

2009

# Conceptualizations of God by Lutheran laypeople

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**Conceptualizations of God by Lutheran laypeople**

by

**Ashley Burgess Leininger**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

Major: Sociology

Program of Study Committee:  
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Ames, Iowa

2009

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Thesis Structure .....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	3
Historical Conceptualizations of God.....	3
Instruments Employed .....	3
Previous Study Findings .....	6
Beginning of the Research on God Concepts .....	6
Class .....	8
Gender Differences .....	9
Societal Differences .....	10
Images of God.....	11
Need for Qualitative Methodology .....	13
METHODS .....	19
Research Design.....	19
Research Participants .....	21
Interview Process .....	24
Sample Characteristics.....	26
Data Analysis .....	28
RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	30
What is God Like? .....	30
God is Loving and Nurturing.....	30
God is Distant .....	32
God is a Friend and Companion .....	32
God is Controlling and Judging .....	35
God has Physical Human Attributes .....	36
Knowing God is Unknowable.....	39
Life Events and Conceptualizations.....	41
How People Know God .....	44
Knowing God Theologically: The Bible as a Source .....	44
Knowing God: Through Personal Experiences.....	46
Knowing God: Others as a Source.....	52
The Trinity .....	54
The Trinity through Stories and Parables .....	55
Understanding different Persons of the Trinity .....	57
The Situational Nature of the Trinity.....	64
LIMITATIONS.....	69

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS .....	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	74
APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT FLYER.....	79
APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT .....	80
APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	83
APPENDIX 4: RESPONDENT LIFE EVENTS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS .....	85
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	91

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Lutheran Religious Places of Worship in Davenport, IA ..... 21

Table 2: Sampled Church Schematics ..... 22

Table 3: Sample Characteristics by Sex and Age ..... 27

Table 4: Respondent Characteristics..... 28

Table 5: Respondent Life Events and Conceptualizations ..... 42

## ABSTRACT

God concept researchers have used quantitative methodology exclusively. The Likert Scale combined with the Adjective Rating of God Scale is the most common measurement used in God concept research. The Adjective Rating of God Scale (Gorsuch, 1968) measures conceptualizations of God through a list of adjectives describing God. Combined with the Likert scale, researchers have measured relationships between adjectives, sex, and religious denomination. Although research that has employed these methods has yielded intriguing information, it has not been able to fully explore the area of God concept research. It is argued this scheme ignores three important topics in God concept research. First, the fact that Christians believe in the Trinity. Second, how the God concepts are formed, and finally, how people know God. After providing a brief summary of the primary survey instruments used followed by a brief account of the historical and contemporary studies associated with God concept research, this paper will discuss four familiar God concepts: (1) God is Loving and Nurturing, (2) God is Distant, (3) God is a Friend and Companion, and (4) God is Controlling and Judging. These are followed by two unfamiliar concepts: (1) God has physical human attributes (2) and God is ultimately unknowable. Three sources of how people know God are discussed: (1) the Bible as a source, (2) personal experience, and (3) through others. Finally, findings are presented indicating the Trinity allows for a situational God.

## INTRODUCTION

Religion continues to be an important influence in the lives of individuals. Throughout the world, different religions have emerged as people search for meaning and fulfillment. Religion has changed constantly throughout time. This change has not only mirrored society, as Durkheim would say, but has also shaped society. In order to understand a religion, one needs to understand how its adherents comprehend the deity associated with it. This study investigates how Lutheran laypeople (members of the Evangelical Church in America) conceptualize God. Specifically, this study assesses church members' God images through their own narratives

I conducted 17 in-depth face-to-face interviews with parishioners at an ELCA church. My primary goal was to allow individuals to tell their stories about what they thought God was like. My questions also focused on the formation of their image of God and how this image relates to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

### *Thesis Structure*

This thesis will begin with a discussion of the historical and contemporary views on people's conceptualization of God, including the methodology associated with research on this topic. It will be shown that traditional methods utilized for gathering information about the concept of God are limited because they are exclusively quantitative and consequently, do not allow for individuals to tell their own stories about God. The next sections will provide a discussion of the gender and societal differences found in God concept research up to this point followed by a discussion about the lack of qualitative work in the area of God conceptualizations especially in the area of the Trinity. In the Lutheran denomination, as in

all orthodox Christianity, the Trinity is central to the official theology. With a lack of exploration in this area, research in the area of God image is left incomplete. It will be shown that by not exploring the theological impacts of the Trinity on God concepts through the use of quantitative methodology, researchers have ignored major components of the God concept. It is argued throughout this paper that this scheme ignores three important topics in God concept research. First, the fact that Christians believe in the Trinity. Second, how the God concepts are formed, and finally, how people know God.

After laying the theoretical foundation, a discussion of the research methods followed by the research finding will be presented. Through analyzing the data, four main adjective groups emerged similar to previous research. In this discussion each adjective is discussed in relation to previous research. Next, two new adjectives were found in relation to God images and discussed.

The next section discusses three different ways individuals know God. These include through the Bible, through personal experiences, and through others. It is argued individuals know God in different ways through different sources of knowledge. The next section discusses the Trinity in great detail. Through the analysis of this data, each person of the Trinity is discussed. This discussion includes common conceptualizations of the person. From this discussion, it is argued the Trinity allows for a situational God. Finally, I will conclude the thesis with a discussion of where my research fits within the broader literature, the contributions it has made to God concept and image literature, as well as areas in which future research can build off of my findings.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Historical Conceptualizations of God*

The monotheistic God that we know of today was not always the dominant God image. Polytheistic gods included Zeus, Juno, and Hera. These gods were used as a way to understand the world around everyone. Why did things occur the way they did? What is death? Where does a person go after death? People used stories involving multiple gods to answer these questions.

In understanding the conceptualization of God, researchers have focused their efforts in the realm of quantitative research methodology. In God concept research, quantification is used to make the data “easier to aggregate, compare, and summarize” (Babbie, 2004:26). This type of methodology has opened up the data to the “possibility of statistical analyses, ranging from simple averages to complex formulas and mathematical models” (Babbie, 2004:26). In the development of sociological research, the natural sciences were influential. Because “advances were often associated with being able to quantify, or measure, aspects of the physical world,” researchers in God concepts began exploratory studies in the area (Burchell, 2006:486). The use of quantitative research methodology gives insight into areas of the world that have not been studied previously in order to find patterns that can later be explored more fully. By utilizing quantitative research methods, God concept researchers have developed many different theories, correlations, and other patterns.

### *Instruments Employed*

God concept research has used quantitative studies exclusively. The strength of quantitative studies is the ability to quantify the results, thus providing insight and

information in numerical form. For surveys done in the area of God concept research, different survey instruments are used. The most common is the use of adjectives. The surveys in God concept research explore God concepts and images by providing a list of adjectives describing God. In some cases, the respondents to the survey are asked to rank each adjective from what they feel best describes God to what adjective least describes God. For example, Roberts (1989) utilized this type of scale. In his work, adjectives were constructed “to reflect polar opposites along continua that are commonly used to characterize God. Adjectives were listed on the questionnaire in random order, allowing subjects to rank each adjective separately on a scale from 1 = never to 5 = always” (Roberts, 1989:377). Noffke’s (2001) method differed from Roberts by asking respondents to rank each adjective on a nine point Likert scale<sup>1</sup> and encouraged to comment on each item. This survey listed six descriptions of God developed to reflect previously developed God concept factors<sup>2</sup> (Noffke, 2001:750). These factors included the Vindictive God, the Stern Father, the Supreme Ruler, the Distant, the Kindly Father, and the Allness Factor<sup>3</sup> (Noffke, 2001:750).

The Adjective Ratings of God Scale developed by Gorsuch (1968) is the most widely used scale in God concept research. “The scale consists of adjectives derived from open-ended questions (Spilka, Armatas, & Nussbaum, 1964), and identified by factor analyses as contributing to factors by which persons characterize God” (Hammersla, 1986:426). This scale includes 91 adjectives that are rated by subjects on a three point scale (Gorsuch, 1968). A rating of one indicated the adjective did not describe God, a rating of 2 indicated the word describes God, and a rating of three meant the word described God particularly well

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<sup>1</sup> On this scale, 1=completely disagree, 9=completely agree.

<sup>2</sup> These factors were determined by research by Spilka, Benson, and Nussbaum’s (1964) research.

<sup>3</sup> See Noffke (2001) for descriptions of each factor represented (750).

(Gorsuch, 1968:57). “To the 91 adjectives, 8 random variables and a variable for sex were added” making the total of adjectives and variables to equal 100 (Gorsuch, 1968:57).

Utilizing this scale, Hammersla (1986) combined the adjectives of Gorsuch (1968) into nine subscales. These scales included: A Benevolent God, a Distant God, an Irrelevant God, a Majestic God, a Potent God, and a Vindictive God (Hammersla, 1986:426). From these factors, respondents were asked to indicate “whether God (1) always, (2) frequently, (3) sometimes, (4) rarely or (5) never ‘seems this way to me’” on a five point scale (Hammersla, 1986:426). Respondent’s scale score was found by “summing responses to the items on the scale and dividing by the number of items answered” (Hammersla, 1986:428) providing a possible range of scores to fall between 1 and 5.

Roof and Roof (1984) utilize a different approach to explore the area of God concept research. The General Social Survey (1983) asked respondents about twelve images of God that included “judge, king, lover, master, father, redeemer, friend, healer, mother, liberator, spouse, and creator” and how likely each image came to mind using a three point Likert scale (Roof and Roof, 1984:201). Each separate response was coded for each image (Roof and Roof, 1984:202). Following their lead, Nelson (1985) compared each image used in the General Social Survey (1983) to its antonym. For example, “mother was included in the data set and then compared to father” (Nelson, 1985:398). This analysis allowed for the comparisons of images that were common in God concept research but not utilized in the General Social Survey (1983). The findings of each of these studies are discussed below focusing on the three adjectives found to have the highest significance level in statistical tests.

### *Previous Study Findings*

In understanding the conceptualization of God, researchers have reported to what can be described as inconsistencies in regards to dominance of masculine or feminine images of God as well as a lack of overarching conceptualizations by individuals (Nelson and Jones 1957; Strunk 1959; Noffke, 2001:747). Nelsen, Cheek, and Au (1985) found women conceptualized God as a healer while Hammersla (1986) found images of God for women are more salient and less of disciplining than men. Krejci (1998) found men to view God as controlling, while Bassett et al (1990), Greeley (1989) and Roof and Roof (1984) found similar conceptualizations of God for men and women (Noffke, 2001:747). With all of these inconsistencies, it is not surprising that the study of God images has been focused on specific groups, ages, and genders. To begin to understand this realm of research, it is wise to start at the beginning.

### Beginning of the Research on God Concepts

In what has been deemed the first introduction of the conceptualization of God in the social sciences Freud (1927) contends that the individual projects father-like images to a Godlike figure. In many religions, especially Christianity, this rings true. Not only have conceptualizations focused on a paternal image, but these conceptualizations have been quantified to be projected upon vast amounts of individuals who do not necessarily hold that particular conceptualization.

The consequence of projecting these images of paternalism upon vast populations is two fold. First, God is endowed with human qualities that divorce the individual from the entity. This divorce forms by the individual endowing qualities that the individual denies to

himself. This denial, in turn, separates the individual from the deity, alienating them from their own belief structure (Schoenfeld, 1987:225; Williams, 1970:448). To better understand this, Schoenfeld conducted a study to determine the effects of individual value systems and worldview on their conception of God. In this study, Schoenfeld found a positive view of God is associated with a positive view of human nature as a whole. People see others as helpful, kind, tender, and loving, and endow these qualities on God. Yet, these same people view themselves as selfish, confused and weaker than God (Schoenfeld, 1987:232; Feuerbach, 1957:14). Therefore, "people are not only the product of God but they are also clearly inferior to God" (Schoenfeld, 1987:234). This process of conceptualizing God found in these studies, then, results in the symbols and myths of the deity having psychological impacts on the individual because they give a framework of meaning "through which people learn to accept certain social arrangements and reject others" impacting every aspect of the individual's life (Griffin, 1995:39; Berger, 1967). In further research in this area of formation and socialization, Clifford Geertz (1973) argues religion shapes the society and psychological processes of the individual. This shaping in turn, allows the symbols, rituals, and images of God to be, in essence, all that is known about the world and how to teach others to react to it (Griffin, 1995:39). Berger (1967) comes to a similar conclusion indicating people have created social worlds, constructed their culture, and then socialized others to participate in this culture. In this process, they create meanings in their own lives as well as within their own religions, giving significant meaning to religious images and symbols in these realities (Berger, 1967; Griffin, 1995:46). In terms of similarity, there have been findings of similar views and conceptualization among groups. God images appear to be very similar for individuals and their primary caregivers. These images are resistant to change, and are

solidified and shaped by denominations, and in turn, these images shape the individual's value system, belief system, and social system (Noffke, 2001:754). These primary images are changed only slightly over time in terms of denominational conceptualizations, but remain as the primary images for individuals and salient in their own minds. These images are consequential to the individual because of the impact they have on aspects in the individual's life.

Therefore, researchers in this tradition have seen the image of God in two ways. Either God is imagined as a wrathful, benevolent being, or as nurturing and compassionate to the human race (Roberts, 1989:381). The historical and traditional God is imagined as disciplining and as the creator, divorced from the human race while the nurturing conceptualization of God is righteous, a miracle worker, and responsible for good works (Roberts, 1989:383). According to Roberts (1989:382), individuals who conceptualize God as disciplining see themselves as questioning others' motives for behavior. An individual who has the image of a nurturing God, most likely utilizes this God as a social reinforcer (Roberts, 1989:383). This reinforcement allows the individual to understand their role in the society, and their place within the larger realm of the world making God concept research important in understanding other belief systems.

### Class

Class influence has been found in previous research to play a role in the conceptualization of God by people. First, in terms of denominational socioeconomic status (SES), Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and the Episcopalian groups are the highest amongst groups, whereas Baptist and Lutheran groups were found to be the lowest in SES. Taking

this into account, individuals with lower socioeconomic statuses hold a conceptualization of God that is more disciplining and angry. This perception has been found to be more common among those in a low socioeconomic status (Roberts, 1989:381). Therefore, it can be assessed poorer people are less able to attain their goals and question “why me?” and are consequently more likely to equate their socioeconomic situation and themselves as being reprimanded by a disciplining and angry God (Roberts, 1989:383). The wealthier, on the other hand, hold an image of God as more nurturing but separate, further away, and a less hands on approach deity (Roberts, 1989:382; Schoenfeld, 1987).

Educational attainment has been used in research as an indication of SES (see Potvin, Roberts, and Schoenfeld) and consequently, diversity in God concepts in regards to educational attainment has been noted. For example, Roof and Roof (1984) found that individuals who did not complete high school as well as those who completed college have more diverse conceptualizations of God than individuals who completed high school and have some college education. In the Roof and Roof study, those who had some high school ascribed the adjectives of creator, healer and father to their images of God, while those who completed college differed only slightly by ascribing creator, healer, and redeemer to their images of God. Individuals with a high school education and those who completed some college had similar images of God, ascribing the adjectives of creator, healer, and friend to their images of God (Roof and Roof, 1984:203).

### Gender Differences

The inferiority idea of the human race in relation to God has been found to transcend gender and sex lines in American society showing vast differences between men and

women's conceptualization of God (Roof and Roof, 1984:205). Pagels (1976) contends there is a masculine emphasis in images of God in descriptions that include king, master, judge, lord, and father (Pagels, 1976:293). Nelson, 1985:397). Even though this emphasis exists, believers themselves can be either more masculine or feminine in their choice of descriptions of the image (Nelson, 1985:398). For women, God images are more salient, long lasting, less punitive, and showing a greater sense of deistic qualities such as holy, eternal, and all-knowing than of men who attribute more negative terms to God (Hammersla, 1986:430; Roberts, 1989). American women, for example, are not necessarily more likely to endorse a paternal conceptualization of God, although they are more likely to be involved in church activities and score high on religiosity scales. Instead, they are more likely to hold the conception of God as supportive, not paternalistic (Nelson, 1985:397). In the Roof and Roof study (1984) women ascribed adjectives of creator, healer, and friend to their conceptualizations of God, whereas men ascribed creator, healer and redeemer indicating at the very least, a slight difference in these images.

### *Societal Differences*

The image of God also differs between societies. In the United States, people emphasize a more paternalist image of God, but with increased age and education, a more maternal image emerges. Roof and Roof (1984) found one quarter of the United States' population conceptualizes God as being like "mother", but the dominant image is "creator" at 82 percent (Roof and Roof, 1984:202). Clearly, there has been a dominant tendency to imagine God as the creator. The image of God remains as a highly paternal deity in American society for both male and females regardless of age or education in comparison to



other societies around the world (Vergote and Tamayo, 1980; Roof and Roof, 1984; Roberts, 1989:396; Nelson, 1985).

### *Images of God*

Images, themselves, range from the creator to father and friend have been found to differ by sex but in other areas as well. In the same Roof and Roof (1984) study, ascriptions of adjectives to God varied across denominations. Protestants, as a whole, ascribed adjectives of creator, healer, friend, and father to their conceptualization of God. Looking at the cleavages of Protestants more closely, differences among these denominations emerge. Baptists ascribed the adjectives of creator, healer, and father as the most popular adjectives used to describe God. Methodist ascribed the adjectives of creator, healer, and redeemer as did Lutherans. Presbyterians ascribed the adjectives of creator, healer, and friend as did Episcopalians. Furthermore, in other religions, Roof and Roof (1984) found a greater difference in ascriptions especially in regards to Judaism. Jewish individuals ascribed the adjectives of judge, creator, and healer. Catholics ascribed the same adjectives as Protestants: creator, redeemer, and healer. For those who reported no religious denomination, ascriptions of creator, healer, and friend were common.

Roof and Roof (1984:204) found age plays a large role on religion but not as one would expect. The older the individual is, the more they embrace their images of God. Furthermore, their conceptualizations include more recent images of a nurturing God. For Protestants under 40, the ascribed adjectives were creator, healer, and friend. Protestants over 40 ascribed a different set of adjectives, including redeemer instead of friend. This may have to do with a closer proximity to death, but this is only a logical assessment, not in

anyway tied to this study. In Catholicism, this pattern emerged again, with Catholics over forty ascribing redeemer instead of friend like their younger counterparts. In individuals who reported no denomination, there was no change in their ascriptions. Judaism, on the other hand, possessed the most change between ascribed adjectives of the under forty population and the over forty population. In the younger group, God was ascribed the adjectives of creator, father, and judge. In the older group, the ascription changed to creator, healer, king, and judge. This indicates a change to a more nurturing God but with strong paternalistic ties. Looking at this data, one can find that older adults possess a greater capacity to incorporate existent information within particular domains into their own imagery, allowing a more egalitarian conceptualization of God (Noffke, 2001:749). This image is the traditional and contemporary familiar image (mother, lover, and/or spouse) for these groups, but the young hold a more traditional view such as creator, father, and healer (Roof and Roof, 1984:204). This is also the case for the conventionally religious, seeing God in both traditional (creator and father) and contemporary ways (lover, mother, spouse) than other groups (Roof and Roof, 1984:203). In a study by Gorsuch (1968), it was found the more liberal the denomination the more likely the conceptualization of God was of a companion while fundamentalist groups were found to be more likely to have a conceptualization of an angry God, or wrathful (Gorsuch, 1968:64). This is in line with Greeley (1989) who found in his study that Catholics tend to see society as a sacrament of God, and therefore society is good and humans are social. Protestants see society as "God-forsaken" and oppressive (Greeley, 1989:486). Spilka et al (1964) found different groups of individuals and denominations possess varying God conceptualizations and the very religious in congruence with the general public had more diverse conceptualizations (1964:35; Noffke, 2001:748). Hammersla (1986)

also found that the more religiously committed individuals were, the more positive their image of God, whereas the less committed portrayed a more negative image of God (1986:434; Noffke, 2001:748).

Looking at Lutherans separately, they are found to have the highest denominational commitment among members (63 percent) in relation to Catholics (42 percent) and Methodists (32 percent) utilizing recent measurement techniques of religiosity in terms of behavior and self-ascription (Noffke, 2001:753; Roof and McKinney, 1987). For evangelicals, the common conceptualization of God is one formed from a greater emphasis of a relationship with their savior. This relationship gives entitlement to the believers in their conceptualization of God. God, for them, is nurturing to believers while disciplining and wrathful toward nonbelievers (Noffke, 2001:753). With their propensity to correspond to polar opposite attributes in a study conducted by Noffke (2001), evangelicals can be seen as being innately pro-God. This means, their conceptualization of God varies by context. For a non believer, a wrathful God is presented, for a believer, a more caring and nurturing God is imagined (Noffke, 2001:754).

### ***Need for Qualitative Methodology***

Surveys and research on religion in the United States has had a focus on belief and strength of belief, but rarely on the content of belief suggesting an error of measurement and validity (Roof and Roof, 1984:201). According to Neuman (2006:458), “quantitative researchers choose from a specialized, standardized set of data analysis techniques (Neuman, 2006:458). This indicates a propensity of data to be lost or misread within greater God concept research. For example, the scales utilized for the discovery of conceptualizations

and images of God have been using the behavior element of religiosity to begin to understand the differing degrees of religiosity including frequency of church attendance and prayer in order to find a religious survey scale (Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls, and Frease, 1986; Brown and Forgas, 1980; Noffke, 2001). For example, Spilka, Armatas, and Nussbaum (1964) wanted to study the relationship between individuals' conceptualizations of God and their behavior. They constructed a list of 63 adjectives utilized to describe God and asked individuals to mark all that applied. From this data, they established five distinct conceptions of God. These included the stern father image, the Omni-concept image, the impersonal image, the kindly father, image, and the supreme ruler image. From this research, the scale of adjectives has been the most utilized by researchers, sometimes only differing by the number of adjectives utilized (Gorsuch, 1968). This scale produced by Roof and Roof is sufficient in measuring conceptions of God, but has resulted in inconsistent results in current research.

Therefore, although this scale has worked in the past, it is no longer as adequate to utilize for the understanding of the God concept because of its lack of exhaustively. This does not mean that quantitative research in the area of God concepts should be disregard and discarded as useless. Instead, investigation in the area of God conceptualizations and images based solely on quantitative methodology provides only a partial understanding of these concepts. By incorporating qualitative methodology, further understanding can be gained. As it stands, research in this area has been inconclusive in some areas. For example, in the realm of gender differences in God concepts which indicates a lack of consistent meanings and ideas associated with the adjectives utilized in the Spilka, Armata, and Nussbaum scale (Bassett et al. 1990; Greeley, 1989; Roof and Roof, 1984; Noffke, 2001:747). Gorsuch

(1968) attempted to marry the previous adjective scale and a semantic differential scale to research this topic. He understood the conceptualization of God as more personal, individual, and psychologically meaningful to be whittled down to frequency of church attendance and prayer (Gorsuch, 1967; Noffke, 2001:747). From his scale, he found distinct differences across denominations and political stance, but had difficulty linking his findings to previous work in the area of age and gender. This was a problem because these areas have been researched separately, and therefore, a consistent and full image and conceptualization of God has not been indicated. Therefore, the work of Greeley (1989) suggests that until measurement of this concept is more sophisticated including the inner dimensions and gravity of conceptualizations, these explanations and understanding of the God concept are not necessarily truthful, and therefore, subject to individual interpretation (Greeley, 1989:501).

Another inconsistency is in the realm of dominance of masculine or feminine images of God (Nelson and Jones 1957; Strunk 1959; Noffke, 2001:747). Focusing on the dichotomy measurements utilized previously in God concept research, Nelsen, Cheek, and Au (1985) found women conceptualized God as a healer while Hammersla (1986) found images of God for women are more salient and less disciplining than men. Krejci (1998) found men to view God as controlling, while Bassett et al (1990), Greeley (1989) and Roof and Roof (1984) found similar conceptualizations of God for men and women (Noffke, 2001:747).

In order to address these problems and gather comparative data, qualitative data analysis is used in this study because it is “less standardized” and often inductive (Neuman, 2006:458). In contrast to qualitative methodology, quantitative methodology requires data to

be analyzed only after a researcher has “collected all of the data and condensed them into numbers” (Neuman, 2006:459). Because of the differences in data collection and analysis, quantitative data begins with a distinct process of data collection that ends when all the data is collected. Therefore, patterns and relationships that emerged during the data collection process are potentially lost (Neuman, 2006:459) producing “a potential loss of richness of meaning” (Babbie, 2004:26). In qualitative research, analysis stretches across the entire research process and guides the data collection (Neuman, 2006:459). The quantitative research scheme ignores three important topics in God concept research. First, this scheme ignores the fact that Christians believe in the Trinity. The Trinity is God existing as three persons: the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Since orthodox Christians believe in this triune God, ignoring this belief in God concept research seems to be a major oversight.

Second, this method ignores how the God concepts are formed. In understanding the conceptualization of God then, researchers have continued to utilize dichotomous adjectives to describe God ignoring how these God concepts are formed.

Third, this scheme ignores how people know God. Surveys and research on religion in the United States have had a focus on belief and strength of belief, but rarely on the content of belief (Roof and Roof, 1984:201). The scales utilized for the discovery of conceptualizations and images of God have been using the behavior element of religiosity to begin to understand the differing degrees of religiosity including frequency of church attendance and prayer in order to find a religious survey scale (Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls, and Frease, 1986; Brown and Forgas, 1980; Noffke, 2001). Gorsuch (1968) attempted to marry the previous adjective scale and a semantic differential scale in his research, understanding the conceptualization of God as more personal, individual, and

psychologically meaningful to be whittled down to frequency of church attendance and prayer (Gorsuch, 1967; Noffke, 2001:747). From his scale, he found distinct differences across denominations and political stance, but had difficulty linking his findings to previous work in the area of age and gender. This was a problem because these areas have been research separately, and therefore, a consistent and full image and conceptualization of God has not been indicated. Therefore, the work of Greeley (1989) makes a suggestion that until measurement of this concept is more sophisticated including the inner dimensions and gravity of conceptualizations, these explanations and understanding of the God concept are not necessarily useful, and therefore, subject to individual interpretation (Greeley, 1989:501). Therefore, following the suggestion of Greeley, analyzing how people know God through the use of qualitative methodology becomes an important area of research to explore.

Three areas that quantitative methodology thus far has not explored include the fact that Christians believe in the Trinity, how God images are formed, and how people know God. Advantages to using a different method for this research include benefits of qualitative data analysis. First, “it reduces the risk of putting words in respondents’ mouths” (Weinburg, 2006:484) (through the usage of open ended questions) allowing for a richer understanding of the data. Second, “it allows investigation of unanticipated themes that emerge in the course of the interview” enabling follow-up questions for clarification. Third, “it allows the study of people or themes about which very little is already known,” which includes God images and God concept research. Fourth, “it allows us to maximize the extent to which respondents’ ‘own voice’ may be preserved in our data” allowing for their stories to be told. The advantage of this in regards to this research centers on life histories. Utilizing qualitative data, life histories can be gathered and analyzed. Respondents in interviews are allowed to

tell their narratives and expand on their answers to give a better picture of the meaning behind their responses. These life histories have the potential to provided information that can have an impact on the data gathered. Fifth, “it allows analysis of not only what respondents tell us but how they do so” providing further understanding within the area of research. Finally, “it allows us discretion to pursue particular themes with respondents in depth” which is not available in quantitative research methodology” (Weinberg, 2006:485).



## METHODS

### *Research Design*

This data was gathered using semi-structured face-to-face interviews. In-depth interviews are beneficial in helping to elicit truthful and perceptive responses that are individual to the person. Due to the nature of my research, this method was best suited to address my research question. I developed an open-ended interview schedule, allowing for the interviewees to lead the discussion. A natural conversation was, therefore, allowed to take place.

This research was exploratory research. The primary purpose of this type of research is “to examine a little understood issue or phenomenon” (Neuman, 2006:33) and is appropriate for this study because God conceptualizations is a subject of study that is “relatively new” (Babbie, 2004:87) because of the qualitative methodology utilized for this research. Exploratory research is typically done for three purposes; the first is for a better understanding of the subject. God conceptualizations and images have not included imagery associated with the Trinity, development of the imagery, and individual narratives. The second purpose is to “test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study” (Babbie, 2004:88), and the final purpose according to Babbie (2004) is “to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent study.” The methods used thus far (see literature review) have been exclusively quantitative. By utilizing qualitative methods, the intention is to uncover a phenomenon within the area of God concept research that has not been uncovered before. In exploratory research, definitive answers are uncommon but important for future research as insight and a starting point (Neuman, 2006:34). The importance of this research is what

insight is found and not whether it is generalized to others. Therefore, a small sample size as with this research is less important to the project as a whole.

Convenience sampling was utilized for this research. According to Neuman (2006) convenience sampling is “a nonrandom sample in which the researcher selects anyone he or she happens to come across (220).” It involves sampling from those who are convenient (Hayes, 2006:532). The methods used in this research included announcements, informal conversations, and a bulletin board announcement.

The sample that I drew from to gather my data consisted of lay parishioners from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Lay parishioners were defined as individuals who have attended one of two ELCA churches for at least one service in the year of 2008. One was a liberal congregation with a female lead pastor and one was a conservative congregation with a male lead pastor. With the use of this sampling strategy for ELCA, I come in contact with many lay parishioners during church, fellowship, and during other church activities. Therefore, I believed I would be able to establish the rapport necessary for recruiting subjects and conducting interviews.

Second, there are many different places of worship found within the Davenport, Iowa area. In 2008 the number of religious places of worship within thirty-five miles of Davenport, Iowa was 568. This included 128 within the Davenport, Iowa zip code of 52806 Davenport, Iowa. In the zip code 52806 there were thirty Lutheran churches. Eighty percent of these churches were Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (see table one).

**Table 1: Lutheran Religious Places of Worship in Davenport, IA**

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b><i>Lutheran</i></b>	30	
Wisconsin Synod**	1	3.3%
Missouri Synod**	4	13.3%
Lutheran Church Ministry of Christ**	1	3.3%
Evangelical Lutheran Church of America**	24	80.0%

\*table includes only those churches that have a Davenport, IA address.

\*\* utilized synod websites for information

<http://www.elca.org>

[http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/sitelist/02/churches\\_statelist.asp](http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/sitelist/02/churches_statelist.asp)

<http://www.lcmc.net/iowa.html>

<http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2601&collectionID=799>

Third, because of the wide variety of churches in the area, I could find two churches that were in the same general area of class, size, race, and denomination. Therefore, the extraneous factors were lowered utilizing this same. Different denominations hold differing theological definitions of God and therefore, parishioners may have differing interactions and theoretical teachings of God. This difference in denomination has the potential to cause a lack of rapport between the interviewees and myself due to the differences in theological ideology. Although initially I planned to interview people from two churches and make comparisons, the small number of volunteer participants at one church made it inappropriate to make a comparison.

### ***Research Participants***

The sample was gathered at two churches within the town of Davenport, Iowa. I selected two churches to sample and attend for this research (see table 2).

**Table 2: Sampled Church Schematics**

<b>Church</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Average Attendance</b>
Church A		1,037
Members		
Baptized	2,888	
Confirmed	2,376	
Church B		
Members		125
Baptized	524	
Confirmed	302	

Table two represents the two churches that were sampled for this study. Church A represents the conservative church sampled and Church B represents the liberal church sampled. The number of individuals confirmed is listed. Each church is registered with the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America). Through the use of the rules and regulations associated with this registration, members of the church are baptized and/or confirmed. A baptized member goes through a ritual within the church setting in accordance with the church doctrine. A confirmed member goes through another ritual that includes exposure and education about the church doctrine. This education varies from church to church. After completing this education, a member is deemed as confirmed. This education for each of these churches is offered exclusively to baptized members of the church whom are in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade of school. The age of these participants ranges usually between 13 and 15 years of age. With this delineation, a confirmed member can participate in the ritual of communion.

The rules of participation in communion were found to vary between the two churches. This variance was due to the pastor's discretion. For church A, participation in the ritual of communion was restricted to those who were confirmed members of the Lutheran religious system. For church B, participation was unlimited. The pastor at this church

allowed anyone to participate in communion and did not discourage anyone from it. These participants included ages of individuals from infants up to elderly adults.

To determine if each church fit my definition of conservative and liberal I attended each church during normal worship times each Sunday missing only four services at each church in the year 2008. I attended the 8 a.m. services of the liberal church for 6 months and the 11 a.m. service for the other six months. At the conservative church my attendance varied. I attended the services on Saturday night at 5:30 p.m. for approximately three months, the services for 8 a.m. for three months and 9:20 a.m. for three months, and the 11 a.m. service for three months. Each service catered to a different crowd of people. The 8 a.m. services at each church used traditional liturgy and hymns for worship. The 9:20 a.m. service and 11 a.m. service at the conservative church incorporated a children's sermon within the worship hour. The 11 a.m. service at both churches was lead by a church band that included short songs projected on white screen to follow along with. Many of these songs have been well represented on the Christian music radio and scene.

Before beginning this research project, I went through the formal IRB (Institutional Review Board) procedures provided by Iowa State University. Upon receiving formal approval from the IRB committee, I sought out the approval of placement of a poster at two different churches in the Davenport, Iowa area. Two of the churches gave me permission to place posters. An announcement was made at the liberal church for volunteers as well. The conservative church refused to make any sort of announcement. Other parishioners were contacted informally at fellowship times in between services with random conversations. After receiving permission from the pastors at each church, I placed a poster on their community board (see appendix 1). I then began attending church services at each of these

churches in an attempt to gain acceptance and rapport with the church members to recruit interviewees who were over the age of 18 at the time of the interview. This age limitation was put into place in order for parental consent to be unnecessary.

When asked about my research interests, I stated that my research was about God images and referred them to the poster placed on the bulletin board. When approached during church activities, I handed out a business card with my contact information in order for them to contact me. In this recruitment process, no formal contact was established.

### ***Interview Process***

Once the respondents contacted me expressing their interest in participating in my research, we set up a date, time, and location to hold the interview. Because of my freedom of scheduling, the interviewee had complete control of the interview date, time, and location. This was important to ensure a more comfortable meeting. Many of the interviewees were interviewed within their own home. By allowing them this choice, I attempted to put them in their own environment and ease their leerness of being interviewed. I allowed each respondent to choose a time that was best for them. The only time a respondent did not get their first choice of time was if another interview had been scheduled at their desired time. This happened only once and the respondent's second preferred time was established. Third, I attempted to establish rapport with the respondent by engaging in a brief conversation before commencing the interview but after obtaining a signature of informed consent (see appendix 2) talking about how their day was going and what they had planned for after the interview. I found this helped ease into the interview and established an increased comfort level between the interviewee and myself.

Although there was an established interview schedule, my goal was to allow a natural conversation to take place following the lead of the interviewee (see appendix 3). Therefore, this schedule was flexible and allowed for specific topics to be discussed if the interviewee did not already address them throughout the process of the interview on their own. As discussed previously, my research goal was to obtain individualized images of God. My questions focused on the process of forming their image of God, what that image entailed, the Trinity, and their relationship with God.

My data included a total of 14 interviews from various individuals at the liberal church and 3 interviews from the conservative church. In the data collection for this project, it was the intention of this researcher to interview individuals from both churches and make comparisons. Unfortunately, there were only three volunteers from the conservative church. Because of the small response rate, insights from the three volunteers were utilized within this project, but no comparisons were made but the data was included due to attendance of individuals between the two churches. Three questions were asked concerning church membership. These were:

- 1) If not a member of ----- church, what is the church you attend most often?
- 2) How long have you been attending this church?
- 3) What made you decide to attend this church?

These questions were posed to each respondent at the end of each interview. Initially, the question of membership of each respondent was posed to have a record that each respondent was a member of the church they were interviewed from or if not, the churches they attended were noted. Consequently, an interesting fluidity between the church members between churches emerged. Not only did some of the members of Church A (conservative) attend

Church B (liberal) on occasion, but some of the respondents who were members of Church B, were members of Church A in the past. Four respondents from Church B were former members of Church A. One of the three members of Church A was a former member of Church B. Since fewer members of Church A volunteered for this research, it is important to note that some respondents from each church went back and forth between churches. The fluidity of respondents amongst the sampled churches allowed for data gathered from respondents in Church A, the church with the lower response rate, to be lumped into the data gathered at Church B.

The interview time ranged between twenty-five minutes and an hour and ten minutes in length. The average interview time was approximately forty minutes long. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked each interviewee if they were ready to start and if they answered yes, the tape recorder was turned on and placed next to me on the table. I then asked each if they received informed consent and had any questions. Only after all these questions were discussed and answered did the interview proceed. The informed consent document provided to them and signed contained the information about each interview being tape-recorded (see appendix 2). After the completion of the interview, I transcribed them and assigned a random name to each participant to ensure anonymity.

### *Sample Characteristics*

I attempted to collect a fairly representative sample based on age and sex of my sample, but consisted mostly female respondents (see table three and four). The age, on the other hand, was fairly heterogeneous. These interviewees consisted of 7 males, and 10 females. One male was under the age of 30, one male was between the age of 31 and 45, and



five males were between the age of 46 and 60. Additionally, three females were under the age of 30, one female was between the ages of 31 and 45, five females were between the ages of 46 and 60, and one female was over the age of 60. The volunteer and tithe columns (see table four) include various answers to the question of whether the interviewee volunteered and whether they tithed. The data collected may be important in further research in the area, but was inconclusive for this project.

**Table 3: Sample Characteristics by Sex and Age**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Sex of Respondent		
Male	7	41.2%
Female	10	58.8%
Age of Respondent		
18-30	4	23.5%
31-45	2	11.8%
46-60	10	58.8%
61+	1	5.9%

My sample was all white. The reasons for this could be because the composition of each church is predominately classified as white. Church A composition of baptized members is 99.41% white, 0.21% African American/black, 0.31% Indian/Alaska native, and 0.03% other. Church B's composition of baptized members is 99.42% white and 0.57% African American/black. Therefore, it is not surprising my sample mirrors the overall composition of the churches sampled.

Although I would have been enthusiastic about a fully heterogeneous sample, I utilized a volunteer-approach to research and therefore only conducted interviews with strictly voluntary subjects. Consequently, I received more females contacting me than males. Throughout the research process, I actively sought male respondents in informal

conversation. The pastor at the liberal church announced the need for more participants in the church service, but although this brought more respondents, they again were overwhelmingly female.

**Table 4: Respondent Characteristics**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Tithe</b>	<b>Volunteer</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
17	75	2 year college	y	y	f	Angelique
16	58	Bachelors	?	y	f	Melissa
15	49	High School	y-close to 10%	y	m	Robert
14	28	Bachelors	n	y	f	Becky
13	59	Bachelors	volunteer time	y	m	Wyatt
12	56	Dual Bachelors	y	y	m	Anthony
11	58	2 year Graduate	n	y	f	Dahlia
10	59	Bachelors	n	n	m	Michael
9	44	Master's	y	y	f	Emily
8	24	2 year college	n	y	f	Bianka
7	53	Bachelors	n-offering	y	m	Brennan
6	51	3 year college	n-offering	y	f	Monika
5	56	High School	y	y	f	Heather
4	32	Bachelors	y	y	m	Roger
3	57	Master's	?	y	f	Irene
2	27	Master's+ Some	y	y	f	Jackie
1	27	Bachelors	n	n	m	Brett

### ***Data Analysis***

The data was analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). According to Strauss and Corbin grounded theory is “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (1990:24).” By utilizing this approach, phenomenon is found that may not have been seen at first glance. By moving back and forth from the data and analysis, I was able to analyze these phenomena producing theory that was ‘grounded’ within the data. The data and analysis worked with each other for a better understanding of the relationships and interactions that occurred.

Due to the nature of interviewing, this data was analyzed using two different types of coding to help make sense of my data. I began with open coding. Open coding is when a researcher goes through their data, used primarily in field and interview data collection, and looks for overarching themes and ideas (Neuman, 1996). By initially picking out these themes, the researcher is enabled to begin to see a pattern in the data and meaning begins to take place. I followed this with axial coding. Axial coding is when a researcher looks through their data with a closer lens to begin to group themes together (Neuman, 1996). Utilizing both types of this coding within the context of grounded theory, I was able to continually reflect upon my data and uncover connections. The reflection process contained five steps. The first step was after each interview, I transcribed the data and looked through it for a pattern or interesting idea or response to my questions. I did this for each interview. Second, I listed out each of these responses in a synopsis of each interview. Third, after each interview was completed, I reflected upon them and searched for similar patterns from previous interviews. Fourth, I began with the first interview, wrote a synopsis, and then for the next interview did the same. Each synopsis was compared to all interviews before and after itself. Finally, after comparing the synopsis, patterns were extracted and reflected upon for further understanding.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### *What is God Like?*

As explained previously, the concept of God has been studied quantitatively. This research had respondents rate different characteristics of God from a prepared list. Although this research has provided valuable information about people's concepts of God, it may miss images of God not found on the surveys and it does not allow respondents to give explanations or stories about God's attributes. In this section, I follow the strategy of Scott Harris (2006) in his study of marital equality. Harris describes "familiar domains of relevance," types of marital (in) equality that previous research had uncovered, and "unfamiliar domains of relevance" that Harris uncovered by asking opened-ended questions. First, I describe four familiar God concepts, those that mirror results from previous quantitative sources. These are: (1) God is loving and nurturing, (2) God is distant, (3) God is a friend and companion, and (4) God is judging and controlling. Two unfamiliar concepts were discovered in the course of this research. These were (1) God has physical human attributes (2) and God is ultimately unknowable.

### God is Loving and Nurturing

The first of "familiar" concept was that God was loving and nurturing. For example, Bianka, a 24 year old female responded in this way:

"Now when I look at things, I can see that they didn't come about through random acts of evolution. I think if God took the seven days to create Earth, he obviously took enough time to start each thing from scratch and make it exactly how he wanted it. I can't see Him being anything but nurturing with that much thought into everything."

Since previous research in God concepts found that God was conceptualized as loving and nurturing, it was not a surprise to find this belief. What was unforeseen, though, was the way in which individuals described God as loving and nurturing. In Bianka's response, nurturing was mentioned as being a quality of God because of his creation of the world. Nurturing depends on the act of creation. This quote also shows how one characteristic of God may be dependent on another characteristic. Bianka is not the only respondent who made the connection between creation and a loving God. Becky, a 28 year old female stated:

“God, the Father... someone who is compassionate and caring and looks after His creation.”

Other respondents connected God's love to his parenthood. Irene, a 57 year old female stated:

“I think that God is both gracious and good and judging and just, I don't know, in many respects parent – parent-like... Parents are very much loving and giving, but they also have to sometimes discipline. And when you do it, you hope that disciplining someone is helping them to understand what would be a better choice verses the choice that they might have made.”

Being parent-like includes loving, giving, and disciplining. Therefore, God is a parent because of these attributes. Other respondents use their life experiences as evidence that God is loving. According to Monika: “Everything in my life to me shows me that He is loving.”

Experiences in life allow for verification of a person's God concept. A loving, nurturing God has been found in previous studies, but these studies have not researched to the full extent of why attributes like this are chosen by people. Dependencies of characteristics on each other and life experiences influence God concepts, something missed in previous studies.

### God is Distant

The second “familiar” concept found in previous research and the present study was God is distant, not intrusive. In this section, respondents indicate a hands-off aspect to God. For many respondents in this study, God does not intervene in the lives of individuals; instead, the deity guides them. God’s lack of intervention, according to Monika, allows her the ability to form their own relationship with God their own way as put in the following quote:

“My relationship with God is one that I wish was more committed on my end, because I know He’s there, and I know whatever I do, He would support. But I wish I could be more supportive in what He wants done here. I wish I could be better about going and helping at the food pantry or whatever is going on, but I’m not (Monika, 51 year old female).”

Having this conceptualization of God grants individuals the ability to form relationships on their own terms. For Melissa, this non-intrusive nature of God indicates love.

“I know that He must be disappointed in us terribly with what He’s given us and how – what a wonderful job we’ve done of taking care of things ...But He loves us anyway.”

For this respondent, God has a hands-off approach for people in this study because he loves them. Again, by allowing people to tell their stories about God and his attributes, we find complex depictions of God. In this instance, loving was dependent on God being distant.

### God is a Friend and Companion

A third familiar concept found in the study was God as friend and companion. Bianka was one of the respondents who identified these qualities.

“Yes, I have some Catholic friends, and they have that lofty image of God, that He’s not our friend as much as our leader and teacher. So that’s – I think that’s where I differ with most people.”

By being a friend, the concept of God grows for an individual and encompasses other aspects that make up the definition of friend or companion for respondents. For Bianka, this image encompassed a friend, teacher, and leader. Others focused their response on what their definition of companion entails. Angelique’s response is an example of this phenomenon.

“He is a companion, someone to turn to.”

As mentioned in previous sections, multiple adjectives can be attributed to a conceptualization of God. God is a companion that is dependable. Dependability is an aspect of companionship for respondents in this study. A rounded, complex image of God emerges throughout these interviews through these adjectives. Consequently, one attribute does not fully describe God. Each attribute is dependent on another. None are mutually exclusive. This indicates that previous research in the area has not allowed for these formulations in regards of narrative means. Heather, a 56 year old female, is able in her response to reconcile seemingly opposite qualities. Put together, they allow for a complex image of God for her.

“I see it – I see it this way: on the day of judgment, ... and I believe we’ll each have one of those, ...we will be standing before God, but I will be holding on to Jesus, and He will come with me. Excuse me. He will be with me.”

God is a friend and companion, but also a judge. These terms seem to be opposites, but respondents were able to use seemingly opposing concepts to construct complex images of God. Crying during this part of the interview, Heather indicated an emotional attachment to God as a friend and companion. In quantitative research, these types of responses are not available. The face-to-face interaction between interviewer and respondent in qualitative data

research allows for a greater emotional response by individuals. These types of responses are important to analyze and understand for the data to take shape. Qualitative data provides a richer understanding by providing respondents the opportunity to have these emotional answers such as with Heather. The response alone indicates a story that has impacted her in an emotional way. This emotional response occurred with Angelique as well. Angelique, a 75 year old female conceptualizes God as dependable.

“He’s always there when you need Him. I guess that’s how I look at Him.”

Because of this, Angelique does not feel that she is alone. Melissa, a 58 year old female elaborates on this dependable nature of God.

“Him being there for my nephew Jacob – my nephew Jacob was three and was diagnosed with Leukemia. And we almost lost him, but it turned out that he didn’t have Leukemia. They called Hemolytic Eremic Syndrome... And I took care of them {her sister’s other children} while she was up in the hospital in Iowa City with him. And didn’t know what I could do. I cleaned the house from stem to stern, just – but He was – I felt like He was there with me.”

Some respondents mention attributes of God that are evident during times of need.

For example, Robert, a 49 year old male conceptualizes God as supportive, but still unreachable to the common person.

“Umm, when I was in the Navy, I was on submarines, and we had an experience. Everybody in the whole ship was scared. And while we were down there, we did a lot of praying. And in my mind, because I saw God as this free-flowing form of energy, I felt that he could come to us through the water, through the hull of the ship. Nothing was going to stop Him from getting to us if we needed him there.”

Some respondents experienced comfort from these qualities of God. According to Dahlia, a 58 year old female,

“And the good news is that no matter how many times we screw up, we’re still saved because we just have to believe that God is there for us. And if we



believe that, that can't be taken away from us unless we want it to be taken away."

### God is Controlling and Judging

A fourth familiar concept is God as controlling and judging. No respondents brought this up in response to my open-ended question about God's qualities. However, when I introduced these concepts, many respondents have strong reactions, some accepting these concepts and others rejecting them. As an example of the latter when asked if God was controlling, Monika became very aggressive and adamant with her response.

"I don't like that word. I guess I could see where some people might think that, but I don't, no. I don't like that."

My respondents, who conceptualized God as nurturing and loving, did not conceptualize God as also controlling or judgmental. Bianka, when asked if she believed God was also vengeful had this to say:

"No, not at all. Again, when I came back to Christianity, I found out – I was welcomed back to {church} willingly through everybody. I'd heard God talking through people, and I don't believe he could condemn anyone that he created and loves enough to give a life on Earth. I don't think he would do anything hateful to them."

These qualities were especially problematic for people who had previously been estranged from the church. However, others embraced these adjectives. Brennan had this to say:

"Oh yes, He certainly can be. History has shown that. Sometimes the discipline or the wrathful side of God, you don't really realize that it was God until after the fact when you start looking back and you're like, "Oh yeah, God was showing me something there."

Some respondents had no problem reconciling a judging God with a loving one. This was the case for Jackie, a 27 year old female.

“But, I do think the law is a gift for us. I think that God gives us a standard to keep us healthy and to let us live abundant lives, so I think that it’s not out of spite or out of vengefulness that God is a judge. But it’s out of love for us that God that God is who God is.”

According to Jackie, the laws given by God serve to support, nurture, and love people. A judging God, for Jackie, does not have to be a negative term. Judgment is utilized to show love and acceptance as explained by Monika.

“I think He – like is said, free will – I think everything happens for a reason. It’s a teaching experience so you can have your own way, but I don’t think he would be ever punishing of anyone that chose a different lifestyle – at least I hope not. We’ll find out someday.”

#### God has Physical Human Attributes

The previous four sections described familiar concepts, those uncovered by previous research. However, respondents also identified unfamiliar concepts. The first of these is God has physical human attributes. This had to do with God’s physicality. Some respondents described God as having physical human attributes. Robert stated:

“I don’t know that anybody ever really addressed what God looks like or how we perceive, what we think God looks like. It’s kind of like the joke that I’ve seen on the Internet where a little girl is painting a picture, and the teacher says, “What are you painting a picture of?” “God.” She says, “Well, nobody knows what God looks like.” And she says, “Well, they will when I’m done.” ... I just love that cartoon or that joke. It’s like... God created man in His own image... I guess I would say the church teaches that He looks like us.”

Physical attributes of God make him human to many respondents. Being formed in his image allows for people to attach this humanness to the deity. This was not uncommon to find. Many adjectives used in quantitative research to characterize God included human roles and attributes. For example, father, mother, and teacher are roles ascribed to people.

Monika, a 51 year old female conceptualizes God through the people in her life that performed these roles. She finds God to be like her own father.

“I was raised in a home where my father was a good image to me. I’ve had a good father. As I have grown up, I have realized that that is not necessarily the case with a lot of people. So I have come to understand why people have trouble with God as a father image or a masculine image.”

When an individual had a positive experience associated with others ascribed these same roles, they conceptualized God as maintaining mirrored physical attributes attached to these individuals. Emily describes this type of conceptualization.

“Ok, if we were to take the best of John or take the best of Jane, take the best in Delaney, take the best of Logan and put that together, you know, ... that would be that humanness.”

God is limited by our own imagination. By ascribing human attributes to God, individuals begin to paint their own picture of what God is to them. God has a human appearance.

Jackie has a human appearance attached to her conceptualization of God.

“God looks like a lot like my dad ... cuz he’s tall and handsome and Scandinavian. So that was my first image of who God was. I think that became more of an old man ... after like differentiating Jesus and God.”

Others attribute human attributes to God that change overtime. Even with this change, conceptualizations of God for some continue to have human attributes attached to them.

Irene, a 57 year old female describes this type of conceptualization.

“I think in some respects growing up in a more conservative environment, when I was younger, I always thought of God as a father figure. And as I have grown and matured, I think that there are times when I like to think of God more as a woman and maybe both. And maybe that’s just part of being a woman and trying to be part of a professional from day to day...”

For some respondents, the human attribute of sex is attached to their conceptualization of God. Monika, a 51 year old female conceptualizes God with the human attribute of sex.

“Well, I know the one thing we might be different with some people is the fact that I believe He is a man, and some might not.”

Wyatt emphasizes the human appearance of God in his response noting God has human attributes because he believe people were made in the image of God.

“Well, I think God is all-powerful. I think He’s made us in His image, so He’s like us, but we’re children of God.”

When asked what God was like, some respondents drew upon popular people or images in the art and media. Some respondents described famous paintings depicting God. Michael, a 59 year old male accredited physical human attributes to God utilizing a famous painting.

“What’s He like? Isn’t He the father image, like Michelangelo?... Sure, I mean – you know, the friendly fatherly image.”

Other respondents attached human attributes to God found in popular media. Robert, a 49 year old male accredited physical human attributes to God utilizing famous portrayals of God in the media.

“So in the Bible, it says that God created man in His own image, so in – in some ways, I think that we – we resemble Him. And so of course in the movies you see George Burns and – oh, what was the more recent one – Bruce Almighty. I can’t think of the –

I: Jim Carrey.

Yeah, well Jim Carrey, but God was Morgan Freeman, you know? So it’s like – and in some other movie, He was a woman – God was a woman.

I: Alanis Morissette.

There you go, yeah. So it’s like – you know, I don’t really have any specific face in mind or whatever, but I just think that – you know, God could look like whatever He wants to look like.”

Others drew upon culturally available stock images. Brennan's response indicates this type of conceptualization.

“Oh, probably as a father figure, you know – some guy in heaven with a beard and robes.”

God having a physical appearance was found throughout this research. By attributing a physical appearance to God, respondents were able to paint their own picture of what God was to them.

### Knowing God is Unknowable

The second unfamiliar attribute found in this research was that God is unknowable.

For respondents, conceptualizing God as unknowable is another attribute of God. According to Jackie:

“I think that God is ultimately unknowable to an extent, ...but I think that what we know God is like we ...find through the revelation of Jesus Christ so, and so and through... how we understand God and hear God through God's holy word like capital W not just like printed word but the way God speaks to us through holy scripture...So I think that God is,.. God is like the things that we see... doing in scripture so God in the beginning creates, God sustains, God... loves us enough to give us both laws and the gospel to... help us live this life. And I think that God,... insofar as we know God through Jesus Christ... loves, saves, holds us to high standards, ...all of those forgives.”

For some, this characteristic, one that has been overlooked in previous research, allows individuals to form a relationship with God. This relationship does not have to be because God is this or that, just because God is and as Emily puts it:

“There's part of God yet that we're not to know about, and I'm sure that's for a very good reason. I'd like to know what it is, but I'm sure it's for a good reason.”

Wyatt, a 59 year old male, said that the unknown part of God is unimportant in a person's overall conceptualization of God.

“Well, we're made in His image. I don't think we know. But I don't think it matters to us.”

Others struggled with this unknown part of their conceptualization of God. For Heather, a 56 year old female, God is something that is so fantastic it is difficult for anyone to understand.

She says:

“He has opened heart and mind so I can take all this in, because without that, who could take it in? It's so – it's so fantastic a concept that how could anyone understand it? How – I don't think anyone really does understand...”

The unknown aspect of God can be explained through the difference in God in comparison to people. Dahlia, a 58 year old female explains:

“We can't do it, so why would we understand that God could? We can't know and see at the same time. We can't – we are not able to do that.”

Anthony, a 56 year old male contends the difference of knowing all there is about God and having an unknown attribute of God has to do with the lack of human understanding of the world.

“God, as a creator of humans, made us in such a way that even with all of our scientific abilities, we can't even come close to understanding all of the complexities.”

Brennan, a 53 year old male explains his conceptualization of God is understood through popular images, but these images can give little understanding to what God is.

“Well, we all do because of art and the fatherly figure and all that, but I think He's so much more than that. I probably can't even grasp what He is.”

God being unknowable is a new finding in God concept research. For respondents in this study, an unknowable God allows relationships to form with God, and interact with the deity in other ways. This is further discussed in the Trinity section.

### Life Events and Conceptualizations

Table Five represents respondents, life events, and images of God. The qualitative nature of this study provided life histories of respondents. These life histories are not fully complete, but significant information about how their God conceptualizations were formed or changed proceeding a significant event in their life indicates an important area to consider in God concept and image research. “One person may have a certain concept of God and evaluate God highly on that account whereas another person may evaluate God highly because he has a somewhat different concept of God” (Gorsuch, 1967:193) indicates that events in a person’s life may have a significant impact on their conceptualization of God. For example, Roger, a 32 year old male describes a conceptualization change after a significant event.

“I’m like a few people, I’m sure. Their feelings about God and their conceptions about God has evolved as they’ve gone through their lives. As a younger adult I wasn’t really sure what God was or who God was and how that pertained to me. I think at that time I was probably on a journey, so to speak, to trying to conceptualize God as something that I could – I could describe, you know, something that could be seen. And as I evolved in my spiritual life, I’ve recognized that that’s not really a necessity in having faith, so I’ve ceased doing that. I suppose that’s recognition of – you know, on this journey to discover something that doesn’t need to be discovered. And so I guess for about – probably about ten years, I felt the way that I just described. But before that, I really didn’t know what God – or conceptualize what God was, but felt that there must be a conceptualization, and I was trying to discover what that was.”

**Table 5: Respondent Life Events and Conceptualizations**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Image</b>
Jackie (all names were changed)	Child Sunday school	Human
	College	Human
	Seminary	Feminine
Irene	Cousin's confirmation	Light on a curtain
	College	In everything
	Aging	Woman, dual sex
	Moving	Relate daily
	Child birth	Providing
	Job change	Providing
	Death	Forgiveness
Roger	Sunday school	Human
	Aging	Any form
	Death	Friend
Heather	Aging	Friend
	Death	Intervening
Monika	Laying on of the Hands	In everything
	Health issues	Providing
Brennan	Aging	Everywhere
	Death	Providing
Bianka	Death	Angry
	Church acceptance	Accepting
Emily	Church event	Nurturing
	Death	Accepting
	Gift for confirmation	Magical
	Dad changing oil	Loving
Dahlia	Death	Demanding
	Laying on of the Hands	Human
	Mennonite church	Demanding
	Aging	Providing
	Acceptance	Accepting
	Childbirth	Providing
Anthony	Bible story	Forgiving
	Meeting wife	Loving
	Bible study	Teaching
Wyatt	Navy/marriage	Accepting
	Divorce	Loving
Becky	Childbirth	Providing
Robert	Navy	Everywhere
	Sunday School	Woman
	Movies	Everywhere
Melissa	Death	Angry
	Acceptance	Forgiveness
Angelique	Death	Dependable
	Child death	Angry
	Other people	Demanding



Feeling and conceptions of god change for people as they go through life changes and events. This change varies from one individual to the next. As explained by Dahlia, a 58 year old woman:

“When you’re pregnant, you’re miserable toward the end, and then when you have the kid, you think you’re going to die, but then there’s this wonderful miracle. And for me, my Christian faith has been like that. It’s just been a series of births and rebirths, births and rebirths and on the other side, a beautiful miracle and, for me, a better understanding of what I believe and why I believe it and why I want others to believe it.”

For others, the significant event of going to college and being exposed to many other things in college causes a conceptualization change.

“Uh, so that was my first image of who God was. I think that became more of an old man uh after real, after like differentiating Jesus and God more college uh I really resisted almost all masculine images, language (Jackie, 27 year old female).”

Similar responses to life events occurred frequently throughout the data as shown in table 5 (see appendix 6 for supporting quotations). Although certain life events were found to change god conceptualizations for respondents, not all every event yielded the same change in conception as the next. The possible life events that respondents in this study indicated they influenced their conceptualization of God in a positive way included Sunday school, aging, acceptance by others, and childbirth. The possible life events that were indicated by respondents in this study influence the respondent to have a negative concept of God included death, health issues, divorce, and some church experiences. These are only possible correlations. The exploratory nature of this study limits the inferences that can be made such as in the area of generalizations amongst the population. Larger generalizations amongst respondents would be marginally at best and can not be statistically proven with the use of

this data set alone. Further, the data for this study provides some insight to the changes in conceptualizations in accordance with life events. Yet, religion and belief systems are personal to the individual for all of the respondents in this study marked by the relationship description they gave for god, and therefore, seem to vary widely amongst individuals. Inferences into a life event that may cause one individual to believe that god is loving, can cause a different individual to believe god is angry (see Table 5 and appendix 6). Personality, exposure, and support systems have been found in this study to affect the changes in perceptions. Further research in this area could yield more general and unified responses that can mark the events more exactly.

### ***How People Know God***

Respondents indicated different ways of knowing God. In this research, respondents were asked a variety of open-ended questions regarding their conceptualization of God in order to allow the respondents to tell their story. Ways of knowing God became a common theme throughout the interviews. These are not exclusive ways though. An individual may know God in multiple ways.

#### Knowing God Theologically: The Bible as a Source

One of the ways that individuals spoke about knowing about God was through claims from church teachings about God, i.e., theology. Since the respondents were Christians, the major source of theological knowledge was from the Bible. When people talk about the Bible, they could be referring to their own reading of the Bible, Bible stories from other books, Sunday school, and/or sermons. Each interview varied in this talk. The theological

way of knowing God was apparent when respondents used words and qualifiers such as “according to the Bible.” Jackie, a 27 year old female, said the Bible was her main source of information about God. Jackie reports that the Bible taught her of God’s love and grace.

"I think, well, I grew up hearing a lot about God’s love and a lot about God’s grace and all simultaneously of course learning the Ten Commandments so I’ve always known that I’ve always had these two sorts of ways of knowing God in mind."

Bianka, a 24 year old female, points to the Bible as the source of her belief that God is creator, and, consequently, is nurturing.

“I think if God took the seven days to create Earth, he obviously took enough time to start each thing from scratch and make it exactly how he wanted it. I can’t see Him being anything but nurturing with that much thought into everything.”

This Biblical account was a corrective to her earlier view of God as angry. Anthony, a 56 year old male, also talked about learning about God from the Bible.

“A lot of those, I would say, Ashley, was those stories that I learned – traditional Bible stories. So God being – God leading His people out of – I remember some of the visual images and God being the flame that leads the – God’s children out of Egypt into their desert journey, but always being there with the people, whether it’s being with Moses and creating the tablets that described the laws that God’s giving for its people. Or it’s all those visual things or being Noah and his family and a God that’s leading that family on a journey for 40 days, 40 nights, and they have no clue of where they’re going, but God, as usual, is in control. So it’s those stories that are the ones that I remember the best.”

Through these stories, Anthony conceptualizes God as a protector and leader of people. This image reflects an intrusive God and a compassionate God. For this respondent and others, the Bible is a source of multiple images of God: dependable, a leader, controlling, and protector of the human race.

### Knowing God: Through Personal Experiences

Other respondents indicated knowing God through personal experiences. Through personal experiences, conceptualizations of God were shaped, formed, and reformed. During difficult times especially, respondents conceptualized God vastly different than they had previously.

A 59 year old male, Wyatt, describes such an instance:

“Well, a saving – I guess saving grace. I guess one thing that does stand out, when I was in the navy, we were in Hawaii, and about seven of us rented a car and went around the island. And we went to a beach, and it was pretty heavy surf running. And I was foolish enough to try to dive under the waves and get out there, and I found myself in a riptide without knowing it, even though I had read a little bit about them. And the other guy that went out with me had swim fins, and I didn’t. Anyway, there were no lifeguards at the beach, and I just couldn’t even – I found myself out further than everyone else, so I thought – I panicked. Anyway, looking back on it, I said, “Thank God for those Hawaiians who helped pull me in.” So that was kind of a life-saving, once-in-a-lifetime thing.”

In this case, Wyatt’s conceptualization of God changed to include the idea that God was a life-saver. He conceptualized God as being dependable in his time of need. By attributing this experience to a ‘saving-grace’ and a ‘life-saving moment’, Wyatt understood God to be able to make anything possible because to him:

“If you believe in Him, then all things are possible.”

Others, like Roger, a 32 year old male reflected on his image of God when faced with the death of his pastor

“Well, my parents. For certain, a pastor of the Methodist church who actually influenced me probably a lot more than he realized. One of the greatest influences that he had was actually his death and his struggle with cancer in the last years of his life. You know, his strength and his unwavering faith through that extremely difficult time, and if I can kind of summarize that, it would be – I suppose one of the foremost feelings I thought was at the time, I was still trying to conceptualize God.”

When confronted with death, Roger realized that he did not know what to think of God. By having this epiphany, he could begin to know God in a more intimate way. Through this death, he was able to witness how the faith in God differed from one person to another and begin to conceptualize God in a deeper way than he had before. The unwavering faith he witness helped him recognize the struggle of human life and the struggles it entails. God was bigger than himself and “the presence and power of God is such an unfiltered and powerful thing that we can’t possibly fathom” (Roger).

Bianka, a 24 year old female voiced a similar knowledge gained through her own personal experience of death.

“O.k., I had some issues when I was a kid with deaths, you know what I mean? And I stopped believing for a while because I couldn’t believe that God would be that angry with me. So I recently came back to Christianity and Lutheranism and have reformed those beliefs into what I believe now.”

Through her experience, she came to believe that God was angry with her and began to conceptualize him as such. She turned away from faith because of this new image. Although death made her question her faith, as Roger did, her negative conception closed her to the suggestion of a different view of God. Over time, her conceptualization was influenced by different sources and molded again coming “back to Christianity and Lutheranism and have reformed those beliefs.” Therefore, with the use of different knowledge sources, images of God are changed and influenced. For example, Angelique, a 75 year old female used many of her personal experiences to mold her current conceptualization of God.

“I think – my dad died at 69, and you have to have God to depend on then. And then I lost my mother. She lived for quite a few years after dad passed away, and then I lost my sister three years ago. So I’m the only one in my family now. Everyone else is gone.”

Angelique conceptualizes God as dependable and close to her because of the deaths of her family. Through these experiences, a sense of interdependence arose between her and God. In one situation, she felt alone, but could believe that God was her friend because he gave her strength and comfort in her life. Over time, each new death experience verified her image of God being dependable and close to her like a friend even when questioned God.

“I know when I lost my babies, I questioned it. I wasn't angry, but I questioned it. but then we adopted our girls and felt better (Angelique).”

For others in this study, an epiphany through their own experience allowed them the opportunity to experience God, which in turn, changed their overall conception of God.

For example, Heather's experience of God introduced her to the idea that God was everywhere.

“My dad was in intensive care. Now my dad had congestive heart failure, so it was many years in coming. He was – he had a hip replaced, so he had that surgery. They put him in intensive care, and it didn't go well. He was a week in intensive care. And I was called home – I was living here at the time. I was called home. The siblings gathered. My mom was there, and it didn't seem the whole week that he was getting any better or getting any worse and just laying there. And I went home – then I had to come home because my children were small. And I had this conversation in my head, and I said, ‘One way or the other. Just do something. One way or the other, we need some peace here.’ And as I was traveling down the road, all of a sudden I felt this calm come over me, ‘It's going to be o.k. It's going to be o.k.’ and about a month later, he died.”

When a respondent experiences God, their views of God are either verified or proven false. In this experience, Heather's image of God as being just in her head was proven false through the physical feeling of calm. God was conceptualized as a listener through this experience.

In another interview, Emily, a 44 year old female, indicated a change in her perception of God and heaven.

“Grandfather was in heaven, but that also changed heaven for me. And maybe that’s when I opened up because I knew what grandpa’s love was like, but that was far bigger – you know, that it didn’t matter who I was or what I did. Grandpa always loved you. And so although it wasn’t the grandpa figure of the white beard and all that kind of stuff, you know, it changed that dimension of, ‘O.k., well it’s not the Jesus image on the cross. It’s not the old man with the beard.’ But it’s something greater and bigger that has more to do with love, and how do you draw love?”

Through this experience, Emily began to increase the limits of the characteristics she believed of God. First, the love of God is bigger than the love of one person on earth is. Second, God did not look like the visual images provided to her through her upbringing. In this one experience, Emily’s knowledge of God evolved to a larger and broader concept of the deity. God was a father figure, dependable, and loving.

“But it’s something greater and bigger that has more to do with love, and how do you draw love? (Emily).”

For other respondents, personal experiences verified and reinforced their previous images of God. For example, recall the story about an experience of the navy from Robert, a 49 year old male.

“When I was in the Navy, I was on submarines, and we had an experience. Everybody in the whole ship was scared. And while we were down there, we did a lot of praying. And in my mind, because I saw God as this free-flowing form of energy, I felt that he could come to us through the water, through the hull of the ship. Nothing was going to stop Him from getting to us if we needed him there.”

Although his image did not change like some of the others that were interviewed, it was reinforced by his own personal experience on the ship. God was dependable, and would

be there if he needed him. Recognizing his own view of God previously, Robert strengthened his view of God being a free-flowing form.

"When I started seeing some of the science fiction shows and movies, then I was thinking this force field of energy that's just kind of out there. I think it can take any form it wants (Robert)"

Similarly to Robert, Monika, a 51 year old woman's experience verified her conceptualization of God.

"There was a period where Bill and I did not have health insurance and we moved here. And he got a job that health insurance was involved – we were able to be covered. And not within a month, I was diagnosed with endometriosis, and I had a surgery. I had a year of pain before I had a hysterectomy. And I really feel that the Lord led us here. He led Bill to the job, and health insurance was then available."

Monika previously conceptualized God as a leader. This experience verified her previous assessment, but it also influenced her to view God as dependable. She conceptualized God as a provider as well because from this experience she learned that he provided for her and her family.

For others, like Melissa, a personal experience changed her conceptualization of God and she rejected some of her previous conceptions.

"And things were going smoothly until my father got sick. And my father died a very painful death with cancer, and I was mad at God because I couldn't believe He would do it to my dad."

Melissa, before this experience, conceptualized God as both kind and nurturing.

"He forgives you, all the things that you do, and I have done a few things. He doesn't give up on us. He's all-knowing and all-seeing. Just knowing that, that there's somebody or something that has that kind of, I don't want to say control over me. It's a comfort thing that I can just kind of—when I'm having a really bad day, I can talk to Him, and it's going to be ok (Melissa)."



When the death of her father occurred, her previous image was not synchronized with the new experience. Because of the lack of congruency, Melissa formed a new conceptualization of God that included the opposite attributes she believe previously. God became angry, wrathful, and insensitive to others.

Research in the area of God concepts has not revealed the ability of people to have emotions about God because they have not been able to tell stories about God. Yet, it was prevalent for my respondents, particularly when they discussed Jesus. Brennan, a 53 year old male describes his emotions about Jesus in the following:

“Oh, what’s there not to think? Thankful, that’s probably my biggest emotion when it comes to Jesus – so thankful that He came because it’s just mind-boggling to think if He hadn’t come, what – if I wasn’t a Christian- because I always think of that when I think of other faiths, too, like Muslim, Hindu and so on. It’s so easy – Christianity is, but yet it’s so hard for people to grasp.”

It is stories about Jesus that brought forth emotional responses in this study. Through these stories, the relationship with God becomes emotional.. People are able to relate and form stronger relationships in their faith through these emotional responses. Robert says:

“So picture a cloud in the sky, you know, and that’s kind of what I think when I think of God. I just think of – you know, like a white puffy cloud that’s very friendly.”

During difficult times, conceptualizing God through these emotional experiences allows a different perspective on life to emerge. Irene explains some of these emotions.

“How human of us to think that pain is so bad for us when Jesus endured such pain for all of us. And so it’s – it’s made me think that, you know, He’s taking away our sin, but we need to do more to not keep making those same sinful mistakes because that can only be so painful.”

Individuals within this study connect to God through their emotional conceptualizations.

Knowing God: Others as a Source

Seeing God in another person is another source by which people knew God. Through the actions of others, individuals tend to conceptualize God in a different way than they had before. For example, the actions of one individual may impact the actions of another. In this study, these actions affected individuals in profound ways. Their conceptualization of God was changed. Sometimes these actions verified their basic idea of God and other times their concept of God changed dramatically. Through the actions of others, individuals gained a different perspective of God.

Roger, a 32 year old male, knows God through others when he talks about talents, gifts, or abilities of others.

“Well, take a look at anybody that feels like they have a gift or talent. Some people don’t call them gifts. Some people call them talents or natural ability, but to look at anybody who has those and uses that gift in some way spiritually.”

For him, talents indicate God’s presence. God gives talents and those talents give Roger the opportunity to learn more about God. As his knowledge grows, so does his conceptualization of God encompassing other aspects of his life. Each new talent brings about a different opportunity to learn more about God.

“I use that talent to try and reach other people spiritually. So when I do that, I feel much closer to God. I feel my relationship strengthens, and I am actually being a servant of God (Roger).”

It also gives Roger the ability to attribute different characteristics to God.

“God is the beginning and the end, and I’m in-between, so I really can’t be at the height or at the low (Roger).”

Heather, a 56 year old female, puts it this way.

“That – that God is with you in other people, within yourself – dig it out, in what you – what other people do to you. The spirit of God and when I say, “The spirit of God” I’m talking about God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all in one - the spirit is within each of us, and how we see God is within each of us.”

Seeing God in other people gives Heather a sense of herself. As she learns about God through others, she learns about herself. Here, God is not only a teacher through others, but reminds Heather that she is not alone.

“I felt such a peace and a clam that it was almost like He heard me. He heard me and He gave me an answer (Heather).”

Everyone is a presenter of God. Every interaction is a time to gain understanding and knowledge about God. By learning how God is working through others, one can ‘dig out’ the true essence of the spirit and understand how they see God working through them and then be able to utilize it in their own life.

“That God is with you in other people, within yourself – dig it out, in what other people do to you. The spirit of God is within each of us, and how we see God is within each of us (Heather).”

Monika, a 51 year old female, points out the qualities in others as characteristics of God.

“Actually I would say Lilly, with her two little autistic boys, she is so gracious and such a loving spirit that I think I see God – I see Christ in her. There are times when I see it in our pastor. There are also times when I’m brought back to the realization that she is human. I think ... as we get older, we realize that our pastors are only human and that we can’t expect them to be little Jesuses all the time. And my mother, she is a very patient person, too and my sister and my brother. I guess I’ve got a lot of – my whole family - I will say, for being one of six, we have all done our straying from the church or what and coming back. And to have us all attending church and have us active in our churches, I’d say that’s a witness of God.”

Recognizing that her pastor is human, and not a little ‘Jesus’ all the time, Monika gains a sense of God not being quite like her. She is different. She has learned that people

are not perfect, but that God can be. She has conceptualized God being bigger than her because different people show different aspects of God and “He is everything” (Monika). Through the actions of others, she characterizes God as patient, accepting, loving, and gracious.

It was not unusual for respondents to draw from their personal experiences to support qualities of God. Similarly, Anthony experiences God as dependable because of his experience with his father.

“So God’s always listening, you know, and always helping me out, which I said about my father – my father was a very quiet, soft-spoken type individual, but he was there, and I knew if something came up with me in my life, he would be there to help support me. And that’s the way I feel about God as well.”

In conceptualizing God, people may give God attributes that they see in other people. By doing this, they can visualize God as relating to them.

Three sources of knowing God were found. They include the Bible, personal experiences, and through other people. Utilizing each source and through their own stories, individuals discussed their complex images of God.

### ***The Trinity***

One of the weaknesses of quantitative research on God concepts is that it has ignored the Trinity. Christians believe that God consists of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which are said to be of one “substance.” This potentially will affect images of God among Christians. The Trinity is essentially three persons within the Christian religion deciphering who 'God' is. These include the son, Jesus Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Each of these indicates a different realm of understanding a presence in everyday life. Therefore, it is

important for researchers to fully understand this concept and be open to a new measurement technique in order to gain this understanding. However, previous research has not explored this issue. I raised the Trinity with each of my respondents by asking the question: “So you’ve told me a little bit about your relationship with God. How does that relate to the Trinity?” I followed up with “which part of the Trinity do you most relate to?” This question allowed each respondent to discuss their views on the three persons of the Trinity.

### The Trinity through Stories and Parables

Many respondents claimed that the Trinity was taught to them as children. Becky explains:

“Well, when you first learn about it, it’s more – more of a textbook feel, kind of not a reality, but just like learning your ABC’s. There’s the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

What people learned as children became important to this study because of the impact it had on their relation to the persons of the Trinity. For many, the first person they were exposed to as children was what they thought of first when the Trinity was mentioned. For example, Monika was exposed to the person of Jesus as a child and relates to this person the most.

Through a story from her childhood, Monika explains the Trinity.

“My images of the three, yes, I do believe in all the little stories of the egg and the concept of the three parts and the water and all that. Those are all good images to teach to kids, I think, because those three elements are one.”

In the use of stories and parables, the Trinity is explained in a way that helps ease the confusion. The exposure to these memorable stories allows individuals the opportunity to understand their own conceptualizations of the Trinity, yet these stories have another role. People in this study remember the stories told to them as children when asked to explain the

Trinity. Although these stories may result in a muddled picture of the Trinity, they give a basic understanding that may not exist otherwise. This basic understanding allows individuals to visualize persons of the Trinity. For example, Brennan, a 53 year old male, explains the tie between childhood and his conceptualization of God.

“Instantly, I think it’s the old conceptions when we’re being raised as a child, that’s the first thing that comes to mind.”

By utilizing stories learned as a child, the persons of the Trinity are explained and serve as a basis for understanding the Trinity as three persons of one substance. Because it is the basis for their conceptualization of God and the Trinity, these stories allow individuals to understand and utilize the different persons of the Trinity throughout their own life. For Jackie, visual activities for children help solidify understanding of the Trinity.

“I think it’s pretty similar um ah there’s that great gospel story where God... where Jesus talks about God being like a hen gathering together her chicks and last year during that the Sunday school kids all got to see a hen with her little chickens (laugh).”

Through memorable stories and activities, respondents learn about the Trinity. Learning stories and parables about the Trinity was found in this study to influence the conceptualizations of God and shape overall images of God in confounding ways. Angelique, a 75 year old female, told me that her image of God has not changed from her childhood because of her early exposure. Instead, her image has stayed the same throughout her life.

“Religion doesn’t change. God doesn’t change.”

Images from childhood remain because of the memorable nature of them. Some respondents said that early childhood education in Sunday school had a large impact on current conceptualizations of God. For example, Irene, a 57 year old female, conveys an experience from her childhood that shaped her image of God.

“I saw a face kind of like lighted on the back curtain behind the group of people. And I really accepted that as, “Ok, there is this presence, and I may not know it or understand it all, but I believe.” And that was kind of like, for me, I believe I accepted.”

Experiences such as this expose individuals to God and help them grasp the Trinity. God can be real and tangible. Through the Trinity, conceptualizations of God are shaped. The intriguing nature of the Trinity causes both confusion and acceptance. It is a difficult concept to grasp. Many times, remembering childhood education and stories allows individuals to explain it.

#### Understanding different Persons of the Trinity

Different ways of understanding the Trinity persons emerged throughout this study. Many respondents perceived the Trinity according to what they had been taught throughout their life. In these cases, the Trinity was discussed utilizing stories and parables as mentioned in the previous section. Their ability to relate to the Trinity was dependent on the responsibilities they attribute to each of the Trinity persons. In this section, the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be developed from these responses.

#### *The Father*

Each of the persons of the Trinity was found to perform certain responsibilities. The Father is given the responsibility for creation and as the judge. Robert, a 49 year old male, understood the Father person because of creation.

“When I think of God as the Father, He is the creator of everything from the hairs in my head to the house that I live in to the car that I drive and the gas that I put in that car. He is the creator and father of everything – not just

people, not just everybody, but living, inanimate, everything. He is the father of all.”

God the Father holds the responsibility of being the creator. In this case, the primary responsibility of God the Father is to create. God the Father maintains the world people live in. Michael, a 59 year old male, sees God the Father as creator too.

“Well, the Father is the creator, the beginning, the end, the everything.”

For this individual, the Trinity persons did not get attributes attached to them, but instead were in other forms interacting with the human individually. Everything is a creation by God. By creating, God the Father provides. Therefore, God the Father provides and begins to take on the role of parental figure. This includes an authoritative aspect. God the Father is a parental figure and an authoritative figure. Anthony, a 56 year old male says:

“I see God as the Father being the one to sort of guide my life, hold me, provide the basic things that – sort of that structure around me that keeps me safe and pointed in a grace-filled life.”

God the Father is the provider of structure and guidance in their life. As people grow in life, they move away from their parents and begin to tread their own path. Anthony explains:

“God, the Father guiding those people and being there to help the Noahs and the Abrahams and Sarahs and Isaacs and Josephs along the way, and somehow the stories always seemed to turn out in a positive sense.”

People tend to find God the Father as judgmental because this person is often viewed as distant. Heather sees the responsibility of God the Father as a judge.

“We have God, the Father, who is judge. In my mind, he is judge.”

The Father person of the Trinity is not approachable. This part of the Trinity is the person that is distant and not easy to relate to. Becky says:

“To me, the Father is more of a watchful figure, maybe someone who is in the background and is all-knowing.”



The Father is the watchful, all-knowing form. He is there for everyone, but in the background for this individual.

By attributing the responsibility of God the Father as a judge, some individuals begin to visualize this person as calculating and vengeful. Melissa, a 58 year old female, describes God the Father in this fashion:

“I just had visions of Him just basically being a bookkeeper up in the sky and having a ledger, and every time I made a mistake, it was like, “Oh, there’s one for her. There’s another one for her.”

God the Father person, throughout this study, remained as distant and unapproachable. Like Melissa, many other respondents visualized God the Father as in the sky (distant) and/or keeping a tally of mistakes (calculating). This is the person people relate to in times of loss and anger because it allows them to find a reason for something that they do not have otherwise. It was common to hear things such as ‘God the Father was angry or mad at me and that is why \_\_\_\_\_ happened.’ For many respondents, their conceptualization of the God the Father person gives them a reason for why unpleasant things happen<sup>4</sup>.

The Father person of the Trinity has been explained in many different ways. Responsibilities attributed to this person include creator, judge, and leader. God the Father is understood to be the creator of the world, the judge of individuals, and a leader to salvation. For many in this study, the primary responsibility of God the Father was to create. By creating, he is able to perform other responsibilities.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Trinity as Situational section for further discussion on the area of loss and anger.

*The Son*

The Son, Jesus, was found to be related to the most by respondents. Because this person is understood as God in human form, it was not surprising this was the case. Robert explains:

“Probably Jesus because that’s the part that is most prominent, and he’s a little easier to connect with.”

As with the person of God the Father, respondents mentioned responsibilities of the person of the Son. One of the main responsibilities of this person was as the forgiver and comforter.

Emily, a 44 year old female, describes the Son in this way.

“And I remember as a child a couple different things, one of which at the altar, there was this image of Christ being crucified on the cross, you know? And I remember growing up and looking at that image all the time. And I remember wondering what it – this sounds really strange, but I remember wondering what it would be like if I could crawl into those arms, and what would that feel like? Umm, and I – I just knew that the love of that was going to be, again, bigger than even that image of Jesus on the cross and that image of Jesus bleeding and that image of Jesus in pain that even when I looked at it, there was a connection there that I had that was deeper than that image.”

The person of Jesus as a comforter was not uncommon for respondents in this study. The visual depiction of the person of Jesus gives individuals a human to connect with. Roger explains it in this way:

“My earliest memories would be Sunday School as a child – you know, seeing God as the pictures and the Sunday School stories and most often the drawings we see of God the carpenter, Jesus and kind of a kind-looking man that has long hair and a beard and a robe. I think – I think that’s kind of encouraged in your earlier years to have something to relate to, to have something you can see, touch and hear.”

This humanness allows individuals to have God as real. The Trinity allows individuals to connect to God on different levels because of the responsibilities of each and the way each

connects to the individual. For example, Becky, a 28 year old female, connects to the person of Jesus because of his humanity.

“For me, Jesus is a more concrete, more real figure. He’s – he’s kind of the everyday – the everyday acquaintance..... The Son is the brother, the friend, the one that – the teacher, the real personal part of God for me, the way, the human part of God to me.”

The Son is the everyday acquaintance such as a friend. The Son is someone to go to for everyday guidance. The Son is the person with which relationships are formed.

“A friend that you write letters to and don’t hear a lot of firm response (Becky).”

Respondents tended to connect to this person more deeply than the others because it is the person that is responsible for being close at hand and mediating between God the Father and people.

“We have Jesus, that is – what’s the word I want – the mediator between sinful man and God, the judge (Heather).”

The Son is responsible for bridging the gap between people and God the Father. To do this, the Son is responsible for guiding, inspiring, and teaching. Through the conceptualization of the Son as a teacher, this person is also a friend and mentor. This person is the human part for this individual. Respondents can connect to the Son because of the humanness to this person, meaning, to establish a bond and relationship or associate with God. Anthony sees this as a way to connect to God on a deeper level.

“And I see Jesus as being the form of God that came to Earth, took human life, went through the experiences, grew as we do, and as he became of age, understood very well that he was God.”

The Son person holds the responsibility of being the comforter, the bridge between the individual and God the Father person, and the forgiver.

“I guess in a nutshell, the Father is the creator and beholder. The Spirit is the presence, and Jesus, the Son, is how we relate and understand that (Roger, 32 year old male).”

The Son holds the responsibility of bring all of the persons together to form the Trinity because “that’s the part that is most prominent, and he’s a little easier to connect with” (Becky, 28 year old female). In this way, the Son is related to on a deeper level than other persons.

### *The Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit was found to be the most difficult to describe and consequently, the area where little data was gathered. There were four people in this study who provided a description of the Holy Spirit when asked. From the following responses, a thin description of this person was formed. Becky contributes:

“And the Holy Spirit is inspiration, comfort, words when you need them.”

The Holy Spirit gives inspiration and comfort. This person of God is a type of sounding board. By having someone to talk to that is not judging, unlike the Father person of the Trinity, the individual can work out some of the issues and problems that occur. Anthony describes the person of the Holy Spirit as the guiding force of a person.

“I see the spirit, then, being the one that’s actually working within me to be the force that helps me on a day-to-day basis to be connected with God – God, the Father, to be the agent in my life that instills a conscience, instills a desire to learn new things and to have a feeling of compassion and love for other people that God has put on this Earth with me.”

The Holy Spirit is the internal connection between the human and the divine. This is the person that interacts with the person on an everyday basis. It allows individuals freewill, but is seen as a guiding force for others.

“He does influence, but I think when God gave freewill, it means just that..... The Holy Spirit acts through other people, and not just people. You feel the presence of God, and you feel it coming through an entity in your life (Roger, 32 year old male).”

It is the provider of life but also connects each other person together.

“We have the Holy Spirit, who gives us life, who gives us – who provides for us...the Holy Spirit has the responsibility of giving life (Heather).”

The Holy Spirit person is described by respondents as being within everyone and everything.

It serves to connect people to the divine. Many describe this internal piece of God like a glimmer of greatness that can only be described through actions. It serves as the mechanism in which people can rise to the expectations of God.

“You can hear the command, ‘feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Where were you?’ that whole concept. But I think it’s the Holy Spirit that allows me, helps me, holds me up, builds me up to be able to do that because I don’t think we have it within ourselves to do it without the Holy Spirit. I guess the Holy Spirit is the caffeine in your life (Heather).”

It gives people the ability to take on the responsibilities they attribute to the Trinity, but also allows for faltering in these responsibilities. The Holy Spirit is responsible for maintaining the world by overseeing it and residing within everyone and everything. Irene explains:

“So I think I started at that point to see God in more of the little things, not just this big presence, but in the little things – you know, just the quiet times, a bird, a flower, those things. And so it kind of said to me, “It’s all around.”

This person is the least described by respondents, but seems to have the most interaction with the individual. The Holy Spirit is conceptualized as connecting each person to the divine in an internal way. The Holy Spirit is understood by the respondents in this study to be responsible for giving guidance and kindness. It is the person in this study that was most conceptualized interacting with respondents today.

### The Situational Nature of the Trinity

As respondents discussed the responsibilities of the persons of the Trinity, it became apparent that these persons are situated in the events of a person's life. The trinity is understood to work as one entity, but each part is understood differently for individuals and therefore takes on different roles for individuals allowing for different interactions to take place. People's understanding of the Trinity is that each person is different, and because of this difference, people are allowed to focus on a specific person during different situations. In defining their situation, individuals define both who they are and who the other is (in this case the person of the Trinity) (Gecas and Burke, 1995; Cast, 2003). According to Cast, 2003, individuals in an attempt to control meanings stemming from their situations "cast(ing) others into supporting identities" (Cast, 2003:185). This is known as "altercasting" (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963). By "altercasting" individuals in this study were found to 'cast' the person of the Trinity in the supporting role for the given situation.<sup>5</sup> This allows for the ability of God to relate to people in different ways. In utilizing the Trinity, people can apply a person of the Trinity in accordance with any given situation. For example, Roger, a 32 year old male, explains:

"Oh, I think everything relates to the Trinity in some way, shape or form. It just kind of depends on what presence you're feeling and what divinity is taking place in your life and where you are at the time. I think if you really had to define, God takes three forms. Again, not materialistic, and it just depends on your situation and where you are in your life and where God needs you to be in your life depends on which of those three that you're dealing with. I think it – the Trinity is what makes it possible for us to believe that God can be one way in one situation and another way in another situation."

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the nature of this paper, identity, role, and altercasting is not explained in depth. For further information, please see Cast, 2003; Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963; Gecas and Burke, 1995; Stryker, Burke, 2000; Goffman, 1959; and Burke, 2004.

Relating to a part of the Trinity varies from one situation to another. Therefore, the Trinity allows an individual the ability to relate to one form or another as they please. The Trinity is not only utilized to explain the different forms God takes in a person's life, but also the different relationships that can occur over a person's life time. In one situation, Jesus can be related to the most because of the need for comfort or forgiveness. At another time, God the Father can be related to explain the consequences that happen in one's life. Then, when a situation occurs on a daily basis, the Holy Spirit is thought of allowing the free will of each individual. Therefore, at different times, an individual will think of different parts of the Trinity.

“Probably it depends on how we're feeling- I'm feeling. We tend to ask God for a lot of things, so if you're in a situation where you feel like you need things or feel like you need to be heard or need to be listened to choose one (Roger).”

Because of this, an individual who stated they relate most to Jesus could say later they relate to God the Father according to their life at the time, as with Dahlia.

“To me, there's definitely a tri-fold entity, and each has a definite purpose, and they all affect me differently and yet obviously are all part of the same for me.”

It is not only with physical resemblance that individuals relate to one form. As pointed out by Roger, a person relates to the responsibility placed upon each form. Respondents also indicated that some persons of the Trinity came to mind during particular religious holidays.

According to Irene,

“And the Spirit and the Son and the Father, I mean, they all have – they all have a role to kind of continue. But I guess I don't think of the Holy Spirit – I don't think of the Holy Spirit as much. Maybe I'm reminded more in Pentecost. I'm reminded more in baptism, those kinds of times. But on the whole, I think more of Jesus, the forgiveness part, having been on the cross and the Father.”

These persons of the Trinity become more apparent during festivals and celebrations of the church. During a baptism and Pentecost individuals are reminded of the Holy Spirit. When thinking about forgiveness in a given situation, Jesus comes to mind. This indicates that the Trinity relates to the situation in a person's life, not merely the individual. The presence of each part of the entity is situational, and therefore, the response gained by each interaction varies as well.

“As a triune God, I think of Him in different ways at different times probably, depending on what I feel I need from Him (Angelique, 75 year old female).”

So, the Trinity is both personal, and situational in its interaction. This variety of situational interactions makes it possible for the belief of the Trinity being one way or another. As Angelique, a 75 year old female, points out, the Trinity is thought of in different ways according to the situation. The triune God can be utilized in different situations by different people. The desire for a specific duty of God is transposed onto conceptualizations of God forming the different responsibilities and deviations of the three persons. A triune God serves as a medium to help people connect to God in every situation. Because of the situational nature of the Trinity, different interactions with each part of the Trinity are determined by the desire of the individual and the roles of each person of the Trinity as Emily puts it in regards to the Son:

“I think Jesus is that - Oh crap, when I'm forlorn, and things suck, its Jesus I can go too. And it's maybe Jesus that I can say, 'O.K., you know what? Jesus has been here. He knows this emotion.' I say that, but then I think about the one thing I know about God is God knows the pain of losing a child..... God Knows suffering and God knows pain of disappointment from His children.”



The Trinity is a substance that is explained by the different way individuals interact with it and the situational stimulus. It is what is felt and understood by the individual, not necessarily what person they are seeking. Robert, a 49 year old male explains:

“That’s – it’s like the Trinity is, I think, more our way of understanding that He is with us always with the Holy Spirit, that He was with us here on Earth in Jesus’ flesh and that He was also with us, waiting for us in heaven. So that’s – there’s – He’s with us in heaven as God. He was with us for a short time with us here on Earth with the flesh of His Son, and He is with us now in our hearts in the Holy Spirit.”

God the Father is conceptualized by Robert as in heaven for people when they die. The form of Jesus allowed him to be flesh. Currently, he is within everyone through the Holy Spirit. God remains with an individual at all times. According to Robert, “He is with us now in our hearts in the Holy Spirit.” So, no matter what situation occurs, God remains there. Each part of the Trinity was a different form of interaction for the individual, but remains in the hearts of people through the person of the Holy Spirit. Through life, situations change and mold a person’s connection to God. Because of this, the Trinity is important. It cannot function for the individuals without each of its persons.

“It is the Trinity, and there are different days and different times of the day where maybe I connect better with one or the other. And it’s funny because I think the one, for me, that’s maybe most difficult to connect with is God, the Father, you know? Son, tangible. Spirit, o.k., I can go with Spirit. Umm, God, the Father – what does that mean, you know, and how is that different from Jesus? So for me, they’re just interwoven together (Emily).”

While respondents may relate to one person more than another, having all persons of the Trinity present invoke a greater understanding and connection to God. Many people “latch on” to the human form of God in order to connect to the Trinity or the form of the Holy Spirit because it can be sensed.

“I mean, that doesn’t mean that sometimes people have a stronger image of Jesus. That’s the human thing. For a lot of people, that’s the easiest, maybe, to latch onto. That’s the visual image. But you’ve also got to have that relationship with the power of the Holy Spirit and be able to sense – I think we all have a sense and knowing that Spirit is present. We feel it. We see it. People talk about it (Emily).”

At different times in a person’s life a different form of the Trinity is needed or sought after.

Utilizing this logic, the Trinity cannot be the same with one person and not another. It would not be complete. It is because this that the Trinity is connected together and exists in harmony. These are different forms the Lord takes on for different reasons such as to teach, to intervene, to watch, or to create. The Trinity allows for God to be a situational God. By breaking apart each person of the Trinity, people connect with God in different ways. These ways vary according to the situation, but are maintained through the situational Trinity.

Overall, it was found that compartmentalizing the Trinity was important because it allowed people to relate and interact with God in various ways. This made God easier to relate to and learn from. Without it, Heather explains:

“Otherwise, we would have God over here that we worship and fear. We have Jesus who’s Jacuzzi Jesus here, warm and fuzzy. And we have the Holy Spirit, and what does that do, you know?”

The Trinity as situational allows conceptualizations of God to include adjectives that are opposites. God can have the responsibility as both a judger of human kind and a forgiver of human kind. Relating to the different persons of God discourages discourse among explanations and allows for a wholly defined deity.

## LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations of this study that needs to be discussed. First, with concern to the questions used in this study, the initial conversations with individuals concerning the study could have imposed ideas about God images on the subjects. When approached and the query of the study was apparent, it was answered with one of two answers. Either a response of “The study is about God concepts: views of God” or “The study is about God images.” Either of these responses have the possibility of imposing ideas of God on the subjects, allowing them to begin to formulate their answers to the questions before the interview could take place. Granted, each interview was scheduled at least a week after the initial approach, the possibility of the imposition remains.

Second, the number of respondents was quite small eliciting questions of validity and whether the findings can be generalized. In response, this was exploratory research, thus the inquiries gathered from this research are not necessarily able to be generalized upon different groups or areas. Even with the small samples, significant discoveries in the area of the trinity and god concepts were apparent.

Finally, not every concept found here, especially in regard to the trinity, can be researched for other denominations. Religious groups and belief systems that do not utilized the trinity in their doctrine have the potential to not hold the same conceptualizations of God found here. Instead, the inquiries about the situational aspect of the trinity will not be present.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research, thus far, in the area of God conceptualizations is predominately informed by quantitative methodology. This scheme ignores three important topics in God concept research. First, the fact that Christians believe in the Trinity. Second, how the God concepts are formed, and finally, how people know God. In this study, utilizing qualitative data, a deeper understanding of God imaging emerged allowing for a fair amount of new understanding. This includes gaining a deeper understanding through the observable and nonverbal cues that accompany participant's responses.

My research contributes to the God concept literature in that it highlights and supports findings that have previously been discussed in relation to God images and conceptualizations as well as introduces new areas of future research. Throughout this research, four familiar concepts of God found in previous studies were supported: (1) God is loving and nurturing, (2) God is distant, (3) God is a friend and companion, and (4) God is judging and controlling. Using similar descriptive terms, this research supports the findings of previous quantitative sources that God is loving, caring, and disciplining; however, it adds an amount of conceptual depth that form individual conceptualizations of God. Through the use qualitative methodology, individuals within this study were able to talk about other concepts of God they have. Two unfamiliar concepts emerged. The first of these is God has physical human attributes. This had to do with God's physicality. By describing God with human attributes, it is argued in this study physical attributes of God make him human to many respondents. Being formed in his image allows for people to attach this humanness to the deity. The second unfamiliar concept this research found was there is a part of God that people do not know. The lack of knowing God is in some cases the lack of knowing oneself

and the world around them. Further study in this area would be beneficial because it has the potential to find the underlying reasons why individuals tend to attribute these two different concepts to God and if this is a common occurrence. This information is intriguing because the many of individuals in this study found physical attributes of God important in their full understanding of God and also responded they did not fully know God. By focusing on the physical attributes of God and unknown aspects of God, a researcher can develop other tools and combinations of tools to fully capture these phenomena such as utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

Another contribution of this study for God concept research was how people know God. This study found people know God through three sources: the Bible, personal experience, and through others. For the Bible as a source, individuals discussed stories and parables that shaped their image of God. Through use of the source of personal experiences, conceptualizations of God were shaped, formed, and reformed. During difficult times especially, respondents conceptualized God vastly different than they had previously. Personal experiences changed conceptualizations in positive and negative ways. In different cases, individuals backed away from religious institutions while others migrated to them. Seeing God in another person was found to include insights found through the actions of others predominately produced one of two outcomes. Either, the actions verified a person's basic idea of God or their concept changed dramatically causing them to conceptualize God in a substantially different way than they had previously. The lack of a middle ground in the way individuals learn about God as a result of their social interactions is indicated through this study to be present. Further research in this area should include questions regarding the stages individuals go through in their conceptualizations of God. Knowledge gained through

this research can be used to begin to mark key ways and sources used in learning about God. Different sources were found in this study to be important in God conceptualizations. Yet, it only scratched the surface of this area. Researchers need to develop sources and stages in order to be able to gain better prediction and generalizability amongst different religious groups and institutions. Having a more general understanding of the sources and stages individuals go through in their conceptualization of God may be influential depicting and understanding different stimuli utilized on a daily basis in choices and decisions.

Another contribution of this study was the Trinity allows for a situational God. The Trinity allows for a God of convenience. Being conceptualized according to the situation, God can have the responsibility as a judge of human kind and a forgiver of human kind all at the same time. The conceptualization of different personas of God discourages discourse among explanations and allows for a wholly defined deity. In asking about these persons, this research found the Father person as being responsible for being a creator, judge, and leader. For many in this study, the primary responsibility of God the Father was to create. By creating, he is able to perform his other responsibilities, again showing the interdependence of aspects. Similarly, the Son held the responsibility of being the comforter, the bridge between the individual and God the Father persona, and the forgiver. The Son held the responsibility of bringing all of the personas together to form the trinity. Finally, the Holy Spirit was the invisible hand that guided people on a daily basis. The Holy Spirit connects each person to the divine in an internal way. It is responsible for giving guidance and kindness to people. It is the one person in this study who was conceptualized interacting with respondents. In order to fully understand the complexity of the Trinity, research needs to address the situational aspect. Research in the area of the Trinity has focused on the

complexity of the Trinity to explain what the Trinity is. Religious understanding of the Trinity permeates the literature. Unfortunately, the situational nature of the Trinity has been overlooked. This research found that the Trinity allows for a situational God. In this initial discovery, the conceptualization of God differs in each situation. Research in this area should focus on why this is and what other questions are answered in this way by individuals. Further, each person of the Trinity is utilized according to the situation. The parameters of the situations each person is sought for is important to study because it offers insight into faith and belief systems.

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## APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT FLYER

**Would you like to participate in a research study  
how people think about God?**



## **WE WANT YOU**

A graduate student at Iowa State University needs your input!!! If you attend Church Name and at least 18 years of age, please contact [ashleyg@iastate.edu](mailto:ashleyg@iastate.edu) to participate. This is completely voluntary. Thank you so much for helping out and God bless.

## **APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT**

### **Title of Study: Conceptualization of God**

**Investigators:** Ashley Leininger

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study is to address how members of evangelical lutheran churches conceptualize God. Specically, this study will assess a church member's God image through their own narratives. In attempting to discover God images, this study hopes to address the variety of ascriptions utilized to describe God not found in the literature up to this point. At completion, this study is anticipated to advance the present sociological literature on God images, differences and similarities in liberal and conservative churches, and indicate the necessity of the utilization of narratives as a research tool in this area.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you attend an evangelical Lutheran church and are over the age of 18.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for one week and will involve one interview that will last about one hour. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: you will be given a numerical number for confidentiality purposes; you will be asked to participate in an interview of approximately one hour in length; and you will be asked to complete a survey consisting of ten questions at the completion of the interview. The interview will be tape-recorded. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable. The numerical number will be referenced on all documents pertaining to your participation and information. The recordings of the interview will be transcribed on to an electronic copy within three weeks after the interview and then the original recordings will be destroyed. The electronic copy will only be accessible by password only the interviewer knows. After the completion of the projects, all paper copies of the information will be destroyed.

### **RISKS**

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: You may experience some discomfort when sharing personal information. At anytime, you may discontinue your participation in this study by telling the interview you wish to stop. You may also experience the inconvenience of the length of the interview. The interview is anticipated to take between one half hour and an hour of your time. This time has the potential to be inaccurate and the interview may take longer than anticipated.

## BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by enriching the literature concerning the image of God held by Evangelical Lutheran parishioners.

## COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

## PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

**Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.**

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: subjects will be assigned a unique code that will be used on forms instead of their name. The interviewer will have the only access to the study records. These will be kept electronically through password protected computer files. The original recordings of the data will be deleted after transcription. The data will be retained for up to one year after project completion and then destroyed. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

**QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Ashley Leininger at [ashleyg@iastate.edu](mailto:ashleyg@iastate.edu) or by phone at (515) 450-4514. Dr. David Schweingruber may be contacted at [dschwein@iastate.edu](mailto:dschwein@iastate.edu) .
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant’s Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT**

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Person Obtaining  
Informed Consent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)



### APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### God Images:

- 1) What do you think God is like?
- 2) Have you always thought God was like that?
- 3) Can you tell me about how your image of God has changed? Try to begin with the earliest image you can remember.
- 4) How have you come to believe your image of God? What evidence or experiences have contributed to this image? \*possibility of leaving out the second part? Will the first question answer this?)
  - a) Variants can focus on particular part of the image, e.g., Why do you believe that God is loving? Why don't you believe this....
- 5) Is your image similar or different from the image of God taught in your church? How so?
  - a) Follow-ups can ask about disagreements, e.g., Why don't you believe that God is all powerful?
- 6) Who were the influential people teaching you about God?
- 7) Do you have significant people in your life who have different images of god than you do? Can you tell me of some of the similarities or differences?
- 8) Can you describe a time when this posed a problem for you?
- 9) You talked about god being----- . Do you believe he is also -----?
  - a) Use variants in previous discussions to incorporate some of the dichotomous terms found in previous studies. Keep in mind, a judge could be seen as a positive thing. Make sure to ask respondent what they mean by each term when it is used.
  - b) Examples to use: father, mother; creator, liberator; friend, teacher (Roof and Roof, 1984); critical, accepting; punishing, forgiving; demanding, giving (Roberts, 1989) protective, controlling; patient; wrathful; (Gorsuch, 1968)
- 10) You have already told me about your relationship with god. How does this relate to the trinity?
- 11) Traditional Christian teaching claims that God is a Trinity of three persons. When you think of God, which part of the trinity do you think of?
- 12) What does each part of the trinity mean to you? Let's start with the father
  - a) Continue questioning with the son, then the Holy Spirit eliciting answers to each.
- 13) What part of the trinity do you most relate to?
  - a) Why do you find you think of ----- more than -----, -----?
- 14) Can you tell me how your understanding of the trinity has changed? Again, try to begin with the earliest understanding you can remember.
- 15) How many times do you think you have spoken to God through prayer, group prayer, in church per week?
- 16) What are the other ways you talk to God?
- 17) How many times do you think you have spoken to others about God in a week?
- 18) Who do you usually speak to about God?
  - a) Ask about coworkers, friends, family, other significant others
- 19) What do your conversations with ----- involve?

- a) Are these arguments, consensus, witnessing, pondering
- b) What is said?
- 20) Is there a usual place these conversations take place?
- 21) What is your relationship with God?
- 22) How does your “God talk” whether an individual conversation with God or talk about God with others reflects your relationship with God?

**Demographical Questions for Interview Respondents:**

- 4) Name (only for documentation purposes, not to be used in any publication. For author use only).
- 5) Age (numerical)
- 6) Education Level Completed
- 7) religious affiliation
- 8) If not a member of ----- church, what is the church you attend most often?
- 9) Amount of attendance (including church activities throughout the week including meetings, clubs, luncheons)
  - a. twice a week or more
  - b. once a week
  - c. twice a month once a month only holidays or special occasions (weddings, funerals, baptism)
- 10) How long have you been attending this church?
- 11) What made you decide to attend this church?
- 12) Do you volunteer for other organizations (example: meals on wheels, caring for the sick, homeless shelters)
- 13) Do you volunteer your time or resources to other things not listed above (scholarship programs, charity, donations)?

**Demographics:**

- 14) Date interview takes place
- 15) Length of Interview
- 16) Time of interview
- 17) Place of interview
- 18) Sex
- 19) Respondent’s Church

#### APPENDIX 4: RESPONDENT LIFE EVENTS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Respondent	Event	Image	Quote
Jackie	Child Sunday school	Human	"God looks a lot like my dad cuz he's tall and handsome and Scandinavian"
	College	Human	"I think that became more of an old man after real, after like differentiating Jesus and God more in college"
	Seminary	Feminine	"my seminary experience was doing a lot of work on the revelation of God through the Holy Spirit and that's much more feminine. And just the way God acts. For example, on of the readings this weekend was the Isaiah text where God is like a mother, so really if a mother doesn't want to leave her child, God doesn't want to leave you."
Irene	Cousin's confirmation	Light on a curtain	"I don't know if it was real or not, but I saw a face kind of like lighted on the back curtain behind the group of people. And I really accepted that as, 'okay, there is this presence, and I may not know it or understand it all, but I believe."
	College	In everything	"I think I started at that point to see God in more of the little things, not just this big presence, but in the little things- you know, just the quiet times, a bird a flower, those things."
	Aging	Woman, dual sex	"As I have grown and matured, I think that there are times when I like to think of God more as a woman and maybe both. And maybe that's just part of being a woman and trying to be part of a professional from day to day."
	Moving	Relate daily	"We found an Evangelical Lutheran church in Texas, and we joined that. And because there seems to be a lot of parallel between Episcopal and ELCA, he was comfortable with that, and he, too, enjoyed not only the fellowship of the people who were worshipping there, but we've looked for people and approaches where the message is related to everyday kinds of life so that it's not just theoretical and it's not something that we can't apply to how we do our daily life"
	Child birth	Providing	"Well actually when I found out I was pregnant, we really saw it as a spiritual blessing. And then secondly then, just, it was kind of like, "okay, this is a gift from God."
	Job change	Providing	"My job changed. I retired from the place I worked for 24 years, and I wasn't quite sure how that would go. You know, I was the major breadwinner for our family, and so for me to give up that role took a lot of faith that it's going to be right...So, I think that what I probably haven't stopped to recognize is that might have been the Holy spirit kind of being with me and just kind of guiding me in those decisions."

	Death	Forgiveness	"it's made me think that, he's taking away our sin, but we need to do more to not keep making those same sinful mistakes because that can only be so painful. You can take morphine for physical pain, but what else is there besides forgiveness and the death on the cross and resurrection for all of that spiritual pain?"
Roger	Sunday school	Human	"My earliest memories would be Sunday School as a child, seeing God as the pictures and the Sunday School stories and most often the drawings we see of God the carpenter."
	Aging	Any form	"Then as life has gone on, I've recognized that in my mind, God can take any form." "Seeing my pastor and his unquestioning, unwavering faith when he went through the most difficult times made me feel like I had no right to be wavering in my faith. If someone else could be so strong in theirs and going through such difficulties, that kind of made me realize that maybe I'm searching for the wrong things. I'm searching for a materialistic viewpoint, and that really wasn't what I should be doing, and as long as I continue to try and conceptualize God as a physical being, that I would always be on some sort of search."
	Death	Friend	
Heather	Aging	Friend	"I grew up ALC, had the Sunday School, had all the instruction. Then I was on my own. My view of God has changed. My view of God now is more a companion than someone sitting on a throne handing out judgment, being benevolent now and then." "I just felt such a peace and a clam that it was almost like he heard me. He heard me and he gave me an answer.... I think at that point on, I was more open to have conversations.... So it was more of a 'he's with me. He's with me. He's not up there that I address him up there. I address him right here.'"
	Death	Intervening	
Monika	Laying on of the Hands	In everything	"it helped to solidify it, too. There have been periods in my life that I can look back and say that 'God had a hand in that.' I see it as God having a hand in it. I don't think there are coincidences. I think God has a hand in it, I guess." "There was a period where *we* did not have health insurance and we moved here. And he got a job that health insurance was involved- we were able to be covered. And not within a month, I was diagnosed with endometriosis, and I had a surgery. I had a year of pain before I had a hysterectomy. And I really feel that the Lord led us here. He led Dwayne to the job, and health insurance was then available. There are just lots of things like that, that have happened that, to me, shows that He is a loving God."
	Health issues	Providing	
Brennan	Aging	Everywhere	"I think as I've matured-gotten older and matured

	Death	Providing	my faith, it's more of a- I think it's probably more of an entity or whatever you want to determine. I can't even grasp or get my hands and arms around it "I've been to funeral services-as I get older, I've been to more funeral services. But I've been to services where there wasn't a faith, and it just seems so empty, and just the experience of family. I've also known people that didn't have a faith, that a loved one died, and it's just taken them absolutely forever to try to come to grips with their grief, get over- I mean, you never get over it, of course, but to live with your grief."
Bianka	Death	Angry	"I had some issues when I was a kid with deaths, you know what I mean? And I stopped believing for a while because I couldn't believe that God would be that angry with me."
	Church acceptance	Accepting	"When I came back to Christianity, I found out- I was welcomed back to willingly through everybody. I'd heard God talking through people, and I don't believe he could condemn anyone that he created and loves enough to give a life on Earth. I don't think he would do anything hateful to them. "
Emily	Church event	Nurturing	"And I remember as a child a couple different things, one of which at the altar, there was this image of Christ being crucified on the cross. And I remember growing up and looking at that image all the time. And I remember wondering what it- this sounds really strange, but I remember wondering what it would be like if I could crawl into those arms, and what would that feel like? and I just knew that the love of that was going to be, again, bigger than even that image of Jesus on the cross."
	Death	Accepting	"And when Grandpa died and I knew at the moment when my parents told me, 'Grandpa died,' I didn't cry because I knew he was in heaven. Now, I cried later because I missed grandpa and I was sad, like any person would be, especially a kid. But I remember not crying right away because I thought, 'well, that's not such a bad thing after all, now is it?' And that grandfather was in heaven, but that also changed heaven for me."
	Gift for confirmation	Magical	"But to have this book, and if I wanted to look up the feeding of the 5,000, I could look that up. And it was just like this magical thing that, for the first time, felt like scripture was approachable."

	Dad changing oil	Loving	"Maybe while he was changing the oil in the car and I was helping him, then he would say something about, "Jesus teaches us to love all people. Doesn't matter what color your skin is, Emily. Jesus teaches us. This is who we're supposed to be. We don't treat anybody different. I don't care who they are."
	Death	Demanding	"I think since I was thirteen, I've been searching God and needed God and wanting to understand God. And having been exposed to God through a rather has, negative way, it didn't make sense to me that God the God would give us salvation and then want to destroy us at the same time."
	Laying on of the Hands	Human	"I had an experience where I was in a Bible study group, and they were- had a thing where you'd sit in the chair and everybody would lay hands on you and pray for you to see whatever it was God was trying to show you. And I remember in that process putting my hands out like this, and then just as clear as if I was really visually seeing it like a picture, during that time I saw what I thought was Jesus' hands superimposed over the top of mine. And very definitely pictures of a man's hands with injuries at the wrist areas."
Dahlia	Mennonite church	Demanding	"So it was really a Mennonite church that just wasn't following the Mennonite church because of how they lived their faith- you know, skirts only and no slacks and don't cut your hair and don't wear make-up and don't wear jewelry and cover your head. I went through that and that experience seemed like the more things I did, the less saved I felt. And I finally realized that that wasn't cutting it. I remember getting angry- I was shaking my fists at the sky and saying, 'Look, the more I do, the worse I feel. This doesn't make sense to me. I can't do this anymore."
	Aging	Providing	"So in the last few years, the key that came to me that God finally let me open the door to, which I'm so grateful for, I realized that the problem was I was trying to understand a God concept that was God's and not mine. And I was trying to make it human and easy to understand."
	Acceptance	Accepting	"I've just made a new friend that's Muslim. I never thought that would happen to me, and it's like, 'God, you are so funny.' ....And the part that was so exhilarating about it was that she believed me, and she told me she's been in this country for five years, and she's never met anyone like me before. She's never met an American that was that open, and she's definitely never talked to a Christian that thought like that. And the exhilarating part for me

was that there was a time when I thought you should just get rid of all of it."

	Childbirth	Providing	"When you're pregnant, you're miserable toward the end, and then when you have the kid, you think you're going to die, but then there's this wonderful miracle... And for me, my Christian faith has been like that. It's just been a series of births and rebirths, births and rebirths and on the other side, a beautiful miracle and, for me, a better understanding of what I believe and why I believe it..."
Anthony	Bible story	Forgiving	"We were talking about how much Zaccheus- I mean, Zaccheus was looked on as a bad person in the time he lived. Jesus interacted with him as one of the lost sheep, and then Zaccheus then goes from being this nasty tax collector to someone who's giving back beyond what Jewish Law required - money that he had taken, had gotten from people for taxes. So whether it's, you know, people's hearts being turned to then be generous and then give back or learning that another "aha" moment for me was that everything that I have, it's not coming from me; it's blessings that I've been given from God."
	Meeting wife	Loving	"The experience that got me back into the church was meeting my wonderful wife. And she was, at that point in her life, very strong in her faith. And we got married and we just started doing things together, and church was one of those things we always have done together."
	Bible study	Teaching	"And it was as if in those Bible studies that God was there again saying, 'okay, here's the hint for today' for the people I was there with would gain additional little insights. So I quit thinking those were just coincidences. I believe God is really talking to- I feel, to me in that sense of applying these people around me that are helping me solve some of the questions and things that I have day-to-day as I go through my life."
Wyatt	Navy/marriage	Accepting	"after high school, I kind of left the church- actually probably before high school. And then when I went in the Navy, I think I was as far away from God as I can be. And when I came back home and eventually got married, that's when I found my faith again."
	Divorce	Loving	"He's put a lot of people in my life that have supported me. I've been through two divorces, and there have been people that are showing God's love through interaction with me."
Becky	Childbirth	Providing	"I think when *my son* was born, I think that definitely is a spiritual experience. It definitely puts into perspective everything that has been part of your life, but now is just so much more real."

Robert	Navy	Everywhere	"When I was in the Navy, I was on submarines, and we had an experience. Everybody in the whole ship was scared. And while we were down there, we did a lot of praying. And in my mind, because I saw God as this free-flowing form of energy, I felt that he could come to us through the water, through the hull of the ship. Nothing was going to stop Him from getting to us if we needed him there. And I think that reinforced my thoughts of God being this free-flowing form of energy that if He was going to come, He was going to come. Nothing was going to stop Him."
	Sunday School	Woman	"I think I had a Sunday School teacher and it was Bible School, and I think she was the first one that allowed me to believe that God might be a woman."
	Movies	Everywhere	"When I started seeing some of the science fiction shows and movies, then I was thinking this force field of energy that's just kind of out there. I think it can take any form it wants."
Melissa	Death	Angry	"My father died a very painful death with cancer, and I was mad at God because I couldn't believe He would do it to my Dad. I didn't go to church for, oh, probably six months."
	Acceptance	Forgiveness	"Then I started going back and getting involved a little bit here and a little bit there and finally realized that he doesn't promise us that. We've got eternal life once we're gone."
Angelique	Death	Dependable	"my dad died at 69, and you have to have God to depend on then. And then I lost my mother. She lived for quite a few years after dad passed away, and then I lost my sister three years ago." "well, I'm sure he's angry with some of the things going on in our country today, I'm sure he is because I don't - in reading the Bible- I mean, I read it and read it everyday, but there were many times He was angry with what they were doing, which was evil. And I think that same thing is happening today in our country. So I'm sure He's not pleased with it at all. I know when I lost my babies, I questioned it. I wasn't angry, but I questioned it. but then we adopted our girls and felt better."
	Child death	Angry	"But people get mad at God. Sometimes I know people who have. And I even had one- one man tell me, 'I don't think I can ever forgive God for taking my son.' I said, 'Oh yes, you can.' And of course at the time, everything is so right up-front. I don't know if he ever did. But I said, 'That's an awful statement to make.' there's a reason for everything. I guess I look at it that way. There's a reason for everything."
	Other people	Demanding	

\*names were deleted



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would first like to thank my major professor, David Schweingruber, for all of your guidance throughout this process. Your patience, e-mails, and meetings made this possible. Thank you. I am also very grateful to my two other sociologists on my committee for your insights and knowledge brought to this project. Thank you for making time for me. My sincere thanks go out to Gloria Jones-Johnson and Carl Roberts.

Next, I would like to thank Bridget Welch. Without your support, I would not have been able to do this without you. Your insight helped me so much. Thank you. I would also like to thank Molly and Anna for helping me continue moving forward and supporting me. Thank you for your time. To my husband, Wyatt, I would like to thank you for pushing me forward and reminding me that this is all worth it in the end. Your love and support made this possible.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank my nephew Brennan. Without your influence in my life, I would never have pursued this journey. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you and will never forget you. This is dedicated to you.