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CHAPTER 1

FINDING SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

A FEW YEARS AGO, the director of a recovery ministry at one of the largest churches in my area asked to meet for coffee. Because I have taught about spiritual warfare ministry for over thirty years, he specifically wanted to talk about the role of spiritual warfare in addiction. His specialty was helping men who were in bondage to pornography, but he found that about a year into this highly regarded program, a lot of men stalled. They often started the journey with a lot of hope and excitement, but many of them hit a wall partway into the process. He wondered if warfare might be the missing ingredient that would give them the breakthrough they needed.

I was impressed that he asked. It is easy to dismiss the role of demons in our modern world. There are also way too many people doing some pretty crazy things in the name of spiritual warfare. (I think of the man who said wearing aluminum foil on your head keeps demons from reading your mind.) So, it is understandable why some people would be skeptical and want nothing to do with the subject. I know

too many Christians who have been wounded by the type of warfare ministry they have experienced.

I told this director that, in my experience, spiritual warfare often played a key role in addiction recovery. I have personally seen people experience significant breakthroughs by evicting demons and have heard numerous firsthand stories of others whose addictions ended when demons were removed. There is no question in my mind that spiritual warfare can play a very important role in the recovery process.

He agreed and invited me to talk to his group about the role of warfare in recovery. He then asked me a broader question. He was curious to know how I would design a recovery ministry. The timing of this conversation was interesting to me.

I had just met with leaders from two other large recovery ministries who were having similar problems. They saw people get off to a quick start and then hit a wall after several months. In each case, they ran programs that were high on accountability and mental renewal but were clearly missing other strategies (like spiritual warfare) that were just as important. His question got me thinking about the various tools I had collected through the years and the various principles I had learned. His question played a big role in getting me to write this book.

In the chapters ahead, I will explain a model that applies not only to addiction recovery but to any situation in which we are looking for a breakthrough from the issues that have us in bondage. For now, I want to focus on some of the challenges that keep our Christian solutions from being more effective in solving common problems people face.

THE LIMITS OF VULNERABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

When recovery programs are heavy on vulnerability and accountability, they emphasize being honest about our struggles and having a team of people who hold us accountable for our behavior. This process often helps people get off to a good start, but without adding a few other important strategies, people tend to stall.

The Challenge with Vulnerability

One problem I have seen with an emphasis on vulnerability is that group time is often spent with everyone talking about the worst experiences and worst emotions they felt that week. At first, it can be liberating to discover that you are not alone in your battles. But when this is the only thing that happens week after week, it can begin to create secondhand trauma for both the leader and the other participants.

I once led a marriage retreat just for couples who led groups for the recovery ministry in their church. Out of curiosity, I asked how many of them thought they would likely quit within the year, and nearly every hand in the room went up. When I asked them what their group time was like, they all described a setting in which everyone shared their deepest struggles and biggest challenges week after week. It was creating a burden too great for them to bear, and they were all looking for an escape.

I asked if it was okay to take one of our sessions and model a different way to lead group time, and they enthusiastically agreed. I was able to walk them through a three-step model based on the pamphlet *Passing the Peace* that was created by Dr. Jim Wilder.[1]

First, I had them get into groups and take several minutes for each person to share one of their happiest memories involving time at a lake or a beach. Within a few minutes, the room was filled with laughter, and you could feel the positive energy filling the room.

Next, I had them close their eyes and ask Jesus if there was anything He wanted them to know about a struggle they were facing. I told them to write down the thoughts that came to their minds when they prayed. I also told them not to worry about whether it was obviously from God because that could be sorted out later.

Third, I had them share with the group what they had written—or at least what they felt comfortable sharing. In this way, instead of focusing simply on their struggles and the hard emotions they created, they were able to focus on God's perspective and His wisdom about their struggle. It also gave people the opportunity to either affirm or challenge

what was shared as they were asked, "Does that sound like something God would want you to know?"

For example, someone might write, "I gave in to the temptation to look at porn, but five minutes into it, I said, 'What am I doing? This is not who I want to be. God, what do You want me to know about this?' The thought that came to my mind was that it was like me to want to resist temptation and that He was proud of me for stopping so quickly. He was also happy that I was sharing the experience with Him and not trying to hide it."

Another person might write, "I gave in to the temptation to look at porn this week, and when I asked God what He wanted me to know about that, the thoughts that came into my mind were, 'Of course, you did. You are a fraud. You pretend to be a good Christian, but this is what you really are.'" By sharing this, the people in the group are able to say, "That doesn't sound like God. That sounds like the enemy. Why don't you renounce that as a lie and ask God for the truth."

When the groups finished their conversations, I asked them for feedback. Most people said they felt a much greater sense of peace than they had before the exercise. Some said they felt like they had hope. No one reported feeling greater confusion or greater trauma. When I asked them if they would still quit if their group experiences were like this, they all said no. What they had just experienced was life-giving. It increased their joy and peace. What they had been doing before was draining, and they had all had enough.

The Challenge with Accountability

In addition to vulnerability, many recovery ministries stress accountability. I have met many people who raved about the impact their accountability team has had on their walk with God and their success in overcoming their addictions. I do not doubt them at all. But when I press into the issue a little deeper, what I hear them describe has almost nothing to do with accountability and everything to do with relational attachment.

The strategy that is actually giving them the strength to walk in victory is not accountability; it is the deep joy bonds they create with others on a similar journey. Many of these groups don't even ask accountability questions anymore. They just like getting together. The joy of their friendship fills a void in their lives that makes it easier for them to resist the temptations of pornography or alcohol or meth, or some other addiction. It is not the fear of failure that motivates them so much as the joy of connection. Their group forms an identity around the idea that we are a people who are there for each other no matter what happens.

Accountability is good for short-term task improvement. For example, I needed to be held accountable to practice the trumpet when I was in junior high. But I never progressed beyond that. Playing the trumpet never became a passion, and I never developed a bond with others who played instruments so that being a musician became part of my identity. Without those, accountability was only going to get me so far. In the same way, if we never progress beyond accountability to an identity that says we are part of a people who are honest with our failings but know that we are not defined by our failings, accountability alone will only get us so far. We need the transformational power that comes from belonging and a healthy group identity.

If the term *group identity* is new to you, I will discuss it more in the chapter on increasing joy bonds. My main point here is that attachment and the sense of identity that comes from who we see as "our people" is a major driver in the way we live.

FOUR GOOD IDEAS THAT NEUTRALIZED WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

One of the reasons many of our models for recovery and emotional healing have holes in them is that Western Christianity itself has some holes that we often don't recognize. In our book *The Solution of Choice*, Jim Wilder and I make the case that the Enlightenment had an impact on the church that is still felt to this day.[2] It changed how we think about

ourselves as Christians and what we see as core to the faith. In the process, it changed the solutions we offer to people with problems. To be specific, the Enlightenment and the philosophies that it spawned introduced four good ideas that, in many ways, have neutralized much of the impact of Western Christianity. The next few pages are going to get a little deep, but if you enjoy understanding how our culture got to where it is, I think you will find them worthwhile.

1. Reason

The Enlightenment taught us that the most important thing about being human was our ability to reason. We were different than animals—not because we were created in the image of God and designed for a relationship with Him—but because we could think. When the French Revolution abandoned the church, they made a statue of Sophia—the goddess of reason—and placed it in the cathedral of Notre Dame. They were making a statement: *From now on, we will worship reason rather than the Christian God*.

While the church did not worship reason in the same way the secular culture did, the church did make a shift in relation to reason. In response to the culture, we put far more emphasis on truth and rationality as the centerpiece of the faith. Instead of placing a deep attachment to God at the center, we placed reason at the center and asked correct thinking to produce a deep attachment to God. But life doesn't work like that. We don't think our way to attachment. Rather, attachment informs the way we think.

As a result of the new emphasis on reason, we sent our pastors to school, but not so they could learn how to build healthy communities or guide Christians to be the sort of people who love their neighbors well. We sent them to school to make sure they had a rational faith and good theology. We wanted to make sure our pastors were good at thinking because our theology was under attack on several fronts. There is nothing wrong with having good theology. In fact, it is vital to the faith. But biblical scholarship should not be valued more than love. Paul warned

us that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1).

So, what was the fruit of this shift toward reason? Did our focus on biblical truth and sound theology produce more mature Christians? Did it help the church become more Christlike? Or did it lead to more and more division? Did we make scholarship more important than discipleship? I ask this as a pastor with two master's degrees and a doctorate who taught college and seminary classes. I am not anti-academic. The question is: *Does reason belong at the center of the faith?*

A rational faith is clearly a good idea. Truth is important. But was it meant to be the hub of the wheel? Or did we move something to the center that was meant to be a spoke on the wheel?

2. Will

The second good idea that neutralized Western Christianity was the idea that the will is even more fundamental than reason to both our humanity and our faith. Many of the early Protestant movements sprang up in the days following the Enlightenment. Puritanism and revivalism were both anchored in a philosophy called *voluntarism* (from the Latin word for "will"). This philosophical movement believed that willpower or volition should be at the center of the Christian faith. The core textbook used in all of the Ivy League schools of the 1600s was *The Marrow of Christian Theology* by William Ames. He taught that the will was foundational to virtue and wrote, "Virtue is a habit whereby the will is inclined to do well."[3]

For the last four hundred years, Bible-believing Christians (like me) have tended to reduce many core concepts to acts of the will alone. But in most cases, there is something deeper going on than mere will.

The problem with reducing something like love or joy to mere choices is that there is so much more to them than the decisions we make. Today, we tend to encourage people to anchor their sense of eternal security in a choice they made at a point in time. But I can't think of a time that Paul told someone, "Remember the choice you made all those years ago and start making choices consistent with it." On the other

hand, Paul often reminded people of the relational bond that had been formed with him (Phil. 1:8; 2 Cor. 12:15), with other believers (Eph. 4:3; Col. 2:2), and especially with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17; Rom. 6:5; Phil. 2:1). Based on these deep attachments, he encouraged Christians to live a life worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1). It is not that choices have no role in this process, it is just not the deepest part of what is going on.

The other problem with putting too much focus on the will is that, for most of us, willpower and decision-making are pretty fickle allies. A person can swear he will never look at a naked woman online again and find himself doing it again the same day. I can tell myself I am going to do a better job of loving my wife, but if I am relying solely on willpower to do that, I'm likely to be frustrated. There are choices I can make that will make the attachment that love creates possible, but the attachment itself is deeper than a mere choice.

Most pastors know that teaching the Bible and calling people to make good decisions is often futile. Sometimes it falls on deaf ears, and sometimes people make choices in the moment but don't follow through on them for more than a few weeks at best.

I have attended many services at which hundreds and even thousands of people have gone forward to make a commitment to change the way they live, only to fail to follow through on that choice in the following months. I myself have gone forward in response to a sermon and made a choice to make some kind of life change, only to fall back into old patterns of behavior relatively quickly.

When we don't see much change from truth and an appeal to the will, we generally turn to accountability. One church leader heard I was working on a discipleship curriculum and encouraged me to "put some teeth in it." Specifically, he meant I should be sure to make accountability a core feature of the curriculum. It is an understandable suggestion, but as I wrote earlier in this chapter, accountability is not as effective at producing life change as most of us think. To this day, evangelicals tend to see life through the lens of voluntarism, which sees beliefs as the root of all our emotions and choices as the key to life change. While both

truth and wise decisions are good ideas, there is something deeper than both of them: our bond, union, or attachment with God. The true hub of the faith is our union with Christ, which makes us one with God.

3. Power

The third good idea that neutralized Western Christianity was the idea that power is the missing ingredient that keeps us from real transformation. While reason and will have dominated evangelical churches, a focus on Holy Spirit power has tended to dominate charismatic churches. Many have embraced the idea that reason and power don't work because we lack Holy Spirit power. But there is more to the Holy Spirit than power, and power does not produce maturity.

Following the Enlightenment and the trend toward voluntarism, the next philosophical movement we saw in the secular world was modernism. One of the prophets of this movement was Friedrich Nietzsche. As a young man, he was deeply influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's treatise, "The World as Will and Representation." Schopenhauer's book viewed the will as deeply irrational and more like a craving or a passion—like the sex drive or the lust for cruelty. He believed if these were not tamed, they would drive a person to misery.[4] Nietzsche came to despise Christianity's focus on love as weak and championed the idea of an *ubermensch* or superman who was able to assert his will through power. Thus, the power to make things happen became more valued than good ideas or well-intended decisions.

Ideas like those espoused by Nietzsche influenced the modern world. It is a common axiom in politics that you can't do the good you want to do until you win. So, accumulating power and cutting the moral corners you need to cut in order to win are justified as necessary "power moves" to accomplish a greater good. Power came to take a greater place of honor than either reason or the will in the modern age with devastating impact. More people died in the twentieth century than in the rest of human history combined because of the power moves of "utopian" visionaries like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao.

The new focus on power in culture was reflected in the church as well. We came to believe the reason that truth and choices didn't produce more fruit was that we lacked the Holy Spirit's power to make those decisions. But is that what the Bible teaches? Does it say the Holy Spirit will give us the power to be more obedient? Or does the Bible teach that a relationship with the Spirit—an attachment with God—naturally leads to a more obedient life? Walking in the Spirit is primarily a relational idea. Again, there is a place for power in the Christian life, but we have often asked it to do something it was not intended to do, and that is to produce maturity.

One needs only think through the long list of charismatic leaders who operated in tremendous power but did not demonstrate great maturity in their personal lives to see that power is not the key to maturity and transformation. Don't most of us know of someone who had amazing fruit in their ministry life but was a mess in their private life? Power produced a following and even led people to Christ, but that same power was not the key to personal transformation. Maturity is about relational and emotional intelligence that only comes with practice.

4. Tolerance

The postmodern generation that dominates culture today has largely given up on the idea that the church has any solutions for producing life change. Our kids have watched our lack of love, joy, peace, and self-control and come to the conclusion that Christianity doesn't really work. As a result, they have waved the white flag of surrender and said, "We should not expect people to change. Let's just tolerate everyone the way they are and not ask anyone to change."

Now, just as there is nothing wrong with a reasonable faith, or making good choices, or experiencing the Holy Spirit's power, there is nothing wrong with tolerance (unless it is redefined beyond recognition). I would define *tolerance* as doing good to people even if you disagree with them. Without disagreement there is nothing to tolerate. Unfortunately, more and more people define tolerance as agreeing with

someone else's opinion simply because they have that opinion.

My point in taking this dive into culture has been to show that none of these four good ideas were meant to be at the center of the faith. That spot has always been reserved for a joyful love bond with God. The stronger and more joy-based that attachment is, the more fruit gets produced. When attachment is at the hub of the wheel, the spokes find their proper place and the wheel spins smoothly. But if Christianity is unable to produce life change in people, then something is missing from our model. If our Christianity is not making us more loving and patient people, who even form attachments with our enemies, then something about our faith is broken.

As I began to grasp more fully the impact of the Enlightenment and especially voluntarism on most of us Bible-believing Christians, I understood more clearly how it has warped many of the solutions we look to for personal breakthrough and offer to those in need. The model in this book is partly an attempt to correct the philosophical foundation that has driven much of what we do in trying to help ourselves and others find the breakthroughs we need and expand the type of solutions we offer.

For example, if an addict comes to one church, he may get a lot of good biblical advice and perhaps some accountability, but is that all he needs? Or, an addict may go to a "power" church and have a dramatic experience at the altar or in a counseling room, but again, is that all that is needed? If a person goes to a church that tells them change is impossible, they are certainly not going to get any help. The issue here is that too many Christians have come to the church looking for solutions to their problems only to leave with inadequate answers that leave a lot of them wondering if Christianity really works.

A MATURITY MODEL

A growth model works like a factory. It is designed to produce a specific product. Any successful factory will need to identify precisely the intended outcome and engineer strategies that predictably achieve that

outcome. Our factory is designed to produce maturity and it follows five specific strategies.

Biblically speaking, *maturity* means *complete*. For example, Paul states that his desire in ministry is to "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28 ESV). The word *mature* in this verse is *teleios*. At its root, it is related to the idea of reaching a desired goal.[5] Thus, when a child becomes an adult, they are said to be *teleios* (1 Cor. 14:20).[6] In a similar way, a plant is mature when it is in bloom, and fruit is mature when it is ripe. They have reached their intended destination and are thus complete.

Emotional maturity is primarily about two areas of development. First, it is about developing a strong identity. Second, it is about developing the skills and capacity needed to regulate our emotions.

Strong Identity (both my identity in Christ and my group identity as a kingdom citizen)
+
Skills (relational skills and emotional regulation skills)

Maturity (the capacity to act like myself and regulate my emotions)

Identity

Emotional maturity can be defined as the ability to act like myself, even under stress. To understand this, it can help to look at the process by which our sense of identity grows from birth to adulthood.

As babies, the part of our brains that knows who we are is largely undeveloped. This part of the brain grows through thousands of relational experiences. The driving force behind our identity development is attachment. As babies bond to their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandparents, and aunts and uncles, these attachments form a collection of memories that tell the baby: *This is who you are. These are your people. You are like them.* For example, growing up in the Warner family, we had lots of deep conversations. My dad was a professor who became a college president. My mom was also an educator. But we were also good at making

each other laugh. It was like us to sit around the table and see who could tell the most entertaining story or make the family laugh. It was an especially big win if we got Dad to laugh. We knew if we got him laughing, he would start telling us all of his "dad jokes," which we all know by heart to this day.

One of the primary developmental processes that is absolutely crucial when we are infants and toddlers is the formation of an organized sense of self—or a core identity. When little ones do not develop a strong sense of self, they will learn to adopt a totally different *persona* depending on the emotion they feel. In a sense, the baby turns into a different person with every upsetting emotion they experience. Instead of learning to live with an integrated, organized core identity that allows them to act like themselves regardless of how they feel, they develop an unstable identity that changes with every mood they feel.

For example, one of a toddler's personas can be angry and easily throw temper tantrums. This was me. Before I was ten years old, I was notorious in the Warner family for my tantrums. I remember my parents wondering what in the world to do with me. I could be a compliant, happy, relationally engaged child one minute, then snap and throw myself on the floor screaming the next.

The primary solution to tantrums (especially in the toddler years) is not disciplining the child. (See *The 4 Habits of Raising Joy-Filled Kids* for more on this.[7]) The primary solution is meeting them in their angry, out-of-control state and helping them regulate their emotions. If our toddlers don't get help with this, their brains will never learn the skill of recovering from anger, and they will continue to handle their anger with the emotional maturity of a small child for the rest of their lives or until that skill set is learned. In my case, I remember my older sister teaching me how to count to ten and take a deep breath, and actually practicing with me so I could learn to control my anger.

Toddlers and young children need to be helped to learn how to regulate all of their emotions. This means they need to be taught skills, but it also means someone needs to stay relationally engaged with them when they get overwhelmed. In their book *How We Love*, Milan and Kay

Yerkovic make the sad observation that among the hundreds of couples they have led through marital counseling, very few of them had even a single memory of someone staying relationally engaged with them as they recovered from any upsetting emotion during their childhood years. They learned to ask each of their clients a simple question, "Can you recall being comforted as a child after a time of emotional distress?"[8] It was surprising how few had even one memory of such an experience. This means that most of the people they worked with did not get good training on how to regulate their emotions. As a result, they were still stuck in child- or infant-level maturity.

Without the proper maturity development, people will lack the skills and capacity to deal with their emotions. This kind of immaturity makes it almost impossible to act like ourselves when things go wrong. It also makes it much more likely that we will get stuck in unwanted emotions with no idea how to recover.

Our Identity in Christ

It is worth noting that if someone has a grossly underdeveloped sense of identity because of neglect or abuse in their early years, simply teaching them facts about their identity in Christ is not going to have the same impact as it will for someone who has a more stable identity already formed. The brain's sense of identity is not formed by information but rather by attachment. What we believe about ourselves is important, but when it comes to identity formation there is something even deeper than our beliefs. When we learn to form joy-filled attachments *and* we get our beliefs anchored in our identity in Christ, we have a powerful one-two punch that makes for a very stable sense of self.

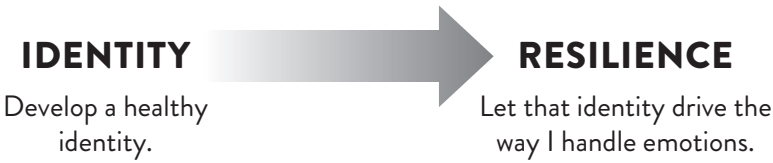
Later in this book, I will unpack more of the brain science related to attachment and identity. For now, it may help to think of the left brain as where our narratives about life are stored (i.e., our beliefs) and the right brain as where attachments are formed and our sense of group identity develops. Bringing the two parts of the brain together for a healthy core identity might look like this:

LEFT BRAIN NARRATIVE	RIGHT BRAIN ATTACHMENT
I am deeply loved by God.	I feel safe and secure.
I am a child of God.	I feel peace.
It is like me to love others well.	I can bounce back from hard emotions.
My people return good for evil.	I share joy with others easily.

Regulation

The second developmental task that is essential to maturity development is *emotional regulation*. The more mature we are, the more it takes for us to blow up, shut down, or melt down. Thus, part of maturity development is learning to know who we are or developing a healthy identity. The other part is emotional regulation, in which we develop the skills and capacity to remain who we are under stress.

The two work together like this:



Most of our emotional regulation skills are learned in infancy and childhood. As babies, we cannot regulate our emotions at all. We are completely dependent on someone else to recognize what is wrong and do whatever is necessary to help us recover. This is why parents spend so much time learning to recognize the slightest nuances in their baby's behavior. We notice when they are fussy or perplexed or angry or overwhelmed. We learn to read their body language so that we can identify what they need and take care of that need. Babies who get well cared for emotionally and physically without having to ask learn that safe, secure attachments are normal. It lays a foundation for emotional

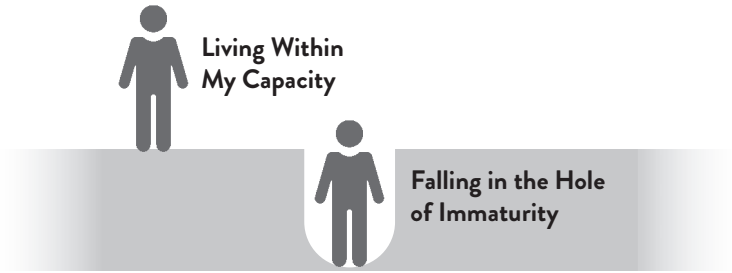
stability throughout life. If a baby does not get these needs met, it will promote emotional instability, and the damage will need to be repaired later in life.

As babies become toddlers, their emotions get more intense. Anger can become rage. Fear can become terror. Sadness can become a sobbing mess. If our reaction to this is simply to try to shut it down and tell them, "No!" or say things like, "Big boys don't cry," we will stunt their maturity development because they will never learn how to properly recover from such emotions. The better response is to meet them in their big emotion, stay relationally engaged with them, and comfort them until they start acting like themselves again. As we do this for them, their brains watch what is going on and learn to imitate it. If we simply get angry at them or shame them for their emotions, they will learn to get angry at themselves or shame themselves for feeling those emotions. Such reactions can become lifelong habits.

As children age, we don't take care of all of their emotional needs as if they were still infants. We begin to train them how to take care of themselves and regulate their own emotions. We teach them how to use their words to accurately name what they are feeling. We teach them how to take deep breaths and count to ten and help them practice all sorts of skills that will enable them to manage their emotions with skill.

HOLES IN OUR MATURITY

If a child gets all of this training, maturity happens almost automatically. It is a natural result of watching mature people, learning skills from those people, and practicing them over and over again with help. However, missing any of this and going through unresolved pain will stunt the maturity process and leave us with holes in our maturity. As a result, most people who are looking for a breakthrough in their lives may not realize it, but they need more than relief. They need to build their maturity and fill the holes created by trauma.



Most of us have holes in our maturity. We missed something (or a lot of things) when we were kids. As a result, we can find ourselves walking along, feeling fine, and acting like ourselves, then suddenly, we get triggered, fall into a hole, and find ourselves acting like a child instead of an adult. We didn't consciously choose to do this. It just sort of happened. Learning to recognize when we fall into these holes can help us determine where our growth edge is. If I find that I fall into a hole when I get sad, but not so much when I feel disgust, it lets me know that I need to work on my ability to deal with sadness. That should become my focus. This means I should start watching how people who recover well from sadness do it. I should get some skill training from a coach. I will likely also need to meet with a prayer minister to uncover any roots that make this particular emotion so difficult.

In some ways, this whole book is meant to answer the question: *How does a person fill the holes in their maturity development?* The models and strategies presented here all play a role in that process.

In the next chapter we will take a closer look at some common growth models used by Christians to provide solutions for the problems we face. Growth models are important, not only because they suggest solutions for our problems, but because they limit the solutions we believe are possible. One of my core goals in writing this book is to help us understand the bigger picture of what people need in order to experience lasting breakthrough and why a variety of strategies are often necessary. In order to better understand the growth model proposed in this book, it will help to see how it compares and contrasts with other common growth models.