

# Thinking with God: Weaving God's Thoughts into Human Identities and Relationships

*By Jim Wilder*

We can only think with God if God reveals himself and God will not reveal himself to everyone. Judas (not Iscariot) was amazed to hear Jesus say that Jesus and the Father would only reveal themselves to those who loved them. (John 14:22) To better understand the announcement Jesus gave to the disciples in the upper room, we will examine two fundamental issues. First, what kind of love leads God to reveal himself? Second, how is that revelation used to think with God using a human brain?

Spiritual formation involves teaching the human brain to love and think with (contemplate) God. Both loving and contemplating are inherently relational. Because the human brain contains a relational engagement system, loving and thinking with God must engage and train that system. An examination of the brain's relational system will tell us why and show us how.

Because the relational system in the human brain establishes both our identity and reality, relational operations entail very careful constraints, limits, processes and protections. Disregarding these safeguards means we will: a) have little relational awareness of God, b) experience very little character change, c) grow very little love, d) fail to share the mind of God, and e) not form relationships with the people we should love.

The central constraint of the brain's relational system is that access (to build and change our identity or reality) is limited to those who we love with attachment love. Thinking in harmony with others (knowing) requires this unique form of love – attachment love. Are Jesus and the Father looking for attachment love before they reveal themselves?

## [Attachment love and Dallas Willard](#)

Dallas Willard once raised the question to me, is our salvation built around attachment love? Attachment love is the strongest force in the human brain and is the basis for developing both identity and character. I set out on an eight year exploration of the implications of attachment love for spiritual formation that culminated in writing [Renovated: God, Dallas Willard and Churches that Transform](#).

There is no question that love is central for God. There is almost universal agreement that the love God commands cannot be reduced to an emotion. But does God intend to form eternal attachments with himself and between his people when God speaks of love? God made attachment love central in

the brain. Humans would need to use their attachment love based relational system to understand what God was telling us about love. Examining the words and practices surrounding love in Scripture should reveal if these match the characteristics of attachment love.

### Attachment love in the human brain

Human infants develop their identities and minds in response to the attachments. Healthy attachments form from joyful interactions with life-giving people. Unhealthy attachments form with those who withhold or threaten life. Attachment love compels parents to enter burning buildings to save their child. The absence of attachment love leads to the greatest atrocities of human kind. Attachment love is stronger than our desire for life itself. Might God want us to love him that way?

Attachment love forms a kind of permanent “glue” uniting two people. The human brain is pre-wired to glue/attach itself to the source of its life. Thus, the one who feeds us, gives us our drink, or gives us shelter will become the center of our attachment love. Hebrew uses the word *dabeq* (to glue) in commanding us to attach permanently to God. (i.e. Deuteronomy 11:22) Letting the serpent feed us was an attachment mistake. Asking the Baals to feed us or provide fertility creates attachments to them. Those who feed on words of life, eat the Bread of Heaven, drink Living Water and dwell in the shelter of the Most High also build attachment love. The love that attaches us to the source of life is attachment love.

### Does the Bible mean attachment love when it speaks of agape love?

While the biblical words for love are covered in much more detail in *Renovated*, it is worth commenting here that we cannot separate God’s enduring kindness (*hesed*) from God’s love (*ahab*). *Hesed* expresses a) enduring kindness that is b) life-giving. *Hesed* and *ahab* characterize both God’s love and the best of human love. (Micah 6:8) *Ahab* (translated into Greek as *agapao* in Matthew 5:43) includes all the New Testament teaching on agape love. It should not surprise us, then, that attachment love is the central and strongest force for developing identity in the human brain.

### The brain’s fast track and slow track

What allows the human brain to think with God? We need to examine a few more details before we can put together a picture of how attachment love lets us think with God and develop Christlike character.

The relational brain process that creates identity runs in the right brain at a speed faster than conscious thought. Everything from attachment love, through thinking together and creating character operate in this “fast track.” Our fast track identity is formed by who we love and determines the reactions we call “character.” The relational fast track creates our spontaneous reactions.

Conscious attention runs slowly under the influence of the left brain. This “slow track” provides explanations, procedures and words for our experiences. What we understand, believe and usually mean by “think” are in the slow track. Beliefs in our slow track struggle to manage our fast track reac-

tions. The slow track does what Dallas called “sin management.”

While the slow track (conscious thought) can think **about** God it cannot think **with** God. The slow track can **believe** about God but is fundamentally limited in **knowing** God. The slow track is the home for most of what we would call religion.

### Mutual mind in the human brain

How then do we bring new life into the fast track? The brain must establish attachment love to some greater mind who lets us think with “it” in real time (faster than conscious thought.) The only system in the brain capable of thinking with another mind in real time is the “mutual mind” stage in the fast track. The brain is wired to await a greater mind that will reveal “itself” through attachment love.

The first “greater mind” the brain encounters will be human. A human brain cannot develop a mutual mind capacity without attachment to a person. Babies are born without this capacity and develop mutual mind abilities starting about five months of age. Without a loving attachment, the ability to understand what someone else is thinking and feeling does not develop correctly. If we cannot love those we see how can we love God who we have not seen?

Once developed, the brain uses mutual mind states to understand others. Understanding others builds identity and character for infants. Before long, the brain builds a “firewall” around mutual mind states. It will not allow any other mind to change its character, reality or identity unless there is attachment love between them. Attachment love opens the firewall (during mutual mind states) allowing changes to who we are and how we react. The fast track uses attachment love as the security check before it changes our character. Notice that the brain checks for the presence of our attachment love rather than checking our belief in attachment love.

### Formation and transformation

Practical implications for spiritual formation are imposed by the tight link between attachment love, mutual mind states and developing character. The fast track in the brain is capable of thinking with another mind in real time. When two minds are connected by attachment love, the lesser of the two minds will become like the greater. Tracking how the greater mind operates during a state of loving attachment allows the lesser mind to think and respond spontaneously like the greater mind. If these mutual mind states are frequent enough, the lesser mind becomes more and more like the mind that gives it life. It becomes increasingly difficult to know who is thinking. Both minds think and react alike.

Conscious meditation about truth and God’s character does not produce mutual mind states. Meditation flows from focusing our attention - be it on nothingness or something. God does not need to reveal himself for meditation to happen. Meditation can be un-relational but contemplation cannot. Contemplative prayer flows from an awareness of God’s active presence. Contemplation involves thinking with God (in real time) using mutual mind states.

I was working with Dallas to expand an idea that has guided spiritual formation since the early church. Early Christians copied the spiritual practices Jesus used. Imitating Jesus prayer life and times alone with God proved to be necessary but not enough. Why do we need more help than Jesus did? As humans, our identity formation begins in the womb. That formation has already gone terribly wrong by the time we are five years old. We are misassembled, malfunctioning and have missing parts. Jesus, on the other hand, matured with a complete humanity. Jesus' spiritual practices only needed to maintain his mutual mind with the Father.

Dallas and I came to agree that spiritual maturity included all natural human maturity **plus** elements that could only be added by the Holy Spirit. The brain will require attachment love with both God and God's people if it is going to develop Christlike character. Maturity reflects relational capacity in the brain's fast track. Let us see why God seems intent upon making us practice attachment love with others as much as with himself.

### Both human and divine relationships are needed

Combined natural and spiritual maturity development should begin during our earthly lives and be learned using our physical brain. Practicing the skills and patterns of normal human maturity requires mutual mind and attachment with people. Attachment love with people completes the missing, weak or distorted elements of our early formation. Jesus did not need this practice.

There is much in our human identity and interactions that is both missing and defective. Jesus instituted a process of discipleship within a group of peers to repair the identities of his followers. Forming attachments between the twelve proved to be a lot of slow work. Disciple building was quite different from what Jesus did personally with the Father. Spiritual formation combines transforming moments with God with formational practices with people. Both activities develop loving attachments.

Starting an attachment, like falling in love, can be quite easy with people we like. Maintaining attachments when something goes wrong is the measure of emotional maturity. When someone begins to feel more like an enemy than a friend (or takes an instant dislike to us) we discover the strength of our attachment love.

"Enemy" times immediately reveal the strength of our attachment to God. God is attached (hesed) with love (aheb) to our "enemy." If we are in a mutual mind attachment with God at that moment, our spontaneous reaction to the "enemy" will be love. To Dallas, these spontaneous responses to "enemies" were the benchmark of spiritual maturity. For me, loving our enemies becomes the testing and training ground for attachment love to God and others. Any identity flaws left by our early development will be exposed. We are most open for transformation while someone feels like an enemy but only if our attachment love to God (or one of God's people) is strong enough to support mutual mind in that space.

When St. Teresa of Avila was leading her Carmelite reform and developing her understanding of

contemplative prayer, she insisted that only through loving attachment to others could the contemplative life develop. St. Teresa likewise insisted that without the contemplative life there would be no transformation of our attachments to others. The spiritual life is a dual sort of relational life.

The threads that weave a cloth go in two directions. Building strong attachment bonds with God and others takes the attachment threads in different directions but result in one cloth. Threads constantly alternate which one is in front but both directions are always there. Sometimes God's thread shows through. Other places, the threads from your life in me or mine in you appear. The cloth is God and you and me. One moment one thread is in front and then another. The strength of the cloth comes from both those threads we see and those that are hidden. We are thinking with God and God's people through mutual mind and becoming new. God's patterns and colors emerge as we attach and are woven together. Our spiritual life as individuals and communities (and there is less separation than we might think) becomes an eternal fabric of relationship or it unravels into nothing.