ responses. In fact, there was a new found confidence in the type of language participants’ used to describe God. A few still noted that they were “struggling” with their faith or “still have questions.”<sup>37</sup> But overwhelmingly, the written responses describing connectedness to God showed much more confidence and clarity. One newer attendee, an over 60 female, wrote “The more I learn, the more awesome God is.”<sup>38</sup> Many pointed to feeling a greater connectedness to God because of the experience of being in the bible study itself– a testament to the importance of this bible study community in feeling connectedness to God. An over 60 male with more than 15 years of attendance said, “What a link to God; fellow believers honestly sharing thoughts and assessment of the concepts presented in the Bible without fear of being rebuked. A small group/community willing to engage strengthens my awareness of God’s presence in my life and in the church.”<sup>39</sup> Participants reported confidence and clarity even as they were in the process of deconstructing faith. One 40-60 newer male attendee said, “If anything, this study just made me think more about God than I normally do. My wife and I would drive home having great discussions about what we were learning. Even though hearing that parts of the Bible may have been mistranslated (or correctly translated but written by authors heavily influenced by

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<sup>36</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Kendra Plating, *Finding Freedom: Releasing the Bible from Patriarchy’s Grip (post)*, AYTM Survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.



patriarchy), it actually makes me feel closer to God in that as some layers get peeled away, we are able to see God more for who she/he is.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

## Connectedness to Christ

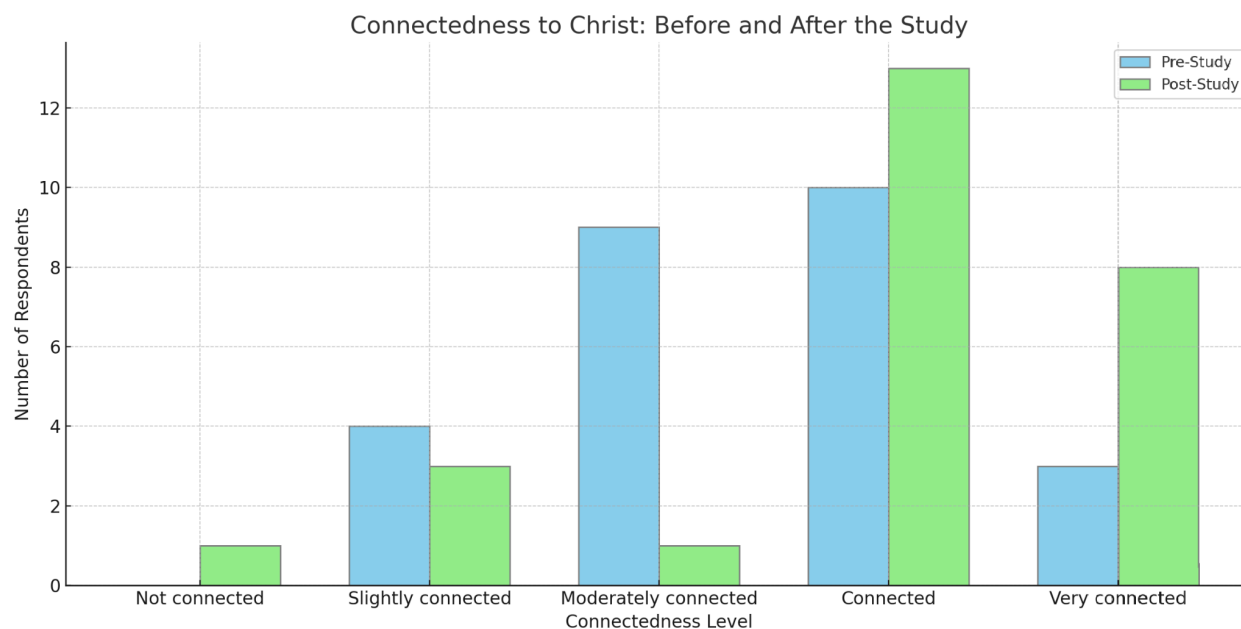


Figure 2.2: *Connectedness to Christ, before and after the bible study.* For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

In the pre-study survey, the largest group of respondents describe their connectedness to Christ as “connected.” This remains the most popular self-reported connectedness descriptor after the bible study, but increases by three people.

In the pre-bible study survey responses, participants described their connectedness to Christ in a range of ways. Some equated Christ and God and therefore didn’t feel a need to distinguish their connectedness between the two. Some described Christ as a “guide” or “model” for living or acting, or as “savior,” but many described their connection to Christ in distant terms.<sup>41</sup> A female aged 40-60 who’s been attending the church for 5-9 years said, “I feel Christ walks with me, however I don’t engage and connect with Christ as often as I did in the past on a

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<sup>41</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

regular basis and I miss that connection” while a female recent attendee over 60 said, “Jesus is my model but I don’t know if he is accessible to me daily.”<sup>42</sup>

Following the bible study, the descriptions of connectedness to Christ were much more concrete and connected to action. Descriptions of Jesus included, “the table turner” and “Jesus is shown flipping the patriarchy upside down!”<sup>43</sup> One over 60 female with over 15 years of attendance said they were reminded of the “radical nature of Christ’s love and attitudes toward people.”<sup>44</sup> Many pointed to a renewed understanding of what model or example Jesus Christ sets for them as Christians: “Christ showed us how to love and care for one another. He sees each of us as important” and “Jesus’ teachings are the way to a better world and I am trying to be a part of that every day” and “Christ’s mission was to reset our view of the society around us.”<sup>45</sup> The suggestion in the bible study to use the teachings and actions of Christ as a litmus test for the rest of the New Testament writings, proved to be a helpful suggestion, as one male over 60 years old with over 15 years of attendance attested: “The statement that as followers of Christ we should interpret scripture through his life and lens makes sense to me.”<sup>46</sup> Overall, people reported feeling more connectedness with Christ because they felt he set a model of being in the world that they are inspired to follow and the bible study was able to give them more confidence and clarity around the model Jesus set for us as Christians.

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<sup>42</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

## Connectedness to the Bible

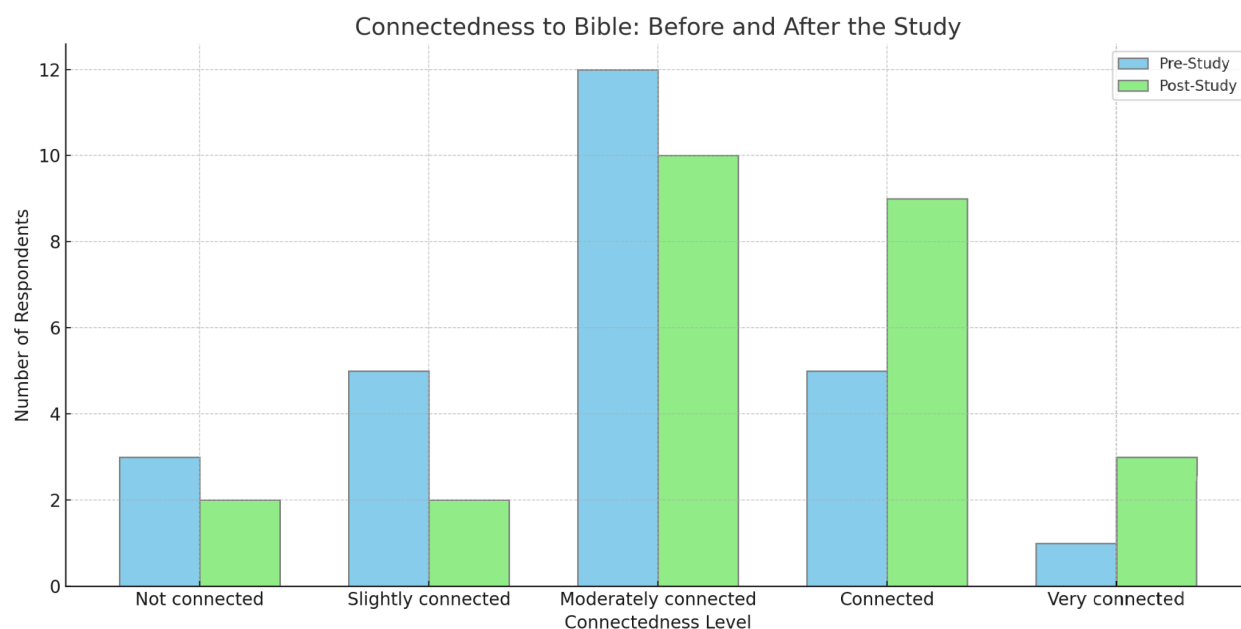


Figure 2.3: *Connectedness to the Bible, before and after the bible study.* For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

In the pre-study and post-study survey, the largest group of respondents describe their connectedness to the bible as “moderately connected”-- this is the lowest connectedness of any category measured. Yet, growth of the post-study bars in “connected” and “very connected” display increased connectedness to the bible over the course of the bible study.

In the pre-study survey, the majority of participants noted that they feel ambivalently or negatively connected to the bible. A couple noted a general lack of knowledge about the bible as a source of ambivalence such as “I don’t read the bible regularly and don’t know the stories well enough to feel comfortable to speak about them to others” and “I’ve never really studied the bible.”<sup>47</sup> But most who reported a negative or ambivalent feeling of connectedness to the bible indicated this is because they feel they lack comfort and confidence in how to interpret the bible.

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<sup>47</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

Many respondents said they put trust in what other experts or authorities tell them about the bible, but don't read it much on their own such as one 40-60 year old male who is a recent attender who said "I enjoy the Bible in church, but out of church, I don't read it. I enjoy reading books about God and faith though."<sup>48</sup> A female recent attender aged between 40-60 years detailed the reason they don't find it a useful way to spend their time in reading the bible:

People can believe anything they want to believe and they can find a verse and an interpretation to back up that opinion. The translations are influenced by the views of the people who translated it. To really know what the bible means, you would have to understand the culture, the time, and the language. You would have to trust that the men who decided what went into the bible had heard from God. I don't mind listening to what some really educated people say about the bible, but I no longer find it a useful thing for myself to spend time reading.<sup>49</sup>

As well, some pointed to a changing concept of what kind of authority the bible has in their life and in their faith. One female recent attendee aged between 40-60 years said, "the bible is still my primary faith tool but I am reevaluating its authority."<sup>50</sup> Another female of the same demographic said, "I have a lot of Bible knowledge from a lifetime of study, including a Bible college degree. But I no longer place much value on that."<sup>51</sup> There were very few straightforward positive assessments of the bible in the pre-study survey, but there were some who noted they want to continue learning more about the bible through study. One female aged between 40-60 years who has been attending between 10-14 years noted, "Since undergoing a deconstruction of my childhood faith, I've found more meaning than ever in the stories and wisdom of the bible."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

Following the bible study, participants described greater connectedness to the bible in terms of wanting to read it on their own, and to gain new understanding. One 40-60 year old female with over 15 years of attendance said, “I feel more compelled to reread some familiar stories with a different lens.”<sup>53</sup> Some indicated a growing sense of empowerment in how to interpret the bible on their own. One 40-60 year old male with 0-4 years of attendance said, “I do struggle with knowing what is true and what is not true since I can’t read the original language. And I struggle with the fact that growing up, I was taught the Bible is inerrant... but if there are teachings/writings that differ from Jesus (in the bible), then it seems we should err on the side of Jesus. So even with the Bible, I need a Jesus lens for discernment.”<sup>54</sup> Relatedly, another male who was over 60 years old and has attended for over 15 years said, “interpreting the scripture through a Christ lens makes it ‘easier’ to connect to the bible.”<sup>55</sup> Another male of the same demographics said, “this study widens my eyes to my interpretation of God’s word and coaxes me to assess the context and the perspectives of its messages. Prescriptive or Descriptive.”<sup>56</sup> One female aged 40-60 with 5-9 years of attendance expressed being less intimidated by the bible after completing the bible study: “I find Bible studies almost always help me to not be so intimidated by scripture. This study has shown me that just because someone in my past said, ‘this is how we interpret this scripture’ it doesn’t mean that it’s the only way.”<sup>57</sup> An over 60 female with over 15 years of attendance expressed general relief in being able to trust the bible with this new understanding gained through the bible study: “I certainly feel better about the

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<sup>53</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

Bible in general. I have always been interested in the beauty and wisdom of these ancient texts. It is inspiring to learn that upholding patriarchy is not necessarily a part of all of these scriptures, especially in the new testament.”<sup>58</sup> Overall, respondents who have attended the church longer reported a more positive and more confident assessment of their connectedness to the bible both before and after the bible study, perhaps revealing the importance of long-term involvement in a faith community that allows open critical dialogue about the bible as being important in establishing a strong connection to the bible. These folks in essence, have had more time to “reconstruct” their faith, while others who are more recent attendees are still in the process of “deconstruction,” especially if coming from fundamentalist backgrounds.

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<sup>58</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

## Connectedness to First Baptist Greenville

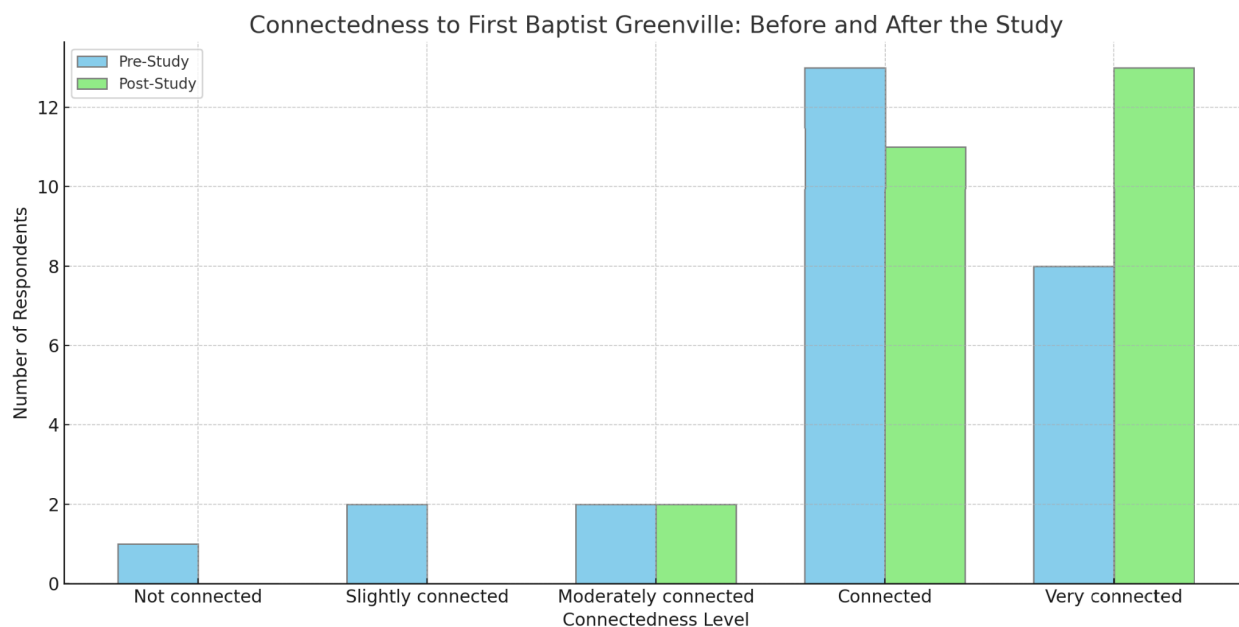


Figure 2.4: *Connectedness to First Baptist Greenville, before and after the bible study.* For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

In the pre-study survey, the largest group of respondents describe their connectedness to First Baptist Greenville as “connected.” After the study, the largest number of respondents have moved into the “very connected” level in relation to First Baptist Greenville. In both pre- and post-study surveys, First Baptist Greenville has the highest connectedness of any category measured.

In the pre-study survey, there were a few people noting a feeling of disconnection to the church due to certain aspects of their life in the moment or because the church was in an interim pastorate and a transitional time. But overwhelmingly, people noted that First Baptist Greenville is a community of great importance to them before and after the bible study. In the pre-study survey people describe First Baptist Greenville as their “primary community,” “like a family,”



and a “spiritual home” connoting a deep sense of belonging and connectedness to the church.<sup>59</sup> Some also note a long history with the congregation as being a source of connectedness. But most describe the community of First Baptist and their connectedness to it in terms of what it means to their faith. One 40-60 year old female with 10-14 years of attendance sums it up beautifully by saying, “Church done right is God with skin on. This church is my community, the people I count on, enjoy being with, and most of all, the people who follow God, pursue truth and do life together with me.”<sup>60</sup> This response connotes a sense of wholeness in belonging to this congregation; this congregation fulfills their needs in many ways.

Following the bible study, the sense of connectedness was slightly stronger with most participants moving from “connected” to “very connected.” Many point to the experience of this bible study as typifying what they love about First Baptist Greenville. One male over 60 years old with over 15 years of attendance said, “I’m always amazed at the dynamics of this community of believers. Bold enough/brave enough to question, to challenge their faith. A group of believers strongly rooted in their belief and commitment to God.”<sup>61</sup> One female over 60 years old with 5-9 years of attendance said, “the opportunity for growth and education, inclusivity, and love for community draws me in and keeps me involved” while another female of the 40-60 age group with 10-14 years of attendance said “the study was a reminder that I am part of a diverse faith community that is really hungry to seek God and God’s truth, interested in finding God more than preserving institutions and traditions.”<sup>62</sup> One comment from a 40-60 year old male

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<sup>59</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

who is a recent attendee, went into detail about how the community of the bible study gave him hope that his own faith will continue to grow and change over the future:

“I loved hearing the interactions! I am a cis male. It was so encouraging to me to see older white men in the South attending the study, contributing, and openly acknowledging patriarchy. These older men lived during the ‘Leave it to Beaver June and Ward Cleaver’ days. And they are able to challenge the system in their old age. I hope when I am their age, I can look back and identify where I was wrong and how we can do better. (Of course I loved hearing what the women had to say. It was just special to me to hear old white men standing up to challenge patriarchy.)”<sup>63</sup>

The experience of being in the room, hearing from others, and sharing the bible study experience, was a bolster for many. The experience of this bible study seemed to highlight what so many people who choose to attend this particular church find encouraging– an open-minded group of individuals willing to ask hard questions and listen to one another.

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<sup>63</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

## Connectedness to Christian Tradition

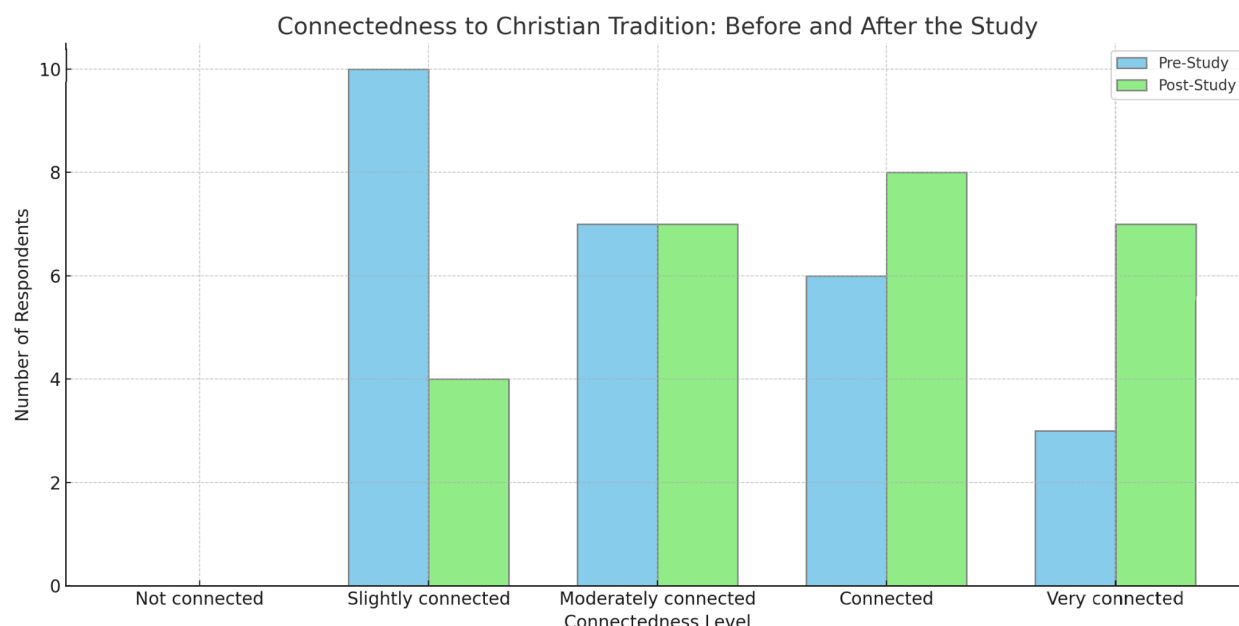


Figure 2.5: *Connectedness to the Christian Tradition, before and after the bible study.* For the twenty-six full sets of data (pre- and post-survey results) analyzed.

In the pre-study survey, the largest group of respondents describe their connectedness to the Christian Tradition as only “slightly connected.” After the study, the largest group of respondents have moved into the “connected” level.

A few respondents both before and after the study said that they weren’t sure what was intended by “Christian Tradition.” Some associated this with conservative or fundamentalist beliefs of their childhood; being raised in churches where “patriarchy, anti-LGBTQ views, anti-poor people views, and Republican supremacy” or “Christian Nationalist teachings” were standard.<sup>64</sup> One female over 60 years old with over 15 years of attendance summed it up like this, “The words ‘Christian Tradition’ cover a broad area, so it depends on what you mean. I agree with and support the attitudes of First Baptist Greenville, but not the attitudes of the church I was

<sup>64</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

raised in.”<sup>65</sup> Still others pointed to the “beauty in the ritual and history of the Christian tradition” or a fondness for the “liturgical side of the faith.”<sup>66</sup> Overwhelmingly, though, in the pre-study survey, there was a general sense of ambivalence or non-clarity around “Christian Tradition” that may have resulted in a slightly lower connectedness level overall, especially when compared to the other categories where connectedness was measured.

After the bible study, most respondents were on the positive side of connection. After the study, participants were more clearly able to describe what parts of the Christian Tradition they felt connected to and what parts they felt disconnected from. Many said they were still in the process of clarification like this female aged over 60 years old with over 15 years of attendance: “The Christian tradition has been shaped by the church as an institution, often embracing patriarchy and power. I am trying to determine what parts to keep and what parts to discard.”<sup>67</sup> Another female over 60 years old who is a recent attendee said, “I chose moderately (connected) because I feel both ashamed and anchored by the Christian tradition. Being informed of the roots of this faith is both embarrassing and inspirational.”<sup>68</sup> Another female recent attendee in the 40-60 age range said, “There’s good and there’s bad, and I can choose what I want to participate in. I can also accept the traditions of other faiths without believing they are wrong.”<sup>69</sup> Many were able to communicate what they found hopeful or inspiring about the Christian Tradition following the bible study. One male over 60 years old with over 15 years of attendance said,

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<sup>65</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Plating, pre-study survey, December 11, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

“True Christian tradition works to follow the teachings of Jesus.”<sup>70</sup> Still others pointed to specific ways of relating to the tradition that were clarified through the study that made them feel more connected: “this study has made me feel more included and more a part of the Christian tradition, especially as a female minister” and “I like tradition. Knowing that it doesn’t have to be filtered through patriarchy helps me to feel more connected to it.”<sup>71</sup> This hopeful assessment, from a 40-60 year old female who has attended between 10-14 years, summed up many participants' increases in connectedness: “I am reminded that over the centuries of Christian tradition, Christians have always grappled with cultural forces that seek to co-opt our faith for a political or economic power grab. So don’t give up on the church in 2024 and beyond!”<sup>72</sup> Overall, participants seemed much more capable of naming parts of the Christian Tradition and Christian history that give them hope and that they feel connected to as an authentic piece of what they have inherited as Christians.

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<sup>70</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

## The Insights

### Age and Gender

Both demographic categories of age and gender showed interesting insights through change in connectedness, while the demographic category of years of attendance did not. As an overview, male respondents and those under 60 showed the most positive change in connectedness as a result of the bible study.

When looking at how self-reported connectedness shifted by age, the most notable increase from those under 60 years old was on their connection to the Bible, with 80% of participants reporting a deepening connection— compared to 31% of those over 60. In fact, the bible study was universally impactful in the under 60 age group, with 70% of participants reporting more connectedness to Christ, 60% to God and First Baptist, and 56% to the Christian Tradition. Participants over 60 years old started the bible study with more connectedness across all five categories, and also showed consistently positive growth where their strength of connections could be improved. In contrast to those under 60, most impacted was their connection to the Christian Tradition with 56% reporting more connectedness after the bible study. Despite relatively stronger starting connections, 38% also reported more connectedness to First Baptist Greenville and Christ, 31% to the Bible, and 25% to God. In essence, the bible study helped those who were under 60 years old reach relatively the same high levels of connectedness as the over 60 age group by the end of the study, showing the bible study's effectiveness to speak to all generations, but especially to those who may be of a younger generations with lower connectedness.

Regarding gender, it is important to note that the comparison of these groups is not as balanced as the comparison of age groups with men making up only 23% of the respondents. However, in both genders represented (male and female) there were similarly universal improvements on connectedness to each category, as we saw with age. Surprisingly, men in the group reported the most significant positive movement in connectedness. Most notably, 83% of male respondents grew their connectedness with the Christian Tradition. 67% of male respondents increased their connectedness to the remaining four categories of faith measured: God, Christ, the Bible and First Baptist Greenville. Female respondents' increases were more moderate, but still compelling with 45% of female respondents showing positive progression on their connectedness to Christ, the Bible and the Christian Tradition, 40% to First Baptist Greenville, and 30% to God.

Therefore, both males and females self-reported a growth of connectedness after the bible study, but males experienced a greater positive change in connectedness overall. Of note, there were eight men who filled out the pre-study survey but did not complete the post-study survey. For women, this number was also eight, but women were more numerous overall. Perhaps this indicates that some men who had a less positive experience with the bible study or its material opted not to continue attending or opted not to fill out the post-study survey. However, the large percentages of men self-reporting feeling “very connected” by the end of the study is significant. The bible study was purposefully built to bring men into the conversation, as opposed to making them the “enemy.” The bible study materials highlighted both the intersectionality of systems of oppression, spoke to the ways in which patriarchy affects both male and female behavior norms negatively, and highlighted the fact that patriarchy does not equal men, but instead equals anyone who upholds the system— this can be men or women. The bell hooks quote used during the bible

study speaks to this idea– “Patriarchy has no gender.”<sup>73</sup> In essence, men were welcomed into this bible study as being humans who can also dismantle the patriarchy, just as women, children, and those outside the hierarchy can do.

## **Deconstruction/Reconstruction**

The second striking insight was how many participants self-reported increased connectedness within the five categories of faith presented in the survey, while also speaking of their faith being in flux. People used words like “deconstructing,” “changing,” and “evolving” to describe their faith after the study, yet they also reported greater connectedness across the board on average.<sup>74</sup> This juxtaposition revealed for me the ways in which the bible study can be understood as helping to reconstruct faith, especially for those who describe their faith as being in a current stage of deconstruction.

I believe the feminist theological orientation in material and structure of the bible study led to this simultaneous reconstruction and deconstruction, which made the bible study successful. Feminist theology has three goals: “it critically analyzes inherited oppressions, searches for alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and risks new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women's lives.”<sup>75</sup> Looking at patriarchy through a critical lens helped to establish the understanding that patriarchy is a system that seeks to control all of us as humans no matter where we fall on the hierarchy. Therefore, giving language to participants that

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<sup>73</sup> The New School, “Teaching to Transgress: bell hooks Returns to The New School,” *The New School Blog*, October 7, 2014, <https://blogs.newschool.edu/news/2014/10/bellhooksteachingtotransgress/>.

<sup>74</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 30.



it is in fact our action and thought (not our gender) that decides how much we live in service to or in opposition of the patriarchy, helped to empower participants to see their action and thought as important in the world— and furthermore connected it the way in which Jesus led his own life. This approach allowed everyone in the room to participate fully in the next two goals of the feminist theological agenda; to read the biblical stories both in light of what is missing and what we've missed because of the influence of patriarchy through history and to connect with biblical stories in a new way.<sup>76</sup> Welcoming and naming cognitive dissonance out loud in the bible study was helpful as people challenged old beliefs and welcomed new ones. The fact that this type of “consciousness raising” about faith happened in a church, led by a minister, was bible-focused, and allowed open questioning and discussion among participants, also probably helped participants to feel less afraid about deconstructing, as they felt they were still given a touchstone to faith in order to reconstruct.<sup>77</sup> They were not in fact losing faith, but simply learning new ways to be connected to faith. The presence of varied beliefs and opinions in the room provided space for this deconstruction and reconstruction to happen as evidenced through the comment of a female recent attendee in the 40-60 age range in her post-study survey: “The relationships I’ve made and the teachings I’ve heard have helped me deconstruct. Seeing other people’s faith gives me hope that maybe someday I’ll figure out my own.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 273–79.

<sup>78</sup> Plating, post-study survey, December 29, 2023.

## Conclusion

The bible study proved to be an important experience that increased connectedness for those who participated. But, a few small changes could make it more effective in the future. Participants' responses on the post-study survey names a few of these small changes– to make the bible study longer by at least two weeks to accommodate more material and discussion, to have “assignments” between classes (such as readings or movies to watch), and to have handouts for each class laying out key terms or key scripture passages. I plan to incorporate all of these changes before I publish the bible study to be used by other churches. In terms of the data gathering, it could have been helpful to define “Christian Tradition” because it seems the ambiguity of the term gave it a lower connectedness rating to the average respondent in the pre-study survey. But in the end, it was also revealing to hear the different ways people interacted with the term and changed their own definition of it over the course of the bible study. Overall, I believe the bible study was very effective at accomplishing what I hoped it would– educating around the concept of patriarchy at play in our world today and in Christian history, gleaning ways we can do faith without patriarchy at the center, and giving the group of participants a renewed sense of community simply by being in the room together those four Wednesday nights. I believe this bible study could do the same for other similarly situated congregations in the future, and I hope to make this a reality through its publication.

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## Appendix 1: Pre-Study Survey Questions

Q1: For privacy, please make up a name to be associated with your feedback. You will use the same name on the final survey.

Q2: What is your current age? (pick one)

- Under 20
- 20-39
- 40-60
- Over 60

Q3: How do you identify? (pick one)

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary

Q4: How many years have you attended First Baptist Greenville?

- 0-4
- 5-9
- 10-14
- 15+
- I do not attend First Baptist Greenville

Q5: If you were explaining your faith to a friend today, what are the five words you would use to describe it?

Q6: In this moment, how do you feel patriarchy affects your faith?

Prompt (Q7): The next five questions ask you to think about your connection to a specific component of your faith or religious life. Please choose the most fitting answer and spend a minute or two writing an explanation for each.

Q8: Beginning this bible study, how connected do you feel to GOD? (pick one and explain)

- Not connected
- Slightly connected
- Moderately connected
- Connected
- Very connected

Q9: Beginning this bible study, how connected do you feel to CHRIST?

(same options as above)

Q10: Beginning this bible study, how connected do you feel to THE BIBLE?

(same options as above)

Q11: Beginning this bible study, how connected do you feel to FIRST BAPTIST GREENVILLE?

(same options as above)

Q12: Beginning this bible study, how connected do you feel to THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION?

(same options as above)

Q13: What questions do you have going forward in this bible study?

## Appendix 2: Post-Study Survey Questions

Q1: In the last survey, you were asked to choose a name to protect your privacy. Please enter the SAME name here.

Q2: How many weeks of the bible study did you attend? (pick one)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

Q3: If you were explaining your faith to a friend today, what are the five words you would use to describe it?

Q4: In this moment, how do you feel patriarchy affects your faith?

Prompt (Q5): The next five questions ask you to think about your connection to a specific component of your faith or religious life. Please choose the most fitting answer and spend a minute or two writing an explanation for each.

Q6: Concluding this bible study, how connected do you feel to GOD? (pick one and explain)

- Not connected
- Slightly connected
- Moderately connected
- Connected
- Very connected

Q7: Concluding this bible study, how connected do you feel to CHRIST?

(same options as above)

Q8: Concluding this bible study, how connected do you feel to THE BIBLE?

(same options as above)

Q9: Concluding this bible study, how connected do you feel to FIRST BAPTIST GREENVILLE?

(same options as above)

Q10: Concluding this bible study, how connected do you feel to THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION?

(same options as above)

Q11: What did you learn from this Bible Study? Please include any concepts or ideas that will stick with you?

Q12: What could have made this Bible Study better?