

“Knight’s Claw”: Neo-Legalism and the Preferential Option of the Institution

*Theological Narratives, Ethnography, and the
Reproduction of Abuse in the Foursquare Church*

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Abstract

This study explores how theological narratives, particularly those surrounding forgiveness, submission, bitterness, and suffering, shape the moral reasoning, ecclesial structure, and institutional culture of the Church in ways that may contribute to the perpetuation of systemic abuse and organizational failure. Using ethnographic methods, this research examines how these theological themes are preached, interpreted, and enacted in church life and how they influence responses to conflict, misconduct, and harm, often revealing a recurring ecclesial tendency to privilege institutional preservation and reputation over the care and advocacy of victims. By focusing on the practical expression of theology, the study identifies the unintended consequences of these core beliefs, offering insight into how the generalization of theological narratives can sustain cycles of silence, complicity, and institutional betrayal.

Keywords: Theological Narratives, Spiritual Bypass, Spiritual Abuse, Authority and Power in the Church, Institutional Betrayal, Impression Management, Ethnography of Religion

ECCLESIAL CRISIS

Abuse & Scandal in the Foursquare Church



LIVED EXPERIENCE (ETHNOGRAPHY)



FUNCTIONAL THEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES



Forgiveness
Accelerated
closure



Submission
Silenced dissent



Suffering
Spiritualized
endurance



Bitterness
Moral suspicion
of the wounded

INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS THAT FRAME A PREFERENCE FOR THE INSTITUTION



Progress
"Move on"



Celebrity
Charismatic
insulation



Loyalty
Gatekeeping &
marginalization



Dualism
Theology
(esp. unger legal
risk)



"Knight's Claw"
Controlling
Institutional Force

HISTORICAL & ORGANIZATIONAL GENEALOGY

- Enmeshment and legal cut offs.
- Neo-legalism as institutional *modus operandi*.
- "Knight's Claw" – internal idiom for controlling institutional force

PREFERENTIAL OPTION OF THE INSTITUTION

This study contends that the renewal of the Church requires more than revised policies or procedural safeguards that all focus on human agency. The remedy appears to be a functional reliance on God's agency, where the institution rests in repentance while being exposed in crisis *reminiscent of Isaiah 30*.



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Introduction

In recent decades, numerous high-profile cases of abuse and institutional betrayal have surfaced across a variety of church traditions. While many studies have addressed leadership failures, governance structure, and policy deficiencies, more attention should be given to theological narratives that undergird these systems and shape how churches interpret and respond to harm. Too often, phrases such as “submit to authority,” “forgive,” and “don’t let bitterness take root” are not merely biblical exhortations; they serve as cultural scripts that frame institutional reactions to crisis both for good and for harm. More specifically, an over-generalization of theology can be weak contextually and contribute more harm than good to the vulnerable.¹

This research asks the following: *How do theological narratives—particularly those surrounding forgiveness, submission, suffering, and bitterness—contribute to the justification and reproduction of systemic abuse and institutional failure within the church?* Using ecclesial studies, this study examines how such narratives are presented, embodied, and framed to manage impressions that prefer the institution over the vulnerable.

Context & Biography

This research focuses on the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Foursquare was founded just over a hundred years ago by Aimee Semple McPherson, a pioneering female pastor who preached the fourfold gospel: Jesus as Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, and Soon Coming King. From its beginnings, the Foursquare Church has affirmed the leadership of women and has historic ties to movements such as Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, the Assemblies of God, the Salvation Army, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance. While the movement began in the United States, it has grown far beyond its American roots. Today, the majority of Foursquare churches are outside the United States, with tens of thousands of congregations in more than a hundred countries and about 1,700 churches in the United States.² Like many Western churches, Foursquare now faces the sobering reality of leadership scandals, including clergy abuse and the institutional mishandling and covering up of such cases.³

This researcher has served as a pastor and denominational leader for more than 25 years, with a calling rooted in walking with people through seasons of suffering, growth, and spiritual transformation. That calling became deeply personal when his wife, a pastoral trauma therapist, came forward

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1. Mary E. DeMuth, *We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis* (n.p.: Harvest House Publishers, 2019), chap. 5; Werner Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up, and the Need for a Reform of Church and Theology,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. CTEWC Book Series 3 (2023): sec. chap. 15, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.72069>.
 2. Foursquare Church, “Our Mission + Approach,” The Foursquare Church, n.d., <https://www.foursquare.org/about/mission/>.
 3. Daniel Silliman, “Foursquare Abuse Response Ignites Fight Over Transparency,” *Christianity Today*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2022/08/foursquare-abuse-transparency-ignite-grace-larkin-lpu/>.

with a report of sexual harassment by a leader in their denomination. Her courage helped expose a broader pattern of institutional abuse, failure, and betrayal.⁴

Standing beside her through that painful season, the researcher witnessed not only the high cost of truth-telling but also the church's hesitance—and at times reluctance—to confront and respond biblically to that truth.

This research is fueled by lived experience. It's not written from a distance but from within the episode itself. At its heart, it explores how theological language—words like “forgive,” “don't be bitter,” and “submit”—can be used not to heal but to prefer and shield institutions, silence the vulnerable, avoid hard truths, and protect those in power. The aim is to name these dynamics truthfully and open space for a more faithful and redemptive way forward, one that reorients the institution's preference for self-protection over the vulnerable. Though the church formally proclaims Christ's preferential option for the vulnerable, its functional systems, structures, sermons, and especially its reflex for image management often betray a deeper allegiance to institutional self-preservation.⁵

Description of Problem

In reviewing the literature, it quickly becomes clear that the global Church faces a serious problem with its misuse of power.⁶ Even those outside the Church recognize the repeated systemic failures of the institutions. However, within this larger crisis lies a more specific issue: the way theological narratives are often used to protect the institution rather than to care for the vulnerable.⁷

Regarding this specific problem, Gustavo Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians remind us that God reveals his nature in the very midst of suffering and marginalization. The cry of the poor and vulnerable is not just a social issue but a sacred place of theology. To draw near to the vulnerable is to encounter God, who in Christ makes a preferential choice for the vulnerable in solidarity.⁸

Knowing God, then, is inseparable from how the people of God live. It's not about protecting the church's image but about practicing discipleship through justice, compassion, and solidarity. When

4. “Heidi's Story,” Hagar's Voice, May 20, 2025, <https://hagarsvoice.buzzsprout.com/1979877/episodes/10632428-episode-1-heidi-s-story>.

5. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* (n.p.: Orbis Books, 1996); Jodi Death, “Identity, Forgiveness and Power in the Management of Child Sexual Abuse by Personnel in Christian Institutions,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 2, no. 1 (2013): 86, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v2i1.92>; The Foursquare Church has at times articulated pastoral commitments to vulnerable communities. See “Shepherding Our Congregations Through the Events in Minneapolis and Immigration Enforcement Activity,” Foursquare Resources, accessed March 13, 2026, <https://resources.foursquare.org/shepherding-our-congregations-through-the-events-in-minneapolis-and-immigration-enforcement-activity/>.

6. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (n.p.: Brazos Press, 2020), 145; DeMuth, *We Too*, chap. 4 & 7; Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church*, 1st ed. (n.p.: Zondervan, 2022), chap. 1; Wade Mullen, *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse—and Freeing Yourself from Its Power* (n.p.: Tyndale Momentum, 2020).

7. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 89.

8. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (15th Anniversary Edition with New Introduction by Author), revised ed. (n.p.: Orbis Books, 1988).

the church stands with the poor and vulnerable, it reflects God's heart. However, when it chooses self-preservation over the wounded, it distorts God's character, harms others, and misaligns its values with God's. In this light, it becomes clear that while church institutions almost always formally profess solidarity with the vulnerable, in practice, they more often align themselves functionally with preserving the institution. This compounds the problem when the church proclaims one set of values yet enacts another.⁹ As Andrew Griffin states, "The answer [to this problem] might be in better [theological] actions rather than better [theological] words."¹⁰

Research Question

This researcher sought to discover the answer to this question: *How do theological narratives—particularly those surrounding forgiveness, submission, suffering, and bitterness—contribute to the justification and reproduction of systemic abuse and institutional failure within the church?* The primary purpose of the research is to understand to what extent theological narratives can be weaponized, leading to repeated abuses. This research is intended to catalyze future conversations that could bring greater clarity to the problem of bypassing real traumas through overgeneralized theological narratives that frame a preference for the institution rather than Christ's preference for the vulnerable.¹¹ The hope is to see the church's formal theology align with its functional theology when responding to abuse and scandal.¹²

Limitations

A limitation of this research is its reliance on the researcher's own perception and, therefore, reflexivity, which are inherent to an ethnographic methodology.¹³ As such, the study is intentionally focused on the experiences and perspectives of the vulnerable within church communities through ecclesial studies.¹⁴ This narrowed scope of congregational studies through ethnography strives to determine "the credibility of the formal theological account of the church."¹⁵ Given that Scripture consistently reveals God's concern for the vulnerable, any such interdisciplinary engagement should be mindful of that divine predisposition and not dismiss the theological weight of centering marginalized voices first.¹⁶ Therefore, the acknowledged limitation of bias by this researcher is purposefully

9. Caroline Yih, "Theological Reflection on Silencing and Gender Disenfranchisement," *Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2022): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073x.2022.2108822>.

10. Andrew Griffin, *Crisis, Issues, and Reputation Management: A Handbook for PR and Communications Professionals* (n.p.: Kogan Page, 2014), 236.

11. Gutierrez, *Gustavo Gutierrez*.

12. Marco Carroggio, "Church Communication in the Face of Vulnerability: A Theoretical Framework and Practical Application for Information Management in Cases of the Abuse of Minors," *Church, Communication and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2021.1880950>.

13. Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Second Edition (Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing), 2nd ed. (n.p.: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 12–21, 91.

14. Christian B. Scharen, *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography) (n.p.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), sec. Introduction.

15. Scharen, *Explorations*, 17.

16. Gutierrez, *Gustavo Gutierrez*.

employed with transparency and reflexivity as a strategy of preferring the vulnerable over any institution.¹⁷ In summary, the bias toward the vulnerable by this researcher is not a liability but rather a strategy when couched in ethnography and the larger theological stream of liberation theology.

Literature Review

As this researcher engaged the literature on church abuse and institutional image management, it became clear that much of the thinking in this space builds upon the work of two key secular voices: Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault. First, Goffman's ideas around impression management, symbolic interactionism, and rhetorical framing help explain how institutions shape identity and manage how they are perceived by the public.¹⁸ Similarly, Foucault's works on power and language, especially his concepts of pastoral power, dual tendencies, and the power/knowledge dynamic, offer tools for understanding how authority and power relate to self, leaders, people, and language.¹⁹

What's striking is how often these two thinkers show up, directly or indirectly, in the work of ecclesial scholars trying to make sense of how churches navigate scandal, protect image, and respond to harm. For example, Wade Mullen and Jodi Death engage directly with either Goffman or Foucault, whereas the remaining authors of the literature used in this research draw more indirectly—even implicitly—from the ideas of Goffman or Foucault. In fact, many authors relay Goffman's ideas secondarily through Mullen's work.²⁰ Additionally, many ecclesial authors utilized the term "impression management," which Goffman coined in his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.²¹

Similarly, along with Death and Mullen, Diane Langberg, Caroline Yih, Paige Sweet, and Timothy Rhee all build on Foucault's insights. Their work shows how institutional and leadership responses shape both individual and collective self-identities. A simple example is gaslighting: as Sweet explains, gaslighting "systematically constructs victims as 'crazy' and destabilizes their realities."²¹ In this way, the literature highlights Foucault's point that power operates not just externally but by shaping how people see themselves, leading individuals and groups to internalize limitations and self-subjugate.²² In summary, Goffman's and Foucault's frameworks seem to form a kind of shared secular vocabulary for

17. Gutierrez, *Gustavo Gutierrez*.

18. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, later reprint ed. (n.p.: Northeastern University Press, 1986); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 7th ed. (n.p.: Anchor, 2021).

19. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, first ed. (n.p.: Vintage, 1980).

20. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 13; Death, "Identity, Forgiveness," 107; Mullen, *Something's Not Right*.

21. Paige L. Sweet, "The Sociology of Gaslighting," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5 (2019): 855, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419874843>.

22. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982), <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>.

anyone trying to grasp the deeper dynamics at play in the church's handling of scandal.

This dynamic, in which the church turns to the secular for solutions to the problem of abuse, is striking. Even ecclesial experts who contribute to the literature on this issue often look primarily to social scientists, psychologists, lawyers, and philosophers as the more credible voices with real answers to the church's abuse of power.²³ In many cases, these experts themselves come from secular fields. For example, Langberg is a psychologist, Rachel Dehollander is a lawyer, and Marco Carroggio is a communications scholar.²⁴

From reviewing the literature, it's clear that while abuse in the church is at its core an ecclesial issue, the go-to frameworks for addressing it come from secular thinkers like Goffman and Foucault, along with psychologists, lawyers, and communication experts. Even ecclesial scholars tend to lean on these voices, which says a lot about both the credibility they are given and the church's struggle to offer an equally strong and non-generalized theological response.²⁵

This matter is highlighted by Maury Jackson and Horace Crogman, who mention in *Shepherding Public Discourse Practices* that church leaders and, subsequently, the church have a credibility problem in public discourse.²⁶ They note that this is due to church leaders having served in the past as instruments of oppression and abuse. According to their research, people trust philosophers more than pastors and church leaders to facilitate public discourse.²⁷ Let that sink in: the church has a credibility issue regarding the handling of truth because it framed truth in the past unjustly, showing partiality to itself as an institution rather than to the vulnerable individual it is supposed to serve.

This credibility deficit is not simply a matter of perception; it reveals deeper, recurring patterns within church life. As this researcher read and analyzed the literature, it became clear that the mistrust stems from institutional habits that cut across context and denomination. At the center was what one may call—borrowing from Gutierrez and liberation theology—the “preferential option of the institution.” This overarching theme carries with it several related sub-themes: the strategic sanctification of silence and the feminization of the vulnerable.

The Preferential Option of Institution

The literature consistently reveals an institutional tendency to prioritize self-preservation in the face of scandal and abuse, even when this comes at the expense of the vulnerable.²⁸ Werner Jeanrond summarizes this umbrella theme most succinctly when he says, “Theologians and church leaders ought to stop sacrificing the victims and survivors of abuse on the altar of ecclesial integrity.”²⁹ He

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23. Maury Jackson and Horace Crogman, “Shepherding Public Discourse Practices: Homiletic Form Aligned to the Logic Operative in Racial Rhetoric and Public Theological Discourse for Secular Liberal Democracies,” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* 4, no. 9 (2016): 577, <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2177/2016.09.004>.

24. Carroggio, “Church Communication”; Langberg, *Redeeming Power*.

25. Jackson and Crogman, “Shepherding Public Discourse,” 577.

26. Jackson and Crogman, “Shepherding Public Discourse.”

27. Jackson and Crogman, “Shepherding Public Discourse.”

28. Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up,” 253.

29. Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up,” 254.

adds, “Moreover, a critical and self-critical theology would need to remind Christians of their collective hermeneutic responsibility to interpret divine revelation in the church.”³⁰ In summary, the literature suggests that the church is too often unjust and even theologically flawed when it functionally prefers the institution at the expense of the vulnerable.

One example out of many is the over-generalization of forgiveness, which has often been used not to restore victims but to silence them, minimize harm, and protect the institution’s reputation and the leaders’ legitimacy. For instance, Jodi Death, Rachel Dehollander, Mary DeMuth, Wade Mullen, and Patrick O’Leary all observe how institutions frequently frame forgiveness in ways that protect the organization’s threatened legitimacy rather than as a way to bring about justice and restoration for those harmed.³¹ This is a struggle to determine who is ultimately going to be responsible for and bear the shame of scandal and abuse publicly: the victim, the persecutor, or even the institution.³²

This framing shifts the focus away from accountability and instead calls the credibility of the victim into question on the basis of an alleged procedural failure. In doing so, it fosters the perception that the victim is at fault. As Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer argue, this mis-contextualization—or “spinning of Matthew 18”—becomes a strategy for marginalizing the vulnerable. They explain that a “method that leaders in a toxic church culture sometimes use to control the narrative is to attack the way in which critical feedback or allegations of wrongdoing are brought to light.”³³

Additionally, Death, Langberg, and Rhee highlight Foucault’s ideas, showing how pastors and church leaders often wield “identity construction” and the power of knowing another’s conscience when navigating abuse within the church.³⁴ Death notes in her study, “The participants of this study recognized that circumstances where pastoral power was unbalanced and unchecked protected abusive relationships, which become internalized in a mode of pastoral governance built around the discourse of forgiveness.” Langberg summarizes this dynamic succinctly: “Words have the power to build up or tear down a person’s sense of self.”³⁵ And Rhee emphasizes Langberg’s insights while calling for accountability among pastors who speak from the pulpit.³⁶

O’Leary adds another layer, observing, “I have come to see that, for some survivors of abuse, forgiveness can be one of the few options available to move their lives forward.”³⁷ In other words, the choice to forgive must belong to the survivor, not be coerced by leaders seeking to preserve institutional legitimacy.³⁸ The agency and voice of the victim, especially in relation to forgiveness, emerge

30. Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up,” 254.

31. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 85.

32. Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 111–12.

33. Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called To* (n.p.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2020), 47.

34. Yih, “Theological Reflection,” 75.

35. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 64.

36. Timothy Y. Rhee, “When Shepherds Scatter God’s Flock: Understanding Spiritual Abuse in Preaching,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* (2024): 108.

37. David Denborough and Patrick O’Leary, “The Church, Confession, Forgiveness and Male Sexual Abuse,” *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 1 (2002): 8, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit>.

38. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 87, 92.

as repeated themes in the literature. Interestingly, the authors theologically frame forgiveness as a commanded empowerment from God that gives agency and voice back to the vulnerable.³⁹ As Death suggests, “Perhaps the most significant issue in the development of forgiveness discourse is the development of a means by which victim/survivors have ultimate autonomy over their stories of abuse and are able to engage in constructing their discourses of self which are valuable to them and enhance their agency.”⁴⁰

Taken together, all these insights point to a troubling institutional pattern. Theological discourse—particularly about forgiveness, submission, and warnings against bitterness—too often becomes a tool of reputation management rather than genuine spiritual care. Instead of empowering the wounded to discern their own faithful response to Christ, these moral expectations are used to reclaim control by the institution, sanctifying silence and subordinating the vulnerable.⁴¹ This, at its core, is the preferential option of the institution: a doctrinal misuse that protects the church’s image while eroding justice. As DeMuth states, “The church has [often] jumped into bed with power and politics and has given preferential treatment to its reputation instead of the broken cries of survivors.”⁴²

Strategic Sanctifying of Silence

Another recurring theme emerges around strategic omissions, through scope setting, rhetorical framing, agenda setting, and even calls for confidentiality, that become sanctified and, in turn, shape what remains unsaid. This silence reinforces institutional self-protection while causing the vulnerable to conclude that the silence and scope itself is set by God, even in the face of obvious injustice.⁴³ Such omissions hold enormous power, not only because they are framed as coming from God but also because people are often governed by the implicit, or by what remains unspoken and therefore dubious.⁴⁴ As Langberg says with piercing clarity, “A related kind of power we rarely think about is silence. Silence can be a wonderful gift. Silence can also be a weapon.”⁴⁵

Building on this, Yih identifies a dynamic she calls “systemically-supported silencing,” in which institutional structures reinforce the muting of vulnerable voices. She explains, “The suppression of voices through silencing actions continues to be commonly used as a tool to control and subjugate.”⁴⁶ Many practical instances of this kind of silencing are tacitly hidden in institutional leaders’ calls for confidentiality or to avoid gossip.⁴⁷

Likewise, Mullen shows how institutional leaders often use symbolic interaction to project the

39. Yih, “Theological Reflection,” 75.

40. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 87.

41. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 86.

42. DeMuth, *We Too*, 59.

43. Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*.

44. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, “Two Faces of Power,” *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952796>.

45. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 8.

46. Yih, “Theological Reflection,” 32.

47. McKnight and Barringer, *A Church*, chap. 3 & 4.

image they want others to believe, even when it is not true. He calls these “strategic secrets”—tactics misused to silence victims, groom observers, and suppress questions about a leader’s or institution’s legitimacy.⁴⁸

Michael Kruger, in *The Bully Pulpit*, contributes to this conversation by highlighting a persecutor dynamic: abusive pastors often endure in institutions long enough to amass significant power because they have learned to manipulate organizational systems, protecting themselves while silencing their victims.⁴⁹

Furthermore, Death critiques how the larger justice system also functions to silence victims and the vulnerable. She notes how interrogations, investigations, and cross-examinations often re-traumatize victims and may deter them from pursuing further justice.⁵⁰ In this sense, silence becomes an obvious sub-theme of the institution’s preferential option for itself. Leaders strategically cast the institution as more credible and deserving of protection than the vulnerable. This institutional self-preservation sets the scope of discourse, marginalizing those who suffer and ensuring their voices remain unheard.⁵¹

Even more sinister, the literature specifies the strategic silencing of the vulnerable through psychological and spiritual abuses such as shaming, grooming, gaslighting, and spiritual bypass.⁵² For example, Sweet says, “I argue that gaslighting tactics become consequential.... By *consequential*, I mean that such tactics damage victims’ sense of reality, autonomy, mobility, identity, and social support.”⁵³ Similarly, DeMuth and Mullen describe how shame and grooming are employed to keep victims silent.⁵⁴

Yet the literature also makes clear that silence is not always a matter of deliberate suppression. At times, it arises from blindness or sometimes self-deception, either in individuals or a corporate group. Leaders, congregants, and institutions fail to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable because they themselves are constrained, bound by their own subjection, institutional loyalties, or implicit biases.⁵⁵ Yih names this dynamic as a “self-restriction,” an “unwillingness to speak up and express opinions which are not aligned with the formally sanctioned script of the organizational culture.”⁵⁶ Likewise, Kruger suggests that people often have multiple biases that may even impact our use of theology. He states, “So the doctrine of depravity is forgotten when it comes to the pastor but remembered when it comes to victims.”

In summary, the literature shows that silence functions as a strategic tool or frame of focus for people to interpret reality. Institutions too often use this tool of silence to protect themselves, pre-

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48. Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 17–31.

49. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 32.

50. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 83.

51. Bachrach and Baratz, “Two Faces,” 75.

52. Sweet, “The Sociology”; McKnight and Barringer, *A Church*, 62–63.

53. Sweet, “The Sociology,” 852.

54. DeMuth, *We Too*, 78; Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 80–82.

55. Foucault, “The Subject.”

56. Yih, “Theological Reflection,” 32.

senting what is left unsaid as if it came from God and is the best representation of reality.⁵⁷ As Death notes, “The management of abuse within the Christian institutional environment has often come at the cost of silencing, marginalizing and confining the ability of both victims/survivors to construct healthy discourses of self.”⁵⁸

Feminization of the Vulnerable

In light of the previous themes, another related, yet distinct pattern in the literature is the feminization of the vulnerable. While many victims are indeed women, men who suffer abuse are often forced to follow the same script. Their voices are framed as overly emotional, chaotic, visceral, and unreliable—traits historically cast as feminine. In this way, the vulnerable are pushed into a domestic, submissive stance in response to scandal. Such general feminization becomes a convenient way for church leaders to sideline survivors’ stories, thereby discrediting their testimonies before the wider community.⁵⁹

This dynamic is often paired with the masculinization of the persecutor. As Mullen observes, leaders frequently dismiss harassment with phrases such as “locker room talk [among men],” normalizing abusive behavior as a mark of masculine culture.⁶⁰

Nearly every author in the literature points to how patriarchy in the church, whether through theology or practice, sustains these dynamics by limiting women’s leadership and reinforcing gendered categories of power. Taken together, the evidence reveals a clear and persistent feminization of victims/survivors in contrast to the masculinization of perpetrators.

Interestingly, Jeanrond argues that one of the most faithful responses the church can offer is to engage deeply with feminist critiques of theological patriarchy and church administration. These critiques unmask the ways institutions use gendered categories to silence the vulnerable, while also pointing toward more redemptive and faithful practices for addressing abuse and scandal.⁶¹

Gaps in Literature

While reflecting on the literature, several gaps emerge that call for further research. For example, much has been said about the harmful ways the feminization of victims/survivors impacts the church. Yet less attention has been given to the parallel masculinization of persecutors. How does this framing shape institutional bias in responding to scandal and abuse? It seems necessary to ask whether the masculine coding of perpetrators does harm to the restoration of male and female relationships.

Another gap appears in the theological treatment of bitterness. The literature often assumes

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57. Jim A. Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action* (Communication, Media, and Politics), 2nd ed. (n.p.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016).

58. Death, “Identity, Forgiveness,” 86.

59. Yih, “Theological Reflection,” 31–33; Sweet, “The Sociology,” 854–55; Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up,” 258; DeMuth, *We Too*, chap. 8; Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, chap. 7.

60. Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 115.

61. Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up,” 258.

bitterness must be avoided at all costs, but is that always the case biblically? For example, in the book of Ruth, Naomi openly identifies with bitterness, even changing her name to Mara. From that place of lament, she actively coaches Ruth in a bold and even scandalous act: uncovering Boaz, their leader, and pressing him to take responsibility. In this narrative, bitterness is not a disqualifier of faith but a lens that exposes injustice and catalyzes restoration. Therefore, a deeper theological exploration of bitterness may help the church avoid weaponizing the term to silence the wounded.

Perhaps the glaring gap, however, lies in the relationship between legal responsibility and theology. Across the literature, there seems to be an unspoken assumption: legal counsel quietly governs much of the church's response to abuse. Yet insufficient attention has been given to clearly mapping how legal strategy and biblical mandate intersect or conflict. The result, as noted in the beginning of the literature review, is that churches often lean on secular legal counsel as their functional guide, while neglecting to ask how God's Word might call them to a more faithful, specific, and robust theology of justice.

Research Methodology & Design

This study takes an ethnographic approach to explore how theological narratives shape the way the Foursquare Church and its leaders respond to scandal and abuse. To get a well-rounded picture of what is actually happening in practice, it draws on field observation, communication analysis, document review, semi-structured interviews across multiple episodes, framing analysis, and, finally, an organizational genogram.

Description of Methodology

The serious nature of abuse calls for a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach.⁶² For this reason, an ethnographic, qualitative method was chosen. This approach protects survivors' anonymity while allowing their experiences to bring depth to the study. To preserve that depth and meet time requirements, the number of interviewees was limited to three.

Justification of Method

An ethnographic or empirical study of the Foursquare Church—understood as part of the universal Church, the Body of Christ—from “below,” through lived experience, is a necessary methodology for this research.⁶³ It prioritizes the perspectives of individuals on the receiving end of church theology, particularly those who have been impacted by its implementation. As Mark Mulder and

62. Scharen, *Explorations*, 11.

63. Scharen, *Explorations*, 101.

James K. Smith suggest, “Theology needs sociology to supply ‘judicious narratives’ that keep ecclesiology from floating off into the realm of ideal.”⁶⁴

Likewise, when this method is paired with theological insight, ethnographic inquiry becomes a powerful tool for identifying discrepancies and blind spots within the church’s formal doctrine and culture as well as the practical outworking of its leadership. This approach brings to light the often-overlooked realities of ecclesial life, allowing theology to be evaluated not only in abstraction but in embodied experience.⁶⁵

Ethnography, therefore, is not a rival to theology, nor does it function as an alternative means of interpreting Scripture or knowing God. Rather, it creates a necessary feedback loop within theological practice and reflection. More precisely, within the life of the church, it functions as a form of contextual diagnosis. It asks a deceptively simple, yet often uncomfortable question: Is the theology we formally confess actually being experienced as good news in the lived reality of the church?

Like other sociological tools, ecclesial ethnography attends carefully to embodiment. It observes whether theological claims are being faithfully enacted or whether—often unintentionally—they are being distorted, selectively applied, or quietly contradicted in practice. In doing so, it makes visible the space that can emerge between confession and experience—between what a community says it believes and how those beliefs are mediated through structures, practices, and relationships.

Given the long-standing tension between sociology and theology, it is important to note that this approach aligns closely with contemporary contextual theologians such as Bo Lim and David Janzen.⁶⁶ Like ecclesial ethnographers, they advocate a dual hermeneutic: a hermeneutic of trust toward Scripture and the church’s tradition coupled with a hermeneutic of suspicion toward the ways those same sources are refracted through culture, power, and institutional life. Far from undermining theology, this posture seeks to safeguard it from abstraction, distortion, and misuse.

From this perspective, ecclesial ethnography is not a move away from biblical authority. If anything, it represents a refusal to treat authority generically or theoretically. Scripture’s authority is not denied but tested—discerned through its fruit, through how it is lived out, practiced, and encountered within the community of faith.

The historical-grammatical hermeneutic, therefore, remains foundational and non-negotiable. It grounds the church in careful, faithful interpretation and guards against overt misreadings of the text. Yet experience has shown that right interpretation does not automatically lead to right practice. When historical-grammatical work is paired with contextual, sociological, and ethnographic insight, it becomes more faithful rather than less.

Together, these approaches enable the church to attend not only to whether Scripture is being rightly interpreted but also to whether it is being rightly *lived*—especially in contexts where abuse, silence, or misused authority have obscured the gospel rather than revealed it.

64. Scharen, *Explorations*, 100.

65. Scharen, *Explorations*.

66. Bo H. Lim, *Contextual Theological Interpretation an Integrated Model for Reading the Bible* (n.p.: Baker Publishing Group, 2025); David Janzen, *The Liberation of Method*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Fortress Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1khdp08>.

In short, by its very design, this method shifts the focus from the institution's interests to those of the most vulnerable—a notable contrast to other approaches, which, as seen in the literature, too often default to protecting the institution.

Research Design

This study examined four episodes of leadership scandal within the Foursquare denomination. Prior to conducting interviews with Foursquare participants, the researcher completed a pilot interview with a non-Foursquare individual to refine, clarify, and finalize both the interview questions and the interview process. Following this preparatory phase, three interviews were conducted with individuals who were either survivors or secondary victims of leadership misconduct.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity across organizational scope, with intentional attention given to geographic location, ethnic background, and variation across administrative and leadership strata within the denomination. While a sample of three interviews drawn from scandals may appear limited when viewed against the size of the United States' Foursquare denomination as a whole, the sample is more substantial when considered in relation to the number of publicly documented leadership scandals available for study. Within this constrained and sensitive field of inquiry, the sample represents a significant and appropriate cross-section for qualitative, exploratory analysis.

Data collection unfolded in several stages. First, field notes, communication analysis, and document review were gathered to capture the broader cultural responses of the Foursquare Church to scandal. Second, interviews with victims or close observers were conducted, providing direct accounts of specific instances. Third, the collected material—interviews, communications, notes, and documents—was coded into themes, and framing analysis was applied to discern a shared motivation, origin, intent, and/or bias.

A fourth step was later added. As motives and patterns began to emerge, it became important to ask whether these were isolated or systemic. To answer this, a historical organizational genogram was employed, helping to trace back to the origin of cultural patterns in how the Foursquare Church tends to manage crises.

Observations focused on both language and tone in real-time interactions, while internal documents were reviewed to assess how theology and narrative were framed during and after each crisis. The interviews provided firsthand accounts that highlighted the theological language, assumptions, and power dynamics that surface when the Foursquare Church responds to scandal and institutional crisis.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format based on Brewerton and Millward's research methods (see Appendix B) and were conducted over video call in a conversational tone to encourage openness, while avoiding leading questions and researcher bias.⁶⁷ The focus was on concrete, lived

67. Paul M. Brewerton and Lynne Millward, *Organizational Research Methods: A Guide for Students and Researchers*, 1st ed. (n.p.: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001).

experiences rather than abstract theory. Each response was treated as a personal perception, not an objective fact, and was recorded as closely verbatim as possible.⁶⁸

The framing analysis followed Jim Kuypers’s method of rhetorical criticism.⁶⁹ The study examined the frames embedded into Foursquare communications responding to scandal, paying close attention to the ways language shapes meaning. As those familiar with framing know, all communication carries an origin, motive, or telos, even when left unstated. Rhetorical framing makes it possible to surface and name those tacit motives, bringing implicit meaning and motivations into explicit focus.

The organizational genogram was composed using McGoldrick, Gerson, and Petry’s design (see Appendix A) for the standard genogram format.⁷⁰ The construction of this genogram drew on key historical biographies of Foursquare’s founder, Aimee Semple McPherson, including *This Is That* and *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*.⁷¹

Proposed Data Selection Procedures

This research design includes qualitative interviews (Appendix B). Interview invitations were sent, followed by one or two scheduled interviews with identified survivors or congregants.⁷² In addition, ethnographic analysis was conducted on provided communications and field notes from four separate episodes of scandal.⁷³

Qualitative Collection Instruments

The qualitative research instruments for this project are interviews (Appendix B), document analysis, field notes, coding, framing analysis, and an organization genogram (Appendix A). The interview guide contains fifteen primary questions aimed at uncovering how theological themes were used in crisis. Each question is aligned with the overall research question, with secondary questions provided to probe deeper into participants’ responses.⁷⁴

Ethical Assurances

68. Brewerton and Millward, *Organizational Research Methods*.

69. Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism*.

70. Monica McGoldrick, Randy Gerson, and Sueli Petry, *Genograms: Assessment and Treatment*, 4th ed. (n.p.: W. W. Norton, 2020), 26–27.

71. Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*, first paperback ed. (n.p.: Mariner Books, 1994); Aimee Semple McPherson, *This Is That: Personal Experiences, Sermons, and Writings of Aimee Semple McPherson*, 3rd ed. (n.p.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009).

72. Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, Mylab Education with Pearson Etext Access Code, 12th ed. (n.p.: Pearson, 2018).

73. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*.

74. Brewerton and Millward, *Organizational Research Methods*.

The nature of church and spiritual abuse is sensitive and has been historically framed in shame and possible re-traumatization for victims. However, the possible benefits of discovering how theological narratives become weaponized are too significant to ignore simply because of fear or historic patterns of shame. It is truly worth the risk and effort to explore in the right way. According to Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ormrod, a researcher should be careful to do no harm to participants, to inform voluntary participants, to acknowledge participants' rights to privacy, and to be transparent before other colleagues.⁷⁵

Potential Risks to Participants

This researcher acknowledges that a participant's details of abuse could possibly damage their reputation and even cost them their position if inappropriately handled. In light of this threat, this researcher sent emails that contained an explanation, an invitation, and a consent form to interviewees (Appendix C & Appendix D). This meant that each interviewee had to volunteer their participation and sign to confirm their consent before being interviewed, as set by Leedy and Ormrod's ethical guidelines.⁷⁶ It is important to note that under this proposed plan, only two parties would have identifying information regarding what was said in the interviews: the participants themselves and this researcher.

Some of the questions may have required some people to rehash past traumatic experiences. Thus, the interviewees were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could quit without any fear of reprisal (Appendix D). More specifically, this researcher utilized the trauma-informed practice of allowing survivors the agency to proceed with the interview only if they felt safe. Additionally, the researcher made himself available to refer participants who were possibly re-traumatized to counseling ministries.

Bias & Reflexivity

The researcher recognizes that his own grief, anger, and longing for justice may shape how he hears and interprets the stories shared in this study.⁷⁷ Interviewers in research of this kind risk over-identifying with survivors, undervaluing institutional or alternative perspectives, or vice versa. While the researcher does not claim neutrality, he has sought to maintain the integrity and transparency of the research.

That is why reflexivity is a core value in this research. The researcher intentionally names his perspective, examines his assumptions, and seeks to create space for the voices of others to speak on their own terms. His hope is that this project will contribute to a deeper reckoning within the church—not only about what has gone wrong but also about what healing and transformation might still be possible.

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75. Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 111.

76. Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 111–12.

77. See Jim Cooper Jr., *Drowning in Drama: Jonah and the Drama Triangle* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, forthcoming). The author explores his experiences with ecclesial conflict and institutional crisis more fully in this work, reflecting on trauma, power dynamics, and the interpretive frameworks that shape his perspective in the present research.

Educating Participants

In accordance with Leedy and Ormrod’s ethical guidelines, participants were notified through a consent form (Appendix D) that assured them that their interviews would be held in strict confidence.⁷⁸ Personal responses are not linked to participants’ real names; instead, pseudonyms have been used to ensure that no specific data can be traced back to any individual. The researcher fully acknowledges the sensitivity of the subject matter and recognizes that the research may have warranted a more extensive Internal Review Board (IRB) process.⁷⁹ However, after consultation with the school and program professor, IRB review was determined to be unnecessary.

Significance of the Study

Analysis of the research codes and themes revealed a sobering realization: the structure of the church itself has a clear preferential option that is not in line with its formal theology—valuing the vulnerable—or even its leaders and people. It is like the institutional system has a will of its own. Interestingly, an interviewee best summarized this idea by saying, “The highest leadership [Foursquare leaders] has good intentions. But all are hindered by the structure; the leaders are hindered themselves by the structure [the institution].”⁸⁰ This insight seems to be affirmed by the data and research.

Before moving into the detailed analysis, it may be helpful to offer a brief summary of the findings. When the data were coded, four recurring themes emerged that shaped the church’s narrative: progress, celebrity, loyalty, and dualism. As these themes and their data points were analyzed, it became increasingly clear that underlying much of the church’s communication, theological discourse, and response was a consistent motive: protecting the institution.

Partiality for Progress

Across all three interviews and documents, the theme of progress emerged clearly. Leaders often invoked the language of “forgiving” as both the motive and rationale for a call to move on from the crisis. One interviewee stated, “Forgiveness is less about righting a wrong and more about moving on.”⁸¹ Another interviewee noted that forgiveness was encouraged even before the identification or ownership of what exactly needed to be forgiven.⁸² The third interviewee added that the call to

78. Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 112.

79. Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 115.

80. Jim Cooper Jr., Foursquare Ethnographic Interview #1 (n.p., 2025), unpublished raw data, accessed August 20, 2025.

81. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q7.

82. Jim Cooper Jr., Foursquare Ethnographic Interview #2 (n.p., 2025), dataset, R-Q7.

forgiveness functioned more as a push to simply “put this behind us.”⁸³ Furthermore, the interviewee exclaimed, “Forgiveness is presented as a stepping stone to reconciliation, which is correct, but skips the other stones of reconciliation [rebuke and repentance].”⁸⁴ And “Victims or survivors are encouraged to quickly have conversations to reconcile.”⁸⁵ This same interviewee declared that the leader made him feel like the resolution of this scandal was more important than further inquiry into its effects on the victim and community.⁸⁶

In a similar fashion, numerous official communications about leaders resigning from or leaving the Foursquare Church often celebrated those leaders publicly while remaining silent about the ongoing internal investigations and the underlying issues driving their departure.⁸⁷ These communications reveal a rhetorical frame that desires to cover and smooth the transition. This may obviously be good and caring. However, it also denotes a preference for progress and the status quo of the institution, even in the face of scandal.

A second example of the institution’s desire to progress even at detrimental costs to the vulnerable is revealed in another data point. For instance, interviewees shared how giftedness, charisma, and skill were functionally prioritized over character. An interviewee stated, “The progress of the church is more important [functionally to the leaders] than the character of the individual.”⁸⁸ And leaders “have a willingness to overlook biblical practices in simple pursuit of the powerful and effective.”⁸⁹

In short, the data uncovered that the theological narratives of reconciliation and forgiveness were framed to ensure a quick recovery of the status quo to not lose ground in the institutions’ and leaders’ legitimacy and effectiveness.

Celebrity Culture

Another significant theme that emerged from the coding of data was the romanticizing of the tribe [Foursquare] and its leaders. All the interviewees referenced, in one way or another, this sense of celebrity or “honor culture.”

For example, when asked, “How would you describe the [Foursquare] church’s overall spiritual atmosphere or culture?” (see Appendix B), one interviewee replied that there is a “romanticism around the denomination.”⁹⁰ They went on to suggest an implicit bias—an assumption that “we are better,

83. Jim Cooper Jr., Foursquare Ethnographic Interview #3 (n.p., 2025), unpublished raw data, R-Q7, accessed August 20, 2025.

84. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q7.A.

85. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q7.

86. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q7.A.

87. International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, “Michael Larkin, Ph.d., Is Stepping Down as President of Life Pacific University-Virginia, Part of Foursquare’s Affiliate Higher Education Program, Effective Dec. 15.,” December 6, 2019, press release. The original webpage has since been removed; a copy is on file with the author.

88. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q12.

89. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q3.A.

90. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q3.

more right, and more accurate than others.”⁹¹

It’s important to note that, in this and other interviews, participants expressed a genuine affection for the leaders and the denomination.⁹² Even as they offered critique, the interviewees often spoke with a desire to honor those they respected, sometimes emphasizing that Foursquare was “where things are at.”⁹³

One participant explicitly described the atmosphere as a “celebrity culture.”⁹⁴ Another interviewee, at least initially, was cautious and guarded in responding to questions about the culture and atmosphere—clearly protective of the leaders and movement they loved.⁹⁵

Two interviewees described something akin to idolizing, platforming, or centralizing of leaders. In fact, one used the terms “idolizing” and “platforming” of leaders, while another drew on the biblical image of Moses coming down the mountain to guide the people.⁹⁶

One participant described the strong sense that leaders deserve to be honored, not only out of respect but also because they function as gatekeepers.⁹⁷ They added that if someone wants opportunities for influence or advancement within the movement, they need to honor those leaders. At one conference, another attendee even referred to a long-time pastoral couple as “Foursquare royalty,” underscoring the perception of a hierarchy based on reputation and position and tenure.⁹⁸

In analyzing communications about leaders and conferences, a similar pattern appeared. Leaders were consistently platformed, celebrated, and presented as ideals for the community.⁹⁹ Smaller conferences felt primarily like a “rah-rah” celebratory rally for the movement, then subsequently like a reflective or missional gathering.¹⁰⁰ Interviewees suggested something like a class system within the denomination, distinguishing between professional and non-professional ministers; between full-time and bi-vocational pastors; and between the laity, local leaders, and higher-level leaders, or “gatekeepers.”¹⁰¹

In summary, when framing this data, it appears again that the origin of communications and theological discourse carries a preference and protection for the institution and its leaders.

Leveraged Loyalty

Admirably, a strong theme of loyalty emerged from the data. All the interviewees had been

91. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R–Q3.

92. Jim Cooper Jr., Field Notes (n.p., 2025), unpublished raw data, accessed September 25, 2025.

93. Cooper, Field Notes; Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview.

94. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R–Q3.

95. Cooper, Field Notes.

96. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview; Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview.

97. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R–Q5.

98. Cooper, Field Notes, Ill–LM.

99. Cooper, Field Notes; International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, “Michael Larkin, Ph.d.”

100. Cooper, Field Notes, One Day.

101. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R–Q5.

lifelong leaders or members of the Foursquare movement.¹⁰² One even described their involvement as a “family affair,” noting that their parents and siblings also served in the church.¹⁰³ As noted in the previous theme, each participant expressed a deep love, respect, and loyalty toward Foursquare, even as they became more comfortable voicing critiques of the church’s responses to scandal.¹⁰⁴ Strikingly, many framed their critiques not as attacks but as acts of loyalty, speaking out of commitment to both their leaders and the movement they cherished.

Yet this loyalty was often tested. One interviewee described their grief and shock at how leaders responded to their critique of the denomination’s handling of scandal.¹⁰⁵ They recounted being “shunned,” “banned from the narrative,” or dismissed as “bitter,” “offended,” or “unforgiving.”¹⁰⁶ This left them wrestling with a profound internal conflict as they tried to reconcile their own loyalty with what felt like the institution’s lack of loyalty to them.¹⁰⁷

Another interviewee described a similar experience of being quietly excluded from meetings and conversations that had previously given them a voice in addressing their concerns.¹⁰⁸ One interviewee reflected, “Criticism is framed as insubordination,” observing that people who raised questions were often “marginalized” or “cut off.”¹⁰⁹ They went on to describe how theological language around “grace” often functioned as a mask for what was essentially a call for loyalty, to leaders and to the institution itself.¹¹⁰ Similarly, another interviewee noted that those who are seemingly un-loyal are labeled implicitly—sometimes explicitly—as “bitter” and “unforgiving.”¹¹¹

A different interviewee described the prevailing honor culture and emphasis on trusting leaders as a form of “coerced loyalty,” which they experienced as manipulative.¹¹² They recounted a situation in which leaders urged someone to maintain a “working relationship” with a leader accused of abuse, even though the underlying issue had never been resolved.¹¹³ As they put it, “There should not be calls for working relationships where you have to submit to an abusive leader.”¹¹⁴

A couple of interviewees reflected on how, in their experience, the institution appeared to offer more care and support to the accused perpetrator than to the victim.¹¹⁵ This left them feeling that the church’s loyalty was primarily directed toward protecting its leaders rather than advocating for the

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102. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview; Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview; Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview.

103. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q2.

104. Cooper, Field Notes.

105. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

106. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

107. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

108. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

109. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

110. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q3.A.

111. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q9.

112. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q6.

113. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q7.

114. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q7.

115. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview; Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview.

vulnerable.

This theme of institutionalized loyalty to leaders was echoed at a higher level as well. A Foursquare executive leader, quoted in the third-party GRACE report on abuse within the denomination, candidly admitted, “We’ve had this ‘touch not mine anointed’ mentality in the church for so long that it’s covered up a lot of stuff.... There’s this idea that we don’t cover up [sin], but we do cover leaders.”¹¹⁶ Such statements reveal a broader pattern in which loyalty to leaders often overshadows loyalty to truth and to the care of the vulnerable.

A final metaphor, often repeated by Foursquare members, sheds further light on this dynamic. Those who used it did so with heavy sarcasm, yet their words revealed an uncomfortable truth about the movement’s culture of loyalty. More than once, members remarked to one another, sometimes with a wry smile, “Foursquare is like a family—like a mafia family. We prioritize loyalty. But once you’re out ... you’re out.”¹¹⁷

Though spoken partly in jest, this metaphor underscores the focus and tension at the heart of the movement’s strong familial identity: a loyalty that binds members closely to one another and to their leaders but that can also close ranks, protecting insiders while marginalizing or casting out those who challenge the status quo.¹¹⁸ Once again, the data from this theme, when analyzed for frames of focus, reveal a tacit bias that prefers the institution over the individual, even those who are vulnerable.

Dualism

Another prominent theme in the data is the gap between the Foursquare Church’s formal theological rhetoric and how it actually operates. As one interviewee noted, leaders often teach and preach one thing formally, yet operate differently in practice.¹¹⁹ In other words, they don’t practice what they preach. Furthermore, leaders are often promoted for their skills and effectiveness before their character has been proven.¹²⁰ When that happens, and leaders fall short, it is not only their failure that the church has to struggle with but also the collateral damage. An interviewee felt that, in general, the church has celebrated the gifts of its leaders more than the fruits of the Spirit and that this imbalance has shaped the culture.¹²¹

Additionally, this observer noted that the church seemed to separate biblical practices from effectiveness, as if being effective could excuse the flaws of character.¹²² It was also noted that church messages most often centered around power, success, and victory, with very little focus given to suffering, the redemptive purpose of pain, or the practice of lament.¹²³

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116. GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment), Executive Summary: Independent Investigation of the Foursquare Church (Lynchburg, Virginia: GRACE, 2020), dataset, 22.

117. Cooper, Field Notes, HC, PK, & TO.

118. GRACE, Executive Summary, 22, 23.

119. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q4.

120. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q2.

121. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q4.

122. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q2.

123. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview; Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview.

This sort of dualism also showed up in how leadership functioned. For instance, one interviewee recalled that, while leaders presented their leadership as collaborative—more like a democracy—functionally, it became increasingly top-down.¹²⁴ As they put it, “It was the leader’s way or no way,” especially in times of crisis.¹²⁵

This same dynamic runs through the tiers of leadership. An interviewee shared with grief how they were cut off by their boss from access to upper leadership and excluded from meetings where narratives about them were being shaped.¹²⁶ Another remembered that, especially in earlier years, the Foursquare Church tended to regard those who operated in the charismatic gifts—such as speaking in tongues—as somehow more anointed than those who didn’t. These patterns created a quiet but very real divide between different levels of leadership and those seen as more or less spiritual.¹²⁷

While analyzing the data for this theme, it became clear that the framing of these communications often reflected a genuine intent by leaders to say the right thing and to demonstrate initial concern for the vulnerable. Yet this concern frequently failed to translate into meaningful action, with institutional preservation ultimately taking precedence. When questions of institutional liability emerged, the scope of the conversation often narrowed, redirecting attention away from the needs of victims and toward protecting the institution. This shift illustrates how power can function not only through overt decisions but also through controlling what is permitted to enter the conversation.¹²⁸ One interviewee mentioned that it felt like “my interests were a liability rather than a gift.”¹²⁹ The talk was less theological and relational, but rather legal.¹³⁰ In the end, risk management emerged from frame analysis as the dominant motive shaping communication responses to scandal.

Foursquare Genogram

After thematic coding and analysis of the data, a consistent pattern emerged: the Foursquare denomination appears to operate with a built-in preferential option for the institution itself. Gareth Morgan’s organizational theory offers a helpful lens for understanding this dynamic. In *Images of Organization*, Morgan suggests that organizations often function like living organisms, adapting and recalibrating in order to survive moments of crisis.¹³¹ Yet in this case, the instinct toward institutional

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124. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q5 & Q6.A.

125. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q6.A.

126. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

127. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q5.A.

128. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14; Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, “Two Faces of Power,” *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962): 947–952.

129. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

130. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview, R-Q14.

131. Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization—the Executive Edition* (n.p.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998), chap. 3.

self-preservation does not merely marginalize the vulnerable; it can paradoxically constrain the very leaders charged with the institution's care.¹³²

This institutional reflex can be seen as early as the movement's founding era. During the conflict between Aimee Semple McPherson and her daughter, Roberta Salter, McPherson's attorney, Jacob Moidel, framed the situation in stark terms: "While she [Aimee] regrets that the war will be sanguinary—with her own child—the only course ahead of her is protection of the organization which has consumed the best years of her life."¹³³

In this moment, Moidel articulated with tragic clarity the governing logic that would shape the denomination's trajectory: the institution must be preserved, even at the expense of personal relationships and the well-being of the vulnerable. Protection of the organization was no longer merely a strategic decision; it had become a moral imperative.

Foursquare leaders have sometimes described a related dynamic using the phrase "the Knight's Claw," referring to the period when Giles Knight exercised extraordinary managerial control over the movement and its founder.¹³⁴ Biographer Daniel Mark Epstein records that prior to Knight's leadership, the denomination faced forty-five open lawsuits between 1926 and 1937, demanding damages ranging from one to nearly three million dollars.¹³⁵ In response to this legal pressure, the movement adopted a new approach centered on strict managerial control and aggressive legal risk management.

According to Epstein, McPherson entered into an agreement with Knight in which she surrendered significant authority over her own activities. Survivors of the Knight era recalled that Knight would assume control of the organization if McPherson yielded certain powers, "some of them exceptional."¹³⁶ Epstein further notes that McPherson "could not leave her house except to preach [or] teach her classes at the college without Knight's permission—and he routinely withheld it."¹³⁷ Knight's authority was so extensive that McPherson at times required written permission simply to leave her own room.¹³⁸

This pattern of legal oversight and institutional control, emerging at such a formative moment in the movement's history, appears to have left an enduring mark on the denomination's organizational instincts.¹³⁹ What began as a response to crisis gradually hardened into a governing logic in which institutional survival and reputation management took precedence over relational repair and moral accountability. As Nathaniel Van Cleave later reflected, McPherson "chafed under Knight's regimen, and it may in fact have contributed to her death."¹⁴⁰

To explore whether these dynamics extended beyond isolated incidents, the researcher con-

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132. Cooper, Foursquare Ethnographic Interview.

133. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 409.

134. Cooper, Field Notes, Convention 2020.

135. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 417.

136. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 417.

137. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 418.

138. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 402.

139. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 407.

140. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 429.

structed an organizational genogram tracing key relational and institutional conflicts within the movement's early history [Appendix A]. The resulting map revealed a striking pattern: repeated tragedies and deaths, followed by deep relational enmeshments among surviving leaders, and eventually the use of legal mechanisms to sever relationships.

For example, McPherson separated from both of her husbands, Harold McPherson and David Hutton, each of whom received financial settlements from Angelus Temple, the founding church of the movement and the mother church of what would become the International Church of the Four-square Gospel.¹⁴¹ McPherson also entered into legal conflict with her mother, Minnie Kennedy; the two eventually settled their dispute by dividing the Echo Park Evangelical Association.¹⁴² Later, McPherson was sued by her own daughter, Roberta Salter, for defamation. In the final years of her life, her son Rolf and manager Giles Knight effectively isolated her from others.

Taken together, these episodes reveal a recurring pattern: the movement's instinct toward institutional protection and legal risk management appears to trace back to the founder's own story. The organizational reflex to preserve the institution—sometimes even at the expense of personal relationships and moral agency—was embedded early in the movement's history and continues to echo within its structures today.



141. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*.

142. Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 323–51.

Conclusion

This research provides a systematic way to explore a pressing question: *How do theological narratives—particularly those surrounding forgiveness, submission, suffering, and bitterness—contribute to the justification and reproduction of systemic abuse and institutional failure within the church?* The literature reveals both the complexity of this problem and the historical patterns that have shaped it. By employing an ethnographic, bottom-up approach, this study explores not merely abstract theories but the lived experiences of survivors, leaders, and congregants. The findings indicate that when theological narratives are abstracted from the character of Christ and generalized across situations, they tend to shift loyalty away from the vulnerable and toward the institution.

The interpretive conclusion of this research can be visualized through the image of a justice scale with a sliding weight, or more simply, a playground teeter-totter. On one side of the scale lies the institution; on the other side lies the vulnerable individual. At the center rests the weight of theological interpretation. The position of that weight determines which side of the scale is preferred. When theological language becomes generalized—phrases such as “forgive and move on,” “submit and endure suffering,” or “avoid bitterness” applied without attention to the specific circumstances of harm—the weight begins to slide toward the institutional side of the scale. In these moments, broad theological narratives stabilize the organization while the concrete suffering of particular people becomes secondary.

Conversely, when theological narratives are interpreted contextually and christologically, attentive to the specific realities of abuse, power, and injustice, the weight shifts in the opposite direction. The scale then begins to tip toward the vulnerable. This movement reflects a consistent biblical pattern in which God repeatedly attends to those harmed by power and calls communities to protect and restore those who have been wounded. In this sense, the decisive factor is not simply the presence of theological language, but how that language is positioned within a particular context of crisis.

A further dynamic emerged in this research, particularly within the case of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. The movement of the weight along this scale is rarely neutral or accidental. Rather, the study suggests that a form of functional neo-legalism has emerged within the church’s crisis-response theology. This neo-legalism does not primarily manifest through overt rule-keeping, but through a theological posture oriented toward impression management, legal caution, and institutional risk mitigation. Within this framework, theological narratives are subtly repositioned so that they protect the institution while maintaining the appearance of spiritual faithfulness.

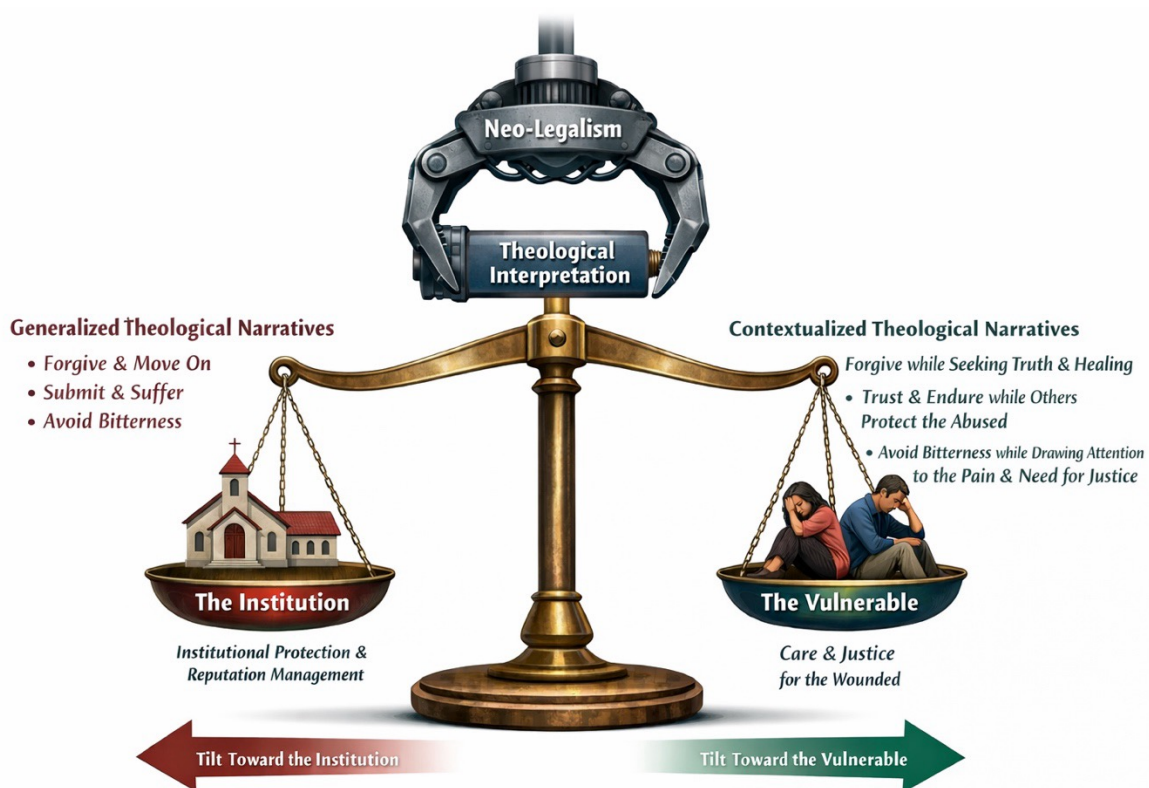
Within the metaphor of the justice scale, neo-legalism functions as the mechanism that moves the weight of interpretation. If the scale represents the interpretive field, neo-legalism operates as a kind of spiritual claw—grasping the sliding weight of theological language and repositioning it toward abstraction and vagueness in order to stabilize the institution. In doing so, human agency quietly replaces discernment shaped by the Spirit and the character of Christ. Rather than allowing Scripture’s persistent concern for the vulnerable to guide interpretation, theological narratives are adjusted

in ways that manage reputational risk and organizational stability.

Such insights underscore that theology is never merely conceptual; it is always enacted within systems of power, leadership, and institutional preservation. When theological language is reduced to slogans—“forgive and move on,” “submit and suffer silently,” “avoid bitterness at all costs”—it becomes susceptible to weaponization. In these moments, theology functions less as a means of healing and more as a protective shield for the institution, reinforcing silence, compliance, and reputational control.

The research therefore calls church leaders to examine not only what theological narratives are preached and taught, but also how those narratives are positioned on the scale of justice when crises emerge. Are theological interpretations sliding toward abstraction in ways that protect the institution? Or are they moving toward contextual specificity in ways that honor truth-telling and attend to the wounded?

Ultimately, this study contends that the renewal of the church requires more than revised policies or procedural safeguards. It requires the recovery of theological integrity—a gospel that resists neo-legalistic manipulation and refuses to allow the weight of interpretation to be moved away from the vulnerable. When the character of Christ is allowed to guide theological interpretation, the scale of justice consistently bends toward those who have been harmed. Only then can the church resist the instinct to preserve itself and instead become a community that embodies the redemptive justice of the gospel it proclaims.



A Theological Reflection

What ultimately emerges from this ecclesial study is not simply a problem of insufficient

policies, inadequate training, or procedural failure—important as those matters may be. Rather, what comes into view is a deeper theological displacement. A form of neo-legalism appears to have taken root within moments of institutional crisis, functioning not merely as a legal strategy but as a *functional theology*. In such moments, the church’s instinctive response often privileges procedural control, liability management, and institutional preservation, subtly reframing faithfulness in juridical rather than theological terms.

This neo-legalism reveals a misapplied telos of human agency. When a crisis arises, the institution often tacitly assumes that its survival depends primarily on human action—on getting the process right, containing risk, and managing outcomes. The result is a preference that centers the institution itself as the primary object of protection. Yet this orientation stands in tension with the biblical witness, which consistently locates ultimate agency not in human systems but in God as the telological agent, the One toward whom all things move and in whom renewal is finally secured.

Isaiah 30 offers a striking theological lens through which to interpret these dynamics. Faced with political threat and institutional vulnerability, Israel’s leaders sought refuge not in repentance or trust, but in alliance with Egypt—a power that promised protection through strategy, speed, and strength. Their decision was not merely geopolitical; it was theological. Egypt represented a competing vision of agency, one grounded in human control, coercive power, and the management of risk apart from God.

Through the prophet, God names this turn with piercing clarity: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (Isa. 30:15). Salvation here is not framed as escape from crisis but as a posture within it. Strength is not found in decisive action or institutional maneuvering, but in quiet trust—a willingness to remain exposed before God rather than hastily constructing alternative coverings. Yet Isaiah also records Israel’s refusal. The leaders rejected rest precisely because it felt too vulnerable, too slow, and too costly. They preferred speed, alliance, and the illusion of control.

Isaiah describes what they built instead as a wall—whitewashed, impressive, and seemingly secure, yet constructed on falsehood and sustained by deception. When it fell, it did not erode gradually; it collapsed suddenly, leaving nothing to salvage. The imagery is instructive. Institutions that rely on borrowed power, managed appearances, or strategic silence may appear stable for a time, but such stability is fragile. When truth presses against it, the wall gives way.

A further theological lens sharpens this diagnosis when the history of the Foursquare Church—particularly the leadership of Giles Knight—is read alongside the biblical narrative of Gideon in Judges. Such a comparison is not intended to diminish Knight’s contribution; rather, it allows that contribution to be named truthfully. Like Gideon, Knight appears to have been a providential gift to a vulnerable movement at a moment of existential threat.

Gideon was raised up when Israel was under siege—impoverished, scattered, and fearful. He was not chosen because of institutional strength but because of courage, competence, and obedience in a time of crisis. Likewise, Knight emerged during a period when Foursquare faced internal fragmentation, insolvency, external pressure, and the real possibility of dissolution. His leadership brought order, protection, and survival. In this sense, Knight functioned much like a Gideon figure—called not

to rule for personal gain, but to preserve a people from collapse.

Crucially, Gideon refused kingship, declaring, “I will not rule over you. . . . The Lord will rule over you” (Judg. 8:23). Similarly, Knight was not driven by naked ambition. By many accounts, his leadership was marked by restraint and sacrifice, animated by a sincere desire to protect the movement rather than dominate it. This makes the analogy all the more sobering.

For Gideon’s failure did not come through overt rebellion, but through a well-intentioned theological misstep. He fashioned an ephod—an object not evil in itself, nor originally intended to replace the Lord’s guidance. Rather, it was meant to serve as a visible reminder of Gideon’s calling and of God’s saving action through him. The ephod functioned as a memorial to deliverance, a tangible witness that Israel’s victory had come not by human strength but by divine intervention.

Yet over time, what was intended as remembrance quietly became mediation. Judges tells us that “all Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family” (Judg. 8:27). What began as a reminder of God’s salvation gradually took on a life of its own. The symbol meant to point beyond itself became the object of attention. The means of remembering God’s action subtly displaced ongoing dependence upon God Himself.

In a strikingly parallel manner, Knight’s legally oriented approach to institutional management—necessary and even lifesaving in its original context—appears to have taken on a similar role within the institutional memory of the Foursquare movement. Legal process, risk mitigation, and procedural control became a kind of modern ephod: a tacit mechanism for discerning “what to do” in moments of crisis. Importantly, this shift was neither explicit nor malicious. It unfolded quietly, under the pressure of survival. Yet over time, legal logic came to discipline theological imagination, narrowing the range of faithful responses the church could envision.

Thus, in moments of scandal or abuse, Foursquare leaders increasingly found themselves “going up the mountain”—not to wait upon the Lord, but to consult legal counsel. This was not because leaders rejected God, but because the institution had learned, tacitly, to trust a different mediating authority when facing practical problems. The ephod had changed form. Where discernment once involved vulnerability, prayer, confession, and communal listening, it increasingly passed through juridical filters concerned with exposure and liability.

When Isaiah 30 is read again in this light, the pattern becomes unmistakable. Like Israel turning to Egypt, the turn toward neo-legalism represents a turn toward human agency as savior. Egypt promised protection without repentance; legalism promises resolution without exposure. Both offer speed, control, and the avoidance of shame. Yet both ultimately fail to deliver what they promise.

What is most tragic—and most hopeful—is that neither Gideon nor Knight intended this outcome. Both were faithful servants whose gifts preserved God’s people in moments of danger. Yet Scripture warns us that gifts given for survival can, if left unexamined, become idols that constrain renewal. The ephod outlived Gideon. So too, Knight’s institutional reflexes appear to have outlived their original necessity, becoming embedded as a neo-legalistic *modus operandi*—one that risks reproducing the very harm it once sought to prevent.

Yet Isaiah 30 does not end with collapse. Judgment is not God’s final word. The prophet promises that the people who once refused to listen will one day hear: “Your Teacher will no longer hide

himself... You will hear a voice behind you saying, "This is the way; walk in it" (Isa. 30:20–21). God's voice does not shout over institutional panic; it waits until the people are ready to listen.

The invitation before the church, then, is not simply to revise policies or refine procedures, but to recover its theological center. To rest in repentance is to relinquish the idol without despising the gift—to thank God for Gideon while letting go of the ephod and to honor Knight's courage while refusing to allow legal rationality to function as a surrogate for divine guidance. Such repentance is not withdrawal or despair, but a reorientation of trust, away from human control and back toward God's agency as the true source of salvation and strength.

Here, Roxburgh and Searle's *Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling* offers crucial wisdom for navigating moments of institutional crisis. They argue that an unraveling is not primarily a problem to be solved but a disruption through which God is actively at work. The danger, they suggest, is that leaders instinctively ask the wrong questions—questions that presume human agency as the solution. *What should we do? How do we fix this?* Such questions subtly reinforce the very logics of control and management that contributed to the crisis in the first place.

Roxburgh instead calls leaders to a deeper, more faithful question: *What is God doing in this unraveling?* This shift reorients the church's imagination away from the Euro-tribal or postcolonial assumption that institutions secure the future through technique, expertise, or strategic mastery. It reframes crisis not as failure to be managed, but as an invitation to discernment—to attend to God's presence amid loss, disorientation, and grief.

In this sense, resting in repentance becomes a concrete ecclesial practice. It turns the church away from a preferential option for the institution and back toward God—and toward the vulnerable ones God so deeply desires to protect and restore. It is a posture of hope rather than control, trusting that even now, amid the rubble of collapsed walls, God is still speaking—quietly, patiently—to his people: *"This is the way. Walk in it."*

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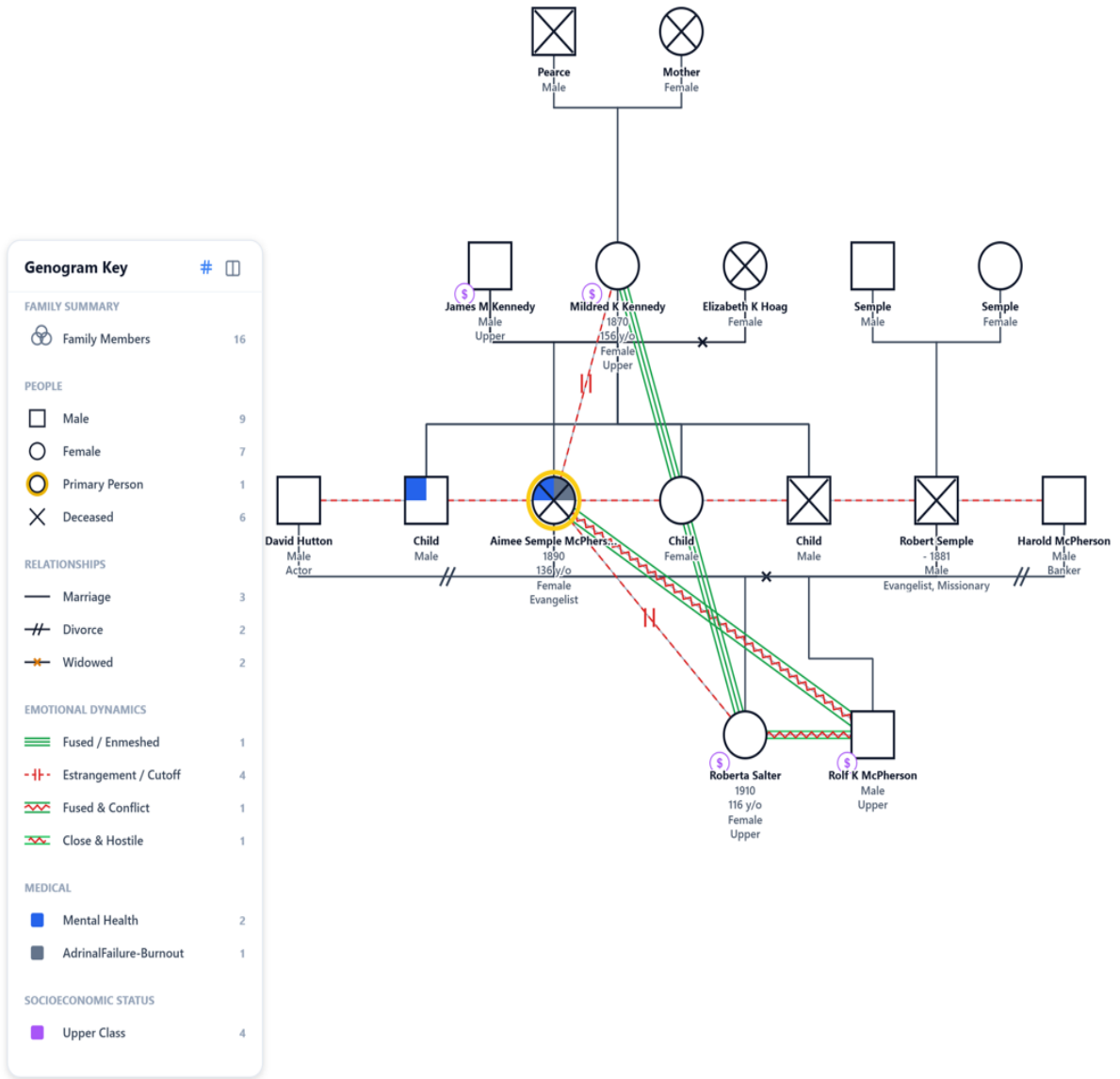
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Appendix A

Foursquare Organizational—Founder Genogram



Appendix B

Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interviewer: Jim Cooper Jr.

Participant ID: Name (Anonymous Code—Pseudonym)

Estimated Duration: 45–70 minutes

Recording Method: (Zoom) (Audio) (Transcription) (Field Notes)—(with consent)

Topic: Thank you so much for being willing to participate in this study. I’m exploring how certain theological themes—like authority, forgiveness, submission, suffering, and bitterness—are taught, interpreted, and lived out in church communities, especially in situations involving conflict, harm, or abuse.

Directions: I’m interested in your personal experiences and observations, not in judging any one church or denomination. Feel free to take your time, and if any question feels uncomfortable or unclear, we can skip it or come back to it later. Everything will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in the final report.

Preliminary questions	Follow-up questions
Do I have permission to record our conversation for accuracy?	
<i>Background & Church Culture</i>	
Can you tell me a bit about your history in your church or tradition?	How long have you been a part of it?
How would you describe your church’s overall spiritual atmosphere or culture?	What theological themes seem most central?
What Scriptures or stories come up most often in teaching and preaching?	
<i>Authority & Submission</i>	
How is spiritual authority typically talked about in church?	What kinds of language or imagery are used to describe pastors or leaders?
What does it mean to “submit to authority” in your church context?	Have you ever seen submission emphasized in times of disagreement or crisis?
<i>Forgiveness & Bitterness</i>	

What does forgiveness mean in your community?	How is it preached or practiced?
Have you ever seen someone encouraged to forgive quickly after being hurt?	What was that like?
How is bitterness typically talked about?	Have you ever noticed people being warned about bitterness more than their actual experience explored?
<i>Suffering & Silence</i>	
What role does suffering play in your church's teaching or theology?	Is it seen as redemptive, inevitable, or avoidable?
Have you ever heard or seen theology used to explain away pain or avoid addressing harm?	How did that affect those involved?
<i>Crisis, Misconduct & Institutional Response</i>	
Can you describe how your church has responded to conflict or misconduct—either recently or in the past?	What role did theology or Scripture play in shaping the church's response?
What kinds of language or biblical ideas were used to interpret what was happening?	
How were victims or survivors treated?	Were there expectations placed on them theologically or socially?
<i>Reflection & Redemptive Possibility</i>	
Have you ever seen theology used in a way that promoted healing or justice after harm?	What helped that happen?
What do you think needs to change in how churches talk about authority, forgiveness, or submission?	
If you had a chance to reshape the narratives around one of these themes, what would you teach or say differently?	
<i>Optional Closing Question</i>	
Is there anything else you'd like to share that you think would help this study?	

Closing Script:

Thank you again for your honesty and courage in sharing your story and perspectives. Your insight will be invaluable as I explore how theology shapes the way churches respond to harm—and how we might find better paths forward. I'll follow up with a transcript or summary if you'd like to review it later. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns along the way.

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate in an Interview

This email will be sent as a follow-up invitation after an initial call to the participant in the interview.

Dear [Name],

I hope this message finds you well.

I'm reaching out because I'm conducting a research project that explores how certain theological narratives—particularly those surrounding forgiveness, authority, submission, and bitterness—are experienced by survivors of church-related harm or abuse. The purpose of this study is to better understand how these messages have shaped individual experiences and institutional responses, with the hope of informing more just and compassionate practices in the future.

Given your unique perspective, I'd be honored if you would consider participating in a one-on-one interview. The conversation will take about 45–70 minutes and can take place at a time and format (in person or via video call) that is most comfortable for you. Before the interview, I would provide you with a few guiding questions so you can reflect in advance.

Your participation would be completely voluntary, confidential, and treated with care and respect. If you're open to learning more, I'd be happy to share a formal invitation and informed consent document that outlines everything clearly.

Please let me know if this is something you might be willing to consider. No pressure at all, I deeply respect whatever you decide.

Gratefully,

Jim

Researcher: Jim Cooper Jr.

Email: cooper4sq@gmail.com

Affiliation: Northern Seminary

Appendix D

Interview Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is intended to answer the question: “How do theological narratives—particularly those surrounding authority, forgiveness, submission, and bitterness—contribute to institutional failures in the church’s response to abuse?”

The purpose of this study is to understand how certain theological ideas may be misused in ways that perpetuate harm, inhibit justice, and influence how churches respond to abuse allegations. This research seeks to bring awareness to harmful patterns and open dialogue for reform.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a 45–70-minute interview (via Zoom or in person) with the researcher, Jim Cooper Jr. The interview will be recorded and transcribed with your permission.

Researcher: Jim Cooper Jr.

Institution: Northern Seminary

To participate, you must:

1. Be 18 years of age or older
2. Have experienced church-based harm or witnessed a church’s response to abuse
3. Provide signed consent

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without consequence. This study does involve potential emotional discomfort, as it deals with sensitive and personal experiences. Every effort will be made to protect your identity and responses through confidentiality and anonymity.

If you have questions at any point, please contact me at [Your Email Here].

AUTHORIZATION:

I have read the above and understand the nature of this study. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this study, I have not waived any legal or human rights. I agree to participate in this study and understand that I may withdraw at any time. I grant permission to the researcher to use my responses anonymously in this study.

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E

Research Project Timeline

Research Tasks	Estimated Time	Start Date	Completion Date
Write research proposal	2 weeks	June 13, 2025	June 27, 2025
Submit final research proposal	One day	June 27, 2025	June 27, 2025
Receive approval for research proposal	One week	June 27, 2025	July 4, 2025
Request approval from churches and survivors & start literature review	One week	July 7, 2025	July 18, 2025
Invite participants for survey and interviews & finish literature review	One & a half weeks	July 21, 2025	July 31, 2025
Receive and confirm consent forms & collect data/conduct interviews	Two weeks	August 1, 2025	August 14, 2025
Analyze data	One weeks	August 14, 2025	August 21, 2025
Write draft research project	Two weeks	September 1, 2025	September 14, 2025
Re-write research project	One week	September 15, 2025	September 22, 2025
Submit final research project	One week	September 23, 2025	September 30, 2025