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Research Article

JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION & SOUL CARE

Renovating Our Images of God: Neuroscience and Biblical Meditation

Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care
2025, Vol. 18(1) 84–98
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DOI: 10.1177/19397909241269489
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Abstract

This paper proposes meditation on selected scriptures as one possible way of addressing a problem identified by the Baylor Religion Survey (2006): the disconnect, for many American Christians, between stated propositional *beliefs* about a benevolent God, and implicit mental models of God as angry, critical, or distant. Possible causes of this disconnect, and negative consequences for personal piety and programs of discipleship and spiritual formation are suggested. A version of *lectio divina* —biblical meditation—combining scriptures emphasizing the benevolence of God (Table 2) together with a picture of a smiling Jesus is presented. This method attempts to integrate reflection on scripture with insights from neuroscience—e.g., implicit memories, neural mirroring, and attachment theory. Further research is suggested to experimentally test the hypothesis assumed in this paper—that meditation on scriptures emphasizing the benevolence of God may mitigate or reframe negative images of God rooted in dysfunctional childhood and family relationships, or abusive experiences with authority figures.

Keywords

images of god, self image, meditation, biblical meditation, neuroscience

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Introduction

In the opening lines of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin (1960) asserts that "… true and sound wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (*Inst.* I.i.1). This is most assuredly true, but there is a problem: studies in the sociology of religion revealed a serious disconnect among many American Christians between their propositional beliefs about God of and their actual emotional experiences of God. The 2006 study by the Baylor Institute of Religion, "American Piety in the twenty-first Century" found that almost 72% of those Christians surveyed held personal images of God that were either angry, distant or critical (Baylor University 2006, 26-30). Cognitively, they may assent to the proposition that "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," but *affectively*—in their subliminal images of God, they envision a God who is usually angry or critical or disappointed with them, or emotionally distant from them. The purpose of this article is to suggest some of the possible causes and consequences of this disconnect, and then to offer a partial remedy: Whole-brain meditation on texts of scripture emphasizing the graciousness of God, in conjunction with an image of a smiling and compassionate Jesus embracing a beloved disciple.

The Baylor Study: "America's Four Gods"

This study was conducted by the Gallup Organization from October 8, 2005 and December 12, 2005. Data was collected from 1,721 respondents, through telephone interviews and self-administered mailed surveys. Respondents were recruited through a nationwide random digital dialing telephone survey, and the results were believed to be valid within a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points (Baylor, 51).

The respondents' views of God were determined by statistical analysis of the answers given to the questions in items 20–23 of the survey form (Table 1), given below:

The data showed that the respondents' views of God tended to cluster in four main groups: an Authoritarian God (31.4%), who tended to be quite angry; a Critical God (16%), who had little interaction with the world, but tended to be critical or disappointed with the world and its people; a Distant God (24.4%), who was not generally angry, but was distant and not involved with the world or its people; and a Benevolent God (23%), who was active in the daily lives of people and was less likely to punish individuals than the Authoritarian God. Atheists, who were certain that God did not exist, were 5.2% of the respondents (Baylor, 26-27).

Roman Catholic and Mainline Protestant respondents tended toward belief in a Distant God. Significantly, Evangelical Protestants, Black Protestants, and individuals who feel strongly that God is a "He" tend toward belief in an Authoritarian God—to have an image of a God who is more likely to be *angry and punitive*. These findings have important implications for pastoral counseling. Pastors, Christian counselors,

Table 1. Baylor survey questions.

20. Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about the Bible?

_ The Bible means exactly what it says. It should be taken literally, word for word, on all subjects.
_ The Bible is perfectly true, but it should not be taken literally, word for word. We must interpret its meaning.
_ The Bible contains some human error.
__The Bible is an ancient book of history and legends.
__I don't know.

21. Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about God?

__ I have no doubts that God exists.
__ I believe in God, but with some doubts.
__ I sometimes believe in God.
__I believe in a higher power or cosmic force.
__ I don't believe in anything beyond the physical world.
__ I have no opinion.

22. Even if you might not believe in God, based on your personal understanding, what do you think that God is like?

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Undecided
a.	A cosmic force in the universe ……..	__	__	__	__	__
b.	Removed from worldly affairs ……	__	__	__	__	__
c.	Removed from my personal affairs ……	__	__	__	__	__
d.	Concerned with the well-being of the world ……...	__	__	__	__	__
e.	Concerned with my personal well-being ……	__	__	__	__	__
f.	Angered by human sin ……	__	__	__	__	__
g.	Angered by my sins ……	__	__	__	__	__
h.	Directly involved in world affairs ……	__	__	__	__	__
i.	Directly involved in my affairs ……	__	__	__	__	__
j.	A "He" ……	__	__	__	__	__

23. How well do you feel that each of the following words describe God?

		Very Well	Somewhat well	Not very well.	Not at all	Undecided
a.	Absolute ……	__	__	__	__	__
b.	Critical ……..	__	__	__	__	__
c.	Distant ……..	__	__	__	__	__
d.	Ever-present ……	__	__	__	__	__
e.	Fatherly ……..,.	__	__	__	__	__
f.	Forgiving ……	__	__	__	__	__
g.	Friendly ……..	__	__	__	__	__
h.	Just ……..	__	__	__	__	__
i.	Kind ……	__	__	__	__	__
j.	Kingly ……	__	__	__	__	__
k.	Loving ……..	__	__	__	__	__
l.	Motherly ……	__	__	__	__	__
m.	Punishing ……	__	__	__	__	__
n.	Severe……	__	__	__	__	__
o.	Wrathful ……	__	__	__	__	__
p.	Yielding ……	__	__	__	__	__

youth ministers, spiritual directors, and discipleship group leaders should explore with their clients issues of early childhood and family dynamics—and possible emotional wounding or trauma—that may be preventing the client from experiencing a positive image of God and a close and satisfying relationship based on that mental model. The

client may not be fully aware of negative memories that need spiritual healing and possibly the help of a professionally trained therapist.

Images of an Angry, Critical, or Distant God: Causes and Consequences?

The Baylor Study was not designed to identify possible causal influences that may have shaped the respondents' images of God. However, extensive psychological research has identified a variety of factors that may contribute to an individual's image of angry, critical, or distant God. Early childhood experiences of a parent who is angry, critical, or distant can be transferred to the child's view of God and other authority figures (Coe and Hall 2010; Thompson 2010). Patterns of inconsistent, anxious, or ambivalent maternal-infant attachment may make it more difficult in later life to form strong attachments to others, including God (Ainsworth 1985; Bowlby 1969; Chandler 2014; Schore 2016, 2019). Traumatic experiences of domestic violence, sexual abuse, or wartime atrocities can damage the individual's ability to have satisfying relationships with others, even when the memories of those events have been lost to consciousness (Van der Kolk 2014; Rustenbach 2011; Siegel 2020, 150-59).

Some devotional practices in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical traditions have reinforced, perhaps unintentionally, negative images of God and Christ. As an Augustinian monk Martin Luther was tormented in conscience with depictions of Jesus Christ as the "Just Judge" on the last day, confronting him in anger and wrath. He even went so far that he hated rather than loved such a God, until he at last came to understand the "righteousness of God" (Rom 1:17) not as a punitive righteousness that punished his sins, but rather as the imputed righteousness of Christ given to him through faith alone (Isaac 2017, 72-75). In the late Middle Ages the crucifix, with an emaciated, and blood-stained body of Jesus hanging on the cross, was prominently displayed in many Catholic churches. While such images depicted the theological truth of Christ's humanity and atoning identification with human suffering, they focused on the pain and suffering of Christ while overshadowing the truth of the resurrection of Christ and the joys of salvation (Howard 2014).

In the Orthodox tradition, the iconic portrayal of Christ Pantocrator (see Figure 1 below) is that of a Jesus who is somber, serene, and not that approachable. The image suggests—at least to some observers— the transcendence of God more than Christ's closeness to believers. The "Jesus Prayer"—so prominent in Orthodox piety—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"—would, by its constant repetition, seem to reinforce in the believer a self-image of a perpetual sinner with whom God is not pleased—rather than that of a beloved son or daughter, who, by adoption, is the object of God's pleasure and delight.

In the evangelical stream of American Christianity, perhaps the most famous sermon of all time is "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached by Jonathan Edwards in Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741, during the Great Awakening. Edwards depicted the unrepentant sinner as hanging by a thread over ". . . a wide and bottomless Pit, full of

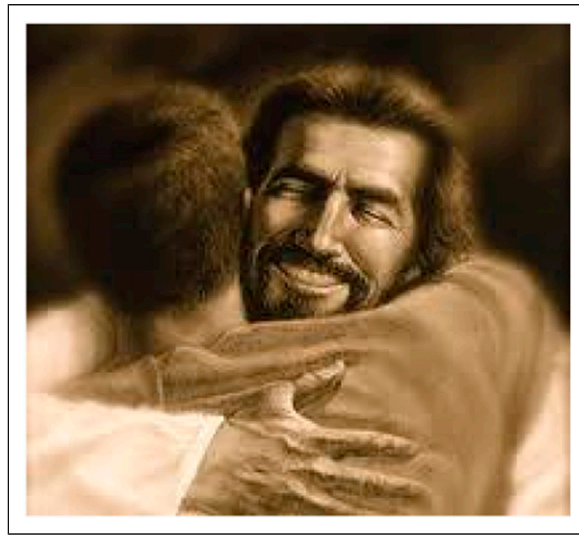

Figure 1. Baylor institute of religion survey: "American piety in the 21st century".

the Fire of Wrath," ready to be consumed by an angry and wrathful God (Edwards 1741). While this sermon, taken out of context, is not broadly representative of Edwards' preaching—who consistently preached on the love of God and the beauty of Christ for the believer—the images of fire and judgment certainly do not suggest an image of God as warm and approachable.

These considerations notwithstanding, a cautionary note is certainly in order. Given the great variety of human temperaments, cultures, life circumstances, and spiritual and ecclesial traditions, one should be very cautious in criticizing the devotional practices of others, especially in instances when the individual in question and mature spiritual advisors have found a given practice to be healthy and beneficial.

It must be recognized that the Bible itself contains many texts and narratives that refer to God's anger, wrath, or distance from people. Passages such as the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the holy war against the Canaanites, and the reality of Hell in the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers (Kohler 1923; Morey 1984; Peterson and Morgan 2004; Shedd 1886) come to mind. These images and teachings inevitably color the imagination of any serious reader of scripture. However—and this is a crucial distinction—it should be recognized that texts referring to the *wrath* of God (e.g., Rom 1:18; 2:5; 2:8; Rev 1t4:10; 19:15) are not directed against God's own redeemed and obedient children, but against the "… godless and wicked who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18), against the stubborn and unrepentant (Rom 2:5), against those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil (Rom 2:8). The forgiven, redeemed, and obedient children of God are not under wrath, but under grace and mercy, because the wrath of God has been satisfied

for them in the cross of Christ. Consequently, the texts on wrath and judgment must be seen in light of texts discussed below—Is 62:4, 65:19; Jer 32:40–41; Zeph 3:17, and Jesus's parables in Lk 15—functioning as the hermeneutical center of the Bible's images of God's deep love and affection for his children.

Faulty images of God can have serious spiritual consequences. Question one of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asked, "What is the chief end of man"—the highest purpose of human life? The answer given was that the chief end of man was "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever" (WSC q.1). To "glorify" God was understood to mean loving God and obeying his commandments. Negative images of God—implicit mental models of God in which God is felt to be angry, critical, or distant—perhaps perpetually disappointed in us—seem less likely to motivate the believer to either whole-heartedly trust and obey God, or to fully enjoy a relationship with him. With such negative images of God, it is difficult to feel safe, secure, and close to God. Just as a parent who is generally angry, critical, or distant from the child damages the parent–child relationship, so it can be for the relationship of God and the believer.

Unrecognized negative images of God can also impede the effectiveness of congregational and parachurch discipleship programs. Extensive surveys conducted by the Willow Creek Association and by the Barna Group for the Navigators found that many pastors and discipleship leaders felt that their programs were not producing lasting personal change (Allin 2018, xi; Navigators 2015). Many active members felt spiritually "stalled," despite their participation in discipleship training programs, Bible studies, and small groups (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011). It seems plausible that unrecognized negative images of God—perhaps influenced by dysfunctional dynamics of the family of origin (Scazzero 2006, 2010)—may be contributing to these problems. However, further research would be needed to demonstrate a clear causal link.

Toward a Solution: Biblical Meditation on the Smiling Face of God

Meditation on a picture of Jesus with a smile on his face (Figure 1 below; Bowman 2005) will be proposed as a partial solution to the problem of implicit mental models of God as angry, critical or distant. Biblical texts justifying such an image of Jesus will be considered, after which neuroscientific studies indicating therapeutic benefits of such meditation will be discussed.

These texts provide biblical warrant for a believer to have images of our heavenly Father and of Jesus—looking at us with *smiling and happy faces*—as we pray, meditate on scripture, or worship. We, by God's grace and mercy, are his forgiven, beloved children—the objects of his pleasure and delight.

In many Protestant churches there is an understandable suspicion about the use of visual images of God in personal devotion or corporate worship. This reluctance may reflect not only Protestant reactions to Roman Catholic statuary and Orthodox icons, but even more fundamentally, a concern not to violate the biblical command not to make a "graven image" (Ex 20:4).

In the eighth and ninth centuries there were bitter controversies in the Eastern churches over the place of icons in Christian worship and piety (Fairbairn 2021, 351-53). Icons were banned from the churches in 726 and then returned to the churches after being defended theologically by John of Damascus. John argued that since the Son of God became incarnate in a human body, and was seen as such by the disciples, that it was justifiable to make visible depictions of Christ. The icons were to be treated with veneration (*proskynesis*), but worship (*latreia*) was to be given to God alone (Louth 2003).

John of Damascus' argument from the incarnation could also be applied to the use––in very conservative Protestant churches—of artist's conceptions of Jesus in children's Bibles, Sunday school papers, and Christmas manger scenes. Here it is understood that such artist's conceptions are not violations of the second commandment (Ex 20:4), but function only as teaching aids that are not intended to replace the supreme authority of the inspired scriptures for Christian faith and practice.

Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Anyone who can, by faith, imagine seeing Jesus with a smiling face can see the face of the heavenly Father smiling with favor and grace. In Numbers 6:23–24 the priests were commanded to bless the people by saying, "The Lord bless you and keep you; *the Lord make his face to shine upon you*. . . the Lord *turn his face toward you* and give you peace" (italics added). In biblical usage the face was understood to reveal a person's emotions, moods, and dispositions (Hamilton 1980, 727). God's face "shines" (cf. Ps 4:6) as a sign of his favor and good will toward someone. To turn away the face signifies rejection (Ps 132:10). In this Aaronic benediction—still used in churches today—the shining face of God, turned toward the believer, making eye contact, signifies God's approval and positive feeling for his redeemed people.

Old Testament prophetic texts such as Is 62:4–5; 65:19; Jer 32:40–41; and especially Zeph 3:14–17, vividly express the "Good News" of God's delight in his people, and provide additional justification for imagining, by faith, the smiling face of God. The prophet Isaiah looks forward to the Messianic age when God will call Zion by a new name and see his people in the light of a new righteousness and glory. They will no longer be viewed as "Deserted" or "Desolate," but returned from exile, God will call his people "Hephzibah" and "Beulah" (Is 62:4).

A new name signifies a new identity and self-understanding. "Abram" becomes "Abraham" (Gen 17:5, "father of many"). Jacob ("supplanter") becomes "Israel" (Gen 32:28, "he struggles with God"). Simon son of Jonah becomes "Peter" (Matt 16:18, *kephas,* "Rock"). The new name signifies how God now sees the person, and *how the person should see themselves.* The core identity of the redeemed people of God is that of a people in whom God feels delight (Hephzibah, "my delight is in her"). They are married (Beulah, "married") the bride of the God who loves them, who sees them crowned with splendor, wearing a royal diadem (Is 62:3). God is happy and smiling as he beholds his beloved bride—the one over whom he rejoices and takes delight (Is 65:19).

The prophet Jeremiah, in the thirty-second chapter of his book, announces, prior to the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the invading Babylonians, a coming new covenant with blessings that stagger the imagination: "They will be my people, and I will be their God . . . I will make an everlasting covenant with them: *I will never stop doing good to them* . . . they will never turn away from me. *I will rejoice in doing them good* and will assuredly plant them in this land *with all my heart and soul"* (Jer 32:38, 40–41; italics added). The blessings promised in this stunning announcement surpass the expectations that most Christians today have concerning the "Good News" of the gospel, as we typically understand it. God promises that he will never stop doing good to his people, never stop blessing them—even into eternity. As the unending ages run, God will be blessing us with new and ever deepening experiences of his holiness, goodness, glory, mercy, love, peace, and joy. This promise of blessings that continue to be bestowed into eternity seems to foreshadow the remarkable vision of the apostle Paul in Eph 3:19, where he states that it is God's intention to fill his redeemed people to the measure of "all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19)—immeasurably more than all we can ask or now imagine (Eph 3:20).

And not only so—but, furthermore, Jeremiah tells us how God himself *feels* as he blesses us. God rejoices in doing us good (Jer 32:41). Our hearts will resonate with God's heart, with the joy that he feels in us. *We will feel* the joyful feelings that *God feels* for us—and behold God's smiling face (cf. Num 6:25–26) as he feels the pleasure of blessing us.

Zeph 3:17 could rightly be called the "John 3:16" of the Old Testament. This remarkable text declares to the returning exiles God's love and favor for his people, and the pleasure and delight that he feels in beholding them:

> The Lord your God is with you; he is mighty to save. *He will take great delight in you*; he will quiet you with his love, *he will rejoice over you with singing* (italics added).

The Old Testament scholar O. Palmer Robertson has called this passage Yahweh's "poem of personal love"—an inspired declaration of ". . . the deepest inner joy and satisfaction of God himself in his love for his people" (Robertson 1990, 339). This is the only time in the Old Testament that God is depicted as singing—and here, he is singing because he is feeling joy and delight as he looks at his beloved children.

A few verses earlier (3:14–15) the people are called upon to "Sing . . . shout aloud . . . Be glad and rejoice with all your heart. . . The Lord has taken away your punishment." The people can sing and rejoice, not only because they know they are forgiven, but also because they can resonate and share the feeling of joy and delight that God feels for them. "Delight, joy, rejoicing, and singing on God's part underscore the mutuality of emotional experience (italics added) felt by God and the redeemed" (Robertson, 339). God sings with delight, and sings with a happy face!

The word for God's love in v.17b is not the usual word (hesed) for God's steadfast, covenant faithfulness, but ahaba, used of the passionate love of Jacob for Rachell (Gen 29:20), of Jonathan's deep friendship with David (I Sam 18:3), or the psalmist's delight

in the law of the Lord (Ps 119:97). This a deeply felt emotion that makes him ". . . contemplate his beloved with wordless adoration" (Motyer 1998, 958).

In the New Testament, Matt 3:16–17—Jesus's baptism in the Jordan—and Gal 4:4–6—our adoption, sonship, and reception of the Spirit—have important implications for our image of God, and God's image of us. All three Persons of the Trinity were present at Jesus's baptism: Jesus, the Son of God incarnate; God the Father speaking from heaven; and the Holy Spirit descending visibly on Jesus in the form of a dove. Before being sent into the desert and subsequently to Galilee to proclaim the good news of the approaching Kingdom of God, Jesus is affirmed by the Father as the beloved Son with whom God is neither disappointed nor distant, but *well pleased.* This is God's image of Jesus—*beloved* Son—Jesus's true identity—how Jesus is to think of himself. The dove that descends on Jesus visibly and externally is an image of Jesus's experience invisibly and internally: the love of God the Father being poured into and felt by Jesus in his heart (cf. Rom 5:5, "the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us").

The baptism of Jesus is a picture not only of Jesus' reception of the Spirit—but also of ours, and of our salvation. Because we, by faith, are forgiven and adopted sons and daughters of God the Father, we too have been given the Spirit (Gal 4:4–6) through which we experience the love of our "Abba" Father, and know that we, too, are seen as a beloved son or daughter. In Gal 4:4–6 the baptismal experience of Jesus is reduplicated in us. We, like Jesus at his baptism, can see through the eyes of faith the shining face of God beholding us (cf. Num 6:25–26), and rejoice in our new status as the objects of God's love and delight.

In Luke 15 Jesus tells three parables that portray God's gracious character and the joy and happiness that he feels in a restored relationship with us. God is like a good shepherd (cf. Ezek 34; Ps 23) who rejoices when he finds his lost sheep, and calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him—an image of the rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents (15:3–7). God is like a woman who searches her house to find one lost coin, and calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her when she finds it (15:8–10). God is like the father of the prodigal son, who seeing his returning son, is filled with compassion, embraces him with affection, and calls for a feast to "celebrate and be glad" (15:11–32). All three stories call us to visualize the happy and smiling faces of the shepherd, the woman, and the father of the prodigal. All three parables—but especially the parable of the prodigal son—reveal Jesus's deepest and most heartfelt teachings about how we are to see God—and how we are to see ourselves in the light of how God sees us.

In the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel Jesus tells the disciples that he no longer considers them to be only servants, but now he calls them *friends*—"for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (15:15). He has not hidden secret information from them, but trusted them enough to share with them all the Father revealed to him. He indeed was willing to lay down his life for his disciples, his friends (15:13). Included in the divine purpose in his going to the cross was the intention to establish this relationship—friendship—with the disciples—and with us. Christ intends

for us to see ourselves as his friends, if indeed we obey his commands (15:14). We are glad to see our friends; we welcome them with happy, smiling faces. John 15:13–15) justifies our seeing, through the eyes of faith, Jesus smiling at us, enjoying having us in his presence. Good news indeed!

Biblical Meditation with an Image of a Smiling Jesus

We filter our interactions with others—including God—through the lenses of mental models influenced by our previous interactions with parents, teachers, and authority figures. Our emotional responses to God are often clouded by our own stories and implicit memories (Thompson 2010). Implicit memories of negative experiences—e.g., an emotionally distant, angry, or critical parent; hurtful experiences in school or church; emotional or sexual abuse, or wartime trauma—can overlay our explicit thoughts about God and sabotage a close and satisfying relationship with Christ. Some research has shown that negative relations with caregivers are associated with God as being experienced as more demanding and authoritarian (Beck and McDonald 2004; Hall and Brokaw 1995).

Recent studies of imagery have shown that intentional focusing on an image can alter neural connections in specific regions of the brain. The mind can change the brain––laying down new neural pathways over the old— as much as the brain can change the mind. For example, imagining playing scales on the piano activates motor areas of the brain responsible for the fingers. This activation is similar to that caused by actually playing the piano (Siegel 2020, 58; 277).

When we look at a smiling face—of a person actually present, or eve of a picture held before us, or even only *imagined*—the mirror systems of the brain activate our facial muscles to imitate that smiling face (Cozolino 2014; Lundqvist and Dimberg 1995). The smiling face of a mother triggers a smiling and happy face in the baby held in her arms (Schore 2019, 171). Not only do we imitate the smiling face we see, but we also mirror the feeling of happiness that we associate with a smiling face (Dimberg and Ohman 1996; Singer and Lamm 2009). This triggering of the imitation of a smiling face—even in the absence of a conscious awareness of the stimulus—prompts our brains to resonate with the happy emotional state of the image that we are viewing or imagining (Decety and Grezes 2006).

These findings from neuroscience could be applied in the practice of biblical meditation on a smiling image of Jesus (Figure 1 below). The suggested image is David Bowman's "Jesus Christ Welcome Home Hug" (2005), accessible at *Amzn.to/4bCiTC7*. All artist's conceptions of Jesus reflect, of course, the artist's own cultural backgrounds (Flett 2022; Fillon 2002). Bowman's depiction is no exception, and reflects his Western and American culture. Other images more suitable to an individual's religious tradition, culture, or temperament could be substituted.

The method is that of ancient *lectio divina*—the slow, prayerful, and meditative reading of scripture—as variously described, for example, by Magrassi (1968); Casey (1996); Pennington (1998); Painter (2011). The method of biblical meditation proposed

here (Davis 2012, 2021) is a *lectio divina* reading of scripture combining narrative and didactic texts with artistic images. Narratives activate both the left- and right-hemispheres of our brains, while scientific texts primarily activate the left (Siegel, 295). Narratives enable our brains to integrate in ideas, images, feelings, and behaviors in our conscious memory (Cozolino, 390). The purpose of this whole brain method is to engage multiple regions of the brain to form new neural pathways, and to mitigate negative implicit memories in the reader's mental model of God.

A practitioner can, over the course of several weeks, meditate on the texts listed in Table 2: Numbers 6:23–24; Isaiah 62:4–5; 65:19; Jeremiah 32:40–41; Zephaniah 3:14–17; Matthew 3:16–17; Galatians 4:6–7; Luke 15:3–24; John 15:14–15. Each text in turn could be the focus of meditation for a period of ten to 15 minutes a day for a period of 1 week.

Research has shown that meditation can promote spiritual, emotional, and physical health. The *Reveal* survey of 1,007 churches conducted by the Willow Creek Association September 2008–March 2010 found that reflection on scripture was the most effective practice for producing spiritual growth—more effective than Bible reading, prayer for guidance, prayer for confession of sin, tithing, journaling, or solitude (Hawkins & Parkinson, 117–18). Meditation can permanently strengthen neural connections in parts of the brain that are involved with lowering anxiety and depression, and enhancing social awareness and empathy (Newberg and Waldman 2010, 149). Even ten to 15 minutes of meditation can have positive effects on cognition, relaxation, and psychological health, and can help to reduce smoking and binge-drinking behavior (Leigh, Bowen, and Marlatt 2005, 1335-41).

Meditation can promote positive emotions, and positive emotions have been shown to have health benefits. A study conducted by Sheldon Cohen and his associates at Carnegie Mellon University involved 334 volunteers ages eighteen to fifty-five who tracked their emotions on a daily basis for 3 weeks. Participants with the highest levels of positive emotions were nearly three times less likely to develop a cold than those who reported the least positive emotions. The subjects with the most positive emotions also tended to report fewer and milder cold symptoms for any given severity of the cold (Cohen et al. 2003; Davidson 2012, 121).

Table 2. Biblical images of a smiling god.

Biblical Images of a Smiling and Happy God:	
God's "Smile" *Promised* in the Old Covenant:	God's "Smile" *Fulfilled* in the New Covenant:
*Numbers 6:23–24:	*Matthew 3:16–17:
*Isaiah 62: 4–5:	*Galatians 4:6–7:
65:19:	
*Jeremiah. 32:40–41:	*Luke 15:3–24:
*Zephaniah 3:14–17:	*John 15:14–15:

Envisioning God as a punishing figure, or having negative attitudes towards clergy and other church members, can contribute to poorer health and depression (Koenig, Pargament, and Nielsen 1998). Having a mental model of God as an authoritarian or critical being activates limbic areas of the brain that trigger feelings of fear and anger––priming the brain to fight (Newberg, 110–11). Seeing a picture of an angry or harsh face triggers circuits in the amygdala that produce feelings of anger in the viewer (Hariri et al. 2002).

On the other hand, meditating on any form of love, including the love of God—such as expressed in the biblical texts in Table 2—strengthens the neural circuits that enable us to feel compassion toward others (Lamm, Batson, and Decety 2007). Perceiving God as a benevolent God—a God with a compassionate and happy face, like the father of the prodigal son—activates the anterior cingulate and the brain's prefontal cortex, generating feelings of empathy towards those who are suffering or hurting (Newberg, 111). Our images and mental models of God can inhibit or enhance our ability to experience the love of God—the love that God wants to pour ever more fully into our hearts (Rom 5:5).

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

This paper proposed biblical meditation on selected scriptures as one possible way of addressing a problem identified by the Baylor Religion Survey (2006): the disconnect, for many American Christians, between their stated propositional *beliefs* about a benevolent God, and their implicit mental models of God as angry, critical, or distant. Possible causes of this disconnect, and negative consequences for personal piety and programs of discipleship and spiritual formation were suggested.

An enhanced technique of *lectio divina*—biblical meditation—combining scriptures emphasizing the benevolence and love of God (Table 2) together with a picture of a smiling Jesus was presented. This version of *lectio divina* combines reflection on scripture with insights from neuroscience and psychotherapy—e.g., implicit memories, neural mirroring, and attachment theory.

Further research is needed to experimentally test the hypothesis assumed—but not proven—in this paper: that meditation on scriptures emphasizing the benevolence of God may mitigate or reframe negative images of God rooted in dysfunctional family relationships or abusive experiences with authority figures. Such future studies might involve recruiting a cohort of volunteers from a local church or parachurch organization, and administering a pre-test and post-test using the questions about beliefs in God employed in the Baylor Religion Survey (see Table 1, 22–23). Data collected would be analyzed to determine whether a stated number of weeks of directed meditation on the biblical texts of Table 2 and the image of Jesus (Figure 1) produces statistically significant movement from negative to more positive images of God.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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