Salubritas: International Journal of Spirit-Empowered Counseling

Volume 1 *Inaugural Issue* Article 1

2021

# Full Issue Salubritas 1 (2021)

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# Salubritas

International Journal of
Spirit-Empowered Counseling

Inaugural Issue (2021)

*Salubritas: International Journal of Spirit-Empowered Counseling*
Volume 1 (2021)
ISBN: 978-1-950971-18-3 for the current issue


Published by the graduate Professional Counseling Program of the College of Theology and Ministry and the Behavioral Sciences Department of the College of Science and Engineering, Oral Roberts University



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*Salubritas: International Journal of Spirit-Empowered Counseling* is published annually in Fall.

The journal is indexed through the Digital Commons (https:// www.bepress.com/impact-analytics/). Journal contents may be searched at www.oru.edu/salubritas and through any web search engine.

Cover designer: ORU art alumna Lahyun Moon and Prof. Jiwon Kim
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# Salubritas

International Journal of
Spirit-Empowered Counseling

The mission of the journal is to create and share unique knowledge to promote the wellness and wholeness (*salubritas*) of individuals and communities through counseling that occurs within the dynamic work of the life-giving Spirit to empower both counselors and counselees to live the fullness of life.

The journal publishes refereed manuscripts of research, theory, and practical approaches regarding the role of the Spirit in counseling. Some from a Christian tradition may refer to this specifically as the Holy Spirit, one component of the relational (Trinitarian) godhead that facilitates and embodies mechanisms of positive change which appear non-reductionistic. Individuals may incorporate diverse ways of knowing and interpreting the Spirit and its role in positive change, and the Spirit is collectively assumed to be at the center of such change. Further, individuals from various traditions may hold unique experiences of the Spirit in counseling, and the journal recognizes, celebrates and welcomes these voices. The purpose of this journal is thus to build bridges among faith traditions by increasing dialogue about experiences of the Spirit in counseling.

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EDITORIAL

# A NEW VENTURE!

ANDREA C. WALKER, Editor
EDWARD E. DECKER, JR., Editor
JEFFREY S. LAMP, *Spiritus* Editor

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The publication of the inaugural issue of *Salubritas* is the culmination of a vision given to the faculty of the counseling program in the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry at Oral Roberts University over 20 years ago. We envisioned an academic journal that would provide theoretical and research articles, book reviews, and other resources for Spirit-centered counselors. This vision grew out of an awareness that at the time the journal was envisioned there were few resources of benefit to Spirit-centered counselors. We thought that identifying a clearly articulated pneumatology, together with a twenty-first-century theological anthropology, and sound counseling methodologies would be of great benefit to counselors who wanted truly to integrate their Spirit-infused faith with their counseling practice. What we have learned is there are pneumatologies, anthropologies, and counseling methodologies in use by Spirit-centered counselors around the world, all of which have been beneficial for us. We have learned so much in this reciprocal process and continue to learn as the Spirit directs our interests and activities.

We thus must acknowledge the existence of significant diversity in experiences with the Spirit. In a recent editorial of our sister journal, *Spiritus*, Editor Jeff Lamp described the diversity in the Spirit-empowered world, referencing his mentor's term "Pentecostalisms" and even suggesting the utility of diverse applications and interpretations of the Spirit-empowered Movement to current issues. Spirit-centered counselors also have many voices that collectively inform and advance the field of counseling. Some from a Christian tradition may refer to activity within

the Spirit specifically as being the work of the Holy Spirit, one component of the relational (Trinitarian) godhead that facilitates and embodies mechanisms of positive change that appear non-reductionistic. Spirit-centered counselors do make some common assumptions: (a) the Spirit permeates everything, (b) the Spirit can be discerned, and (c) the Spirit facilitates functional order out of chaos. Our commonly held principle is thus in our assumption of the Spirit to be at the center of positive change. With this launching of the *Salubritas* Journal, we attempt to create an avenue for scholarship originating from the many voices who wish to speak about the role of the Spirit in the act of counseling as they experience it.

Bringing discussions of the Spirit and change into academic conversations within the counseling profession has its own set of challenges. Is it possible to measure counseling that is Spirit-centered, and if yes, are such measurements predictable? Can we isolate variance in the counseling process to observe the Spirit moving? Can science and faith truly be integrated in delicate matters such as the highly personalized experience of the Spirit in counseling?

These are all reasonable questions to ask, but we must acknowledge that attempts to measure the unseen are not novel in the world of scholarship. The questions emerge from traditional epistemological world views, but research in the social sciences and counseling has already done the necessary work of expanding to include ways of knowing embedded in "process" and underscoring the fluid nature of the human experience. Such epistemologies highlight the importance of the dialectical process in counseling and how a mere shift in perspective can result in positive change through creation of new meaning and deeper understanding of emotions, relationships, and one's own growth. More recently developed ways of knowing consider context in change and how larger networks influence personal experience. Some in our contemporary world overlook the power of context by refusing to acknowledge patterns within the system that are oppressive and unjust, but in the field of counseling, the larger ecology is recognized as a driver that shapes and molds our clients' experiences. The idea of being embedded in something larger than us also leaves room for productive and creative forces, like justice and transcendence. Aristotle's

widely known quotation, which was adopted by Gestalt psychologists in the mid-20th century and later by the marriage and family therapy movement, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," captures this principle. The world of scholarship and the study of human experiences, including the change process in counseling, has already expanded to consider those things that are not necessarily directly observable with the five senses but allow for something else, something "in addition to," something beyond direct measure currently, something that might be recognized as the Spirit.

So the illuminating question becomes, how do we employ scholarly ways of knowing to expand and catalyze our understanding of the Spirit? It may seem a lofty goal, as our current cultural milieu in the United States quite literally supports the pitting of science against faith, creating gridlock that has never been so helplessly immobilizing as recently witnessed in the various responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Namely, many publicly oppose scientific recommendations around vaccinations and mask-wearing for reasons attributed to their faith systems. (We recognize the diversity of reasons for this decision and refer here only to those related to faith.) In this way, science and faith are so polarized that a true marriage between the two seems unlikely if not impossible. We, however, the editors of this launch issue of *Salubritas* Journal, believe the integration of science and faith is possible.

What might the marriage of "what is" with "what might be," the integration of faith and science in the realm of counseling, look like? We have yet to fully uncover this, but this journal is intended to begin the conversation. Research in this domain might explore ways of helping clients expand their capacities in the face of life's stressors so that they are able to simultaneously hold room for both joy and grief, disappointment and hope, disillusionment and faith, discontent and love. Theoretical formulations might attempt to explain the process of allowing space in a seemingly hopeless situation to remain open to the possibility that things can change and something different can emerge. Scholarship might include acknowledgment of the transcendence in a sense of connectedness to a higher power. In short, it might begin to examine seemingly paradoxical

human experiences, as they appear to produce the seeds of truth. Such examinations will not ignore human pain felt to its fullest, but they will begin from the vantage point that clients and counselors might also at times experience more. *The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.*

The growing vision that the ORU Counseling faculty have nurtured since its birth over 20 years ago, now further cultivated in partnership with the Behavioral Sciences faculty, culminates in the launch of this new Journal. From the conceptualization of this avenue of scholarship, our purposes have been and remain as follows: (a) to build bridges among the various "Pentecostalisms" and advance the conversation about the nature of change in the Spirit-empowered world, (b) to build bridges between science and faith in scholarship, and (c) to understand better the integration of the Spirit into the change process to improve our counseling interventions.

This issue begins with a pair of studies that examine Spirit-centered counseling in a broad, conceptual sense. First, Bill Buker, Edward E. Decker, Jr., and Jeffrey S. Lamp offer a vision of Spirit-centered counseling that operates on three foundational assumptions—an ontological assumption that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, permeates all of creation; an epistemological assumption that there are means by which human beings might know what the Spirit is doing in the world, namely discernment and participation; and a functional assumption that attests that the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world is bringing order out of chaos. The article develops the contours of a model in which emphasis is always on the importance of being aware of and experiencing the Spirit and utilizing this awareness within the counseling endeavor. Following this broad picture, Buker follows up with a study using the image of a fractal to propose a Spirit-centered approach to counseling that conceptualizes the Spirit's activity as seeking to replicate the patterns of God's redemptive story throughout creation, forging an epistemological shift from ways of knowing shaped by the conventional wisdom of culture to a renewed mind grounded in the transformative wisdom of Jesus, in order to facilitate deep second-order change. This pair of studies provides a starting point for the journey to explore Spirit-centered counseling.

Following this orientation to Spirit-centered counseling, four studies follow that engage specific areas of counseling practice. Pamela Engelbert, drawing on both the theory of intergenerational trauma and Matthew's mention of "the wife of Uriah" in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:6), presents a compelling argument that Jesus communicates #metoo in his identification with the victims of sexual assault, represented in the inclusion of Bathsheba in his family lineage. It concludes with a call for the church to take the stance of "radical disciples" in listening to the stories of survivors of sexual assault and thus facilitate Jesus' healing of these traumas. Haley French reflects on counseling in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic through the eschatological lens of the "already, not yet" dialectic. The counseling process is presented as a place in which suffering is encountered and explored as the counselor stands in solidarity with the sufferer, anticipating hope and the prospect of change in the present through the work of the eschatological Spirit of God. Practices of companioning, lament, and re-storying are presented as ways of navigating the tension of the already, not yet. Robert McBain draws on his own experience of suffering from depression to provide direction for the church in ministering to those suffering, often in silence, from depression. Charting the church's history of helping sufferers interpret their experience of depression, McBain laments that the church has been pushed to the periphery of the mental health conversation by the emergence of the medical, therapeutic, and pharmaceutical communities. He urges a model of "Jesus-style friendships" to help sufferers from depression find identity, purpose, and meaning within the church community. Karuna Sharma offers a look at the growing prevalence of Christian counseling in the nation of Nepal. The nation's people have experienced great political, social, religious, and economic upheaval in recent decades, resulting in mental health crises and the acceptance of counseling as a mode of healing. Sharma argues that Spirit-centered counseling in churches is especially well-suited to address this situation in Nepal.

In the final article in this issue, Melinda G. Rhoades and Andrea C. Walker present the results of a research project that analyzes the

responses of college students in an evangelical university to experiences of bereavement. The authors posit that this study may be the first to utilize narrative descriptions from participants describing their own changes in spirituality and beliefs about God after experiencing a close loss. The authors utilized Bill Buker's Spirit-centered Change Model as a construct for measuring spiritual growth, with results from the study serving as a first empirical step toward measuring spiritual growth as epistemological change.

So let's proceed with the launch of this new venture!

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# THE SPIRIT, CHANGE, AND HEALING

## TOWARD A SPIRIT-CENTERED MODEL OF HEALING

EDWARD E. DECKER, JR.
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*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 7–28

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**Keywords** *Spirit-empowerment, pneumatological imagination, counseling, change*

**Abstract**

Spirit-centered counseling is an approach to counseling that makes full use of Spirit-centered spirituality as well as techniques and interventions used within Spirit-centered faith groups. An emphasis is always on the importance of being aware of, and experiencing, the Spirit and utilizing this awareness within the counseling endeavor. Three orienting assumptions are delineated to provide direction for the specific practices and methods of Spirit-centered counseling that prepare the way for Spirit-directed changes. Of special importance are the pneumatological imagination, Holy Spirit empowerment, and the development of a trialogical encounter, within which the counselor and the person seeking counseling experience the immanent nature of God through the Spirit's presence in the counseling endeavor.

## Introduction

There have been limited efforts among persons who counsel as pentecostals1F1F to develop a clinical approach derived from a tradition

in which the Holy Spirit is central to the counseling endeavor. Although some pentecostal clinicians have begun to reflect on their therapeutic tasks (Decker, 1996, 1997; Gilbert & Brock, 1985, 1988; French, 2017; McMahon, 1995; Parker, 2014, 2016; Serrano, 2003; Vining & Decker, 1996), Johnson, Worthington, Hook, and Aten (2013) note that "a formal Pentecostal/charismatic model of psychotherapy has not been developed yet" (p. 339).

Although such an approach to counseling has not yet been developed, in a review of the counseling literature, Decker (2002) related that Christian counselors unanimously believe, although often tacitly so, that the Holy Spirit is available to clients and counselors to empower them for personal or spiritual growth, or service. This article goes beyond what appears to be a tacit acceptance of the Spirit in the counseling endeavor by identifying the contours of a Spirit-centered perspective of counseling and by articulating the pneumatological assumptions that frame the counseling endeavor.

## Assumptions

What is distinctive about Spirit-centered approaches to counseling is a set of orienting assumptions. These assumptions imply an openness to multiple ways of discerning the Spirit, consequently they also serve to guide the development of Spirit-centered counseling, and to define its methodology.

### An Ontological Assumption

The first assumption upon which our model of counseling is built is an *ontological assumption* that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, permeates all of creation. From the beginning, the world has been imbued with the presence of the Spirit (Genesis 1:2) who gives life (Job 33:4; 34:13–15; Psalms 104:29–30; Romans 8:18–27). This understanding suggests that followers of Jesus are to be co-participants in the Spirit's work to transform creation into the dwelling place of God. There is intentionality to the Spirit's activity: calling forth that which is best and granting grace and life—an abundant life (John 10:10)—to all.

### An Epistemological Assumption

Second, following our ontological assumption is an *epistemological assumption*. We believe that there are means by which human beings might know what the Spirit is doing in the world. This knowing is achieved by two means: discernment and participation. Discernment is grounded in the reality of human beings created in the image of God. It then proceeds as a dynamic engagement of the Spirit in the world, and as characterized by Howard Ervin (personal communication) as collegiality and consensus in the Holy Spirit. In the words of James in the book of Acts (15:28) "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us . . ." (*Today's New International Version*, 2005).

Discernment is an activity that is embedded in the larger framework of participation in the move of the Spirit in the world. Simply put, people who are Spirit-centered can discern what the Spirit is doing in the world because they participate in the life of the Spirit and the Spirit's work in transforming creation into the dwelling place of God. This participation often results in a transrational, transformative knowing leading to encountering the Spirit in surprising ways.

### A Functional Assumption

Building on the previous two assumptions, our third assumption—a *functional assumption*—attests that the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world is bringing order out of chaos. One way in which the Spirit brings order out of chaos is to facilitate the ongoing narrative of God's redemptive story. The patterns of God's redemptive story are revealed in the macro-narratives of Scripture, especially in the ministry of Jesus.

## Spirit-Centered Practices That Inform the Counseling Practice

The assumptions identified above form what is distinctive about Spirit-centered counseling because they comprise the basis of the theology undergirding

the entirety of the counseling process. These assumptions give rise to four practices that are essential to Spirit-centered counseling and provide the consistent lenses through which the counseling endeavor is viewed.

## A Pneumatological Imagination

The term *pneumatological imagination* is proposed by Amos Yong (2002) as a way of knowing that refers to the human imagination, shaped and formed in distinctive ways through the continued engagement of the Spirit with it so that it is adequate for "engagement with the world and with others in particular . . ." (p. 22). Unlike the traditional understanding of the word "imagination" that posits that the imagination is the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), Yong stipulates that "knowing as a pneumatic process" arises ". . . out of the experience of the Spirit . . . mysteriously [and] graciously received as a gift of the Spirit" (pp. 120–121). Smith (2010) considers this aspect of Spirit-centered spirituality to be a specific construal of the world, an implicit understanding that constitutes a "take" on things (p. 79). For the Spirit-centered counselor the pneumatological imagination is a way to view the entirety of the counseling endeavor as the Spirit illumines, guides, and informs the counseling process.

## Holy Spirit Empowerment

It is our contention that for the Spirit-centered counselor the entirety of the counseling endeavor is infused with the presence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Two scriptures support and substantiate this perspective: the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit "[to] live with you and [be] in you" (*New International Version*, 2011, John 14:17) and the admonition of Jesus that believers will "receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (*New International Version*, 2011, Acts 1:8).

In further clarification, Decker (1996) defines Holy Spirit empowerment *as the enhancement* [emphasis added] of understanding and interpretation of the person and the stories that are told as part of the counseling process.

He further stipulates that this empowerment of the Spirit is present for both the counselor and the client and often seems to be an extraordinary intensification of the natural human abilities to make sense of what is heard and felt, and to derive new meaning from personal experiences as they coalesce into a meaningful dialogue (p. 63).

## The Stories People Tell

The Bible is a storybook. It is much more, of course, but the message of God's grace and presence is told through stories. These stories tell of victories, defeats, detours, deep personal failures, of violence, confusion, and perseverance. They serve to ground people in families and communities. And often in biblical story, as the Spirit interacts with people, they feel encouraged for specific actions. New beginnings are suggested for them and comfort and support is provided.

Spirit-filled counselors help clients to begin to tell their stories. With the help of the Spirit, they begin to ask questions that result in opening an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual space for new stories and to provide a support system for a preferred story. These stories create meaning and understanding as people capture the dynamic sense that God is active and present in the world and in their personal experiences. As a result, people learn to "re-story" their lives in empowering ways (Parker, 2016, p. 62).

## The Integration of Faith and Science

Most problems that bring people to counseling develop out of a confluence of factors: the choices people make; the genetic and biologic codes that make people human; misplaced epistemological assumptions; and entrenched and habitual patterns of interaction. And human problems also develop because of outright evil.

This is because people are psychosomatospiritual beings. The psychological aspects of people (*psycho*) are indicative of the psychological mechanisms necessary to navigate human life and to develop and maintain relationships. The biological or bodily aspects of people (*soma*) identify that people live a creaturely life—flesh and blood, hair, and fingernails,

all of this expressed in a physical body. The spiritual aspect of each person demonstrates that people are designed to maintain a relationship with God and that it is the Spirit of God that gives them life. But, when viewed through the lens of faith and science, each of the aspects of human life identified immediately above respond to the resources that enable a person to become a whole person: the caring of a Spirit-centered counselor, taking prescribed medication, and of course prayer. All are aided by the Spirit who enables each person to live fully as a human being.

## Methods of Spirit-Centered Counseling

Methods are procedures or techniques by which general practices are implemented. In this regard, four methods characterize Spirit-centered counseling. Relational interactions are methods that foster a relationship between the counselor and the client. Counselor dispositions frame the relational component of Spirit-centered counseling and foster a trialogical engagement during the counseling endeavor between the Spirit, the counselor, and the person receiving counseling. The second method, narrative structures, enables the telling of and listening to stories. They provide an opportunity for a client to reframe one's own story. Developing God's redemptive story provides a doorway through which Spirit-centered counselors can assist clients to connect with and participate in God's ongoing story of redemption. Instruction in the subversive wisdom of God provides a new perspective of what people perceive as the "correct" way to do things: the appropriate way to live one's life. It also enables people conceptually to enter God's story by reflecting its redemptive patterns in the context of their own personal challenges.

### Relational Interaction

Asay and Lambert (1999) state that 30% of beneficial counseling outcomes can be attributed to the therapeutic relationship—aspects of the counseling relationship over which the counselor exerts the most influence. Pope and Kline (1999) identify those personal characteristics as empathy, acceptance, and warmth. Writing about personal characteristics that grow out of a

Spirit-filled person, Land (1997) refers to *abiding dispositions* [emphasis added], those enduring and prevailing tendencies of one's personality and interaction in the world, that dispose a person (emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally) "toward God and . . . neighbor" (Land 1997, p. 128). Maddox (1994) refers to Charles Wesley when he cites that "these dispositions, in true Christian action are not inherent human possessions. They emerge in conjunction with the empowering Presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives" (p. 132). Four facets of relational interaction central to Spirit-centered counseling are godly love, compassion, courage, and a trialogical encounter, an engagement of the counselor, the client, and the Spirit.

## Godly Love

The New Testament reminds us that the Holy Spirit was given to remind believers of all that Jesus taught (John 14:26), most notably, to "love each other as I have loved you" (*New International Version*, 2011, John 15:12). It is the human experience of the "living flame of love" —the Holy Spirit— that produces what Paloma and Hood (2008) have called *godly love* [emphasis added], defined as the "dynamic interaction between divine and human love that enlivens benevolence" (p. 8). "Godly love" emerges from the lived experience of "loving God, being loved by God" and ultimately being motivated by this dynamic interaction to engage in selfless service to others (Lee & Paloma, 2009, p. 1). The love of God extended by Spirit-centered counselors is the ultimate relational dynamic.

## Compassion

As the Spirit empowers compassion within the heart of a counselor, she, or he, as Reichard (2014) has stipulated, is able to "fully and enthusiastically embrace the 'other-oriented nature' of God's persuasive love" (p. 226), acceptance, empathy, and warmth. In support of the research cited earlier by Pope and Kline (1999), who identified acceptance, empathy, and warmth as influencing fully one-third of counseling outcomes, research conducted by Sutton, Jordan, and Worthington (2014) found that among a student population (n=265) of a small midwestern university affiliated with a Pentecostal denomination, that "Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality . . . made a significant and unique contribution to understanding the

compassionate dimension of benevolence beyond that explained by other variables" (p. 120). This finding is consistent with the biblical definition of compassion as "value others above yourself, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of [the] others" (*Today's New International Version*, 2005, Philippians 2:3–4).

### Courage

Courage is spirituality expressed as confidence and hope that is "borne out of confidence in God" (Land, 1993, p. 156). For the Spirit-centered counselor, the confidence in God cited by Land comes from biblical narratives following the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit "[to] live with you now, and later to be in you" (*New Living Translation*, 1996, John 14:17), together with the concomitant acts of healing (Acts 3:1–9; 28:8–9), exorcism (8:7), and escape from prison (Acts 12:3–19) experienced by the early believers.

Courage is also an aspect of discernment. It can be equated to enablement, "knowing what to do, or say, and when and how to do it or say it" (Decker, 2015). Spirit-directed counselors realize that discernment, in this respect, is not so much a matter of persuading the Spirit to provide answers as much as it is asking the Holy Spirit to sharpen and unblock their inner vision.

### A Trialogical Encounter

A relational interaction also describes the immanent nature of God through the Spirit's presence in the counseling endeavor. Spirit-centered counseling has been developed from an understanding of the Trinity that emphasizes the relational nature of God—God within God's self, God relating to Jesus, God relating to the Spirit, each relating to the other in coequal hypostasizations.

The trialogical encounter is modeled after a dialogical encounter in which two people become fully able to understand each other because they have given themselves to "entering another's worldview, sharing that consciousness, exploring its interior, [and] looking out at the wider view through its windows . . ." (Augsburger, 1986, p. 39). In much the same

manner the counselor seeks to relate to the client, and vice versa, to the extent that they enter the other's worldview, and both commune with the Spirit as the Spirit communes with them. This relationality is central to the Spirit-counseling endeavor.

## Narrative Structures

Narrative methods are used in Spirit-directed counseling to encourage those seeking counsel, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to deconstruct the socially constructed narrative by which they have been living their lives, in order to create a new story.

Any number of narrative structures are part of any counseling endeavor. But, in speaking of the narrative structures that inform Spirit-directed clinical practice, there are two that deserve particular attention: narratives regarding Scripture and healing prayer.

### Reading Scripture through the Eyes of the Spirit

The expansive grace and mercy of God is revealed throughout Scripture. Scripture also reveals the work of the Holy Spirit in and among all of creation, including humanity. Based on their understanding of Scripture, human beings who wrote the early creeds of the church refer to the Spirit as "the giver of life." For these reasons we believe that Scripture is vitally important for Spirit-centered counseling.

What is different, however, in Spirit-directed counseling is the reading of Scripture through the "eyes of the Spirit"—a metaphorical way of identifying how the Spirit influences the reading of the Bible. We believe that reading Scripture in this way increases one's ability to expect the Spirit to apply biblical truth and promises to every-day experiences and circumstances. In this regard, reading Scripture may be assigned prescriptively as homework, taught didactically during sessions, used in meditation, and metaphorically. As Green (2020) stipulates, Scripture is the instrument of the Spirit so that "the reading of Scripture has a purpose, and that purpose is the making-present of the works of God" (pp. xii–xiv). The result is a conversation with God, through the

Scripture, as mediated by the Spirit, that changes us for life in this world, this place, this time, these circumstances, in these contexts.

### Healing Prayer

Prayer is a narrative practice that is central to the life of the Spirit-filled believer, and it is central for the practice of Spirit-centered counseling. Spirit-centered counselors pray privately for their clients. They pray for their own continual transformation into the image of Christ. Prayer is offered as part of the counseling hour, and prayer is encouraged as homework as a continuation of the conversation during the counseling hour. At other times persons are encouraged to pray in the Spirit—"pray through" —for help in developing a new story and to participate in the new story as a movement toward personal wholeness (Dobbins, 2000; Decker, 2001).

Because the words of prayer are "bite-sized pieces of one's personal experience," it is often in prayer that meaning is made and meaning is discovered, that a new meaning of the self in relation to the world and God emerges. The new order of meaning alters or replaces an old frame of reference and reorders damaged or inappropriate elements of self-understanding. In support of the importance of the benefits of prayer narratives, Wilkinson and Althouse (2014) surveyed 258 participants in 25 locations and found that prayer—"soaking in the presence of God"—produced palpable feelings of forgiveness of others, self, and God, as well as a greater sense of compassion and hope.

## Developing God's Redemptive Story

Distinctive of the Spirit-centered model is the conviction that the on-going task of God's redemptive story is to bring order out of chaos by imbuing all of creation with the Spirit. In Spirit-centered counseling clients are invited to reflect upon God's redemptive story by conceptually entering God's story by reflecting on its redemptive patterns in the context of their own personal challenges. Three methods enable clients conceptually to enter God's ongoing story of creation: utilizing a relational epistemology, pointing out the patterns that connect, and receiving instruction into the subversive wisdom of God.

### A Relational Epistemology

People acquire knowledge and information about themselves from a variety of sources and they "make meaning" of that knowledge and information. We believe, along with Wilkinson, Shank, and Hanna (2019), that people uniquely construct, rather than simply gather, or acquire, knowledge about themselves and the world in which they live. This knowledge is essential to develop a perspective of the kind of person one wishes to be, but it is also important to the task of solving human problems.

A relational epistemology emphasizes the transactional nature of the assumptions made by a person to form their core self. It examines how an individual is embedded in their social context, at home, at work, at play, and in worship. Social anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1978) refers to the relational epistemology as the "patterns that connect." The habitual assumptions a person makes in one context often are carried over to the other contexts of the person's life. Spirit-directed counselors use these "patterns that connect" to help each person look at their life from a variety of perspectives.

### Pointing out the Patterns That Connect

Spirit-directed counselors view meaning for each person as emerging from the relation of the individual to his or her environment. They see the person and the situation-at-hand in context. Particularly, Spirit-directed counselors demonstrate how this joint interaction of counselor and client, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, searches for patterns that emerge from the relationship of the individual to him- or herself, to her or his environment, and to the various contingencies of their lives. And Spirit-centered counselors relate the person's assumptions and behaviors—the patterns that connect—to the narrative stories of Scripture, to what is known at the intersection of faith and science and to God.

### Instruction in the Subversive Wisdom of God

Jesus, through his life and ministry, introduced a counterculture known as the Kingdom of God based on the subversive wisdom that directly contrasted the conventional wisdom of his culture (Borg, 1994). Based on radically altered values that lent themselves to significantly different

patterns of perceiving and relating to oneself, to others, and to the world around them, the wisdom of Jesus offered a new way to live one's life.

However, it is difficult to extract oneself from conventional wisdom—cognitions and behaviors consistent with one's perception of reality as well as the underlying assumptions, rules, and values that inform it. To do anything different than what is currently being attempted often seems irrational. And yet to admit to oneself that what has always seemed like the correct way to do or say something is no longer working, to become fully aware of the wisdom of God that "passes all understanding," is healing in and of itself (Buker, n.d.).

## Spirit-directed Change

We believe that Spirit-directed change is possible as God, through the Spirit, guides the process of personal growth and healing by enabling persons actively to determine what needs to change and to make the changes. Paul, writing to the Philippians, says it clearly, "It is God who works in you *to will* and *to act*" [emphasis added] (*New International Version*, 1978, Philippians 2:13). Putting it another way, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (1996) has written, "would it be so strange to consider that the omnipresent God pervades us without displacing us? God's pervasive presence is no stranger to our psyche" (p. 9).

Specifically, what needs to be changed, and the steps toward change, occur in what we have referred to earlier as a trialogical encounter. The trialogue is the ongoing three-way engagement of the counselor, the client, and the Spirit, as each session of the counseling endeavor is imbued with the experiences, the richness, and intensity of feeling associated with the Spirit. Each person involved in this experience becomes filled with the Spirit such that it becomes possible for both the counselor and the client to become more fully aware of—discern—the patterns that connect in the specifics of the narrative being told. The resultant discernment points to the correspondence between thought and external reality, and the comprehension so necessary to change occurs.

The elements of this discernment seem to be, as stated earlier, an enhancement of understanding and interpretation: extraordinary insight, perception, awareness, or the ability to derive meaning. It is an enhancement or intensification of natural abilities. It is an extraordinary enablement. This divine discernment also seems to involve more than a complete comprehension of the situations and contexts of the client's life than previously understood. The Spirit enhances their desire to understand where previous lassitude or human abilities seemed to hinder the perception or observation necessary to comprehension. Illumination occurs such that either the client or the counselor develops a heightened clarity and a sharper focus. Revelation occurs in which the Spirit reveals directly to the mind or senses what needs to be understood or interpreted. The result is that they know more than they know and understand more than they realize. Anderson (1990) refers to the results of this divine dance as an agogic situation within which a kind of motive power is released that generates change. Below we discuss what we believe are some mechanisms of change and some common results of Spirit-directed change.

## Mechanisms of Spirit-directed Change

With the help of the Spirit, Spirit-directed counselors develop a sensitivity to change so that the expectancy of change is always present and a context for change is created. Listening to the Spirit is vital to the change effort, as is the development of attitudes and skills as a counselor. When placed at the disposal of the work of the Spirit, these attitudes and skills, and the creation of an expectancy of change, create the atmosphere within which both participants in the change effort become able to sense what is necessary for the way forward.

### Becoming Change Focused

Becoming change focused requires skill. In a discussion of counselors who can facilitate change, Hubble et al. (1999) indicate that this occurs as counselors become change focused. In becoming change focused, Spirit-centered counselors become aware of the ability of the client to change and his or her openness to change. They accommodate treatment to what is

presented during counseling sessions, and they tap into the client's outside world—safe persons, support groups, availability for medical care—always focusing on the possibility that things can be different.

### Listening to the Spirit's Leading

Believing that God desires to communicate with people, effective Spirit-directed counselors ask God to lead them. These counselors learn to listen to inner promptings of thought and images they receive, recognizing that the prompting of the Spirit comes in many and sundry ways, often involving the human sensation and perception systems, and at other times through thoughts and feelings that occur at particular points during counseling. And they teach clients to do the same. They encourage the setting aside of preconceived ideas, trusting that the Spirit will direct, and that the response of the Spirit always surpasses expectations. This belief enables them —the participants in the counseling endeavor—to act, in faith, on what they believe to be true, trusting that they will know what to do or to say or how to imagine being different.

### Counselor Characteristics

Spirit-filled counselors are representatives of God who are continuing our Lord's ministry of healing. They are people who, with the help of the Spirit, seek to be "salt and light" to the world as the Bible instructs us (Matthew 5:13–16). They develop the competencies necessary to working with private, personal spirituality (Richards & Bergin, 2000; Vieten et al., 2013). They also exhibit the godly love, compassion, and courage, cited earlier, as well as empathy, acceptance, and warmth. And Spirit-centered counselors allow clients to maintain autonomy by being tentative about what the Spirit may be impressing on them. These characteristics are representative of godly love mentioned earlier in this discussion as the love that is central to Spirit-directed counseling.

## Common Results of Spirit-Directed Change

What changes as a result of successful counseling is related to what was, or is, needed by the person seeking help. Often reported is self-

transformation identified as moving from irresponsible to responsible behavior, a recognition that the old way of being in the world was wrong and that the new way is right. Enhanced decision making is reported in which there is a witness to the Spirit as evidenced in a resonance of thought and affect, and, often in retrospect, a peaceful sense of calm (Parker, 1996).

### Meaning Making and Meaning Discovery

The creation and discovery of meaning in counseling is what is often referred to as a first level change (Fraser & Solovey, 2007). Buker (in-press) identifies this first-order change as "commonsense change," primarily concerned with changing behavior while not addressing the deeper assumptions behind that behavior. It is the most superficial of change efforts. During the process of meaning making and meaning discovery a given situation or context is considered and compared to previously encountered situations or contexts or potential contingencies. Sometimes what is considered is a new way of being in the world, one for which the person in counseling has no previous context. Consequently, new ways of thinking and feeling are created that provide a new way forward. One way in which this seems to occur is to help people re-story their lives to see themselves and the situations they face in new ways.

### Changing Epistemological Assumptions

What is described immediately above is changing the way someone looks at his or her experience. But there is a second level of change at which a person changes conscious assumptions—the discovered premises that underlie behavior. The conviction is that if these deeper presuppositions can shift, the desired behavior will naturally follow. Such a process is epistemological in nature and is what is meant by second-order change (Buker, in-press).

Although not displayed in extant counseling literature, Buker (2015) postulates a third level of change in which the unconscious premises and presuppositions—the assumptions—that unconsciously influence the interpretation of experience become conscious. When this happens, a complete paradigm shift occurs. As this occurs, Spirit-directed counselors, with the

help of the Spirit, enable clients to look more closely at the assumptions that have ruled their lives, and help them to develop new assumptions. In doing so, the truth of John 10:10 becomes evident when Jesus says, "My purpose is to give life in all its fullness" (*New Living Translation*, 1996, John 10:10).

## Spiritual Development

According to Buker's (2021) CPR model of Spirit-centered change, spiritual development grows out of a similar shift in assumptions about the world as those identified above. The changed assumptions involve a complex interplay of behaviors, cognitions, and values that can be felt individually, experienced relationally, and applied culturally. Ray Anderson (1990) describes this process as becoming more competent in being human, the result of which is that the person becomes more competent in relating to all aspects of himself or herself, becomes more competent socially by expressing concern for others while maintaining a clear sense of self, and by developing a deep faith in God despite losses, challenges, and tragedy. Equally important, the result of changed assumptions is growth toward embracing the themes of the kingdom of God—"righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (*New International Version*, 1978, Romans 14:17).

## Developing Relapse Strategies

The new ways of thinking and acting in the world described above are often met with resistance from within the person from an unconscious and habituated sense of self that resists change. They might also be met with resistance from the systems within which the person is embedded: families, communities of faith, and other situations and contexts the person encounters. Developing clearly defined ways to prevent returning to previous ways of being in the world requires specificity. These include purposefully anticipating the most difficult situations the person may encounter and pre-planning healthy responses. This specificity also includes the identification of communities of support: churches, community support, and self-help groups.

Perhaps foremost among these strategies to prevent returning to old patterns and situations is the destigmatizing of relapse. Sometimes the

change is not as deeply defined as they wish, and viewing what could be, can be defeating, consequently, people often need to return for counseling. As Richard Dobbins would often say when talking about relapse strategies, "sometimes helping people settle for improvement (symptom reduction and functional improvement) rather than the total victory that is the best way forward" (personal communication). This attitude enables clients to recognize the changes that have been made, gives them permission to return to counseling if necessary, and provides hope.

### Hope

Hope is created by the recollection of the past and the re-visioning of the future—those elements of Spirit-directed change detailed above. In this respect, Lester (1995) identified two types of hope: finite hope and transfinite hope. Finite hope is the ability to anticipate the presence of specific content or results in the future by way of concrete objects, events, and relationships (p. 63). Examples include anticipating the birth of a child, a marriage, or, within the context of counseling, encountering a situation or context that previously would have triggered old, dysfunctional ways of responding with a new way of thinking and/or behaving.

Transfinite hope is the ability to embrace the mystery and excitement of an open-ended future and the as yet unseen options. These are subjects and processes that go beyond physiological sensing and the material world. Two examples are freedom and deliverance. Another, most often within Spirit-centered communities of faith, is "to follow the leading of the Lord." As the old gospel song says, "Many things about tomorrow I don't seem to understand, but I know who holds tomorrow, and I know who holds my hand" (Stanphill, 1950).

## Summary

Spirit-centered counseling is not an accommodative approach to counseling where specific techniques are overlaid on a particular theological understanding or on a set of biblical propositions. Rather, it is an approach to counseling that makes full use of Spirit-centered spirituality as well as

techniques and interventions used within Spirit-centered faith groups. An emphasis is always on the importance of being aware of, and experiencing, the Spirit and utilizing this awareness within the counseling endeavor.

A Spirit-centered approach to counseling emphasizes a set of assumptions that postulate that the Spirit is always at work in the world, most notably bringing healing and restoration to all of creation. These assumptions lead to practices that inform the entirety of the counseling endeavor. It is by way of the pneumatological imagination, for example, and Holy Spirit empowerment, that the central practices utilized in Spirit-centered counseling encourage an ongoing interaction between the Spirit and participants in the counseling engagement. It is within this trialogical encounter that stories are told and meaning is discovered as the Spirit leads the counseling participants into all truth; the truth of God's ongoing acceptance, love and grace; the truth of the subversive wisdom of Jesus; personal truth that encourages new ways of thinking and behaving that encourages change. Further, we understand that personal growth and change are led by the Spirit, for it is in and through the Spirit of God that "we live and have our being" (New International Version, 1978, Acts 17:28).

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### Notes

Unless indicating a specific religious denomination, we use the lowercase pentecostal to refer to the diversity of people who "are radically open to the continued operations of the Spirit" (Smith, 2010, p. xvii), no matter the group in which they worship.

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# EXPANDING GOD'S REDEMPTIVE FRACTAL

## SPIRIT-CENTERED COUNSELING AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE WISDOM OF JESUS

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*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 29–54

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**Keywords** *epistemology, systems theory, second-order change, conventional wisdom, Way of Jesus, mind of the Spirit, Spirit-centered counseling*

**Abstract**

Using the image of a fractal, a Spirit-centered approach to counseling is proposed that conceptualizes the Spirit's activity as seeking to replicate the patterns of God's redemptive story throughout creation by facilitating deep second-order change. Involving an epistemological shift from ways of knowing shaped by the conventional wisdom of culture to a renewed mind grounded in the transformative wisdom of Jesus, this deep change is explored from the perspectives of science and Scripture. Integrating findings from systems theory with the ministry and message of Jesus, this approach to counseling emphasizes relational premises and values believed to be characteristic of the mind of the Spirit. Defined as the capacity to know and see in ways that are consistent with the passion and purposes of God, cultivating the mind of the Spirit is viewed as the essence of Spirit-centered counseling. Presumed to be seen most clearly in the life of Jesus, this model focuses on his distinctive way of knowing and seeing by examining what can be learned about the epistemological facets of perception and meaning-

making when comparing his Way with the patterns of this world. It is proposed that Spirit-centered counseling is guided by the premises and patterns contained in Jesus' transformative wisdom.

## Introduction

Characterized by a property referred to as "self-similarity," fractals are never ending patterns that repeat themselves at every level (Butz, 1997). Driven by the recursive feedback loops that are characteristic of dynamic systems, these patterns can become infinitely complex, yet remain strikingly familiar (Capra, 2002). While their complexity is a result of the ongoing repetition of simple processes, their familiarity is in the recognition that fractals exist all around. From the formation of trees, roses, and river networks in nature to the development of lungs, blood vessels, and neural networks in the human body, fractals are everywhere. What each has in common is that every level is comprised of the same pattern, such that any dimension of the fractal reflects the whole.

With this image as a visual aid, the work of God's Spirit is envisioned as the formation of a fractal[1] in which he invites all of us to participate. Using the pattern of God's redemptive story as a template, it is as if the Spirit is seeking to replicate that design in all of our stories by facilitating new creations out of thwarted dreams. Summarized as a sequence involving creation, fall, struggle, redemption, and new creations, this redemptive pattern reflects the universal human experience of life not going as intended. Just as God set creation in motion and pronounced it good only soon to discover that something went terribly wrong, so also we set our lives in motion (e.g., relationships, careers, education) only to encounter a similar reality. Like God, we get upset and in attempts to salvage our plans, often incur regrets, especially in realizing that despite our best efforts the progression often goes from bad to worse (Genesis 6:5–8; 9:8–17). Stuck in a cycle that repeatedly generates feelings of "here we go again," we experience confusion, despair, and in many cases, disillusionment. It is a story of disappointment, frustration, resilience, and repair. One that requires perseverance, trust, creativity, and flexibility. The challenge is in learning to collaborate with the Spirit's activity so that conditions can be

established that allow for redemption and the emergence of new creations. This typically occurs when we finally realize that redemptive responses are most likely to appear when we stop engaging in willful behaviors designed to exert control and become willing to surrender to the Spirit's activity. This movement from willfulness to willingness (May, 1992) involves a deep perceptual shift, characteristic of second- and even third-order change, by which transformation is facilitated and new creations conceived. Getting to this point and beyond generally requires an examination of the underlying premises, values, and beliefs constituting the network of epistemological assumptions that inform yet limit our perception and options.

## The Pattern That Connects

In expanding this redemptive fractal, the Spirit's activity is conceptualized as hovering over the chaos of our lives, inviting us into God's story by enabling us to recognize its patterns and embrace its wisdom so that something of beauty and value can be birthed out of hopes and dreams that did not go as intended. This redemptive process is analogous to Bateson's (1972) "pattern that connects" in the sense that it unites our stories around a common experience and reveals how we are all part of a meta-narrative in which relationships are fundamental. Examining the relational patterns of God's redemptive story and the systemic epistemology that makes them apparent provides a way of understanding our own experience and involvement in this meta-narrative to which and in which we are all connected.

### Systemic Epistemology

From the systemic perspective, the understanding of life itself must begin with an understanding of pattern (Capra & Luisi, 2014). In fact, there appears to be an inherent sacredness to the organization of the universe. Revealed in what Bateson (1987) described as "the pattern which connects" (p. 145), this sacredness reflects an enveloping, integrated fabric of mental process in which everyone and everything participates. Recognized by those who are able to perceive systemically, it expresses itself in interwoven regularities so pervasive and influential that they could be said to reflect the will of an encompassing,

permeating Mind (Bateson, 1972/2000; 1987). This emphasis on pattern, especially a "pattern which connects," offers an intriguing development that reflects a paradigm shift from the previous emphasis on substance and allows for a fresh way of conceptualizing reality (Keeney, 1983).

The tension between substance and pattern has existed at least since early Greek philosophy and is probably best reflected in the basic tension between the parts and the whole (Capra & Luisi, 2014). An emphasis on the importance of understanding the parts is typically referred to as a mechanistic, atomistic, or reductionist perspective, while an emphasis on the whole is known as a holistic, ecological, or organismic viewpoint. Reflected in the pursuit of answers to different questions, these competing emphases have explored divergent paths of investigation, with a study of substance or matter generally beginning with the question, "of what is it made," while research on form or relationship asks, "what is its pattern?"

Regarding the relational perspective, some have explored its theological implications (O'Murchu, 1997, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2007; Yong, 2011; Hall, 2021) and Trinitarian theology, exemplified well in Jacques' (1991) work, finds within the Godhead nothing less than the relationality by which reality is constituted. He boldly states, "I shall go so far as to say that God Himself [sic] is relationally. God is He [sic] who is, the One who makes relations possible, because He Himself [sic] is a relation" (p. 69). Knabb and Bates (2020) seem to echo these sentiments by asserting that every work of God is shaped by God's relational nature such that at the heart of Christianity is relationality.

In exploring relationality with its emphasis on patterns, it becomes apparent that this conceptualization of reality comprises a paradigm shift from the popular presuppositions of western culture, which have favored a reductionist focus by emphasizing substance and the related question "of what is it made" (Bateson, 1979). Since God's story is characterized by patterns, the version of Spirit-centeredness presented in this article proposes that the premises informing the mind of the Spirit consist of a wisdom that is inherently relational (Hall, 2021). When viewed as a reflection of God's design, especially as demonstrated in Jesus' life and ministry, it provides a fresh way of appreciating what it means to be Spirit-centered.

Building upon this possibility, a model of Spirit-centeredness is proposed that emphasizes the importance of cultivating a relational epistemology and suggests that such a mindset is informed by a wisdom that runs counter to the conventions of culture, a transformative wisdom revealed in the message and ministry of Jesus and distinctive of the mind of the Spirit. Adopting this mindset involves a perceptual shift, whereby we come to recognize the relational network in which we are all interconnected, and especially the principles that enable the dynamics within this network increasingly to reflect the redemptive patterns of God's story. In cultivating the mind of the Spirit, we come to know and see like Jesus such that we stop conforming to the patterns of this world and start accurately discerning and cooperating with the purposes of God (Romans 12:1–2). In other words, we become Spirit-centered.

## The Mind of the Spirit

As the term is used in this article, to be "Spirit-centered" is to have the mind of the Spirit. Based on the Apostle Paul's declaration that those who live by the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5), Spirit-centeredness is defined as the cultivation of a particular mindset distinguished by the capacity to know and see in ways that are consistent with the passion and purposes of God. Equating it with Paul's references to the mind of Jesus (Philippians 2:5), the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16), and setting our minds on things above (Colossians 3:2), Keener (2016) states that this mindset goes beyond a frame of mind that is in accordance with God, to cultivating a way of knowing that is inspired or activated by God, that thinks like God.[2] Essentially, the mind of the Spirit constitutes an epistemology, a way of knowing, perceiving, and understanding that enables the Spirit-centered counselor to function cooperatively with the Spirit's activity in the counseling process.

To experience this epistemological shift, Keener (2016) notes that those whose lives are quickened by the Spirit already have something of the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) and are transformed as they no longer conform to the patterns of this world but renew their minds, presumably

according to different patterns, so that the will of God can be accurately discerned (Romans 12:1–2). The implication is that this new mindset (renewed mind) is informed by alternative premises, which lend themselves to fresh patterns. Since this renewed mind is capable of discerning the will of God, its epistemology or means of knowing must be distinct.

## Epistemology

As the flip side of ontology, which is focused on the nature of reality, epistemology is concerned with how we come to know that reality. Consisting of "the basic premises and presuppositions that unconsciously influence the interpretation of experience, thus serving as the basis for action and cognition" (Bateson, 1974, p. 87), or more succinctly as "the rules of operation governing cognition" (Keeney, 1984, pp. 12–13), epistemology is the study of the processes that influence how we come to know what we know. In stating that "your machinery of perception, how you perceive, is governed by a system of propositions I call your epistemology: a whole philosophy deep in your mind but beyond your consciousness" (pp. 93–94), Bateson (1987) emphasized that it is impossible not to have an epistemology. Anything we claim to know is the result of an epistemological procedure whereby information is selected and filtered through a meaning-making process influenced by numerous factors, especially core beliefs and assumptions. Ultimately, epistemology governs perception. In other words, we cannot separate what we see from how we know. Our perception provides a doorway into the deeper premises that inform how we see the world. Together they form a mindset, consisting of a network of taken-for-granted presuppositions (deep philosophy), which is resistant to change (Watzlawick et. al., 1974). So, when it comes to understanding and altering patterns, it is important to identify and examine the mindsets that inform them. What are they, where do they come from, and how are they formed?

### One Pattern, Two Mindsets

God's redemptive pattern tends to reflect universal human experience, at least in its first three phases, but how it ultimately unfolds depends upon the mindset of those involved. The first three phases of the pattern—

creation, fall, and struggle—are universal. We all set initiatives in motion with hopes and dreams (creation) yet due to the fact that we cannot control all of the variables influencing the process, we eventually experience the disappointment and frustration of discovering that our plans rarely go as intended (fall). At that point, we instinctively seek to salvage our initiatives by engaging in efforts (struggle) to correct or control whatever we identify as the problem. If those efforts are not effective, we reach a watershed where the premises informing our mindset determine whether our continued actions move the pattern forward toward redemption and new creations or generate a repetitive cycle of ongoing struggle and hitting bottom experiences. For the purposes of this article, two mindsets will be explored in terms of their impact on the redemptive pattern: one that is based on the conventional wisdom of culture and the other on the transformative wisdom of Jesus.

**Conventional Wisdom and the Pattern of This World.** Essentially the epistemological assumptions of which our mindsets are formed are more caught than taught. They are the result of a socialization process whereby persons inculcate the conventional wisdom of their culture containing the premises and presuppositions that form the lens through which life is perceived (Keeney, 1983; Bateson, 1987). Every culture has its version of conventional wisdom, which Borg (1994) describes as

> the dominant consciousness of any culture. It is a culture's most taken-for-granted understandings about the way things are (its worldview, or image of reality) and about the way to live (its ethos, or way of life). It is "what everybody knows"—the world that everybody is socialized into through the process of growing up. It is a culture's social construction of reality and the internalization of that construction within the psyche of the individual. It is thus enculturated consciousness—that is, consciousness shaped and structured by culture or tradition (p. 75).

Borg (1994) suggests that the values of a culture's conventional wisdom can be summarized in how it defines the three A's of appearance, achievement, and affluence, to which I add a fourth, authority. These four A's provide a description of the good life to which most aspire. They

comprise a standard by which success and significance are assessed and in so doing, influence perception in a manner that produces both social and psychological consequences. Socially, they provide a means of establishing who is in and who is out, and psychologically, they become the basis for identity and self-esteem. As such, they create a performance-based, image-driven orientation that characterizes the pattern of this world.

As far as *appearance* is concerned, the emphasis tends to be on external characteristics such as certain desirable physical features, body types, and fashion. *Achievement* is generally showcased through the recognition of various accomplishments that culture deems important such as in athletics, education, and the performing arts. *Affluence* is typically noted through attention given to attractive homes, cars, and leisure destinations, while *authority* is often highlighted by featuring those in positions of power and influence, which commonly spotlights the political and financial arenas. As culture socializes its members into these values from a young age, they tend to be internalized without much critical thought. Because they are simply taken for granted, these premises exert their influence outside of conscious awareness, thus enhancing their power. In our desire to feel good about ourselves, we end up instinctively and unconsciously pursuing those values.

Since the conventional wisdom of culture is based on the principles of rewards and punishments, it tends to assume that those who succeed have worked hard, and thus earned their favored status (Borg, 1994). By implication, the opposite is also considered true. These values not only invite an image-driven, performance-based orientation but also create a culture characterized by the C's of comparing, competing, criticizing, conforming, consuming, and controlling. When aligned with conventional wisdom's four A's of appearance, achievement, affluence, and authority, it is easy to see how attempts to feel good about ourselves are not simply based on personal improvement but on outdoing others, as we compare, criticize, and compete to receive the recognition and validation that our self-esteem craves. In being unaware that we are conforming to what conventional wisdom dictates, we consume what we are fed while seeking to control outcomes, especially the image by which we are perceived.

**Conventional Wisdom and Religion.** Sadly, religious versions of conventional wisdom are common and produce similar approaches to life as found in the broader culture. Since both base identity and worth on performance, they are characterized by anxious striving, profound self-preoccupation, and selfishness (Borg, 1987), qualities that are not relationship-friendly and, in attempts to cope with the resultant stress, are often conducive to the development of unhealthy patterns such as addictions. Since these "baptized" versions of culture's four A's base success and significance on equivalent cultural principles of rewards and punishments, they create environments characterized by the same C's, thus generating comparable experiences and outcomes.

**Transformative Wisdom and the Pattern of Redemption.** The conventional wisdom of the culture to which Jesus came appeared to define the four A's in a manner not dissimilar to our contemporary western world. Those considered successful and significant were assessed as such based on similar values of image, prosperity, performance, and position. These values created distinct social divisions and those in power seemed invested in keeping it that way. Standards for acceptance and inclusion were clear and demanding, as were the consequences for falling short. The result was what some scholars (Borg, 2006; Brueggemann, 1978; Crossan, 1991; Wink, 1992) describe as a domination system in which a small minority of elites exercise power over most of the population.

Through Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God, which is widely acknowledged as the major theme of his ministry and a description of what life would be like if God were King instead of Caesar (Ladd, 1959; Crossan, 1991; Borg, 2003; Perrin, 2019), he introduced a counterculture in which he described new patterns of living and relating, informed by a transformative wisdom. He did so by essentially redefining the four A's of conventional wisdom. *Appearance* shifted from an emphasis on externals to internals, from management of image to matters of the heart (Matthew 23:25–26). *Achievement* was less about validation from others and more about hearing God say, "well done," less about elevation to positions of status and honor and more about serving others and

finishing one's race (Matthew 25:14–30). *Affluence* was not determined by what one possessed but more by what one gave away, not by striving and hoarding but more by contentment and gratefulness (Luke 12:13–21). *Authority* became about controlling self rather than controlling others, more about empowering than dominating, being under authority than in authority (Matthew 20:20–28). Through this transformative wisdom, Jesus revealed a set of relational values that directly countered the conventional wisdom of the dominant culture, thus explaining their paradoxical nature. You can imagine how odd it must have sounded to hear that greatness came from serving, honor from humility, receiving from giving, and finding life from losing it. To this day, these principles remain challenging.

If we conceptualize the seemingly paradoxical statements contained in Jesus' transformative wisdom as constituting his underlying epistemological premises, or "rules of operation governing cognition," to use Keeney's (1983) phrase (see Table 1), then it becomes possible to understand how Jesus saw a different world. When looking through the lens of this wisdom at the same cultural dynamics as everyone else, his assessment of what he saw contradicted convention because his perception was informed by alternate values and beliefs.

With the self-referential paradox in mind, which contends that anything we claim to know says as much about us as it does about what we are asserting (Keeney, 1984), some interesting questions emerge. What do our personal assessments of success and significance reflect about the underlying wisdom that informs our own perception? Would the same people, organizations, or ministries that are currently on our noteworthy list remain there if we viewed them through the values of Jesus' transformative wisdom? Whenever we classify someone as successful or something as significant, what does that say about our own values?

Because Jesus' way of knowing and seeing, his epistemology, was influenced by a wisdom counter to the premises of convention, his perception was aligned with the values of the Kingdom he proclaimed, premises reflective of the mind of the Spirit. As a result, when he saw the religious elite seeking seats of honor at banquets, or announcing

Table 1: CONFLICTING ASSUMPTIONS AND RULES

| CONVENTIONAL WISDOM | TRANSFORMATIVE WISDOM |
|---|---|
| **If you want to be great,** get into a position to be served—demand respect and recognition | **If you want to be great,** serve—develop an attitude of service |
| **If you want to be first,** assert yourself—go after what you want | **If you want to be first,** be last—prefer others over self |
| **If you want to receive,** take—declare what is rightfully yours | **If you want to receive,** give—be a generous and cheerful giver |
| **If you want to find your life,** claim it—take control | **If you want to find your life,** lose it—let go of control |
| **If you want to live,** go for the good life—follow culture's path to success/significance | **If you want to live,** die—die to an identity based on cultural definitions of success |
| **If you want to be strong,** hide your weaknesses—don't be vulnerable/apologize | **If you want to be strong,** embrace your weaknesses—be authentic and vulnerable |
| **If you want to be exalted,** promote yourself—toot your own horn | **If you want to be exalted,** humble yourself—stay small in your own eyes |
| **If you want to be wise,** listen to the cultural experts—get knowledge | **If you want to be wise,** embrace the foolishness of paradox—be like a child |
| **If you want to be free,** exert your independence—trust yourself | **If you want to be free,** surrender—trust the process |

their charitable giving, or only loving those who loved them back, or praying in public to be seen, or disfiguring their faces to indicate they were fasting, he assessed them differently, accusing them of following the broad path that leads to destruction and building their lives upon a foundation of sand (Matthew 7:24–27). In what must have sounded like an impossible task, he cautioned the people against imitating their example stating that unless their own righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees, they would not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Since by the standards of convention, the Pharisees were considered the most righteous of them all, what hope did the average person have of entrance to God's Kingdom? In response, Jesus offered an alternate route that constituted a redemptive pattern and narrow path, which came to be known as The Way.

## The Way of Jesus

Much controversy exists over the Way of Jesus. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (*New International Version*, 2011, John 14:6), what did he mean? In what sense is Jesus the way to God? Is his way exclusive, and if so, how? What are its patterns and how are they relevant to Spirit-centered counseling?

For many Christians, following the Way of Jesus involves believing certain ideas about Jesus such as his virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and future return (Borg, 2003). If a person believes the right notions, which of course may vary somewhat depending upon the religious organization, then they have the truth and Jesus becomes their way to God. The concern with this approach, however, is that it tends to equate truth with belief, thus conceptualizing it in static terms, more consistent with the reductionist paradigm's focus on substance. As Todd Hall (2021) states,

> If the Bible is a set of facts to be properly arranged, and God is known strictly through explicit knowledge of propositions, then knowing God, ourselves, and others—indeed the entire task of theology—becomes a linear rationalistic process rather than a nonlinear relational process (p. 10).

Whenever the emphasis is placed on right beliefs, it elevates the intellect, becomes inherently divisive, and does not necessarily result in a transformation of life. We are told that even demons believe and tremble (James 2:19), but that knowledge does not seem to produce much change. While not disparaging the importance of good theology, the dynamic, nonlinear emphasis of the systemic paradigm allows for a different understanding of the Way of Jesus that prioritizes transformation by accentuating the importance of following his pattern.

Based on the New Testament portrait, the Way of Jesus is not a set of propositions, it is a pattern. It is the way of death (Borg, 2006). Just as the redemptive pattern allows for new creations to emerge out of the ashes of dashed hopes, so also following the Way of Jesus necessitates dying

to live, losing life to find it (John 12:23–26; Matthew 16:25). From this perspective, regardless of what persons believe about Jesus, they cannot follow his Way without being transformed. Maybe this explains why he reserved his commendations for right actions rather than right beliefs. In fact, he commended those who were considered outcasts and heretics by the religious establishment of his day if their actions were consistent with his Way (Matthew 9:20; Mark 7:24–30; Luke 10:25–37; 17:15–16). But while the pattern of Jesus involves loss, experiencing new life is not automatic. It necessitates a certain type of response, which the Spirit seeks to facilitate.

## God's Redemptive Pattern and the Way of Jesus

While the redemptive pattern's initial phases of creation, fall, and struggle are inherent to human experience, due to the fact that life rarely goes as intended, new possibilities are not guaranteed. Consequently, Spirit-centered counseling plays a vital role. Since clients typically reach out for help on the Saturday between their cross of Good Friday and new life of Easter Sunday (Rambo, 2010), the focus of therapy for counselors in general, and Spirit-centered counselors in particular, is how to facilitate redemption out of loss, disappointment, frustration, and the further complications that have often been created by their struggle to produce desired outcomes. Toward that end, how a person responds when life does not go as intended appears to be the critical variable and that response is determined by the wisdom with which their mindset is informed. Responses informed by the values of convention are typically distinguished by either escalating efforts at conquest and control or disillusioned capitulations to despair and bitterness. These reactions generally create a stuckness in the pattern typified by repetitive cycles of increasing struggle and hitting bottom experiences. Minds renewed to the transformative wisdom of Jesus, however, are more likely to exhibit responses that are accepting, trusting, flexible, and creative. In other words, they are more cooperative with the Spirit's activity, and thus conducive to moving the pattern forward toward redemption and new creations.

The challenge of Spirit-centered counseling is in facilitating a shift from one mindset to the other. This process is challenging not only because it requires addressing the underlying, taken-for-granted presuppositions informing perception but also an even more deeply embedded set of premises that operate unconsciously and are intensely resistant to change. Referred to by Bateson (1971) as symmetrical, these premises fuel performance-based assumptions making it difficult for persons to stop competing even when there is little hope of victory, yet when shifted, result in a radical reorientation to life.

## Symmetrical vs. Complementary Premises

In his classic paper on cybernetics and alcoholism, Bateson (1971) discussed pride and symmetry in relation to an alcoholic's addictive behavior. Underlying the alcoholic's relationship with the bottle, Bateson believed, were premises so fundamental as to be called epistemological. By fundamental he meant that these premises are so deeply embedded in the psyche ("hard programmed") that the alcoholic is unaware of their existence even though they determine the manner in which s/he experiences the world. As such they are resistant to change, but when shifted, result in a reorientation so radical as to be transformative. In other words, when these fundamental premises change, the way a person is oriented to life changes such that their experiences of self and the world shift in ways that lend themselves to complementary responses based on humility rather than pride.

**Symmetrical Premises.** The fundamental premises underlying the behavior of many alcoholics were what Bateson (1971) referred to as symmetrical. In relational terms these are characterized by competitive actions, in that a given behavior by one person will stimulate more of the same in another. Often described by the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses," symmetrical relating involves engaging in similar actions as another in an attempt to outdo the other. Additional examples include one-up-manship, athletics, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Driving symmetrical behavior is pride and fear.

Behind their competitive relationship with the bottle is the hubris of alcoholics, which is not based on past achievements but rather on a

stubborn assertion of ability. It is reflected in the willful claim "I can," often expressed as an ability to control one's drinking behavior. As a repudiation of the proposition "I cannot" it becomes a challenge that typically compels alcoholics repeatedly to attempt controlled drinking in order to prove themselves right. Of course, this involves risk-taking and since the drinking habits of western culture are prone toward symmetrical relating, the pride of alcoholics will not let them be outdone by another. Inevitably the risk-taking results in another drunken state. But, rather than recognizing this as a reflection of a lack of control, alcoholics typically continue to claim "I can" and respond in either rage or shame to any contrary assertion. This symmetrical pride leads to increasingly desperate attempts to prove that they cannot be defeated by the bottle, which, due to the phenomenon of emergence, eventually produces various types of hitting bottom experiences.

**Symmetrical Premises and Culture.** While Bateson (1971) focused primarily on the symmetrical pride of the alcoholic, it would seem reasonable to suggest that symmetrical premises are fundamental in all of western culture (O'Murchu, 1997/2000). Whether "hard-wired" through genetic inheritance or "hard-programmed" through socialization processes, they appear to be prevalent and reinforced by cultural values. In western culture symmetrical premises appear to be socialized into a person's psyche from birth. When combined with an innate pride that fuels them and a conventional wisdom that promotes them, it seems as natural to respond to life symmetrically as it is to breathe. Promoting self, demonstrating influence, producing outcomes, achieving distinction, and projecting images of success and significance are all symmetrical strategies for success. They create environments characterized by the C's where comparisons are the norm and others are viewed as either competitors for recognition or possible sponsors of a personal agenda. In whichever case, relationships become selfishly organized around the fundamental premises of symmetrical pride. For this willfulness to move in the direction of willingness (complementarity), persons generally have to discover that they are part of something bigger than themselves over which they cannot

exert control. This discovery often comes in the form of hitting bottom experiences created from attempts to control this larger system, which even though they may have helped to bring into existence, is now more powerful than they.

**Emergence.** Summarized by the popular phrase, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," emergence reflects the capacity of interactions within a system to produce something that transcends the participants involved. Just as water (H2O) emerges out of the interaction between a particle of oxygen and two particles of hydrogen, a quality that cannot be found in the particles themselves but only as a product of their interactions, so also qualities, behaviors, and experiences can emerge in relationships that are more a result of mutual influence than a reflection of individual character traits. The cliché, you never know what will happen when those two get together, and the Torah's observation that one can put a thousand to flight but two, ten thousand (Deuteronomy 32:30), both reflect this non-summative dynamic.

When participants in a relationship system begin to recognize the influence of their interactions to produce entities and experiences that transcend what any of them could generate on their own, they are starting to think relationally. Even our sense of self is an emergent property that can shift from interaction to interaction depending upon the engendered experience (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2016). In any relationship, whether with another person or a substance, the interactions of those involved produce something beyond themselves—what Bateson (1979) referred to as the mind of a system and Wink (1998), its spirit. Much like the gravitational field of the solar system in which each planet, based on its mass, contributes gravity yet is in turn regulated by the resultant field, so also the emergent properties of systems regulate their members (Kerr, 1988). As a result, symmetrical relating predictably fails. Based on the systemic principle that no part of a system can control the whole, any attempt to compete with that which is larger than the self will consistently result in reminders of one's limitations, often coming through the gift of hitting bottom. At these low points, however, persons typically become a little less willful and a little more willing, even if temporarily, to experience

deep change. In other words, their deeply embedded symmetrical premises soften toward complementarity.

**Complementary Premises.** In contrast to symmetrical relating, a complementary style seeks to fit appropriately into a given interaction. Rather than exhibiting similar behaviors that invite an escalating competition, a complementary style engages in dissimilar behaviors that more effectively complement a situation. Examples include such combinations as speaker-listener, mentor-mentee, and fans-athletic events. Complementary premises recognize the larger system of which one is simply a part, and thus seek to relate to that greater entity with humility and flexibility. This does not mean that complementarity is always desirable such that persons cannot take initiative or seek to influence a system. In fact, parallel interactions involving occasional episodes of symmetrical relating, as participants in a system temporarily engage each other competitively, usually while addressing conflictual issues in an attempt to facilitate a more mutually satisfying fit, are considered healthy. But complementarity does acknowledge that ultimately control is not possible or desirable and it is willing to be influenced by the feedback that the larger system inevitably provides.

**Complementary Premises and Culture.** Shifting from symmetrical to complementary premises usually requires the gift of crises but when it occurs, generates a radical reorientation of life (Rohr, 2011). Rather than being absorbed with one's own status, as determined by the performance-based values of convention, persons become more oriented to how they can fit into the larger system(s) of which they are a part, for which the relational values of Jesus' transformative wisdom provide guidance. In other words, the self is no longer viewed as the center of one's concern, an independently existing entity that must compete with other entities for recognition and dominance, but as part of something bigger, a meta-narrative in which it can play a vital role in finding its fit by learning to complement the others involved. This deep change parallels what Capra and Stiendl (1992) have observed as a paradigm shift, occurring in both science and theology, involving a movement away from reductionist (linear) approaches to understanding the universe and divine revelation to a way of

knowing that is informed by relational (nonlinear) emphases more attuned to process than substance. Such a shift is essentially epistemological in nature, constituting what Keeney (1983) describes as the deepest order of change humans are capable of experiencing.

## Jesus and Second-order Change

One way of understanding and facilitating such a dramatic shift is to conceptualize it as a process of second- and possibly third-order change (Watzlawick et. al., 1974). In applied terms, this involves replacing the symmetrical premises of culture's conventional wisdom, as reflected in performance-based, image-driven behaviors, with the complementary premises of Jesus' transformative wisdom constituted by relationally-oriented values that are more others-centered. But as conventional ways of defining and pursuing success and significance are discarded, the resultant loss of these former bases for self-esteem and identity are often experienced as a type of death, leaving persons wrestling with the question, who am I? Yet as new ways of knowing the self, founded on radically different premises, are discovered, it commonly feels like resurrection to new life. In this sense, adopting the mind of Jesus, by embracing his transformative wisdom in seeking to follow his Way, becomes a means of understanding what losing life to find it might involve. This deep, second-order change[3] constitutes both the process and goal of Spirit-centered counseling.

What Jesus and Spirit-centered counselors share in common is the desire to facilitate second-order change, meaning both are seeking to shift perception by challenging the underlying assumptions that inform it. This indicates that the focus of change is on the deeper level of epistemology where Bateson (1987) located the network of propositions that influence how we see the world and come to know what we claim to know. While any effective counseling process will facilitate second-order change (Fraser & Salovey, 2007), Spirit-centered therapists have a particular type of deep change in mind, which is based upon the transformative wisdom of Jesus.

When the ministry of Jesus is examined through the framework of second-order change, it reveals both the possibilities and challenges

of facilitating deep transformation via an epistemological shift. If we conceptualize Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God as constituting a different set of epistemological assumptions, in other words a spiritual wisdom to guide us in how to live, then the challenge facing us is how to embrace and internalize those premises such that they form the new philosophy that guides our perception. From this perspective, Jesus' task in his earthly ministry was essentially that of facilitating deep second-order change.

## Spirit-centered Counseling: Facilitating Second-Order Change

All second-order change interventions share the common goal of shifting the way clients see the world, especially the situations that have brought them into counseling. While Jesus demonstrated many of these techniques (Buker, 2021), especially reframing, the one he seemed to use most frequently was stories. Story-telling is a rich component of the rabbinic tradition from which Jesus emerged, and he was a master storyteller.

For the Spirit-centered counselor, the beauty of stories is that they are easily remembered and repeated, and there are so many points of entry where listeners can connect. Jesus' parables, as invitations to a different way of seeing (Borg, 2003), have continued to exert an influence long after their initial telling and still bring value to the counseling process today. They contain common second-order change elements, such as unpredictability, paradox, and reversals (Fraser & Solovey, 2007), and they certainly challenge the performance-based assumptions of culture's conventional wisdom. To hire workers at various times throughout the day yet pay them all the same even though some worked much longer (Matthew 20:1–16), or to restore a son to his status with seemingly no consequences for his arrogance and irresponsibility (Luke 15:11–32), or to make a despised Samaritan the hero over the religious elite (Luke 10:25–37) all constitute subversive yet transformative scenarios, which the values of convention would not have predicted. Together they provide snapshots of what life is like in the Kingdom of God and serve to illustrate what Jesus'

transformative wisdom looks like in action. Take for instance the familiar parable of the prodigal son, which is especially useful therapeutically when addressing issues of shame with its underlying performance-orientation fueled by symmetrical pride.

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son

In Jesus' story of the prodigal, a father's younger son requested and received his share of the inheritance and promptly departed for a distant country where he "squandered his wealth in wild living" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:13). Left with nothing, he hired himself out to a local citizen who sent him to feed his pigs, which to Jesus' Jewish audience would have presumably reflected an unkosher, and thus shameful, place to end up. While in the pigpen Jesus said the prodigal "came to his senses" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:17) and acknowledged that he was no longer worthy to be called his father's son, a statement that any person struggling with disgrace would immediately recognize as the voice of shame. He tells himself that his father's hired hands are better off than he so he decides to return home to ask if he can be received as a servant. The implication is that the humiliated son just wants to slip quietly back home in the hope of simply gaining the security of a roof over his head and decent food to eat.

Upon his arrival, the prodigal's father, who saw him coming, runs to embrace him saying, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:24). He instructs his servants to bring his best robe to place on him, along with his ring and sandals, and to kill the fattened calf to celebrate his son's return, all of which constitute a completely unexpected turn of events. It seems confusing yet wonderful, unless you are the prodigal.

### The Father's Perception

Essentially the father's gracious response placed the prodigal in a predicament. He is now faced with the challenge of how to celebrate grace in the face of shame. It goes against everything the conventional wisdom of culture dictates. Instead of being punished for his performance, he

is embraced for his relationship as the father emphasizes reconciliation over mistakes. As amazing as this response was, it creates a dilemma, one that all of us must face on our spiritual journeys. Essentially it is the challenge of how to celebrate the gift of grace, which we know we do not deserve and can never earn, a reality that our performance assumptions struggle to accept and one that is complicated by the presence of elder brothers (and sisters) who serve as constant reminders of our unworthiness.

Based on the tenets of conventional wisdom, we would have thought the father gracious if he had said something like, "son, you have embarrassed yourself and this family, but I am willing to give you another chance. I will let you come back as a servant and if you work hard and demonstrate that you have learned your lessons and changed, then maybe at some point in the future we can consider restoring you to your former status." According to the guidelines of convention, such a considerate response would have been deemed evidence that this was a good dad, firm yet kind. So how do we account for what appears to be an excessively gracious response, one that seemingly overlooks failure and does not punish faults but rather celebrates reconciliation? Two observations seem important. First, the father may have realized that the prodigal's pigpen experience had already done its intended work, and second, he may have been preventing the son from falling back into old performance-based patterns, in which his older brother seemed trapped.

## The Elder Brother's Perception

The elder brother's perception reflects a classic performance-oriented mindset characterized by the C's of comparison, competition, and criticism. Calling attention to his own performance, the elder brother compared his responsible choices to his younger sibling's irresponsibility and criticized his father's decision to throw a party on his brother's return. In a typical compare-compete-criticize pattern, the elder brother distanced himself from the prodigal by informing his father that "this son of yours" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:30) squandered your inheritance, to which the father responded by emphasizing relationship in reminding his

eldest son that "this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found" (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 15:32). In other words, he is not just my son, he is also your brother. With this simple reframe, the father seems to be saying that relationship is the basis of identity and worth, not performance.

## The Prodigal and God's Redemptive Story

While no one wants to end up in the "pigpen," these experiences seem to have an important role to play in facilitating second-order change. As with the prodigal, they bring us to our senses by exposing our symmetrical, performance-based orientation to life and inviting us to do some deep soul-searching. For those who allow their pigpen experiences to have this intended effect, two qualities become especially pronounced—humility and gratefulness. In the case of the prodigal, rather than making excuses or blaming others for his mistakes, he accepted responsibility, acknowledged his loss of credibility, and only asked to be a servant, not to be restored as a son.

Pigpen experiences, or what Alcoholics Anonymous (AA, 1976) refer to as hitting bottom, are designed to serve as a mirror, challenging us to take an honest look at ourselves. When humility and gratefulness are prominent responses, they are reliable indicators that the pigpen experience has done its job, meaning that the person has had the courage to acknowledge what was revealed, and as a result has been deeply impacted and humbled. They are no longer the same. Symmetrical premises have begun shifting to complementary, but since these presuppositions are so deeply embedded and easily recovered, the father's gracious response was key to ensuring that this fledging change continued.

While on the one hand the father's emphasis on relationship over performance seems naïve, on the other hand if the prodigal had been granted his request to come back as a servant and given the opportunity to demonstrate the sincerity of his repentance, he would have found himself right back on the broad path of performance, trying to perform his way out of shame. Such an approach would have likely reactivated his symmetrical premises by reinforcing culture's conventional wisdom that

identity and worth are based on producing desired outcomes. Knowing that this strategy is a dead end, the father, rather than requiring the son to earn back his status, chose to celebrate their reconciliation.

When viewed through the template of God's story, the prodigal's experience clearly illustrates the redemptive pattern. He took his share of the inheritance and set his life in motion with hope and dreams (creation) only to discover that it did not go as intended (fall). In landing in the pigpen, he came to his senses (struggle), humbled himself and returned to his father's house (redemptive response) where his status was restored and a party thrown to celebrate resurrection and reconciliation (new creation).

Through the lens of performance-oriented premises, the prodigal is an abject failure, undeserving of the father's favor. But when perceived through the lens of Jesus' relationally-oriented wisdom, the prodigal's resurrection to new life generates excitement. He has lost his life to find it, a process that while painful, produced an outcome that is arguably worth celebrating.

## Conclusion

When clients enter counseling, their presenting problems often reflect imprisonment to the image-driven, performance-oriented patterns of this world, secular or religious. Although most do not recognize it as such, their attempts to gain the experiences they desire have been driven by the assumptions of conventional wisdom into which they have been socialized and whose guidance they have followed to the point of exhaustion. Even though they are experiencing problems severe enough to seek help, it is difficult for them to stop their previous efforts, regardless of how ineffective, due to the symmetrical pride that drives them. While thinking they are trying different approaches to producing desired outcomes, they are unaware of how each of their strategies is informed by the same performance mindset, oriented to comparing and competing, and thus, only capable of producing more of the same results. At this point the transformative wisdom of Jesus provides hope in revealing an alternate

Way forward. But to walk this narrow path, a deeper change is required, involving a form of death.

Experienced as a perceptual shift, clients essentially die to an identity based on performance-driven assumptions, or what the Apostle Paul referred to as the "patterns of this world" (*New International Version*, 2011, Romans 12:2). In so doing, they position themselves to discover a new identity grounded in relational values, as contained in the transformative wisdom of Jesus and exemplified in the pattern of his Way. In other words, they lose their life to find it. Concepts of success and significance are drastically redefined. Engagement with life becomes less competitive and controlling, and more collaborative and compassionate. A redemptive process is allowed to unfold, facilitated by increased cooperation with the Spirit's activity, which enables new creations to emerge and God's redemptive fractal to be expanded. Such is the type of deep second-order change that constitutes both the goal and distinctive of Spirit-centered counseling.

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## Notes

1 The term "fractal" is referenced here only for its visual properties to provide a means of imaging and imagining how the pattern of God's redemptive story can serve as a template for our own.

2 In this article the terms "mind of the Spirit," "mind of Jesus," and "mind of Christ" will be used interchangeably.

3 While some would argue that the epistemological shift I am describing is actually third-order change, to which I would not necessarily disagree, for the sake of simplicity I will refer to it as a type of deep second-order change.

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# HOW JESUS COMMUNICATES #METOO

## A PERSPECTIVE ON INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND HEALING IN THE ATONEMENT

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*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 55–77

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**Keywords** *trauma, #metoo, atonement, healing, Matthew's genealogy, pastoral care, stories*

**Abstract**

This article offers a practical theological praxis of how the church may participate in Christ's atoning ministry of healing towards persons who have experienced sexual violence. Drawing from the theory of intergenerational trauma, it uses the mentioning of "the wife of Uriah" in Matthew's genealogy to convey how Jesus identifies with survivors of sexual violence. The article then focuses on the hypostatic union to establish how Jesus provides ontological healing in the atonement for said survivors. It concludes by demonstrating how Matthew's Gospel calls radical disciples to a healing praxis of listening to stories of the disenfranchised, thereby pointing towards Christ's atoning work of bearing and healing humanity's weaknesses.

## Introduction

The year was 1983. The family had gathered for the funeral of my grandmother's youngest sister. When the graveside service was completed,

the family reviewed nearby headstones, but one memorial caught the interest of the only grandchild in attendance. The grave marker was for a baby, a little boy of approximately one year of age. Escorted by the natural curiosity of a child, the granddaughter inquired as to the identity of this infant. "Whose baby is this?" she innocently questioned her grandmother. While accounts vary as to how my grandmother responded, they all agree on one fact: the family's matriarch identified the baby as being hers.

Pieces of the family secret unfolded concerning the stark reality of this baby's existence in the aftermath of that visit to a cemetery: my grandmother had been 17; the interloper was a relative, probably an uncle; and he raped her in her family's own home. While the baby's identity had been largely unknown within the family system for almost 60 years, he was a member of the family: a son, a grandson, a sibling, and an uncle. Despite the secrecy surrounding him, the undisclosed violence that brought about his birth had carried unacknowledged repercussions within the family.

While most may perceive this event as tragic at best, not a few will view it as an isolated incident in a family, impacting only my grandmother. Some may even assert families are to maintain my grandmother's silence by refusing to speak of such travesties. After all, the past is the past. However, trauma has far-reaching tendrils that stretch from the past into the present and from the victim to familial members of future generations, even when the trauma is concealed. This is the very nature of trauma: it silently moves to and fro within time, shaping the lives of others. Like a contagion infecting a time traveler, trauma's repercussions within a family exceed the boundaries of time and the embodied victim.

Yet, it is precisely this apparently unbounded nature that may be used to speak theologically to Christ-followers, especially in the discipline of practical theology. I draw from the repercussions of trauma, specifically sexual assault, to aid in the development of a pathway that leads to how Jesus communicates #metoo. By using the psychological lens of trauma, particularly intergenerational trauma, I assert that the understanding of atonement is enlarged so that Jesus is seen to identify with those who have been sexually violated while also challenging Christ-followers in their response. Such an outcome will be accomplished in four movements: (1) by

outlining trauma theory, including the theory of intergenerational trauma; (2) by asserting that sexual violence is included within the genealogy of King Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew; (3) by demonstrating how Christ is the atonement, the healer; and (4) by putting forth characteristics of radical, welcoming disciples who are members of God's kingdom.

## Trauma Theory: Repercussions

To begin, I provide a descriptive overview of trauma prior to discussing the transmission of intergenerational trauma. Caruth (1996) defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). Herman (1997) explains that traumatic events in most cases "involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (p. 33). But perhaps Rambo's (2010) description is most helpful as it points to both of the above definitions: "Trauma is often expressed in terms of what exceeds categories of comprehension, of what exceeds the human capacity to take in and process the external world . . . . Trauma is described as an encounter with death" (p. 4). As Rambo explains, this is not simply a physical death, but trauma is an event(s) that destroys a person's perceptions regarding the operations of the world and how one is to function within it. This means, as Rambo explains, that what was known in the world has become no longer "true and safe" so that life is no longer described in the basic manner it once was, but instead life becomes "always mixed with death," involving uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (p. 4).

### Trauma's Reverberations

Trauma's power is not simply isolated to a solitary incident, but it has persistent reverberations in an individual's being. When a woman is sexually assaulted, this traumatic event occurs at a certain place in time so that, in one sense, it becomes a part of history. However, as stated above, the impact of the event is not fully assimilated at the time of its occurrence. The event may have happened suddenly without warning and/or be so

horrific that the victim is unable to comprehend the original event in its full weight and magnitude; therefore, the victim is only able to grasp miniscule fragments of the original event. As Rambo posits, since the traumatic experience is not assimilated in time, it remains "an open wound" so that "a belated awakening" transpires, which causes the event to return (p. 7). As Herman describes, this returning is referred to as repetition compulsion in which the trauma is unconsciously repeated in various ways, such as in nightmares and flashbacks, sleep or eating disturbances, physical ailments, various emotional reactions (e.g., fear, anxiety, or shame) but also through various benign and/or harmful behaviors, such as in abusing others, having unsafe sexual encounters, or cleaning compulsively. Herman comments that the victim may not remember the event, but repeatedly expresses powerful emotions, or she is able to recall every minute of it, but the telling is devoid of feeling. She notes that in such forms of repetition that the victim is unknowingly attempting to relive the event, perhaps to change it, heal from it, master it, or die from it (see Herman, 1997, for a fuller explanation). This may appear when the victim has compulsive organizing proclivities that point toward a desire for some semblance of control since power was stripped from her during the original event. She may attempt to harm herself through risqué behavior in order to punish herself or to substantiate her inherent turpitude, or she may avoid any risks to assure herself of protection. If the assault occurred at night, she may struggle to sleep when it is dark due to the higher risk of harm. Rambo remarks that these types of repetitions are the principal challenges of trauma so that it is the aftermath of the original traumatic event that continues to exist and be explored. In short, the past event is alive in the present.[1]

## Intergenerational Trauma

With an overall portrayal of trauma theory, I now turn to the transmission of *intergenerational*, or *transgenerational*, *trauma*. Kaitz et al. (2009) define intergenerational transmission of trauma (ITT) as "the shown impact of trauma experienced by one family member on another family member of a younger generation, regardless of whether the younger family member was directly exposed to the traumatic event" (p. 160). In

other words, not only does trauma repeat in an individual but also within a multigenerational family system.

Studies have demonstrated that trauma experienced by the parents impacts the children. For instance, Zerach et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal study of "123 Israeli father-mother-offspring triads" in which the fathers served in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and it was found that the post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) in children were linked to both the fathers' and mothers' PTSS. In the sample, in which 79 fathers were ex-POWs and 44 were veterans who were not formerly POWS, the fathers who were ex-POWS contributed to elevating the mothers' PTSS; this in turn engendered elevated PTSS in their offspring via direct and indirect paths. In another study by Suozzi and Motta (2004) of 40 Vietnam combat veterans and 53 of their adult children, it was determined that the "intensity of combat exposure influences the expression of secondary symptoms in children of veterans" (p. 32). While the children did not clinically exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Suozzi and Motta detected a difference between the offspring of those with high combat exposure and of those with low combat exposure 20 to 30 years after their parents' war experiences.

Other studies reveal that trauma is transmitted to not only the second generation but also to the third. For example, a study by Scharf (2007) of 88 middle-class educated families living in Israel showed differences among the participants that correlated with whether or not both parents, one parent, or no parents were second-generation Holocaust survivors. It was concluded that when both parents were descendants of Holocaust survivors, those of the third generation had the lowest level of "psychosocial functioning" and the most inferior self-perception in comparison to others in the study. In such studies, it is not PTSD that is necessarily transmitted to second and third generations, but it is the psychological and relational effects of the trauma that appear. In other words, that which remains, the echoes, is what is transferred. Studies such as these convey how the echoes of trauma appear in future generations, and these echoes are a pathway that will allow me to assert that Jesus communicates #metoo, to which I specifically turn.

## Sexual Violence within Jesus' Genealogy: Identification

Sexual violence against women has been a silent epidemic in the world, including in the church. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2012/2013/2015), approximately one in five women will experience rape or attempted rape at some point in their lives, and one in four girls will be sexually abused prior to their eighteenth birthday. While the church has been slow to admit to its complacency, passivity, and complicity in the matter, twenty-first-century churches are now acknowledging that sexual violence is a prevailing ill in society and also within its own walls, as seen in the formation of such movements as #churchmetoo and #pentecostalsisterstoo. The latter movement is especially significant for pentecostals who have been known to resist a social gospel and to propose a theology of healing in the atonement without a robust theology of suffering. In a desire to contribute to the conversation on sexual violence within the church, I turn towards theology and Scripture as a lens through which to perceive sexual violence within a multigenerational family system. I begin by briefly delineating how I understand sexual violence prior to discussing the Gospel of Matthew's genealogy.

### Definition

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2010) offers the following definition of sexual violence: "Sexual violence means that someone forces or manipulates someone else into unwanted sexual activity without their consent. Reasons someone might not consent include fear, age, illness, disability, and/or influence of alcohol or other drugs." The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (2013) notes three characteristics of sexual violence. First, it is unwanted and encompasses words and/or actions. Second, the person may be unaware the words/actions are harmful due to chronological and/or mental age, drug/alcohol influence, and I would include, culture, upbringing, etc. Finally, it may not be illegal, as in the case of sexual harassment or, I would add, as in the case of cultural attitudes. These attitudes emerge when a culture historically ignores various kinds of sexual violence because of its ingrained perceptions, such as "Women are

not human"; "Women are to submit to men"; "Boys will be boys"; or "She really wanted it." This cultural element is instructive as I reflect on sexual violence and Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's Gospel.

## The Story of Sexual Violence in Jesus' Genealogy

Matthew describes Jesus as "Emmanuel," God with us (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019, Matthew 1:23). As God with us, Jesus, the Eternal One, entered time by becoming a part of a specific multigenerational family system, the royal line of King David. Matthew highlights this point by placing Jesus' genealogy at the beginning of his Gospel, summoning the reader to regard Jesus and the remainder of this Gospel through this genealogical lens. As is evident in the genealogy, God did not elect a spotless family system in which the Incarnate One was to belong, as if such an undertaking were even possible. Instead, this multigenerational family system is one of dysfunction that includes sexual violence, exposing humanity's vulnerability. In other words, Eternity enters time by claiming a family as his own with characteristics of lust, immorality, and sexual injustice and demonstrating his own risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure. For instance, readers who are familiar with King David's line may recall how David's beautiful daughter Tamar was raped by his son Amnon, resulting in David's son Absalom killing Amnon (2 Samuel 13). While this incident is omitted from this genealogy, the sexual improprieties of David's line are not concealed. Instead, Matthew alludes to King David's own sexual violation, as if implicitly to say of Jesus: "He took our weaknesses" (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019, Matthew 8:17), including the inclination towards sexual violence and the impact it has upon surviving victims and their generations, such as Tamar.

Matthew's genealogy revolves around Jesus being a king through David's royal lineage as it flows through Joseph. My focus is narrowed by the uniqueness of the inclusivity of four women, five if one incorporates Mary, the mother of Jesus. Women were not normally recognized in genealogies, and as Keener (1999) underscores, these women were uncharacteristically unlike the women who were married to patriarchs, such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. My focus is not on Matthew's purpose for incorporating these select

women (see Keener pp. 78–80) but rather I am centering on King David and "the wife of Uriah" (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019, Matthew 1:6) because of the themes of royalty and God's reign in this Gospel. As Nolland (1997) perceives, the phrase "the wife of Uriah" (Bathsheba) reminds readers of David's sin and God's judgment as well as God's faithfulness through the inclusion of Solomon in the royal line. Clements (2014) asserts that while Bathsheba emerges in three pericopae (2 Samuel 11–12; 1 Kings 1:11–31; 2:13–25), Matthew's use of the phrase "the wife of Uriah" points to the account in 2 Samuel, which employs the same phrase on four occasions. Clements reminds her readers that the women "are the first indication that Matthew's Gospel is concerned with the construal of a new identity for the people of God . . . an identity that is based on responsiveness to Christ lived out in relationship with others" (p. 278). King David's actions in the story of "the wife of Uriah," then, are in contrast to the actions of King Jesus and those who welcome God's reign.

The story from 2 Samuel 11–12 is one of a King practicing *power over* rather than *power with*, resulting in sexual violence. Several clues emerge to inform the reader that the King has abused his power, which Grey (2019) underscores. First, as Clements indicates, this story repeatedly uses the word "send," demonstrating the power of the individual. For instance, David *sends* out Joab (11:1); David *sends* someone to ask about the woman (11:3); David *sends* messengers to fetch Bathsheba (11:4); David *sends* a message to Joab, which states, "Send me Uriah," and Joab *sends* Uriah to the King (11:6); David *sends* a letter with Uriah to Joab (11:14); Joab *sends* a report to David (11:18); David *sends* for Bathsheba (11:27); and Yahweh *sends* Nathan to David (12:1). Similarly, as Clements conveys, the only time Bathsheba, who is passive in this story, has any power is when she is pregnant, causing her to send David a message (11:5). Second, Clements notes that the actions of 2 Samuel 11:1–3 are slow in contrast to those in 11:4. Verse 4 mentions four verbs in quick succession: sent, took, came, and lay.

Third, the story demonstrates that David is aware of his abuse of power as he utilizes his power to hide his sin by sending for Uriah. When Uriah arrives, the King instructs Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet" (*The New International Version*, 1973/2011, 2 Samuel 11:8), which

Grey notes is a substitute way to say that Uriah was to lay with his wife (11:8). Since Uriah resists sleeping with his wife on the first night (which, as Clements comments, is in stark contrast to the King), David serves alcohol to Uriah on the second night with the sole purpose of making him drunk so that he sleeps with his wife; however, this plan is foiled by Uriah's integrity (again, in contrast to King David), resulting in an order to Joab (a use of the King's power) for Uriah to die in battle.

Fourth, the parable of Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 12:1–4) indicts David, not the wife of Uriah, as David is the one with wealth and power. In the parable, the rich man is the one who took the lamb and feasts upon it. Nathan recognizes David's power and his abuse as implicitly seen in the use of a parable to convict David. Grey explains:

> To address the powerful king, Nathan uses a judicial parable. Why must Nathan veil his criticism of the king as a parable? To confront David directly suggests that, like Bathsheba, even the prophet is vulnerable to harassment and harm by the king. So if Nathan the prophet, known to David, is possibly open to physical harm by offending the king, then how could Bathsheba be expected to have rejected his sexual advances? Even if she was not unwelcoming of his advances, she would have no choice regardless. It appears that this king is dangerously intoxicated on power and despotism (p. 21).

In short, David exploits his power to serve his lust for Uriah's wife. Whether or not Bathsheba physically resisted is not the issue. According to 2 Samuel 11:27, "the thing David had done displeased the LORD" (T*he New International Version*, 1973/2011, 2 Samuel 11:27). David had power over Uriah and his wife by virtue of his office; thus, he abused his power by having sexual intercourse with Bathsheba, murdering her husband, and covering it up. Matthew's use of the phrase "the wife of Uriah," then, clearly underscores David's sexual exploitation of his power within Jesus' genealogy.

### Jesus' Identification with Survivors

By drawing from the above event in Matthew's genealogy and combining it with intergenerational trauma, I assert that Jesus identifies with survivors of

sexual violence.[2] The reader bears witness to the presence of the sexual misuse of power in the genealogy of Jesus, and the echoes of sexual violence become a part of succeeding generations within Jesus' multigenerational family system through the lens of intergenerational sexual violence. For instance, the repercussions of David's sexual misconduct upon the family system may be interpreted when David's son Amnon committed incest by raping David's daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13). This means that David's sexual exploit of power is not a self-contained incident, but it impacts future generations. Furthermore, the prophet Nathan declared that a member of David's household would have sexual relations with David's wives for all to witness (2 Samuel 12:11). This indicates that various patterns of relating within the family system are passed from one generation to another so that members of the multigenerational family embody the rules, roles, and attitudes/emotions of the system. It is in this way that I connect Jesus to his identifying with the survivor by considering the power of intergenerational sexual trauma and the multigenerational family system. The lens of intergenerational sexual trauma allows Matthew's words in 8:17, "He took our weaknesses and carried our diseases" (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019) to have a bearing on survivors of sexual violence. Wilkins (2004) seems to affirm this by noting that this verse follows Matthew's portrayal of "how Jesus' messianic ministry brings restoration to people who were often marginalized within Jewish culture: lepers (8:1–4), Gentiles (8:5–13), and women (8:14–15)" (p. 339). Matthew, then, conveys that Jesus identifies, or takes on, humans' afflictions of the disenfranchised of society, which includes the infirmities of sexual violence. As such, Jesus is able to communicate #metoo to the survivor. However, he not only identifies with said survivors, but as I aim to demonstrate, he also provides a way towards healing for them.

## Healing in the Atonement for Sexual Violence: Reconciliation

Having sought to convey how Jesus communicates #metoo, I demonstrate in this section that Jesus not only identifies with those who experience the impact of sexual violence, but he also provides an avenue towards healing through the atonement. Since I have established sexual violence within

Jesus' genealogy, I am now able to argue that what is assumed by Jesus Christ is that which is also healed.

### Jesus Is the Atonement

Historically, pentecostals have adhered to a belief of healing in the atonement, supported by Matthew 8:17: "In this way what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet was fulfilled: 'He took our weaknesses and carried our diseases'" (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019). Typically, the attention of pentecostals has focused on Christ's suffering and death on the cross in their explication of the atonement. In other words, they have highlighted the work of Christ on the cross over and above his very being. By emphasizing the phrase from Isaiah 53:5, "with his stripes we are healed" (*King James Version*, 1769/2019), pentecostals imply that the atonement concentrates on Christ's suffering and death, and it is through his crucifixion that healing is experienced. While I agree that the doctrine of atonement includes his suffering and death, I also hold that it encompasses his life, resurrection, and ascension. The atonement is not limited to Jesus Christ's pain and death on the cross, but it incorporates the entirety of who he is. Torrance (1971) explains:

> [I]t was not the *death* of Jesus that constituted atonement, but Jesus Christ the Son of God offering Himself in sacrifice for us. Everything depends on *who* He was, for the significance of His acts in life and death depends on the nature of His person. It was *He* who died for us, *He* who made atonement through His one *self*-offering in life and death. Hence we must allow the Person of Christ to determine for us the nature of His saving work, rather than the other way around. The detachment of atonement from incarnation is undoubtedly revealed by history to be one of the most harmful mistakes of Evangelical churches (p. 64, italics in original).

God comes to humanity as a personal human being with a specific family system, who lives, dies, resurrects, and ascends. Humans know God through the person of Jesus Christ, through the coming of his being. It is his being, his own person, that is the action (work). As Torrance (2009) writes:

> We are not saved by the atoning death of Christ, . . . but by *Christ himself* who in his own person made atonement for us. He is the atonement who ever lives and ever intercedes for us. He is, in the identity of his person and work, priest and sacrifice in one. His *being* mediates his great redeeming work (p. 73, italics in original).

By saying that Jesus' being is his action, I am pointing toward two movements that transpire in Jesus Christ, the divine-human one: Jesus as the divine one reveals God to humanity, and Jesus as the human one reconciles (heals) humanity with the divine. In the former movement, God is revealed to humanity through the being of Jesus. When humans see Jesus, they are seeing God. As Torrance (1992) asserts, there is no other angry God standing behind the Son for people to fear. As Jesus tells Philip in John 14:9: "The person who has seen me has seen the Father!" (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019). In the latter movement, Jesus is in solidarity with humanity, living out his life in complete obedience to God, which means he heals humanity. Purves (2015), in writing about Torrance's view of atonement, comments how reconciliation is "worked out within the hypostatic union," which indicates it "begins with the conception and birth of Jesus, when the real union between God and humankind is established"; thus, it is Jesus' whole life and death that is reconciliation (p. 238).

Since it is both Jesus' vicarious life and vicarious death that provide healing, it means that every aspect of Jesus' life heals. Gregory of Nazianzus' words from the fourth century substantiate such a view: "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved" (*Early Church Texts*, n.d.). Gregory argued that if Jesus Christ is not completely human while being wholly divine, humanity is not completely redeemed. His words support the doctrine of the hypostatic union in which Jesus is one person with two natures, divine and human. The divine is with humanity not only as Jesus walked with humans on earth, but also, and more importantly for my purposes, the divine is with humanity within the being, or person, of Jesus Christ. Matthew's Gospel confirms this when it informs its readers that Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us (1:23). The divine is securely, eternally attached to humanity within the

person of Jesus Christ, the divine-human one. Such an attachment not only indicates that through his genealogy Jesus Christ identifies with those who are affected by sexual violence, but he also provides healing from the acts of sexual violence within his very being, his person.

Jesus' provision of healing without his experiencing the defilement of intergenerational trauma is demonstrated throughout Jesus' life as he was not tainted by sin and sickness. For instance, Matthew 8:1–4 depicts a leper approaching Jesus and requesting to be made clean. Keener writes that the word "leprosy" could refer to a variety of skin disorders. Nevertheless, those with leprosy during Jesus' day were considered defiled and were forced to live outside the community. If one touched a leper, that person was also defiled; thus, one may imagine the shock of those present when Jesus touches the leper, making the leper clean rather than Jesus becoming ceremonially defiled. Keener comments:

> Jewish Law forbade touching lepers (Lev 5:3) and quarantined lepers from regular society (Lev 13:45-46; Jos. *Ant.* 3.261, 264), and people avoided contact with them (2 Kings 7:3) . . . . Yet by touching Jesus does not actually undermine the law of Moses but fulfills its purpose by providing cleansing (pp. 260–261).

This is not the only occasion in Matthew that Jesus heals the other without becoming defiled. In chapter nine, Jesus is touched by a woman with an issue of blood (vv. 20–22), and Jesus touches a daughter that has died (vv. 24–25); in both cases the impure are healed. Healing (reconciling) not only occurs when people have diseases, but also among those who are perceived as transgressors. In Matthew 9:10–13 Jesus is described as dining with sinners, an action that is considered to have a negative influence on Jesus; however, as Keener points out, rather than Jesus being unduly swayed, the divine-human one heals, or reconciles, sinners to God—that is, he sways them to be more like him. Jesus chooses to associate with sinners because he characterizes himself as the physician who socializes with the sick, those who acknowledge their need for healing (9:12). In using Keener's reference to Diogenes Laertius who is speaking of an earlier philosopher's words, this physician attends to the sick without becoming sick himself.

### Jesus' Healing Power

Thus far I have described how Jesus restores those within his proximity on earth. However, it is important also to maintain that Jesus' healing matches and exceeds the repercussions of human trauma given its tendrilous nature throughout familial generations. Theologically, Jesus' healing power remains in everlasting abundance since he is for eternity the divine-human one. This connotes that ontologically the divine is securely attached to humanity so that healing is continuously flowing towards humanity. Since he is fully divine, Jesus is imbued with divine qualities, indicating he has an immeasurable amount of healing power for humanity. Thus, as the echoes of trauma are heard repeatedly through a multigenerational family system, Jesus Christ's healing power ensues and surpasses each repetition. Even though trauma impacts the whole being of the survivor, Jesus' healing is also ontological as seen in the doctrine of the hypostatic union in which the divine heals humanity in the person (being) of Jesus. His ontological healing may be said never to tire as it remains an unwavering reverberation that counters the echoes of trauma and contains a power that is able to supersede them. When the deaths that accompany trauma also play their repetitive tunes, the healing being of Jesus breathes into those deaths the power of the resurrection, raising that which has died into newness of life. That is to say, no matter how the repercussions of trauma repeatedly ripple through time and even though they may fade slowly, Jesus Christ's relentless rhythm of reconciliation is heard resounding throughout eternity without decay.

## The Healing Response: Participation through Story

If Jesus' genealogy contains intergenerational trauma allowing Christ to respond #metoo while also providing ontological healing, the question remains for the church, "How may the church's praxis reveal God who ontologically offers ongoing healing to the survivor of sexual violence that will counter the echoes of trauma?" For me, the place to begin is with "radical discipleship," a theme in Matthew put forth by Keener. Radical discipleship includes the embodiment of God's reign by Christ followers,

which is a way to participate in Christ's healing ministry to the oppressed. Just as Matthew portrays Jesus Christ as one who identifies with and supplies healing for "the sicknesses of others through his own suffering and death" (Wilkins, p. 345), so also is the church to participate in this ministry by supporting others who are wounded. Keener, in commenting on 8:17, confirms, "Jesus' sacrifice to bear others' infirmities may also provide a model for his disciples" (p. 273).[3] In considering the subject at hand, I aim to demonstrate that radical disciples serve others by transforming any attitudes that exhibit power over, which shame said survivors, and instead develop attitudes that validate their worth by honoring their stories through listening that heals. This will be accomplished (1) by briefly outlining antiquity's cultural worldview of meritocracy, which is in contrast to God's kingdom; (2) by claiming that storytelling of the trauma is often necessary for healing; and (3) by asserting that Matthew's Gospel embodies a praxis of healing ministry for the church by listening to stories of the marginalized—that is, the survivors of sexual violence and their multigenerational family systems.

## Society's Meritocracy vs. God's Reign

Radical disciples understand that the characteristics of the kingdom of God are contrary to the meritocracy of a society that values status and competition. Such a contrast is seen in Gorman's (2001) description of the Greco-Roman world of antiquity:

> In this cultural context, "power" and "glory," or "honor," were associated with high culture and status. Among the means of possessing and displaying power and honor were wealth and abundance; political, social, and military achievements and influence; family heritage and status; friends; impressive physical appearance; learning; and eloquent speech. Not to possess, or to lose, these status indicators resulted in shame; people who did so were not powerful but weak (p. 270).

In essence, human kingdoms do not value the embracing of vulnerability and trusting God for one's identity, but they esteem power

over the other to gain honor. DeSilva (2000) writes, "Honor is essentially the affirmation of one's worth by one's peers and society, awarded on the basis of the individual's ability to embody the virtues and attributes that his or her society values" (p. 519). Worth, then, is dependent upon the approval of society. Competition for honor ensued since, as Neyrey (1998) points out, the perception in antiquity was the availability of only a limited amount of good. If one's neighbor had honor, then less honor was accessible for others.

Contrary to this competitive grasping for power and respect, Matthew's Gospel depicts a portrayal of those under God's reign, or radical disciples. Matthew begins with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in which he underlines characteristics of those who are honored in God's kingdom, conveying a reversal of values in contrast to human kingdoms, such as David's. In a human kingdom, those who assert and defend themselves, exerting their power, are the ones who are honored, but in God's kingdom those who are humble, merciful, peacemakers, persecuted, pure in heart, hungry for righteousness, or mourn are the ones who are highly esteemed. Unlike David's reign, in which the king exerts his power over a woman, Matthew counters David's behavior with those who are under God's reign: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (*New English Translation*, 1996/2019, 5:27–28). Under David's reign, murder was committed, but under the reign of Jesus, one is not even to be angry with or insult the other (5:21–22). Stassen and Gushee (2003) remark that these are not "high ideals," or "strenuous demands," but "transforming initiatives" that deliver and heal (transform), while providing hope for healing in relationships (pp. 132–136). That is, the person is transformed from being one who harms the other to one who protects the other and the relationship.

Besides the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew continues to subvert the power and meritocracy of human kingdoms by putting forth the welcoming of vulnerability and grace of God's kingdom. For instance, in chapter 16, Matthew highlights Peter's perception of the Messiah, which is

one of dominion without vulnerability (vv. 13–23). For Peter, suffering is not a characteristic of a Christ who is powerfully to overthrow governments like Rome. As Keener (1999) notes, Jesus' rebuke of Peter indicates that power without the cross is a characteristic of Satan's kingdom, not God's. Nevertheless, it is not only the Christ who is to refuse to cling to merit and status but also his disciples as they are to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him (16:24–25).

Shortly thereafter, Matthew speaks of the importance of becoming like children as citizens who welcome God's reign. Contrary to children in antiquity who are powerless with no status, as Keener (1999) describes, in God's kingdom those who become like children and are hospitable to the powerless are considered the greatest (18:1–5; 19:13–15). Gorman (2012) comments about a similar account recorded in Mark 9:34–37: "Since the parable is Jesus' response to the argument about achieving greatness, which would mean also achieving honor and power, his 'upside-down logic' means that greatness, honor, and power are achieved by service to those without honor and power" (p. 188). Jesus, then, is admonishing his disciples in these verses to welcome the little ones and the children, the vulnerable and powerless.

## Communicating Stories of Trauma

The welcoming of humanity's vulnerability and powerlessness is what members of God's kingdom are to exhibit, which includes the hearing of experiences of trauma. However, such welcoming may be resisted when extending it to stories of intergenerational trauma as some may question the benefit of speaking about said trauma to the second and third generations. Similar to my grandmother, families traditionally refrain from discussing horrifying traumatic events. Some question why one is obliged to unwrap hidden, depraved events of the past, adhering to the old adage, "Let sleeping dogs lie." Some may wonder about traumatizing their children by revealing their traumatic experiences of the past. Christians may additionally argue that past atrocities are not to be mentioned because believers are instructed to think about positive things, such as what is pure, lovely, or of a good report (Philippians 4:8) or because in Christ all

things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). However, secrecy does not necessarily silence the trauma as is evidenced in a qualitative study of 15 adults who were children of Holocaust survivors. In a study by Braga et.al (2012), the Holocaust survivors that remained silent or communicated indirectly about their experiences transmitted traumatic symptoms to the next generation; however, if the participants openly and affectionately shared, even with humor, about their experiences, it produced resilience in the offspring. Alpert (2015) writes about silence, "Grief and intolerable pain cannot be hidden, not from the victim, nor from the generations that follow" (para. 1).

Yet, it is not only the informing of a family system of its secrets, but it is the way in which the information is passed to the next generations that also may determine the character of the repercussions. This was apparent in study by Shrira (2016) of 450 Hebrew-speaking, Jewish Israelis involving 300 offspring of Holocaust survivors (OHS) and 150 who had parents without a Holocaust background who were used for comparison. A difference among the OHS emerged in the second generation's attitudes towards aging, which was linked to how their parents relayed their wartime experiences. The offspring whose parents maintained a more intrusive method of communication about the Holocaust, such as discussing their suffering during the war in relation to something their children did to upset them or conveying their wartime experiences in order to minimize their children's difficulties, were more anxious about aging and death and perceived themselves to be aging less successfully. This was in contrast to the offspring whose parents' form of communication was more informative, such as discussing wartime experiences or being willing to share their experiences from the war in relation to current events. While this study may not be generalized to all instances to intergenerational trauma, it is an example of how telling the story of trauma may move a multigenerational family system towards healing. Alpert (2015) concludes that in order to decrease the power of the "transmitter" of intergenerational trauma, "the stories must be told" (conclusion section, para. 50). For Alpert, the stories do not die with the traumatized persons, but they live within the members of the multigenerational family.

## Listening to Stories of Trauma

In light of these studies that depict how a salutary telling of the stories of trauma generates a path toward healing for certain multigenerational family systems, I assert that members of God's kingdom may participate in Christ's healing ministry through the embracing of vulnerability and powerlessness by listening to stories of trauma of sexual violence. This is based on Matthew's Gospel, which is an embodied story of being hospitable toward the powerless, making it a praxis for the church. Matthew begins with a genealogy that puts forth five women (see above) as being in the Davidic line. By the distinctive naming of these women in Jesus' genealogy, the hearers of Matthew's Gospel are drawn to their existence, and it is the ambiguity surrounding the reasons for their inclusion that beckons the hearer to be attentive to the stories. It is this very essence of Matthew's Gospel that furnishes the church with a praxis: the honoring of the stories of women, the disenfranchised.

The honoring of these women's stories in Jesus' genealogy conveys the inversion of God's kingdom from that of human kingdoms. Unlike human kingdoms, God's kingdom is not one of status, merit, and positions of power in which one gains the upper hand by taking what one does not own (e.g., Nathan's parable to David in which a wealthy man takes the poor man's cherished lamb). Instead, the reversal is true in which one who is last is first, and one who is first is last (20:16). Since women had very little power in the culture of antiquity, Matthew's inclusion of them in the divine-human one's genealogy honors and validates their humanity. Validation of a story normalizes the experience and produces a wholeness in the storyteller, which is healing; hence, God's participation in humanity's story by becoming human ontologically validates and provides healing for all of humanity. Nonetheless, the inclusion of these women in Jesus' genealogy focuses on one element of this healing. It demonstrates how Jesus specifically participates in human (hi) story in a way that entails the embracing of the vulnerable and the oppressed, validating their humanity, while simultaneously healing them.

When Matthew explicitly mentions "the wife of Uriah," he creates space for her story of powerlessness in an act of sexual violence, thereby inviting the hearer also to offer space to similar stories. Since Matthew's Gospel honors the disenfranchised of a society (like "the wife of Uriah") by bearing witness

to their stories and portrays Jesus as the bearer and healer of humanity's weaknesses (8:17), Jesus' disciples are to act accordingly. The offering of support through the listening to stories of sexual violence is a way to participate in Christ's healing ministry to the powerless, society's marginalized. Jesus' disciples may participate in Christ's ministry of healing of humanity when they listen, thereby validating the other's story. In the case of trauma, the telling of the story enables the survivor to take traumatic events, which are disruptive in time, and create order amidst chaos, moving the person towards wholeness. These are specific ways, then, radical disciples may serve the other: honor, listen, and validate, thereby participate in Christ's healing ministry.

As I have relayed an intergenerational story of the trauma of my grandmother, the telling of this story has been a healing experience for me. Likewise, as individuals have read this article, they have participated in both my family's story of intergenerational trauma and Christ's ministry of healing through listening. That is, readers have embodied God's reign by allowing space for humanity's vulnerability and powerlessness as seen in hearing my story of intergenerational trauma of sexual violence. As participants in Jesus Christ's healing ministry, readers may now point towards Jesus who communicates #metoo.

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## Notes

1 Portions of this discussion on trauma were included in my paper I presented virtually at Society for Pentecostal Studies in March of 2021.

2 While this paper centers on survivors of sexual violence, it may also be said that Jesus identifies with the perpetrators of sexual violence since King David is in his genealogy.

3 Keener's support of his assertion is Romans 15:1–3 and 1 Peter 2:20–24.

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# COUNSELING IN THE ALREADY, NOT YET

## REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK OF THE CHRISTIAN COUNSELOR THROUGH AN ESCHATOLOGICAL LENS

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*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 79–102

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**Keywords** *counseling, eschatology, Holy Spirit, suffering, hope, companioning, lament, re-storying, COVID-19*

**Abstract**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this article reflects on the work of the Christian counselor through an eschatological lens, specifically exploring the notion of what it means to counsel in the "already, not yet." The counseling process is presented as a place in which the dialectics of this eschatological tension are present and outworked. Pain and suffering are encountered and explored as the counselor stands in solidarity with the sufferer, and yet the Christian counselor also anticipates hope and the power of change in the present, particularly as ushered in by the eschatological Spirit of God. To this end, the author explores three practices, as undertaken by the counselor, that demonstrate a sensitivity and ability to minister effectively in the tension of the already, not yet—companioning, lament, and re-storying.

## Introduction

Being a counselor during the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique and trying experience. Counselors and their counselees, along with untold

others across the globe, have shared in a "collective grief" (Berinato, 2020). The pain of a broken creation has become particularly evident as a result of the Coronavirus, and counselors and their counselees are experiencing similar traumas, grief, distress, and dysregulation due to the pandemic (Madani, 2020). In an unprecedented, worldwide loss of life, loss of physical contact, loss of hopes and dreams, and the loss of normalcy (Walsh, 2020), there has been a substantial increase in anxiety and depression, domestic violence, substance use, and loneliness (Galea, Merchant & Lurie, 2020). Therapists—the ones who are skilled at "holding hope" for their clients (see Flaskas, 2008)—may find their reserves and resources tapped and strained as a result of their own COVID-19 experiences, as well as the emotional demand of caring for others while being in need of care themselves (Gold, 2021).

Such a widespread and life-altering force evokes existential questions and concerns. As Dein (2020) explains in a discussion on COVID-19 and religious and secular perspectives on the Apocalypse: "Pandemics indicate the fragility of life and the world, chaos, engender paralysing anxiety that the world is dissolving, a sense of detachment and raise significant issues of meaning resulting in existential crises" (p. 2). Such crises cause humans to reflect upon and reevaluate the status quo, and old assumptions and ways of life are questioned so that a new beginning can come forth. In this way, humanity seeks to make meaning of its experiences—individual and shared—including the pain and loss that has been suffered. Humans question whether the pain has a purpose, as well as whether or not their present efforts to address the pain are capable of paving a way for hope in the future. For Christians, in particular, they long for the future and the promised hope it holds in Christ, while praying that God's kingdom would come *now* on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10) to disrupt, intervene in, and heal the adversities experienced in the present.

Theologically speaking, these are matters and cries of a largely eschatological nature. Eschatology is generally understood as an area of Christian dogmatics that concerns the study of the "last things" (i.e., death, judgement, heaven, hell, the end of world history, the return of Christ). However, eschatology does not only pertain to the "end," but

very much involves all of human history, including social-historical life (Althouse, 2010). Moreover, the whole of the Christian life is truly an eschatological reality ushered in by the eschatological gift of the Spirit of God. Said otherwise, in the words of Volf (1990): "Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new creation or it is not Christian life at all. And the Spirit of God should determine the whole life, spiritual as well as secular, of a Christian, and not only some aspects of it" (p. 28; see also Volf, 1991). This is to include the social responsibilities and cultural labors of the believer, who undertakes those efforts in the Spirit, in light of the coming, promised new creation. As such, it is in the area of eschatology in which one can reflect on the theological significance and impact of human cultural labors in light of eternity. It is also this area of theology that helps us to grapple with the suffering of the present that exists in tension with the already-but-still-coming eschatological fulfillment of God's tomorrow.

In a world where "grass withers and the flowers fall" (*New International Version*, 2011, Isaiah 40:8), we may find it highly contradictory to ascribe eternal significance to the fleeting efforts of humans. But, if we affirm the continuity of creation, eschatologically speaking, it is an imperative that Christians think *Christianly* about their professional, vocational undertakings, particularly because it is through those very efforts that humanity is invited to participate in the redemptive plans of God through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 28:18–20; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; see also Wright, 2008, pp. 209–210).

Considering, then, the work of the counselor, in particular, this article will be concerned with reflecting on the labors of the Christian counselor through an eschatological lens. And, specifically, this article will explore the idea of "counseling in the already, not yet"; a reality that has been profoundly felt in the midst of COVID-19, making counselors and counselees hyperaware in many regards of the pain of the "not yet," but perhaps profoundly more eager for and attentive to hopeful signs of the "already" that break forth in our midst by the Spirit. To this end, the work of the counselor will be proposed in this article as being a cultural, penultimate practice that is intended to assist individuals with their problems of living now, while also being a practice that holds eschatological

promise, serving as a signpost to the ultimate (Kunst & Tan, 1996; see also Bonhoeffer, 1955, pp. 125–142).

Moreover, the author will propose that counseling, itself, inherently creates space in which the dialectics of the already, not yet are encountered and explored—both pain and promise. Accordingly, the Christian counselor will be presented as one who enters into human pain and stands with afflicted counselees, while simultaneously holding hope for them and signaling the possibility of change, informed by God's own divine action borne out in the cross and resurrection, and empowered by God's eschatological Spirit. The dialectics of suffering and hope, and their practical significance and outworking in the work of the Christian counselor will be explored with a specific focus on three practices that the author suggests hold potential for the work of the eschatologically-informed Christian counselor—*companioning*, *lament*, and *re-storying*.

In order to provide context and a theoretical foundation for this discussion, a brief overview of selected literature will be given concerning the practice of counseling and its relationship to eschatology.

## Brief Overview of Selected Literature

Christian counseling literature, at large, certainly discusses the importance of the counseling endeavor in light of a Christian worldview and theology (e.g., Greggo & Sisemore, 2012; Johnson, 2011; McMinn, 2011; Tan, 2011). However, there have been fewer efforts that specifically reflect on the eschatological significance of counseling, or to reflect theologically on the counseling endeavor with a specific focus on eschatological implications, at least at notable length.

On a cursory level, it has been suggested that "the overarching context of the counseling session [is] the 'here, but not yet' tension" (Serrano, 2003, p. 222). Similarly, Decker (1996) proposes that the eschatological task of counseling is "intended to produce hope, but it is also intended to provide a context for measuring present pain against ultimate gain" (p. 60). It has also been suggested that because of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing life where there is death, "one can have a realistic hope

regarding the process of therapy" because "[r]eal transformation can take place, though one tempers this with the understanding that not all things occur quickly" (Parker, 2016, p. 62).

A few of the more thorough explorations of the topic of counseling and eschatology have come from Kunst and Tan (1996), Holeman (2012), and French (2019), which will be highlighted in this article. Drawing heavily upon the work of Volf (1991), Kunst and Tan propose that the psychotherapeutic task is consonant with God's own will and action in the world, in that it is "forward-reaching" and intended to assist people in managing their difficulties in living and, thus, it can be considered a cooperation with God inasmuch as it aligns with the will of God for creation. They posit that therapy, in itself, is not capable of *precipitating* new creation, human healing, or liberation, but that it has value and purpose when understood as a *participating* practice in the redemptive action of God in transforming "injured creation." As such, therapy is viewed as an "expression of God's own redemptive work in the world" in the way in which it anticipates the coming age when sorrow will be no more, and when people will live at peace amongst themselves and with God (Kunst & Tan, 1996, p. 289).

In a similar vein, Holeman (2012) has suggested that Christian counselors adopt an "eschatological perspective" of the counseling task, particularly as they help clients to bear the emotional burdens that result from trauma and tragedy (p. 161). Following the leading of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8–9 (*New Revised Standard Version*, 1989), Holeman reminds counselors that we are "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed," followed by an echoing of Paul's concluding remarks in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 (*New Revised Standard Version*, 1989):

> So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (p. 161)

Regardless of the source(s) of pain in a counselee's life, or our own, Holeman (2012) emphasizes that it is Paul's eschatological perspective, made clear in the passage of 2 Corinthians above, that assists him in making sense of the suffering of the present age in light of God's tomorrow, and can likewise assist the counselor and counselee in addressing the tragedies and traumas of life. It is such an "eschatological horizon" that "helps us all to live with the evil that befalls us" knowing that "God's kingdom will come, that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (p. 178). Holeman proposes, therefore, that the ultimate task of the Christian counselor is to "prepare the way for the LORD" in the midst of a counselee's "emotional desert" through the use of his or her therapeutic skillset, in an effort to "raise up every valley of depression, to make low every mountain of anxiety and to make level the roughed-up places in the clients' relationships (Is. 40:3-4)" (pp. 174–175).

Alternatively, but resonating with the proposals of Kunst and Tan (1996) and Holeman (2012), French (2019) has explored the relationship between counseling and eschatology from a phenomenological perspective. As a result of studying the lived experiences of ten Pentecostal/Charismatic mental health professionals concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the counseling process, French has proposed that "participation with the Spirit" is one of the primary findings that distinguishes the practice of these clinicians. This "participation" was not understood, by participants, only to be related to the goals and progress made in therapy, at present, but to have very much to do with the "not yet," thus demonstrating that the participants in her study interpret their therapeutic task in light of eternity. The ten counselors voiced a strong, shared belief in the healing and hope that God brings to their counselees, which they believe they witness and participate in. As one participant explained:

> [W]hatever I do with a client, whatever work I am able to accomplish, I see it as my contribution to the work that God is doing in the world, and the healing and hope that God is bringing to the world. . . . It means that my life and my work has meaning and significance in a grander scheme in the world that God is

> doing and it's not just me doing something with a client here . . . . I don't go into these situations trying to control the outcome. We have our goals set in assessment and in treatment planning, but as a Christian, I see myself as a tool in the Holy Spirit's hand to bring healing and wellness to those people, and to achieve those goals. (French, 2019, p. 184)

Thus, as the study revealed, the pangs and sorrows of the present are not denied or dismissed by these clinicians, but rather, they feel that their work as counselors and the brokenness they encounter in therapy is ultimately viewed through a hermeneutic that affirms that death has been swallowed up by victory (1 Corinthians 15:54). They view God's divine action as primary in their lives and those of their counselees, demonstrating an auxiliary and dependent role in the advancement of the kingdom of God through their practice as counselors, emphasizing their creaturely dependence on the grace of God (French, 2019).

These counselors' participation with the Spirit in counseling occurs in and through the caregiving relationship between the counselor and her client(s). This is enacted through the use of clinical skills, techniques, and interventions, utilized within the therapeutic relationship, and submitted to and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore not something that occurs from "without" but takes place *within* and *between* people, as empowered by the Spirit. It is embodied and outworked in practice. It is what French (2019) has termed a "practical pneumatology of counseling." Counselors are "clothed with power from on high" (*New International Version*, 2011, Acts 1:8) in order that their human practices and cultural labors can be made to participate in the redemptive action of God in the earth.

In this way, eschatology is not separated from the practical work of the Christian counselor. Rather, the two are inextricably intertwined as eschatology informs, shapes, and defines the practical work of Christian counselors precisely because the eschatological Spirit of God empowers them to be "salt and light" (Matthew 5:13–16) in the earth and for the restoration of creation through their practical action as counselors.

## Further Theological Considerations: Living as the Resurrection Community

Building upon these initial perspectives, then, we might also consider the work of Swinton (2000) who has written on the importance of the resurrection and hope in relationship to the care of those with mental health issues. Swinton explains that the primary meaning of the resurrection is, of course, the bodily resurrection of Christ. This cosmic event is that which makes new possibilities and hope for the future a reality, including the hope of bodily resurrection for all believers. There is also, on another level, the resurrection "motif" that informs our very being in the world "as it extends to address all forms of death" (p. 128). In this way, the "[r]esurrection is a continuing process, a way of being, wherein the Christian community is called to live in such a way that death, in its wider sense, is recognized and the reality that it has been overcome [is] lived out in its continuing praxis in the world" (p. 131). Thus, the Christian community lives in the dialectical tension "between the pain and chaos of what is, and the fresh and radically different possibilities of what will be when the Resurrection life becomes the natural life of creation" (p. 129). In the space between what is and what will be, the Christian caregiver (e.g., pastor, counselor, chaplain, friend) exists and provides care to those with mental health issues, bearing the call to "reveal pinpoints of resurrection light in the present and, in doing so, inspire hope and meaning in a world that struggles to find both" (p. 129; see also Tietje, 2018, pp. 96–109).

To this point, God's own divine action (demonstrated in the cross and resurrection) is what radically informs what the Christian community does in both thought *and* deed. Swinton (2000) explains that in the cross God assumes "a stance of critical solidarity with the world, as God enters into the suffering of humanity in all its fullness" (p. 129). Subsequently, the resurrection serves as "God's protest against death and all manifold forms of evil and suffering that death takes already in the midst of life" (p. 129). The resurrection has ushered all of creation into a new era wherein death has been overcome and hope is made possible even in the face of the most seemingly hopeless situations.

Thus, through God's own divine action in the cross and resurrection we have been provided a model of Christian practice that fully embraces and enters into humanity's pain in the present, yet also lives in such a way that acknowledges that there is hope and a future that, itself, informs our present circumstances. To this point, Swinton (2020) notes that Christian hope is both an idea *and* a practice. This understanding yields a different way of being in the world that enables the church to live as the "resurrection community" and to be a prophetic witness to life and hope as suffering remains very real and present; even as pandemics sweep through the earth (see Swinton, 2000, pp. 130–132).

## The Already, Not Yet Tension of the Counseling Process

Having reviewed these initial perspectives, we move to consider more specifically how the counseling process itself points to the dialectics of the already, not yet tension.

Pain and grief over the present state of creation are the fodder of therapy, and yet the counseling process itself is ever motivated by the hope for change, fresh possibilities, and a better future. To this point, decades of "common factors" research affirms the role of hope in therapy. This research has been concerned with the commonalities that exist amongst counseling approaches that make them effective despite their differences, and the literature indicates that at least 15% of positive outcome in therapy is due to hope and expectancy in and for treatment, whether it be hope held by a counselee at the outset of therapy or through hope instilled in the counselee during the counseling process (Leibert & Dunne-Bryant, 2015; see also Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999; Sprenkle & Blow, 2004). Thus, whereas the hardships and pain of life make the therapeutic endeavor necessary and relevant, therapy is pursued and enacted on the premise that change is possible. In this way, pain and promise exist together and are explored in conjunction within the therapeutic relationship, each signaling the need for, and existence of, the other.

To this end, Flaskas (2007) has suggested from a therapeutic perspective that hope and hopelessness are coexisting experiences, existing in intimate relationship and functioning more as a "constellation" than as separate states. She writes: "Territories of loss, abuse, trauma and tragedy [. . .] can simultaneously call forth both strong orientations to resilience and hope as well as strong experiences of hopelessness" (p. 190). Both counselee and counselor are said to approach the therapeutic process with a certain relationship to hope and hopelessness. The request of therapy, in itself, is proposed as being an "act of hope" (p. 193) by both counselor and client, and the goal throughout the therapeutic process, for both/all parties, is to "do hope" by "holding onto a vision of possibility" for the counselee(s) without detracting from the magnitude of their pain and loss (p. 195). In this way, Flaskas has suggested that we all have the capacity to "do" and "think" hope, just as we can "do" or "think" hopelessness (see also Swinton, 2020).

As such, it can be suggested that counseling is, in many ways, a dance between honoring the pain of the counselee while holding onto and enacting hope for a better tomorrow. This does not only occur in concept and theory, but through practical action and the "doing" of hope between counselor and client. However, for the Christian counselor, in particular, this process and its hope for change are framed within another, greater reality, as has been discussed in the preceding sections. It is not only a hope enacted for today but is one that is also imbued by the promises of the eschaton. Thus, the eschatological future in Christ becomes the hermeneutic through which the Christian counselor understands her professional, practical work of today, whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged. Moreover, and very importantly, it is through the "charismatic enlivening" experienced in the life of the counselor by the Holy Spirit—through which she experiences "the coming springtime of new creation"—that the counselor is empowered to *be* a "living hope" in the earth, now (Moltmann, 1997, p. 95; see also 1 Peter 1:3).

To this point, one cannot properly consider the eschatological significance of human labors, including those of the Christian counselor, without affirming the pneumatic empowerment that makes the

practices of the believer, and church at large, an "expression of life" and "proclamation" of the future in Christ (Self, 2013, p. 49). Without the pneumatic empowerment of the Spirit, flesh is flesh and human practices are bound by the limitations of a fallen humanity (i.e., sin, finiteness). But, by the infilling and empowering work of the Holy Spirit, human flesh becomes a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19) through which flows life, hope, healing, and other inbreakings of eschatological promise. Moreover, through the indwelling and empowerment of the Spirit, human practices become capable of transforming the brokenness of the current state into first fruits of what is to come.

## Exploring Practices for Effective Ministry in the Tension of the Already, Not Yet

It is therefore beneficial to consider *how* the Christian counselor may effectively counsel in a way that rightly grapples with the realities of the already, not yet, not denying one for the other, but rather intentionally practicing with an awareness of where she is located in salvation history. More specifically, we might ask how the Christian counselor can 1) enter into human suffering to stand in critical solidarity with the sufferer, and, also, 2) prophetically protest all forms of death, suffering, and oppression through practical strategies that are intended to bring change and hope, as informed by the eschaton and empowered by the ministry of eschatological Spirit of God (see Swinton, 2000, pp. 129–130).

Recognizing, of course, that there is potential to explore numerous and varied counseling practices that *could* potentially accomplish the above, it will be the goal of the author in the final sections of this article to explore the ideas of "companioning," "lament," and "re-storying" as possible practices by which the counselor can demonstrate sensitivity to, and minister effectively in, the tension of the already, not yet reality in which she and her clients exist. These practices are aligned with the very real dimensions and tensions of the life of faith wherein suffering abounds *and yet* there is an ever-present, all-encompassing hope for redemption and restoration (see Romans 5:1–4). Thus, they should be viewed as interrelated partners

that assist the Christian counselor who desires to be more sensitive to the eschatological realities in her therapeutic practice.

Moreover, what is crucial to bear in mind throughout the following sections is this: The eschatological Spirit of God is the comforter (John 14:16) within us, the one who laments through us (Romans 8:22–27), and the one who invites us into a new story and new consciousness as believers (1 Corinthians 2:16). Thus, the Christian counselor is both a recipient of, and participant in, these ministries of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is by the Spirit that the counselor can properly assist those she counsels in the tension of the already, not yet, and engage in the practices of companioning, lament, and re-storying in a way that participates in God's restoration of creation.

## Companioning

Grief expert Alan Wolfelt (2006) bases his approach to bereavement care and counseling on the premise of "companioning." This is a term he developed to define a particular attitude and posture taken in the care of the bereaved. Central to the practice of companioning is a being-with and coming alongside the one who suffers, in sharp contrast to a "treating" or "curing" approach. Companioning, true to its Latin roots, evokes imagery of sharing a meal together, (messmate—*com* for "with" and *pan* for "bread") and indicates a particular way of being in which the counselor is present to the one who suffers, "sharing, communing, abiding in the fellowship of hospitality" (p. 17). Amongst the many tenets of the companioning approach, Wolfelt states that it is "about walking alongside; it is not about leading"; it is "about bearing witness to the struggles of others [. . .] not about directing those struggles"; it is "about being present to another person's pain [. . .] not about taking away the pain" (p. 6). Moreover, to companion is to "observe," "watch out for," "to keep and honor," and "to bear witness" to the experiences and the one who grieves (pp. 17–18). To companion is to seek to understand and to learn from the one who suffers. Companioning is therefore a particularly helpful practice to explore when considering the Christian counselor's care of clients in the tension of the already, not yet; and it can be suggested that

this posture should not only be utilized in the care of those specifically seeking bereavement counseling, but for those enduring any and all types of suffering in this life, including the suffering brought about by COVID.

To this point, the pandemic has presented counselors with an opportunity to suffer with and companion their counselees in unique ways. For example, through the mass move to telehealth and the shared experience of being homebound, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, many counselors and counselees experienced more intimacy and vulnerability in the therapeutic alliance. As Captari (2021) described of a client with chronic physical health problems, the pandemic meant that the client's therapist was also unable to leave home, and this realization "deepened the relational connection and facilitated a sense of solidarity as the patient felt seen and known in a new way having sessions conducted by phone," additionally noting that "this client now expressed relief in being companioned through suffering at a more intimate level during homebound restrictions" (p. 332). Though the pandemic restrictions continue to relax and therapists and their clients will likely return to in-person meetings, on a large scale, this example challenges therapists to remember the power of companioning and coming alongside the one who suffers in a posture of solidarity and understanding. It is an approach to care that requires one to be patient and present to an individual in their grief, without moving on the impulse to fix, cure, or treat. It is also intent on acknowledging the lived experience of the client and the meaning it holds for them.

It is worth noting that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, it may be more difficult for the counselor to exercise presence and to avoid the impulse to rush ahead due to the shared experience of being disheartened and overwhelmed. Counselor and counselee, alike, are longing for a reprieve. However, a critical part of the ministry of the church to a hurting world is an ability and willingness to enter into the pain and suffering of humanity, not "pass over" it (see Cross, 2020, pp. 123–147). To this end, there remains a need for a theology and practical observance of "Holy Saturday" experiences wherein experiences of forsakenness, descent into the abyss, and the seeming absence and silence of God are

acknowledged, attesting to the liminal space between the trauma of Good Friday and the hope of Resurrection Sunday (Cross, 2020; Rambo, 2010; Tietje, 2018). The counselor is therefore challenged to remember that ministry in the midst of the already, not yet reality involves an ability to enter into the pain of the counselee *as part of* the redemptive journey toward hope and transformation—as long as that journey takes. Christian hope does not eradicate suffering, but it transforms the experience of it (1 Thessalonians 4:13; see also John 16:33). Moreover, it is the Christian counselor's own experience of the Paraclete—the One who comforts, exhorts, and encourages the believer—that becomes an invitation and equipping to participate in that same ministry to those she counsels (see Kärkkäinen, 2002, p. 35; Olthuis, 2006).

## Lament

To the above points, the practice of lament is an important way in which Holy Saturday experiences and the pangs of the "not yet" can be rightly observed and expressed among the church, and yes, within the therapeutic context between the Christian counselor and client, as it gives actionable and structured expression to suffering.

Lament is a spiritual discipline rooted within the Judeo-Christian tradition, notably evidenced in the psalms of lament (e.g., Psalm 22; 42–43; 89), the book of Lamentations, through Christ's own practice of lament (e.g., Matthew 23:37–39; 27:46), and subsequently, that of the church. It thus carries a deeply biblical and theological significance. As such, it is likely not a practice readily attributed to or adopted by the professional counselor, most certainly if the counselor is serving clients who ascribe to non-Christian beliefs. However, for the Christian counselor and client, a theological understanding of lament and its practice can result in a therapeutic process that is eschatologically informed and attuned.

Lament carries within it an ability effectively and deeply to acknowledge the pain of the present world and the wounds of a broken creation within the broader framework and understanding of God's faithfulness. As Swinton (2007) explains, it is a practice taken up and enacted by a covenanted people, bringing their cries of distress,

rage, pain, and sorrow to God, repeatedly. Lament gives voice to the grievances of God's people and demands that God respond and take action. It is prayer—a specific form of prayer that is "not content with soothing platitudes or images of a God that will only listen to voices that appease and compliment," but, rather, "[l]ament takes the brokenness of the human experience into the heart of God and demands that God answer" (p. 104). Lament is therefore more than catharsis and the venting of emotional anguish. It is the expression of deep emotional pain to God, specifically, and not only for the purpose of expressing sorrow but for calling God to respond through action. Interestingly, biblical lament also contains a surprising element that differentiates it from the sole expression of sorrow or unhappiness—the inclusion of passionate praise to God, at times (Hall, 2016).

More specifically, lament has a structural component that is important to its function. Lament operates on a trajectory that is characterized by five core elements, including "an address to God, complaint, request, motivation (why God should act), and confidence in God" (Pemberton, 2012, as cited in Hall, 2016, p. 223). There is therefore an inherent movement within the structure of lament, one that Hall (2018) suggests takes the sufferer through a transformative shift from distress to praise. To this end, Brueggemann (2007) proposes that the Psalter, including the psalms of lament, give speech to the life of faith that moves along a trajectory of being "securely oriented" to "painfully disoriented" to "surprisingly reoriented" (p. 2).

Lament gives voice, therefore, to the full breadth, depth, and range of the human experience in the life of faith, from pain and suffering to praise. And lest we conclude that lament can only be practiced through the cognizant, "word-full" expression of our suffering through the praying of the psalms, for example, we must be reminded of Paul's words about the ministry of the Spirit. The Spirit intercedes through God's people through "wordless groans" when they do not know how to pray, searching their hearts and the mind of God to pray and cry out on their behalf in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:26–27). In simpler terms, the Spirit of God laments through us (see also Torr, 2013, pp. 187–189).

Through lament, the believer has the experience of being "seen" by God in her suffering and heard in her experience of being wronged (Swinton, 2007). Lament gives voice to the sufferer, and in the practice of lament, suffering is not diminished or explained away, but it is recognized. Accordingly, ". . . the sufferer is legitimized" (Hall, 2018, p. 226).

Placing focus on the counseling endeavor, these comments can highlight the power of the practice of lament for the Christian counselor who companions the Christian client experiencing the very real pains of the "not yet," framed within the greater hope that originates in God's faithfulness. It is a practice that deeply acknowledges the ongoing flow of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation that characterizes the life of faith, as mentioned above, allowing the counselor to serve counselees well as they navigate places of suffering, experiences of hope, and the liminal wilderness spaces that characterize Holy Saturday experiences.

The experience of the pandemic, for example, has brought about a significant, worldwide experience of disorientation, and people are seeking to reorient themselves in its wake. Lament can be a useful and effective tool to help them do so. To this end, Marsha Fowler (2020), a registered nurse and researcher, writes about the use of poetry, and lament in particular, as a powerful, structured means by which to practice self-care and the care of others during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lament allows both healthcare provider and patient to find meaning in the experience of illness, sorrow, and grief, as well as to develop compassion for oneself and others. It gives expression to suffering of all kinds, allowing the one who laments to move from "'not me, not here, not now' to a place of acknowledgment, 'yes me, yes here, and yes now,' giving voice to what is frightening, wrong, and unjust" (para. 11). Following a specific structure of lament—initial cry for help; naming the foe as external force; "I/me" statement; naming of God or ethos; affirmation or expression of trust; motif designed to prompt desired response; expression of praise; assurance of being heard (Westermann, 1981, as cited in Fowler, 2020)—Fowler provides guided examples with prompts (religious and nonreligious) that are relevant to the experience of COVID-19 in the healthcare context, with hopes that it will help healthcare workers and their patients to record their own laments

that detail their personal experiences of suffering and, in turn, begin to transform them and provide meaning.

This practice would also be well-placed in the therapeutic context. In addition to pointing clients to the psalms of lament in the Hebrew Bible for personal reflection and the expression of suffering, counselors could also introduce clients to the general structure and key elements of the psalms of lament, encouraging them to compose their own laments with personal and circumstance-specific content. Through this practice, clients can articulate the specific agonies of their COVID-19 experiences and other lived experiences of the "not yet" in a way that generates transformation, all framed within the covenant faithfulness of God.

As Hall (2018) explains, lament restores a semblance of order out of the chaos of one's experiences. Like the practice of many other rituals that mark life transitions (e.g., weddings, funerals, graduations), lament provides opportunity for the creation of new meaning. Thus, even when God has not appeared to act on one's behalf, the "ritualized movement" that occurs through the structure of lament brings the mourner to a place of praise (p. 224). More importantly, we find that, "[a]s we pray through the psalms, our desires, affections, and perspectives are *reshaped*" (p. 230). This is a significant point that moves us to the idea of re-storying.

## Re-storying

In Narrative Therapy, the term "re-storying" is central to its philosophy and practice. The therapeutic process revolves around narratives and involves the "storying" and "re-storying" of clients' lives and their experiences with the intention of co-creating new, more liberating narratives (White & Epston, 1990). This is based on the premise that humans give meaning to their lived experiences by storying them. Consequently, humans not only story their lives, but they also perform the stories of which they hold knowledge. Stories are therefore understood to be both an asset and a liability. They are the means by which individuals understand themselves, others, and their relationships. Some narratives have the potential to foster wellness

through being "reassuring, uplifting, liberating, revitalizing, or healing" while others "constrain, trivialize, disqualify, or otherwise pathologize" an individual, others, and their relationships (Tomm, 1990, p. x). As can be imagined, the most dominant story that shapes a person's life can determine the nature of his or her lived experience and habitual actions.

Narratives also assist individuals in interpreting and navigating difficult or unknown phenomena. They help explain what is happening on all levels—personally, in one's family, and in broader society. Thus, stories assist people in coping with situations with which they are presented, and they provide a sense of coherence to their lives. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 has been a radical instance of the "unknown" that has deeply challenged and disrupted our coherence and ability to make sense of things, thus requiring the creation of new meanings, new narratives and metaphors. Therefore, according to Castiglioni and Gaj (2020), one of the primary goals of the therapist in the midst of the pandemic should be to utilize interventions that focus on the construction of meaning for clients—drawing on metaphors and narratives, as this assists clients in coping with the effects of the pandemic and its repercussions. Additionally, they note that clients who participate personally and socially in spiritual and/or religious practices may experience a greater level of coherence and, thus, cope better with the distress brought about by COVID.

In light of this, it is important to provide clients with the opportunity to explore their narratives and the stories that weave their lives together and help them to make sense of suffering, including that which has been experienced as a result of COVID-19. On one level, the story that dominates a counselee's life will powerfully shape that individual's worldview and, therefore, his or her experience of the world. What is explored in therapy will, in many senses, be the outworking of the counselee's worldview and the stories that generate it, resulting in particular behaviors and ways of operating in the world. How the counselee views his current circumstances, future, and outcomes will also be largely dependent upon the narrative and "script" by which he is living. Likewise, the story that dominates the counselor's life will also radically inform her worldview, experience of the world, and, also, her approach to, and work as, a therapist—including her

view of a counselee, the present circumstances, future, and outcomes. For Christian counselors and clients, then, specifically exploring the Christian narrative and the promise of hope will be crucial to their meaning-making processes and reestablishing a sense of coherence after the distress and disruptions of the pandemic. The eschatologically-informed counselor must therefore be intentional about discussing clients' Christian spirituality and helping them to frame (and/or re-frame) their experiences of the "not yet" within the overarching promise of hope in Christ that serves as an anchor for the soul (Hebrews 6:19).

To this end, Pennington (2009) has explored the importance and centrality of a Christian eschatology and the hope it holds for the work of the Christian counselor. He suggests that there should be a "strong grammar of hope in our counseling, seeing our goal as very much including a re-education of our counselees toward an eschatologically-focused, new-creation-hoping understanding of Christianity," writing further,

> The biblical content of the eschatological nature of the New Testament and Christian teaching must play a central role in how we approach counseling and the kind of language we use. Not, of course, in a "Take two verses and call me in the morning" way [. . .] but at the core of our own worldview in such a way that it seeps out into all of our concepts and language. (p. 45)

In the face of unimaginable suffering—the death of a child, a cancer-ridden spouse, or a worldwide pandemic—people are desperate for more than imminent methods and answers, seeking out "something that goes beyond the grave and this fallen world as we know it" (Pennington, 2009, p. 44). The human soul desires transcendence. Therefore, as Pennington (2009) notes, "[t]here is a deep need for a universe-wide, transcendent answer of the hope of a renewed and restored creation itself" (p. 44).

Thus, as the Christian counselor is deeply imbued by the Christian story and its eschatology, it will begin to "re-story" the counseling process itself—the language used, the interventions chosen, and the manner in which the counselor understands and attends to the two dialectics of the Christian reality in the counseling process, suffering and hope. In the face

of immense suffering, such as has been encountered in the pandemic, the Christian story will be crucial for reorienting the Christian counselor and client to a place of hope. And, ultimately, this will occur with the help of the eschatological, story-telling Spirit of God, the one who gives the believer the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16; see also Keener, 2016; Smith, 2013, pp. 14–15).

It is important to note briefly that the suggestion of "re-storying," as presented here, is not a quick departure from the necessary acknowledgment of suffering. Rather, it is to suggest that through the Christian story, the counselor and client are brought closer to a true hope that is not naïve but takes the brokenness of creation seriously. For Christian hope "refuses the premature consolation that pre-empts grief, the facile optimism which cannot recognize evil for what it is" (Bauckham & Hart, 1999, as cited in Pennington, 2009, p. 44). Ultimately, this re-storying that occurs by the Spirit of God will always testify to Christ's own words in which the believer is told to expect suffering and trouble in the world, but to do so with great courage, and ultimately hope, since the world (and all its pain, suffering, and death) is already conquered by Christ himself (John 16:33). Therefore, re-storying, in this sense, does not deny suffering, but rather presents a reinterpretation of it, and thus, it yields a different way of living in response to it.

## Conclusion

As has been explored in the preceding pages, the eschatologically-informed Christian counselor will be one who can meaningfully minister in the place of tension—not foregoing suffering for hope, but also not foreclosing on true, Christian hope out of an inadequate understanding of the Christian story or an overcommitment to momentary therapeutic "fixes" or "cures." The eschatologically-informed Christian counselor will be one with "space" to allow the complexities and the paradox of the Christian narrative to be explored in the counseling room—one who can companion well in the tragedies without rushing ahead to pass over suffering; one who can encourage the practice of lament for the expression of suffering with

a call to God for redemptive action, and with a trust that God is faithful to respond; and one whose practice and counseling work will be deeply steeped in the Christian story that both indicates the telos to which the counselor is moving, but also shapes and informs her way of being in the world, including who she is as a counselor and how she counsels, from the grammar of therapy to the chosen methods utilized therein. Ultimately, it will be the Spirit of God—the eschatological gift to the church—who will minister to and through the counselor in order effectively to accomplish these things.

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# BREAKING DEPRESSION'S SILENCE WITHIN THE CHURCH THROUGH FRIENDSHIPS

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*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 103–115

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**Keywords** *depression, mental health, church, friendship, community, silence, stigma*

## Abstract

This article explores the silent nature of depression in the local church and suggests that developing Jesus-style friendships can break the silence. It adapts the author's Doctor of Ministry (DMin) research project, which explored the silent nature of depression in the local church and Christianity's interpretive healing qualities. This article argues that the church has a rich history of helping sufferers interpret their experiences of depression, but changing worldviews, the growth of the modern medical model, and the effectiveness of pharmaceuticals monopolized health and shoved the church to the periphery of the conversation. Silence became the church's typical response, which promoted an attitude of stigma and avoidance. The article suggests that developing Jesus-style friendships can help break the silence because social or religious barriers do not restrict such friendships. This model of friendship is crucial for giving depression sufferers a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose within the church community.

## Introduction

I suffered from depression for years before I became a Christian. I self-harmed, lived a self-destructive life, and entertained suicidal thoughts, but not once did I know I suffered from depression or that such a condition existed. It was not until a failed suicide attempt forced me to see a doctor that I learned that what I was experiencing had a name. The doctor prescribed antidepressants, but they did not work particularly well. My suffering continued as usual, with the doctor simply increasing the dosage each time I saw him. It was not until a few years later that I met God through a religious experience, and he changed my life. Immediately the depression left me, and I immediately stopped taking the antidepressants. During my next appointment, I told the doctor about the religious experience and that I was no longer depressed. He agreed that I certainly looked happier. I never saw him again after that. However, six years passed by, and now living as a Christian and active church member, the depression slowly returned. This led me on a spiritual journey with God, through which I overcame depression. I narrate these events in McBain (2021).

During the second bout of depression, I noticed that depression and mental health were things that the Spirit-empowered church I attended in Scotland at the time did not speak about. I observed this silence in the years that followed as something many Christians from the UK and the USA experienced. From this, it was only natural I chose to explore the silent nature of depression in the church as my Doctor of Ministry research project (MRP) topic. I studied what it was about depression that made Christians and the church not talk about it. As part of the MRP, I also surveyed approximately 120 depression sufferers from three Spirit-empowered churches located within different demographic areas (i.e., Turley, Bixby, and Glenpool, Oklahoma) to observe their experience of depression's silence. Towards the end, I suggested some models that churches could use to reach out and help those suffering. This article adapts the content of the MRP to explore the contextual nature of depression while integrating into the study and discussing the MRP survey results more fully. It also offers one suggestion for how churches can respond to depression through hospitality and friendship.

## Depression and the Church's Silence

Depression is an experience that affects one's mind, behavior, body, and relationships. Rowe (1996) describes it as like being in prison:

> Intellectually you know that you are sharing space with other people, that you are talking to them and they are hearing you. But their words come to you as if across a bottomless chasm, and even if you can reach out and touch that other person, or that other person touches you, nothing is transmitted to you in that touch. No human contact crosses the barrier. (pp. 1–2)

Rowe's language reveals the complexity of depression and the dichotomy present between what the suffer knows is happening and what their sense-experience tells them is happening. Swinton's (2001) phenomenological study of the lived experiences of depression sufferers provides an excellent description of how sufferers experience the illness. His interviews with Christian sufferers isolated central themes of their experiences, such as meaninglessness, questions about the meaning of life, feelings of abandonment, physical and psychological exhaustion, and others. He summarizes the condition as a cataclysmically spiritual experience that affects every area of the sufferer's life.

Considering the nature of depression and the metaphors sufferers use to describe it (e.g., darkness, hopelessness, and despair), one would assume that the church, which is supposed to be a light to the world, would have no trouble helping sufferers. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Rather than providing the shining light of Christ and embracing sufferers as it leads them to wholeness, it appears that the church is mainly silent about depression and mental illness in general. In an interview with Evans (2014), Simpson spoke of her own experience with the church regarding her mother's mental health problems:

> . . . we did not receive the help and support we needed from the church. Like other families, we were affected by stigma and a sense of shame that kept us mostly silent about our problems. And church leaders who wanted to help us, for the most part, didn't know how to help . . . . Instead, we felt pressure to pretend as if everything were fine and to put on our best face at church. (n.p.)

Simpson accuses the church of handling mental illness in ways that do not reflect the love of God and are isolating and cruel. Stetzer (2018) agrees and challenges the church to move past the silence, shame, and stigma and display Christ's love.

In light of these criticisms, the silence of depression appears as a problem within the church. It is a problem substantiated by the MRP survey (McBain, 2020). One question asked how respondents felt the church leadership and pastoral care staff supported them in their struggle with depression. About 50% said that they had not told anyone they were depressed. Similarly, in another question, 50% said they had not even told their friends in the church. When asked why they never told anyone about their struggle with depression, nearly 20% said that it was their private concern, a further 21% said that there was no one close enough in the church to whom they could talk, and 44% said they were ashamed of their depression. Overall, 60% of people admitted to hiding their depression. It should be noted that the church's theology (i.e., what was preached from the pulpit) accounted for less than 5% of those surveyed as to why they told no one (McBain, 2020). These responses reveal an element to depression that stops people from speaking about it, which begs the following question: how can the church respond and help sufferers if they are not telling people in the church community they are depressed? The article will suggest that developing meaningful friendships can solve this problem. For the moment, it is clear from the survey and other sources that there is something about depression that stops people from talking about it. The following section will provide a brief socio-historical survey to explain one reason for the silence.

## Social History of Depression and Its Relationship with the Church

History knows depression as melancholia (Nemade et al., n.d.). It is a term taken from the Latin transliteration of a Greek word referring to a mental disorder that involved prolonged sadness, fear, and depression (Blazer, 2005). The first description of the condition is from Mesopotamian

literature dating from 2000 BCE. It is mentioned numerous times throughout human history. For the brevity of space, this historical section will begin at the Middle Ages. During this period, and the lead up to the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation, most people thought demons were the cause (Taylor & Fink, 2006). Coudert (2014) argues that the people's perception of nothingness and worthlessness mixed with the volatility of world affairs augmented an already fragile melancholic state. When combined with the cultural belief that demons infested the world, people of this period thought that demonic possession caused melancholy and mental illness.

The church's response to these beliefs was exorcism. Exorcists and theologians published a variety of texts detailing methods and instructing how to identify demonic possession. As these texts developed, so too did different symptoms of demon possession. Because of conflicting symptoms, the texts encouraged exorcists to seek a physician's opinion before performing an exorcism. They hoped that a medical professional's advice would help identify frauds and stop mistakes from happening (Coudert, 2014). The development of conflicting symptoms and appeal to medical professionals reveal the emergence of a tension between two competing worldviews. On the one side was a spiritual understanding of the world that people were questioning. On the other side was a developing rationalistic worldview based on reductionism and reason (Bosch, 1996). The new enlightened worldview included empiricist and positivist models of knowledge. These did not consider the reality of anything not rationally explainable like the spirit world. As a result, exorcism began losing influence as the proper response to mental health issues.

From the 17th century even into the 19th century, Christianity was still at the center of mental illness and depression. While physicians focused on the biological origins of melancholy, religious melancholy emerged as another explanation. Blazer (2005) notes that religious melancholy is closely associated with the spiritual life of many traditions and was most active during the medieval period and the 18th century. Typically, people understood it as some kind of spiritual visitation caused by wandering away from God. Even into the 18th and 19th centuries, the Protestant

understanding of humanity painted such a bleak picture that people could determine whether they were in or out of God's plan. Anxiety, doubt, and despair abounded, and many people had their dark nights of the soul. The only way to ease these feelings was for a new social movement of great awakenings and religious enthusiasm (Blazer, 2005).

As these great awakenings took place during the 18th century, physicians began to separate mental illness from religion. A more medicalized view emerged that coincided with a positive understanding of humanity different from the sinful beings that the Reformers broadcast. The power of reason became humanity's most prominent aspect—only human reason could make humanity good or bad; sin had nothing to do with it. With the power of reason taking a preeminent role, a growing sense of self-awareness and individuality also emerged. Coudert (2014) explains how this meant that people ceased interpreting depression and mental illness using a social context (i.e., through religion and the church) and began interpreting it from their individual contexts. As a result, by the end of the 18th century, most people understood that mental illness was a natural malady and had nothing to do with God or the supernatural. Medicalization went hand-in-hand with the period's more positive view of humanity. Patients preferred a more physical explanation of what was bothering them because it minimized their personal responsibility, guilt, and shame.

During the 19th century, melancholia was recognized as a core illness among other forms of insanity (Taylor & Fink, 2006). It was understood that melancholia had biological origins and required biological treatment methods (Blazer, 2005). During this period and into the 20th century, mental health definitions began to emerge and the term "depression" was increasingly substituted for the term "melancholia." As the 20th century continued, the effectiveness of pharmaceuticals in treating other mental ailments meant that a new optimism arose for seeing depression as a biological illness with a psychiatric cure (Taylor & Fink, 2006). As pharmaceuticals became more effective in treating depression, the understanding that depression was a biological illness permeated the health system through the biomedical model. The biomedical model is

a healthcare model that views humans as machines that operate with certain identifiable principles (Peters, 2003). It reduces a person to their components and sees disease as a dysfunction that one must control, minimize, or eliminate (Swinton, 2005). Within this model, how a patient experiences depression is a symptom of the biological abnormality itself (Engel, 1989). This model, linked with the success of new medications and the pharmaceutical industry's influence, came to define and interpret depression (Blazer, 2005). This move completely took mental illness and depression out of the church's domain and placed it firmly within the medical field. This shift in professionalization meant that the medical sector monopolized the physical and mental aspects of healing. At the same time, the clergy forfeited their position as providers of care for mental ailments (Vacek, 2015). The church lost its voice, and people no longer saw it as an expert.

This historical survey reveals that depression is contextual. Someone's worldview will dramatically affect how that person understands depression. Steve Fenton and Azra Sadiq-Sangster (1996) show that many symptoms are universal in the way sufferers will experience the same symptoms cross-culturally. However, sufferers will also experience depression relative to their social and cultural contexts. Because of this, a 21st-century American will understand and respond to their illness differently from a 15th-century European. Likewise, the church responds to depression in ways consistent with the culture and worldview of which it is a part. For example, in the Middle Ages, the church responded using exorcism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it responded through religious melancholy and the Great Awakenings. In the current period, the church responds through stigma and silence. All of these responses correspond to beliefs of the dominant worldview of that time. And for each of these responses, changes in worldview governed the usefulness of the response. With this in mind, we see how changing culture and worldviews pushed the church from the center of dealing with depression to the periphery. These changes moved the etiology of depression from being spiritual to biological. As a result, the treatment of depression moved into the realm of the medical profession. Also, a rise in individualism made health a private matter and

excluded the clergy. These findings help explain why the church's current response to the issue is one of silence. The church is silent because western culture has taught it to be so.

## One Possible Response: Developing Friendships

Culture and society have taught the church to be silent about mental illness and depression. Yet, the church has a vibrant history of helping people reinterpret their experiences of mental illness in ways that are more akin to a biopsychosocial-spiritual framework and less reductionistic than the biomedical model. The MRP survey revealed that the church could help people suffering from depression, for approximately 80% of those who told their friends or church leaders found them supportive. One framework that might provide a safe space where the church can help and where sufferers can speak about their experiences is by developing friendships.

### Difficulties in Developing Friendships

Perhaps the easiest way for those in local congregations to help people who are experiencing depression is by simply being their friend. However, this may not be as easy as it seems because those struggling with depression do not necessarily tell people the truth of what they are going through. It is usually impossible to look at someone's physical appearance and know they are depressed. What tends to happen is that people begin to isolate themselves. This happens because western culture and society besieges them with images of what being mentally healthy should look like, especially in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. It has a unique image of mental health, which involves being joyful, abiding in peace, and being thankful. However, when people struggle with depression, it may be difficult for them to cope in the way their community expects, the rhetoric of which often involves confessing the Word, rebuking the devil, and praying through. Faced with this difficulty, they may find it challenging to be the type of Christians their community expects of them. Since they struggle to live up to community expectations, the danger is that they will increasingly begin to see themselves as *one* of the

community but not a *member* of the community. Unless things become terrible, depressed persons will remain part of the community in a physical sense but will begin to see themselves as those whom the community might reject because sufferers know they do not look like group members. Swinton (2005) explains this process. He observes how the way sufferers view themselves turns into a cultural lens that they use to navigate the community and interpret everyday life experiences. Therefore, when they go to church, they may see themselves as those whom others will stigmatize and begin to exclude themselves from the community.

Compounding things is that pain itself isolates people from those closest to them. This is also true of depression. Sufferers think that no one understands what they are going through. It is natural to feel this way because everyone's suffering is unique and is filled with deep personal meaning. A person's expectations, values, hopes, culture, and worldview are mediums that make up our life experiences and teach us how to respond to pain (Swinton, 2005). Therefore, isolation is a somewhat justified response because no one can know what sufferers are going through; one can only empathize. Hauerwas (1986) says that those in pain want help, and those not in pain want to help. Yet, it is difficult for those not in pain to help because they cannot experience the sufferings of others. He explains that this dilemma causes a double burden because it is difficult enough making friends at church when everything is normal.

The desire for sufferers to isolate certainly occurs, but it remains true that the shared experience of pain unites people (Hauerwas, 1986). This fact speaks towards the usefulness of dedicated small groups and workshops to help support people with similar needs. It also explains some attitudes I observed in congregations over the years. I have seen a divide between the empathy that those who suffer/ed from depression share with each other and the apathy (or nonchalant attitude) with which some people who have never had depression view sufferers. Even though there may be a gap between these groups, it is also the case that friendships can grow despite their differences. Hayes' (1993; as cited by Swinton, 2001) social psychology research shows that people tend to make friends with those with whom they have regular contact regardless of their differences.

## Breaking the Silence through Friendship

Swinton (2005) offers a model of friendship that may be suitable to break the silence. He interprets Mark 1:40–45 and explores the social and theological meaning behind the illness. He draws a parallel between the depression sufferer's experiences and how their church community views them with those of the leper and his society, where leprosy was considered a socially repugnant disease resulting in isolation and social and religious exclusion. With this in mind, Swinton explains that one way to read this passage is to see Jesus as a physician-like figure who uses divine healing to take away the disease. In this understanding, health is the absence of disease, so Jesus makes disease absent to bring about health. Within this reading, as in today's society, disease is a dysfunction that one must control, minimize, or eliminate to ease suffering. Within this framework, society considers some illnesses worse than others. So, if someone receives a diagnosis that society does not look favorably upon (depression in this case), society will view and interact with the person differently. The sufferer is negatively labeled. As a result, the sufferer will interpret their experiences of pain and suffering through that label and navigate their life and community differently from how they would have if the condition were absent. One way the MRP observed how depression sufferers navigated church differently was in the area of church attendance and volunteering. Twenty-four percent of the respondents said depression frequently stopped them from attending church and events, and 41% said it occasionally stopped them. Twenty-seven percent said it frequently stopped them from volunteering at church, and 29% said it occasionally stopped them from volunteering (McBain, 2020).

Jesus went against these social and religious constraints. He associated with the leper's suffering and showed that he accepted the leper into his Kingdom. This is a distinctively different approach from today's form of friendships, which are mainly built around the principles of exchange ("What can I get out of this?"), or the idea that like attracts like. Both of these kinds of relationships are not the kind that Jesus practiced. Jesus made friends with those whom society marginalized, stigmatized, and refused access to God. This is the type of friendship the church should

model to help depression sufferers—one structured around grace and love and a willingness to be friends with those unlike us (Swinton, 2005). Jesus' actions are a perfect model to break the cultural constraints placed upon the church and break the silence of depression. As Swinton (2005) says,

> The church's task is to provide a physical and spiritual space where people perceived by society as "different" can find a home, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, mentally ill nor mentally healthy, but only travelers struggling together to sustain faith in God and trust in one another. (pp. 74–75)

Adopting Jesus-style friendships can help bridge depression's silence. However, using Jesus' pattern of friendship requires providing the physical and spiritual space where friendships can occur. The concept of space is an important one. D. J. Louw (2008) discusses the close association between healing and space and describes how human relationships help form spaces and places into what they become. From this perspective, Louw states that incarnational and eschatological concepts contribute towards and help develop a theology of space and place. The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in this because he indwells Christians with God's presence. Christians, therefore, act as the incarnational body of Christ. Louw's contribution is valuable because he shows that friendships do not take place in a vacuum. Instead, they take place in human spaces filled with meaning and presence. In a fundamental sense, the church community must make space in its life for people to build meaningful friendships. This can take many forms, from the formality of the worship service to two people meeting for coffee one afternoon through the week or being present together at a child's baseball game.

Even during formal church events where the context makes it seem impossible to develop friendships (e.g., during the Sunday morning worship service), there is power in the gathered community to bind sufferers to the church. In such situations, although someone may have given up their belief in God and hope of healing, their position within the church binds them to the community. It provides them the momentum they need to continue on their journey. For instance, one woman describes how the

church's worship service acts as a safe space where she can bring her doubts and questions to God within the comfort of a community of fellow worshipers. The preaching, symbolism, music, and lyrics are mediums that go beyond the restrictions placed upon her by her doubting mind and help her express her deep longings to God and her spiritual need. Through the church service, she can believe, despite her struggles (Swinton, 2001).

## Conclusion

This study argued that the church is silent about depression because western culture has taught it to be. Changing worldviews, the modern medical model's growth, and the effectiveness of pharmaceuticals monopolized health in such a way that shoved the church to the periphery of the conversation. In this position, the church believed it had nothing to offer those suffering. Silence, then, became the church's typical response. Still, history shows that the church has a rich interpretative history that can help those suffering. The challenge for the church is to break the silence. One way this article suggested was developing meaningful friendships modeled after Jesus' approach. Social or religious barriers do not restrict this type of friendship. This type of friendship is crucial for giving depressed people the space to heal and a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose.

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# THE HOLY SPIRIT THE ULTIMATE COUNSELOR AND TRANSFORMER FOR HEALING AND WHOLENESS

## A NEPALESE PERSPECTIVE

KARUNA SHARMA

*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 117–127

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**Keywords** *Nepal, Spirit-led counseling, Nepali Christians, healing, wholeness*

**Abstract**

Nepal is a country with cultural and religious diversity. This country has gone through much turmoil and many crises. Since the time of the Maoist insurgency up to the recent pandemic situation, people have faced various emotions, feelings, and thoughts. These sudden devastating moments have not only affected their physical wellbeing, but has in turn affected the whole being of a person. These experiences of accusation, suffering, violence, and pain have led many to sadness, worry, anger, and fear resulting in various mental disorders. Therefore, the ministry of counseling is very important in order to help people get connected to their feelings and to understand their problems. It enables people to express their emotions freely and bring a sense of positivity to their lives. For effective counseling, there is always a need for the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit. Human beings are very limited in their own ways, and it is only through the presence of the Holy Spirit

that a person can be transformed and changed. Therefore, it is important for the churches in Nepal to preach and teach about the Spirit who is a helper and brings healing and wholeness through comfort and counsel. It is the Holy Spirit who is the ultimate agent of transformation to lead people into all truth.

## Introduction

Counseling is an emerging field of study and practice in Nepalese society and has now started paving its way towards the interest of people. In part this is because various events and crisis situations have led to an emergence of mental illness, although this is felt and discussed only by a few individuals. Before understanding the counseling situation in the country it is important to know about the nation of Nepal.

## The Nation of Nepal

Nepal is situated between two huge countries: China and India (Khanal et al., 2005, p. 1). Despite being a small country in landscape, it has the highest peak in the world within its territory, Mt. Everest. There are about 30 million people residing in Nepal. Although the country is small, it is culturally and religiously diverse as there are many different religions, expressions, beliefs, and practices. There are more than 150 castes and sub-castes existing in Nepal, and society is based on the caste system. Nepal is predominantly dominated by the Hindu and Buddhist religions, but there are also other minority religions like Sikhism, Islam, Animism, and Christianity present. Most of the economy is dependent on tourism and agriculture as the country has an extremely rich biodiversity of plants, vegetation, and wildlife. Today, remittances, money sent home by Nepalis who migrate to different countries seeking education and employment opportunities, have become a major contributing factor to increasing household incomes and the national GDP. Education facilities were not provided to common people as late as the 1950s. Therefore, education is not considered a high priority to many people even today and we find

many students dropping out after entering into secondary and higher education levels.

## Challenges That Nepalis Have Experienced

Nepalis have experienced many crises leading to turmoil in life. The Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) brought fear, anxiety, and post-traumatic syndrome disorder to the lives of people. In that decade-long conflict more than 16,000 people lost their lives, and many others were tortured, intimidated, extorted, forced to leave their houses, and abducted (Luitel et al., 2015). As a result, many people migrated to Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, for safety purposes. During that time, people were fearful, worried, and devastated by the situation, and this brought uncertainty to many. Everyday there was news of people dying, of strikes, curfews, and the sounds of guns shooting and bombs exploding. Travelling from one place to another was very risky, problematic, and almost next to impossible. There were traffic strikes and lockdowns. Vehicles were not allowed to move from one place to another.

Following the Maoist insurgency, there was a massive earthquake (in 2015) that affected the lives of many people. Many experienced a big loss, and for some it became a traumatic experience. About 8,000 people lost their lives and more than 22,000 people were injured. It is said that 90% of the affected population experienced sleeplessness and a lack of attention and concentration for fear of further major earthquakes (Psychosocial Support to Survivors, n.d.). Many individuals lost family members or close friends in the earthquake. For many it was a shocking nightmare about which they avoid talking. Still today people fear that the earthquake will come back and bring destruction in the country. Many of the places that were damaged by the earthquake are still not reconstructed. As a result, fear and anxiousness are still haunting people.

Now five years after the earthquake the global COVID-19 pandemic has hit the country very hard. It has brought more psychological instability

to the lives of people. As a result, the rate of mental illness among the population has now grown higher compared to previous decades. People are finding it difficult to cope with their lives as there are uncertainties, worries, conflicts, and doubts among individuals, families, and society in general, leading people to commit suicide. In a six-month span during 2020 there were approximately 600 recorded suicide cases. Recently the second wave of COVID has made the situation worse. People are losing still more family members and friends. The fear of death is affecting people's psychosocial well-being. The country is under full lockdown again and there are no empty beds available in the hospitals nor are there sufficient oxygen cylinders for all who need oxygen. Many are waiting hours in line to receive oxygen and beds, while others are dying without finding a place for treatment.

With this abnormality and instability in living, many Nepalis are going through a challenging situation. Many Nepalis have experienced depression at least once in their lifetimes although very few go for counseling or consultation. Most often people do not share the difficulties that they go through and hide it within themselves. From childhood they are told to be silent and not to share their problems to anyone outside of their families. From childhood, children are asked to control their emotions so staying quiet and keeping all their problems within their own four walls becomes their mindset.

There is a famous song in Nepal, particularly emphasising the emotions of men, that says, "*Logne Manchhe Bhayera Runu Hunna Re, Mardako choro le Ashu Jharnu Hunna Re*" (Translation: A man should not cry; a strong person's son should not shed his tears). This strongly expresses the emotions that must be controlled and should not be shown in front of others. If a man cries in front of others, people immediately respond to him by asking, "Why are you crying? You are a man and you have to be bold. People are watching you." Some people even go to the extreme saying, "If you cry, people will question your whole manhood."

On the other hand, as Nepali society is a patriarchal society, women still have a secondary position in the family. Hindu scriptures strongly say that women are always under the headship of men. A passage by Manu, as stated in an article on the Status of Women in South Asia, says, "During

her childhood a woman depends on her father, during her youth on her husband, her husband being dead, on her sons, if she has no sons, on the near relatives of her husband" (Bhushan & Sachdeva, 2014, p. 210; Mazumdar, 1954, p. 57).

One day a foreign friend asked, "Why do women in the midst of troubles stay silent in Nepal?" No answer was apparent at that moment. It seems, however, to be related to a woman's personality, which is dependent on the background in which she was born and brought up. In Nepal, the social context and cultural influence play an important role in the development of a people, especially women. From childhood they are discouraged from sharing their problems outside of their families, therefore, they feel shy and prefer to stay silent even if they are facing troubles. This results in misunderstanding, conflicts, inequality, violence, and even separation in the family. Unlike in western countries, the sharing of emotional difficulty is considered taboo. As a result, persons who develop a mental illness are often stigmatized by others and their mental illness is compared to being "mad." This in turn forces people to hide the difficulties they experience and not to share them with anyone or go for treatment.

## Counseling and Mental Health in Nepal

The concept of counseling and mental health is very new in Nepal and receives little attention. The Nepalese government has allocated 3% of its national budget for health, out of which approximately 1% is spent on mental health (Jordans et al., 2007, p. 58). Traditional and religious healing methods are commonly practiced in Nepal with decades of "evidence" of underlying beliefs that spirits and spirit possession causes mental illness (Tol et al., 2005, p. 327). Even though in 1947 a course in psychology was introduced in the Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus affiliated with a university in India, it was not a full course, but was offered only at the intermediate level as a part of philosophy. It was only in 1966 after the establishment of Tribhuvan University that psychology was offered as an academic subject at the intermediate

and bachelors level in four different colleges. It was only in 1980 that a masters level course in psychology was introduced (Dangol, 2018). Consequently, many colleges and universities initiated short-term courses on psychosocial counseling. This has created an awareness on the part of the greater Nepalese society for the welfare of people. As is evident, the concept of counseling for mental health is a very new area of practice in Nepal.

## The Challenges of Nepali Churches

Christianity is an incredibly young religion in Nepal, having begun only after the 1950s. There were very few Christians in Nepal until the 1990s, when small congregations started to emerge in different parts of Nepal. Christians were not allowed to preach and conversion to Christianity was strictly prohibited. People were severely persecuted, and a few were imprisoned because of their faith. The church started to experience freedom only after the new form of government was instituted. Then, people received freedom to profess their religion openly and Christianity grew rapidly. Even though the growth of Christianity was rapid it is still considered a minority religion.

The majority of Christians in Nepal are either converted or first-generation Christians, with most of their families and relatives still immersed in other faiths. Christians face challenges as the families of converts to Christianity do not accept and agree with the faith that the converts profess. They suffer physically, mentally, socially, and financially. They are humiliated in family and society for accepting a new religion (Wingate, 1999, p. 112). Converts also face the problem of identity as they struggle with their dual identity, i.e., an identity in the church as a new creation in Christ, and an identity outside the church as a member of a family and society. In 2017 Nepal passed an anti-conversion law that prohibits conversion from one religion to another. In fact, no one is to attempt to convert someone from another religion. These are just some of the examples of struggles that Christians in Nepal are going through.

Christians are not exempted from any of the other devastating events that the country goes through. Being part of the society, they too struggle in life and are not able to share their struggles with those around them. They hide their pains, discomforts, and daily tussles within themselves, and within the four walls of their houses, because when they share their feelings and struggles sometimes their faith is questioned. When Christians face difficulties in life people (often other Christians) start judging and condemning saying that because of their difficulties they might have committed sin, or that their faith in God is not strong. Sometimes they even begin to doubt their faith in God.

Although counseling is visible in Nepalese Christian churches, the concepts of counseling are mostly based on advice-giving and are limited to providing instant and readymade answers to people who are facing problems. But counseling is more than just providing advice. It is necessary for people to connect and to understand the problems that others are going through. By doing this counseling helps people deal with distress by providing them emotional support, compassion, and empathy. This attention enables one to express emotions freely and bring a sense of positivity in the lives of people. While providing pastoral care and counseling is essential in Nepal it is important to provide not just advice but counseling that makes use of the skills and spiritual resources that make pastoral counseling different from other counseling practices that may focus on self-attainment or self-satisfaction.

## The Importance of Spirit-led Counseling

There are many theories and therapies that are oriented to clients and to their own self-understanding. These therapies are good for developing self-value and self-esteem in a person as they focus on the physical, mental, and social dimensions of living. But those therapies are not sufficient for a complete transformation, for healing and wholeness, as they very often do not deal with the spiritual aspects of a person's life. Today, a major part of secular counseling has become simply resolving conflicts between people and building relationship with self and others,

and seem to have forgotten the whole being of the person, including the spiritual aspect.

Spirit-led counseling is objective in nature. It moves beyond subjectivity and secular humanism and helps to see one's pain and suffering in the light of eternity and God's unfolding plan. This in turn helps a person to receive new meaning and purpose and to be filled with renewed joy and sense of meaning in life. Unlike secular psychotherapies, Spirit-led counseling focuses on the spiritual dimension as seen in the person's relationship with God, self, and others. In other words, it emphasizes both the vertical and horizontal relationships of humanity.

Spirit-led counseling aims towards the sanctification of the soul. It is an intervention from a sovereign God who continues to commune with each person to bring about the healing that is often needed within relationships. In doing so it relies on the power, truth, and fruit of the Holy Spirit that can transform and empower persons to be who they can be in Christ. As such, Spirit-led counseling deals with wholeness and holiness. Howard Clinebell says that spiritual healing and growth is the core task of counseling. According to Clinebell, understanding humankind's fundamental spiritual needs is essential in counseling as it helps persons to enjoy an open, growing relationship with God, and enables them to live growthfully in the midst of the losses, conflicts, and tragedies in life and in the world (Clinebell, 1984, pp. 107, 116)

## The Holy Spirit as the Ultimate Agent of Transformation for Healing and Wholeness

There is a need for the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit in counseling because everyone goes through both developmental and accidental crisis situations in life. These calamities come up at different stages of life. They often come unexpectedly, suddenly bringing chaos into a person's life. Therefore, there is a need for divine intervention in the situation, because as a counselor, a person has his or her own limitation, and each individual should know that when the counseling session is going on, the Holy Spirit is ever present. With the help of the

Spirit a person does not need to stay in the crisis, rather he or she can be delivered out of those situations.

The concept of Invitational Posture (IP) in the Christian Wholeness Framework (CWF) very well exhibits the role of the Holy Spirit while providing counseling to the client. This approach says that it is not only the counselor who is dealing with the problem presented, but the Spirit is present in the counseling session. It is ultimately the Holy Spirit who brings transformation in the lives of individuals towards wholeness. The IP clearly demonstrates the attitude of the helper toward the person seeking help. It is not pushing, pulling, coercing, deciding for, carrying, or rescuing (Nikles & Nikles, 2010, p. 64). Rather, a counselor accompanies clients on their healing journey, believing that God is with them in the midst of the counseling situation. This symbolic posture of being with the client shows just how the Spirit is always there in a supportive way to bring healing and wholeness in the lives of counselors and in the lives of those with whom they work.

As Christians, we need to believe that it is the Holy Spirit who is the ultimate agent of transformation for healing and wholeness in Nepal. It is very important for a person to reconnect to God in order to receive wholeness. There are many stories from believers saying how their family's problems were minimized and disappeared after accepting Christ, how many people were able to leave their bad habits and receive complete healing in their lives. The Holy Spirit indeed brings self-realization in people's lives and this is a gradual way to self-recovery and self-discovery of who they are in Christ. It is the Spirit who shows the truth that helps us to realize our true state. It is the Spirit who ultimately helps a person to connect to God and connect to others. Truly, Jesus' promise of sending the Holy Spirit as a counselor and comforter is an important aspect for people (John 14:15ff).

## Summary

The churches in Nepal preach and teach that the Spirit is a helper who is always by our side and is always ready to guide and lead us. The power of the Spirit is experienced by Christians in Nepal in a supernatural way. The

Spirit has brought transformation in their lives. It has drastically changed, convicted, and healed them. And it is because of the Spirit counselors can be available to listen to people with compassion, love, and empathy. Counselors are limited in their skills, knowledge, and attitude, thus they need the guidance of the Holy Spirit who is the ultimate counselor and transformer for healing and wholeness of a person. As the Bible clearly says, "when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth" (*The King James Bible*, 1957, John 16: 13). I strongly believe that Spirit-led counseling is important.

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# SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

## OF BEREFT COLLEGE STUDENTS IN A CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL UNIVERSITY

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*Salubritas* 1 (2021) 129–156

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**Keywords** *spiritual struggle, spiritual growth, bereavement, college students, religious development*

**Abstract**

This article examines spiritual struggle in bereft Christian evangelical students and how struggle might potentiate spiritual growth. The death loss of a close person can result in shattered assumptions about the world that trigger spiritual questions and struggle and spiritual struggle can be a catalyst for growth. To our knowledge, spiritual growth has not been measured utilizing the actual voices of those struggling with the loss, nor has it been measured in Christian evangelical populations who may find it more threatening to yield to spiritual questioning. The Spirit-centered Change Model guides our conceptualization of spiritual growth from a Christian evangelical perspective. Utilizing a mixed methods design, bereft college students (n=161) at a Christian evangelical university answered questionnaires about religious coping, daily spiritual experiences, meaning in life, and open-ended questions about their spiritual growth and how students' beliefs about God

had changed after the loss. Compared to non-bereft peers, bereft students reported higher daily spiritual experiences, but bereft students who struggled spiritually reported less meaning and daily spiritual experiences than bereft students who did not struggle. Narrative responses indicated that spiritual struggle simultaneously tended to reflect more expansive beliefs around God and a deepened spirituality, according to the Spirit-centered Change Model. Results reflect a first empirical step toward measuring spiritual growth as epistemological change.

## Introduction

In 2018 there were 18.9 million college students in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2019), and 39% of college students have experienced a death loss within the past two years (Balk et al., 2010). Furthermore, 64%–87% of Americans report believing in God (Hrynowski, 2019), and college students in particular report desire for colleges to support their religious and spiritual needs (Astin et al., 2011). College students are known to struggle when they experience the death of a close person, and religion during such times can be both a source of comfort and struggle (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2012). Collectively, these findings imply that clinicians would serve their bereft college-aged clients well by tending to their spiritual needs. Past research has measured transformational aspects of bereavement (Bray, 2013; Gerrish et al., 2009; Hai et al., 2018; Krosch & Shakespeare-Finch, 2017; Michael & Cooper, 2013; Patrick & Henrie, 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Wagner et al., 2007), but research measuring spiritual growth as a separate outcome of bereavement is scarce.

A major death loss can challenge a survivor's assumptions about the world and trigger related questioning about God and spirituality (Chen, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Thanatology researchers and clinicians recommend encouraging openness and exploration of related spiritual questions but also suggest that process is more difficult with clients from

cultures with stronger and more homogenous belief systems around death (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Christian evangelical religious groups may embody this type of culture, as they tend to incorporate goals regarding specific religious outcomes and value a singular form of religious expression, and students at Christian evangelical universities report significantly different religious experiences than those at secular universities (Walker et al., 2015; Walker & Rhoades, 2021). Furthermore, past research has found spiritual struggle and questioning potentially to provide an impetus for growth, especially during bereavement (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Lord & Gramling, 2014). It is possible that spiritual struggle could be a conduit for spiritual growth in Christian evangelical students when facing a close loss. The interplay of these factors fuels the current study to examine spiritual struggle, and perceptions of spiritual growth, in bereft college students at a Christian evangelical university. We begin with a review of spiritual struggle and other religious and spiritual development variables, and then describe a new theoretical lens, the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015), which guides this study.

## Religious and Spiritual Development

### Religious Coping

Only a few studies have examined the relationship between bereavement and religious outcomes in college students, and most of those studies involved measures of religious coping, a concept built primarily from the work of Pargament (1998). Religious coping encompasses both positive and negative styles in response to life stressors and is frequently measured using either the RCOPE or the shorter Brief RCOPE (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2011; Pargament et al., 2013). Positive coping involves expression of assimilated religious and spiritual constructs, and negative coping allows for expansion of those constructs through accommodation of new information gained through the experience of bereavement. We summarize related literature here, but Pargament et al. (2013) identified needs for additional research examining the ramifications of religious coping with spiritual constructs and utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Positive coping is defined as acting on a sense of connectedness to a higher power and others and is typically linked to better physical and mental health, posttraumatic growth, and improved religious and spiritual outcomes (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2004; Pargament et al., 2011; Pargament et al., 2013). In a meta-analysis, Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) found that those who utilize positive religious coping are more likely to experience positive outcomes, including spiritual growth. Though bereaved college students report being more likely to use positive religious coping than negative religious coping (Lee et al., 2013; Pargament et al., 1998), Christian evangelical students' reports vary. A recent study with bereaved university students found that those who identified as Christian were more likely to report positive coping to be more helpful but actually utilized negative religious coping more frequently (Collison et al., 2016). Another study measuring bereaved Christian evangelical students found strong suggestions of low positive coping coupled with more struggle when students experienced close losses, though religious coping was not directly measured (Walker et al., 2012).

Pargament (2000) defined negative coping, also referred to as spiritual struggle, as tension concerning the sacred. Though it has often been found to correlate with poorer outcomes, including poorer physical health, depression, anxiety, apathy toward others, and worse spiritual outcomes (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Lee et al., 2013; Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2004; Pargament et al., 2011; Pargament et al., 2013; Van Dyke et al., 2009), research is mixed on this front (Exline & Rose, 2013). Grieving a close loss relates to both increases and decreases in different aspects of religiosity (ter Kuile & Ehring, 2014). In some cases, negative coping correlated with positive coping, suggesting to researchers that struggle can be a catalyst for growth (Lord & Gramling, 2014; Magyar-Russell et al., 2014; Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2011). Employing various kinds of religious and spiritual resources can lead to growth in the long term, even when there appears to be spiritual decline initially (Allmon et al., 2013). Furthermore, a meta-analysis indicated that negative coping is not correlated with declines in spiritual growth

and self-esteem but, rather, may provide an impetus for growth (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Lord and Gramling (2014) even assert that "Not all negative religious coping strategies are truly 'negative' or maladaptive when measured in a bereaved population" (p. 164). The death of a close loved one provides an opportunity for survivors to re-examine their beliefs, and for many this leads to a more deeply meaningful religious and spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006).

For Christian evangelicals, however, the struggle may be hidden. Older Christian evangelical students grieving a close loss reported more educational and mental health problems, in comparison with their younger counterparts (Walker et al., 2012), and this may be related to the religious questions and doubts around death that are characteristic of negative coping. These same students also did not access their typical religious and familial resources for support during their spiritual struggles. In another study, Christian evangelical students reported desires for environments open to discussing difficult religious questions around death (Walker et al., 2014), although they often do not experience that. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) suggested that the degree to which people report experiencing spiritual struggle during loss may partly relate to the degree of support or constraint encountered when attempting to self-disclose their questions. Furthermore, those who do not have available guides in their social contexts to help facilitate positive spiritual change through their struggle with bereavement would be less likely to experience spiritual growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). It is possible that the homogenous belief structure and environmental resources in place for those Christian evangelical students lead to both (a) spiritual questions when close deaths occur and (b) a poverty of reliable support students need to grapple with those difficult questions. The effect this has on Christian evangelical students' perceptions of their spiritual growth remains unknown.

### Daily Spiritual Experiences

The construct of spirituality is related to but distinct from religiosity and religious coping, with its own relationship to positive outcomes,

including life satisfaction (Van Dyke et al., 2009). Underwood and Teresi (2002) defined spirituality as "a person's perception of the transcendent (God, the divine) in daily life and his or her perception of personal interaction with or involvement of the transcendent in life" (p. 23). The concept of spirituality permeates the boundaries of particular religion to encounter personal experience. The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) was developed to measure concerns addressing questions one may have about life's ultimate meaning, and developers acknowledged their assumption that there is more to life than what is known or understood (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The DSES has been positively correlated with spiritual growth, positive coping, and better physical and mental health (Cole et al., 2008; Currier et al., 2018; Underwood, 2011; Van Dyke et al., 2009). One study found that college students who were bereaved from a natural death loss reported more daily spiritual experiences than those who experienced a violent death loss and scored significantly higher on the DSES than college students who were not bereaved (Currier et al., 2013). This evidence suggests that the experience of bereavement leads to differences in spiritual experiences, and it is also possible that if a survivor struggles spiritually with the loss, daily spiritual experiences could change.

## Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is thought to be a necessary precursor for happiness, and Steger et al. (2006) defined it as "the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and significance" (p. 81). Victor Frankl's (1963) work facilitated thinking about the importance of both having and searching for meaning as an instinctual human motivation. Both presence of and search for meaning in life have thus been important variables in the well-being literature, guiding the development of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006). Presence of meaning in life has been found among university samples to be a key mediator in the relationships between well-being and both religiosity and daily religious activity (Steger & Frazier, 2005). Krok (2015) found significant relationships between the RCOPE and the MLQ, with positive correlations between positive

coping and both presence of and search for meaning. Spiritual struggle was negatively related to presence of meaning but had no significant correlation with search for meaning (Krok, 2015). Meaning in life is considered to be a growth-related variable and may be an important outcome related to the struggles of crises (Steger et al., 2006). College students who are bereft may experience different levels of meaning, and this may be especially true if their spiritual struggles are high.

## Spirit-centered Change Model

As an operationally defined term or measured construct, spiritual growth evades academic literature. Various concepts measuring religious development have been operationalized through application of human development theories (for example, see Hathcoat & Fuqua, 2013; Strieb et al., 2010), but participants who are Christian may not view them as capturing the origins of their spirituality or as indicative of what cultivates their spiritual growth. Christian evangelicals have reported different experiences of religiosity and spirituality than their non-evangelical counterparts (Walker et al., 2015). On the other hand, measures emerging from a specifically Christian worldview may not be viewed as applicable outside of Christian groups (Walker et al., 2020; Ji, 2004). This leaves spirituality researchers with a need to develop a way of measuring spiritual growth that is embedded within and emerges from a Christian worldview while also situating the experience within the larger context of what is already known about human religious and spiritual development.

Buker (2015) sought to develop a unified and comprehensive approach, emerging directly from Jesus' writings in the biblical text that inform Christian theology, and incorporating cybernetics of change (Bateson, 1979) to understanding spiritual growth as a change process. According to Buker's Spirit-centered Change Model, spiritual growth embodies an epistemological shift in assumptions about the world, the effects of which can involve a complex interplay of behaviors, cognitions, and values that can be felt individually, experienced

relationally, and applied culturally. Spiritual growth as epistemological change is thus embedded in an overlay of cognitive, relational, and systemic perspectives. Buker (2003) applied the principles in the Spirit-centered Change Model to explain addiction recovery as a process of spiritual growth, but it has not yet been applied to the experience of bereavement. Full explanation of the theory is beyond our scope here, but we briefly summarize major concepts.

According to Buker's (2015) model, conventional and unchallenged cultural wisdom dictates that success and self-identity are measured by performance-oriented definitions of achievement, affluence, appearance, and authority to varying degrees according to cultural group. These performance-based norms lead people to be characterized by behaviors such as comparison, criticism, competition, and conformity. Buker (2015) notes that there may be religious versions of conventional wisdom, which prioritize obedience to authority and view God as authoritarian. Applied to bereavement, conventional epistemology for Christian evangelicals might involve repetitive grief-related responses nested in an orientation toward (a) avoiding any ambiguity around the death, (b) concerns about appearance around one's spirituality in relation to the loss, (c) criticism of responses to losses that do not appear spiritual enough, and (d) conforming to expected death-related religious protocol without question.

In contrast to conventional wisdom, Jesus demonstrates a life of transformative wisdom guided by paradoxical values, such as affluence being defined by gratitude and generosity or achievement being characterized by pleasing God and participating in God's vision for the world (Buker, 2015). Transformative wisdom is relationship-based, challenges assumptions about appearances, and facilitates openness to view the world differently than previously assumed. Applied to bereavement, the transformative epistemology for Christian evangelicals might comprise (a) increased comfort with vulnerability and ambiguity, (b) acknowledging the mysterious and paradoxical in death, and (c) valuing a grieving person's pain over the image being projected. Individuals can progress from conventional to transformative wisdom, essentially changing their epistemology, through Buker's

CPR Model (2021), a therapeutic intervention incorporating elements of "connection, perception, and redemption" (p. 1). The pathway for bereaved individuals may involve a transitional stage of uncomfortable spiritual questioning and struggle around the death of a close person. The Spirit-centered Change Model applied to bereavement appears to align well with earlier research that proposes a need for loss to challenge an individual's assumptive worldview in order to lead to post-traumatic growth (Calhoun et al., 2010).

### Aim of Study

Collectively, literature points to the idea that grieving a close loss can lead to spiritual changes, and perhaps growth, and that spiritual struggle may be a factor in this. We believe Buker's (2015) model helps to explain this from a Christian evangelical perspective. Our purpose here is to address the remaining questions in literature by first measuring how college students who are bereft from a recent loss utilize religious and spiritual resources, in comparison with college students who are not bereft. Second, we examine how bereft college students who report low vs. high spiritual struggle differ in how they utilize their religious and spiritual resources. Finally, we supplement quantitative results by exploring levels of epistemology evident in bereft students' narrative responses to questions about (a) the influence of the death loss on their beliefs about God and (b) their own spiritual growth.

## Method

To fulfill the study's purpose, we employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2015) utilizing data collected via electronic survey from undergraduate college students at a mid-sized Christian evangelical university located in the Southwest. We first examined the bereft students' scores on religious and spiritual variables and then students' responses to open-ended questions about how the loss affected students' beliefs about God and about their general perceptions of their spiritual growth. Although the survey utilized several questionnaires, here we present only those relevant to the current study.

## Participants

Previous research suggested emotional closeness to be an important variable in grieving college students (Walker et al., 2012), so we focused our analysis on "bereft" students, defined as those who reported a recent loss of a close person. Bereft students indicated "4" or "5" on a scale of 1 to 5 when asked to describe their degree of closeness to the person. The sample included a total of 161 bereft students, though not all 161 completed every questionnaire. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, with the mean age of 20.4 years. The majority were females (n=119; 73.9%), and the number of students from each year in school increased with each year (30 [18.6%] first-year undergraduates, 38 [23.6%] sophomores, 40 [24.8%] juniors, and 53 [32.9%] seniors). Frequencies of racial/ethnic identities reported were as follows: 30 (18.6%) African American, 5 (3.1%) American Indian, 2 (1.2%) Asian American, 2 (1.2%) Mexican American, 10 (6.2%) other Hispanic, 18 (11.2%) "Other," and 94 (58.4%) White, not of Hispanic origin. In terms of denominational preference, 114 (70.8%) identified as Charismatic/Evangelical or Nondenominational, 24 (14.9%) as Pentecostal or Assembly of God, 8 (5%) as Baptist, 8 (5%) as "other" or not affiliated, 4 (2.5%) as Word of Faith, 1 (.6%) as Orthodox Catholic, 1 (.6%) as liturgical, and 1 (.6%) did not say. Though several of these religious denominational identifications involve an emphasis on evangelism, subtle differences in beliefs regarding biblical scripture and the Holy Spirit could influence scores on the study variables and how students understand death and conceptualize God.

## Sampling and Recruitment

After the university's IRB approved the study, the Registrar sent emails to all undergraduate students ages 18–24, on behalf of the researchers, explaining the purposes of the study and inviting them to participate. If students agreed to participate, they accessed a link provided in the email, which led to an electronic consent form followed by demographic questions and several questionnaires pertaining to losses experienced, religiosity, and well-being. The survey took about 45 minutes to

complete. If students completed the entire survey and provided their names and contact information in a separate document, which was not connected to the survey, they received $10 vouchers in compensation for their time.

## Instruments

### Daily Spiritual Experiences

Underwood and Teresi (2002) developed a 16-item questionnaire to measure the frequency of daily spiritual experiences (DSE). We modified the scale slightly for our purposes in this study by incorporating a Likert-type scale so that students could indicate agreement, rather than frequency, and removing the 16th item, which required a different category of responses. The result was a 15-item questionnaire to be answered according to agreement with the statements (from 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal). Reliability analysis indicated that removal of item 14 improved the alpha score, so we removed that item from further analysis. The resulting 14-item questionnaire yielded strong internal reliability ($\alpha$ = .917). Example items include, "I feel God's presence," "I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities," and "I feel a selfless caring for others." Previous research (Underwood & Teresi, 2002) found daily spiritual experiences to correlate significantly with the SF-36 Quality of Life Scale (r = .240) and the Scheirer Optimism Scale (r = .352).

### Meaning in Life

Steger et al. (2006) developed a 10-item questionnaire to measure the well-being variable of meaning in life (MIL). The questionnaire comprises subscales of presence of and search for meaning in life. Students answered questions by using a Likert-type scale (from 1 = absolutely untrue to 7 = absolutely true) according to their agreement with the statements. Reliability analysis indicated that removal of item 9 of the presence scale improved the alpha score, so we removed that item from further analysis. Presence thus comprised four items and search comprised five items leading to alpha coefficients of $\alpha$ = .878 and $\alpha$ = .861, respectively. Example items

measuring presence include "I understand my life's meaning" and "My life has a clear sense of purpose." Example items measuring search include "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful" and "I am always looking to find my life's purpose." Previous research (Steger et al., 2006) found the presence scale to correlate significantly with the Life Regard Inventory (r = .606) and with the Purpose in Life Scale (r = .659), and the search scale to correlate with both scales inversely (r = -.179 and r = -.302, respectively).

### Religious Coping

We measured religious coping by utilizing Pargament et al's (2000) brief RCOPE 15-item instrument. The scale comprises subscales of positive and negative religious coping, both of which are calculated by summing responses to associated items using a Likert-type scale (from 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal), according to level of agreement with the statements. The 7-item positive religious coping (PCOPE) subscale yielded an alpha coefficient of $\alpha$ =.804. Reliability analysis determined that removing item 13 improved the internal reliability of the scale, so those items were removed from further analysis. The resulting 7-item negative religious coping (NCOPE) subscale yielded an alpha coefficient of $\alpha$ = .804. Negative coping is considered by Pargament et al. to represent "spiritual struggle," and NCOPE scores can thus be categorized into high, medium, or low levels of spiritual struggle, based on predetermined cut scores. Example PCOPE items include "Looked for a stronger connection with God" and "Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems," and example NCOPE items include "Wondered whether God had abandoned me" and "Felt angry at God." PCOPE has been found to correlate with subjective religiousness (r = .80) and NCOPE has been found to correlate with anger coping (r = .33) and anxiety (r = .35) (Ai et al., 2010).

### Beliefs about God and Spiritual Growth Questionnaire

Students provided descriptions of their beliefs about God and perceptions of spiritual growth in their answers to three open-ended questions: (a) How has your loss influenced your beliefs about God?, (b) Please describe how you have grown spiritually since being in college,

and (c) What has happened that makes it obvious to you that you have or have not grown?

## Analytic Procedures

To test the first hypothesis, involving comparison of bereft vs. not bereft students on religious variable scores, we conducted t-tests to compare the means of the two groups on daily spiritual experiences questionnaire (DSEQ), meaning in life-presence (MIL-P), meaning in life-search (MIL-S), positive coping (PCOPE), and negative coping (NCOPE). To test the second hypothesis, we first categorized bereft students into low, medium, and high levels of spiritual struggle, according to established cut scores of the NCOPE variable (Pargament et al., 2000). Only nine students were categorized as "medium," and these were removed from this analysis. We then used t-tests to examine differences in DSEQ, MIL-P, MIL-S, and PCOPE when students reported having high vs. low spiritual struggle.

We then qualitatively analyzed the Beliefs about God and Spiritual Growth Questionnaire responses of bereft students reporting high and low spiritual struggle. We coded responses in terms of whether descriptions of the grief loss reflected conventional, transitional, or transformative epistemology, according to the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015). The first author engaged in a process involving reading through the entire data set and making notes, re-reading the data and making associations within the notes, assigning general codes to descriptions of students' beliefs about God and any shifts in epistemology, and making corrections so that the themes, labeled by the codes, remained consistent throughout the data. After the codes were finalized, the second author then re-coded the responses of high scoring students independently and noted any discrepancies between her codes and those of the first author. Both authors met to discuss discrepancies, cultivate deeper understanding of how responses might be interpreted through their mutual dialogue, and eventually reach consensus. An outside researcher was then consulted to read through the data and the associated codes to confirm agreement with the finalized codebook.

# Results

## Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive analysis determined means, standard deviations, and correlations among all study variables. See Table 1 for variable means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations.

Table 1: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS, AND ABBREVIATIONS OF STUDY VARIABLES (N = 161)

| VARIABLE (abbreviation) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Coping (PCOPE) | 17.560 (5.984) | .070 | .203* | .084 | .445*** |
| Negative Coping (NCOPE) | | 8.843 (3.043) | .246** | .240** | -.157 |
| Presence of Meaning (MIL-P) | | | 15.877 (3.728) | -.157* | .596*** |
| Search for Meaning (MIL-S) | | | | 16.617 (5.486) | -.033 |
| Daily Spiritual Experiences (DSEQ) | | | | | 61.364 (8.255) |

NOTE. Means are on the main-diagonal. Standard deviations are in parenthesis on the main diagonal. * p < .01; ** p < .05; *** p < .001.

### Hypothesis 1

We hypothesized that bereft students would report different levels of spiritual experiences, presence and search for meaning, and positive and negative religious coping. The comparison of the sample with the larger group of non-bereft peers (N = 654), via a series of t-tests with corrections for possible inflation of Type I error, lowering alpha level to .01, yielded that bereft students reported significantly higher DSEQ scores ($t$[806] = -2.889, $p$ < .01). No significant differences were found in PCOPE ($t$[829] = .760, $p$ = .210), NCOPE ($t$[829] = 1.604, $p$ = .109), MIL-P ($t$[806] = -1.158, = .247), or MIL-S ($t$[806] = .621, $p$ = .535).

### Hypothesis 2

We hypothesized that bereft students who reported high degrees of spiritual struggle would score differently on measures of daily spiritual experiences, presence of and search for meaning, and positive and negative religious coping, and a series of t-tests with corrections for possible inflation of Type I error, lowering alpha level to .012, mostly confirmed this. Levene's test for equality of variances yielded significant differences for DSEQ and MIL-P, so we calculated those t-tests by utilizing un-pooled variances and a correction to the degrees of freedom. Students with high spiritual struggle reported significantly lower MIL-P scores ($t$[88] = 3.005, $p$ = .003), nearly significantly lower DSEQ scores ($t$[83] = 2.468, $p$ = .016), and nearly significantly higher MIL-S scores ($t$[143] = -2.409, $p$ = .017). There was a meaningful difference in PCOPE, with high strugglers reporting higher scores ($t$[147] = -1.678, $p$ = .096).

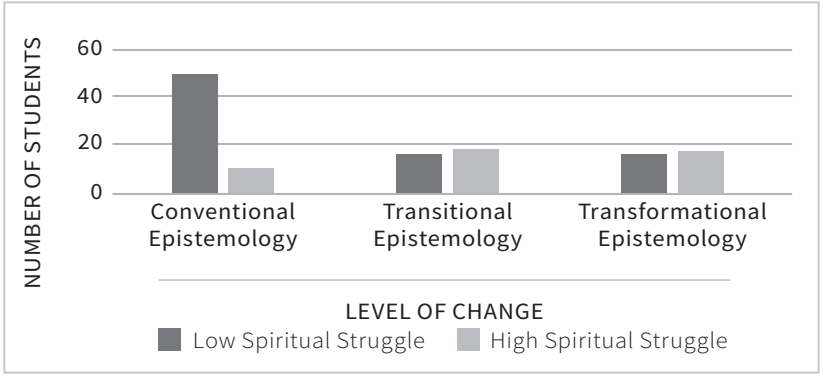
## Qualitative Analysis

Out of the 161 bereft students in the sample, 122 reporting high and low spiritual struggle provided responses to the open-ended questions that were comprehensive enough to be coded. The responses varied from extremely concise phrases to paragraphs of thick, rich detail describing their spiritual experiences. A total of 60 (49.18%) were coded as having conventional epistemology, 33 (27.05%) as having transitional epistemology, and 29 (23.77%) as having transformative epistemology. See Figure 1.

### Low Spiritual Struggle

Out of the 78 individuals classified as having low spiritual struggle, most ($N$ = 49; 62.82%) were coded as having conventional epistemology, while transitional epistemology came in second ($N$ = 15; 19.23%). According to Buker's (2015) model, individuals having a conventional epistemology are achievement-oriented and self-preoccupied, and students' responses reflected this. One such student, a 22-year-old female, described evidence of her spiritual growth as, "I have gone to chapel [and] I am a youth leader." A 21-year-old female participant stated, "I am more consistent in my

Figure 1: LEVELS OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHANGE FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING LOW AND HIGH SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE (N = 122)




daily walk with God through prayer and scriptures," and another student replied, "I pray more and read my Bible more" (20-year-old female). In response to the question regarding students' losses affecting their beliefs about God, one student said the following:

> (My loss) only made my love for Him stronger. I have never blamed God or been angry with Him. I believe He loves me and only wants the best for me. . . . I am more secure in my faith and practice it more often. My prayer life has increased as well as my desire to know the things of God (19-year-old female).

Those who exhibited transitional epistemology expressed doubts and questions in terms of their beliefs about God. One student said, "I am confused with certain things" (22-year-old male), while another noted, "It never influenced my beliefs in God. I will and always will believe that God has a reasoning for everything that happens, even if I don't understand his reasoning" (23-year-old female). Another student shared, "It just made me wonder why it was her time to go" (21-year-old female), and yet another replied:

> I remember that I never questioned God or His power or love, but I was strongly confused and asked myself on many occasions, "Why him?" I did not understand how God chooses who dies and who

> lives, and who gets a second chance at life on earth. I think I still struggle with that question today (20-year-old female).

Other respondents coded as being epistemologically transitioning displayed internal conflict due to their grief loss, or presented characteristics from both conventional and transformative epistemology, such as trust or paradox combined with self-preoccupation or criticism. For example, one 20-year-old female student said:

> When I got to college my plan didn't work out and I had to trust God with everything in my life. After I let go of my plans and took in what God had planned for me I realized that his plan was definitely better.

This quotation exhibits both the trust found in transformative epistemology and the self-preoccupation common in conventional epistemology.

### High Spiritual Struggle

Out of the 44 individuals classified as having high spiritual struggle, most ($N$ = 18; 40.91%) were coded as having transitional epistemology while transformative came in second ($N$ = 15; 34.09%). High struggling students coded as having transitional epistemology identified similar themes to their low struggling counterparts. Students who were coded as having a transformative epistemology provided answers that displayed an ability to embrace paradox or were characterized by behaviors that are contrary to conventional wisdom, such as showing mercy to others. Examples of responses that show an ability to exist within paradox include a student who stated,

> I questioned many things in the world, and simply did not want to accept God's love. I knew it was there, but I was not ready for it. Slowly, with a lot of time and living day by day, it got easier. I really began to seek after God and He just helped reveal His beauty throughout the moments of despair (19-year-old female).

Another student shared, "I have believed, doubted, believed again, stopped believing, and now stand in between faith and reason, having

come to terms with my questions and [being] okay with not knowing immediately" (22-year-old male). An example of a response indicating a desire to show mercy to oppressed individuals and to connect with others includes this 18-year-old female student's statement, "[The loss] makes me wonder [re-think] where God stands on suicide and makes me want to spread the word of God more to people who are hurting."

Other themes that were prominent in the transformational group included desires to serve and empower others and to contribute to the world. For example, one 19-year-old female student responded: "I've learned to love people selflessly. To serve whether or not I feel like it. And often I can tell it is (becoming) first nature to me." Another student replied,

> I saw that God doesn't will that these things happen, but the beauty is that no matter what it is, he works it to the good in our lives, whether it be teaching us things, or taking us in a new direction, or helping us help other people. It showed me that God is bigger than just a "plan A" God. He can work all things to our good, even when things like this happen (20-year-old female).

One final student stated, in regard to her spiritual growth, "[College] has pushed me and challenged me to build my own relationship with God so that I can be prepared to go out and make a difference" (21-year-old female).

### Unexpected Findings Related to PCOPE

We noticed a pattern in the qualitative data that suggested positive coping may relate with epistemological change. Students reporting relatively low positive coping, identified by scoring more than 1 SD below the mean on the PCOPE scale, more frequently described transformative epistemology in their narrative responses ($N = 24$; 19.35%) than did those who reported relatively high positive coping, identified by scoring more than 1 SD above the mean on the PCOPE scale ($N = 16$; 12.9%). Additionally, students reporting high positive coping more frequently described conventional epistemology in their narrative responses ($N = 27$; 21.88%) than did students reporting low positive coping ($N = 18$; 14.75%).

## Discussion

Results generally supported the study's hypotheses. Students experience higher levels of spirituality when bereft, but when they struggle greatly with integrating the loss, students drop on many measures of spirituality. When students report high struggles, they also describe beliefs about God and their own spiritual walk that more frequently suggest a transformative epistemology characteristic of higher-order change, according to the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015).

### Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis, stating that bereft students would report different levels of spiritual experiences, presence of and search for meaning, and positive and negative coping, was only supported in the case of daily spiritual experiences. Bereft students reported more spiritual experiences, but nothing changed significantly in regard to the other variables. This suggests that when students experience a close loss, they do not shift their learned ways of coping religiously or their established patterns of constructing meaning. Students do seem to seek out more spiritual experiences, a pattern of behavior that may provide needed comfort during grief. Theological researchers and clinicians have similarly suggested the utility of spiritual resources during loss (Chen, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Although we cannot draw conclusions about changes over time with this cross-sectional design, results suggest this should be explored in future research.

### Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis, stating that bereft students reporting high degrees of spiritual struggle would score differently on measures of daily spiritual experiences, presence of and search for meaning, and positive religious coping was mostly supported. High struggling students searched more for meaning, reporting less of it presently and fewer daily spiritual experiences. This finding is consistent with past research measuring the relationship of negative religious coping with poorer spiritual outcomes (Pargament et al., 2004). The finding that spiritual struggle results in higher degrees of

searching for meaning is important, however, in that these bereft college students are not abandoning their spiritual resources altogether but, rather, searching more deeply to broaden their understanding of death and loss in the context of their spiritual and religious beliefs. Thanatology literature suggests that the degree to which bereft individuals can reconstruct spiritual meaning that incorporates (a) continuing bonds with the deceased, (b) belief in the person being at peace and experiencing love, and (c) assurance of a future reunion with the deceased reflects the degree to which bereft individuals are able to tolerate their spiritual questioning and struggle (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). This may also usher in opportunities for spiritual growth via epistemological change, and qualitative findings support this notion.

## Qualitative Analysis

Students' narrative descriptions of belief in God and their spiritual growth often described leaning on current religious and spiritual resources for support, and for most students that was enough. For those moving away from conventional epistemologies, spiritual struggle was common. Students who more often questioned the loss reported more nuanced and complex understanding of God, and this seemed to deepen their spirituality and expand their growth. Narrative descriptions of those who reported higher levels of spiritual struggle included more change talk, such as "I began to see the world differently . . ." or "My view of God expanded," and the changes seemed to be perceived as positive. The finding that positive coping more often was low for those who reflected transformational epistemology in their narrative responses and high for those reflecting conventional epistemology, suggests that students' typical religious resources oftentimes do not facilitate spiritual growth. Students seem to welcome opportunities to expand their thinking, however. Past research has also found that students prefer environments open to discussing death and asking difficult religious questions (Walker et al., 2014).

## Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Findings of the current study represent the only empirical data of which we are aware that originates from students' own voices explaining their

perceptions of their own spiritual growth as an outcome of bereavement. Furthermore, the study adds to the spiritual development literature by contributing the particular perspective of Christian evangelical students, as they are known to report different religious and spiritual experiences than non-evangelical students (Walker et al., 2015). Whereas past studies have focused on measures of religiosity that specifically emerged from a Christian perspective and may not extend beyond protestant Christian groups (Ji, 2004; Walker et al., 2020), or on measures of religiosity that do not acknowledge conceptual origins that are meaningful to Christian evangelical groups (for instance, see Hathcoat & Fuqua, 2013; Streib et al., 2010), this study is guided by a theoretical model that holds promise to unite the teachings of Jesus, held dear to Christian evangelicals, with the larger human development literature regarding cognitive therapy, relational dynamics, and the cybernetics of change.

Findings of the current study also affirm that Buker's Spirit-centered Change Model (2015) provides the structure effectively to identify epistemological shifts, related to spiritual struggle, emerging from students' experiences with bereavement. Students describing these epistemological changes also perceived that they had grown spiritually, but future research should explore religious and spiritual variables across time. Fundamental shifts from conventional elements of comparing, competing, criticizing, and controlling outcomes to appreciating, accepting, and affirming others is not unique to Christian perspectives but also aligns with other religious and philosophical orientations, for instance mindfulness approaches (Birnie et al., 2010; Borders et al., 2010). The Spirit-centered Change Model thus holds merit for possibly explaining spiritual growth in other populations and religious groups, and future research should examine this.

Findings further suggest that the difficulty associated with sometimes tragic and devastating grief losses of a close loved one may, paradoxically, serve to usher in the opportunity for second order epistemological change leading to spiritual growth. Open questioning may be more difficult for Christian evangelical religious groups, as the belief system

around death tends to be more homogenous. For this reason, it may be advantageous to incorporate Buker's CPR model (2021) into approaches to counseling bereft clients, especially when Christian evangelical, but possibly with other groups. The spiritual struggle involved in grappling with a death loss is not unique to grief but may also occur during overwhelming events such as developmental trauma, natural disasters, and war-related combat. Future research should consider application of the model in various situational contexts that potentiate epistemological shifts that lead to spiritual growth. Development of a specific instrument to measure spiritual growth as an epistemological shift would assist in facilitating these lines of inquiry.

### Limitations

The cross-sectional design of the study limited any conclusions about trends from being made. As with all empirical studies, results should not be generalized beyond the groups represented in the sample. Additionally, we relied on self-report measures such as the RCOPE, DSE, and MiLQ, as well as open-ended answers for the subjects' experiences of spiritual growth. These open-ended responses varied greatly, some rich with detail and others only a few words in length. The ex post facto survey design of this study not only prevented follow-up questions from being asked to the students' open-ended responses but also prevented causal conclusions from being drawn.

## Conclusions

Utilizing the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015), the current study represents a first step toward conceptualizing spiritual growth as epistemological change. Findings expand literature related to spiritual growth, religious development, and college student bereavement. For bereft evangelical Christian college students, experiencing a close death loss can trigger greater reliance on spiritual resources, and sometimes spiritual struggle can result. Spiritual struggle involves questioning of prior religious beliefs held close, and the resulting tension facilitates

expansion of those beliefs toward a more relationship-based set of epistemological assumptions. Students who described this process also reported benefiting in terms of their spiritual growth.

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# REVIEWS

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***Human Sexuality & the Holy Spirit: Spirit-Empowered Perspectives.*** Edited by Wonsuk Ma and Kathaleen Reid-Martinez. Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, 2019. 360 pp.

*Human Sexuality & the Holy Spirit* is a multi-authored work edited by Wonsuk Ma and Kathaleen Reid-Martinez that brings together a global list of contributors. Wonsuk Ma serves as Dean and Distinguished Professor of Global Christianity at Oral Roberts University. Kathaleen Reid-Martinez is the Provost and Chief Academic Officer of Oral Roberts University. She also served as a Co-Chair of the Scholars Consultation of Empowered21.

This book is a revised compilation of the studies presented at the 2017 Empowered21 Scholars consultation in Singapore. It assembles a host of global scholars who engage with the topic of human sexuality using an array of examples from real-life experiences within their global contexts. The overall theme running through the book is that human sexuality is a gift from God that has been corrupted by sin, but the Holy Spirit is at work restoring the gift through Spirit-empowered communities.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part contains four chapters that provide a biblical and historical background for the book's second part. In part one, Lian Mung's chapter on human sexuality and the OT Spirit-empowered leaders reveals the goodness of human sexuality. The second chapter is Mark Hall's study on the Pauline vice lists with an emphasis on homosexuality. In their own ways, both of these chapters assert that one can live within God's healthy sexual boundaries by submitting themselves to God (9, 24). Chapter three contains Clayton Coombs's historical survey of the church's response to homosexuality. In chapter four, Michael McClymond excellently evaluates some of the literature on gender identity. He suggests Christians should respond

by loving their neighbors as themselves while not accepting every transgender ideology (93).

The book's second part contains various contextual studies from Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe. The section's first three chapters focus on child discrimination within Korea, India, and Nepal. The following six chapters explore various issues among youths and young adults in different social settings in Africa, the Philippines, and North America. The chapters cover gender inequality, HIV, discrimination against women workers, and God's design for marriage. The last three chapters explore issues of adult sexuality and homosexuality within more of a Christian context. These studies include the struggles faced by celibate gay Christians, the role of women in Yoido Full Gospel Church's cell ministry, and the struggle of pursuing liberty under Christ. In summary, the studies reveal the extent of the fallenness of human sexuality within religious, cultural, and social settings and the restorative role of Spirit-empowered communities within these contexts.

The writing style of the authors is an engaging blend of scholarly thoroughness and easy reading. Having such an eclectic group of global scholars is particularly refreshing, as is the worldwide scope of their studies. This breadth of scholarship provides readers with fresh perspectives into their understanding and engagement with human sexuality within their own settings. The book's global scope was undoubtedly its greatest strength, but it was also a weakness to some extent. For instance, the second part of the book contained all the global studies. It would have added to the book to have these studies sub-sectioned by location (i.e., Asia, Africa, North America, Europe) and have a few introductory paragraphs beginning each subsection to provide the reader with a contextual overview of the region. Doing so would have given the reader some background information while helping the book flow. Naturally, as with many books published from academic consultations, it can be challenging to make the content flow. Still, even with these limitations, the book performs well. The postscript does an excellent job of drawing all the threads together.

While the input into the book is global, the underlying attitude behind the studies is that of a conservatively Evangelical approach

to human sexuality. In keeping with the studies' broad scholarly and contextual scope, it would have benefited the book to have the input of voices who hold alternative views of human sexuality to contribute to the dialogue. However, the absence of such voices makes this book "safe" to put in the hands of students and interested laypersons within the Spirit-empowered communities while still challenging them and expanding their understanding of the topic. To this point, the book does remarkably well. It undoubtedly fits the brief of providing a text to the global Spirit-empowered community discussing the theological and pastoral challenges regarding this issue of human sexuality.

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***Depression, Where is Your Sting?*** By Robert D. McBain. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021. 158 pp.

Serving as a chaplain in two Pennsylvania state psychiatric hospitals for over three decades, I have read numerous accounts about depression. Why read another? Because each person's journey is different, and healing originates from God in various ways. This book reveals the spiritual aspect of recovery in depression that is profoundly missing from countless volumes. Mental health concerns have become immense topics of conversation in our society, and properly so.

Robert McBain's book, *Depression, Where is Your Sting?*, is a courageous description about one man's battle with depression. The author openly shares his fight with depression in his youth on the East Coast of Scotland. He relates his struggle about despair overwhelming his life as he walked into the Atlantic Ocean to drown himself. Providentially, he recounts that his cell phone rang and eventually he walked back on the shore to answer the device. These suicidal feelings pervaded his life for a number of years. As he wrote, "suicide acted as a vent to release the pain depression causes"

(34). Consequently, when he had an encounter with Christ, his spiritual life tackled futility with some victory. Yet, his salvation experience did not necessarily take away his hopeless feelings. I will not provide the entire narrative in this review; one must read his story for all the details.

The author describes depression interchangeably as either a disease, illness, or sickness. He speaks of the stigmatic grip it has in our American society toward this dreaded ailment, as opposed to other sicknesses. When one speaks of cancer, there is an immediate compassion (as it should be toward the person). However, we treat depression with comments such as "cheer up," or "just get over it."

Nevertheless, the author conveys a different perspective than the distinctive biomedical model cure. He takes us on his spiritual pilgrimage for help and wholeness for depression. One of his conclusions is that the biomedical model has overtaken the spiritual paradigm for people suffering from depression. He notes that in the medieval era the church led the way with assisting persons with mental health issues. In our contemporary age, with the discovery of psychotropic drugs and therapy, the spiritual is disregarded. McBain offers a holistic method that includes spiritual with physical methods.

The author defines depression as "a total body experience that isolates the sufferer from everything real" (15). He presents the themes of depression, guided by John Swinton's book, *Spirituality and Mental Health*, such as meaninglessness, the meaning of life, abandonment, clingy feelings, physical exhaustion, and a trapped life (15–25). Insightfully, he notes that these themes with proper reflection can become a life-changing experience that enriches our lives.

McBain researches several biblical characters such as kings like Saul, David, and Ahab. Other personalities like Elijah and Job are unpacked as well. Through scripture, primarily the Psalms, he demonstrates how insomnia, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and recurring thoughts of death are common in the mind of depressed people. Even the psalmist wrote, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:5, NIV).

One major item he notes is that our modern church remains relatively silent about depression. He chronicles the church's response through the centuries from exorcism, to the Great Awakening enthusiasts, to the biological method. Today, the majority of pastors assign these issues of mental health to the hands of psychiatrists and psychologists. In his view, having only the medical response is not a complete healing process. Notably, after his experience he believes that every church should have a mental health department. That is a novel idea worth consideration.

The book discloses the coping methods he learned in overcoming his depression. Some approaches he employed were:

1. Lament. He utilized the lament Psalms commenting that "the Psalms acted as a lens and an outlet through which I could reflect on my experiences and communicates them to God" (54).
2. In addition, he practiced spiritual language such as "the garment of praise" and "tongues" for catharsis and help (116–20).

In short, McBain's writing is a much needed response for the care of church parishioners who come seeking God's care for this disease. From my involvement in this vocation of ministry, I would add these ideas to the book, assisting pastors and priests who deal with this subject in their congregations.

1. Pray openly about depression in the pastoral prayer of the liturgy of the worship service. Almost every time I intentionally express the thought of depression, someone comes after worship and wants to talk about the topic.
2. Speak up about depression in sermons. Inevitably, we will meet individuals with depression and either subtly turn them away or discount their feelings with our lack of interest. Most therapists believe that talking openly assists with the healing process. We provide care groups for other diseases, why not depression?
3. Provide training in mental health and family systems in seminary as a required course of study and experience for pastors. I wonder

> how many ministers would have survived in the church ministry understanding the facets of mental health in their members.

As Pentecostal-Charismatic theology continues to evolve, a theology of suffering must mingle with the triumphalist preaching that comes from some sectors of this renewal movement. McBain's book unveils these dual concepts in his story. His experience does not dispose of medical science. Neither does he trust that faith alone provides healing. He believes that the combination of these actions remains our best option for wholeness to occur. Oral Roberts attacked this problem head-on with his emphasis on building the City of Faith (COF) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. COF was a medical center founded on combining both the biomedical world and faith for healing. Opening up about depression is not easy. It is a vulnerable and raw part of ourselves that many persons desire to ignore. I commend Robert McBain for the candid and honest thoughts about his journey. By writing about his depression, he opens a door for more dialogue on the topic. Hopefully, this work will cause others to spring into action and support those struggling with mental illness.

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