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 occur 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 to the integration of Christianity and counseling. To this end, and distinctively, the journal welcomes academic scholarship that considers the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit in or related to the practice of counseling. 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 invites these voices. The purpose of this journal is thus to build bridges among Christian traditions by increasing dialogue about experiences of the Spirit in counseling.

Find instructions for submitting articles and reviews for consideration at http://DigitalShowcase.ORU.edu/salubritas/. This site receives all submissions leading to publishing decisions.

Other correspondence (not related to submissions or subscriptions) is welcomed at salubritas@oru.edu or by writing to

Salubritas  
College of Theology & Ministry  
7777 S. Lewis Ave.  
Tulsa, OK 74171  
USA
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To the title above, I consider this third issue of *Salubritas* to be a bit of a scholarly tapestry—the intricate combination of works that, together, creates something unique and appealing.

This issue, as with the preceding two, was not organized by a specific theme, making it open to diverse topics and contributions. The result is interesting, and through the publications herein, I propose that the journal continues to contribute in important and distinctive ways to at least two specific bodies of academic literature that I wish to highlight — 1) studies related to Christian integration in counseling, and 2) the broader field of research on Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, also referred to as Spirit-empowered Christianity. Some articles in this issue address one field of study more than the other, but taken together, the contents included here offer much to both fields named above, amongst others.

In the previous issue, I spoke about the ability of *Salubritas* to ‘expand horizons’ through its role as a journal that has a commitment to publishing counseling research from a Spirit-empowered perspective. There are many esteemed academic journals dedicated to integrative, Christian counseling scholarship, and likewise, there are many esteemed journals dedicated to Pentecostal and charismatic scholarship, predominantly featuring theological and biblical perspectives. But, to my knowledge, *Salubritas* is the only journal established in its aim and scope to offer a space for scholars and clinicians—both established and emerging—to contemplate the professional counseling profession and process as it relates to Spirit-empowered spirituality and praxis. Though
the journal welcomes and features scholarship that is not explicitly focused on the relationship between these two areas of study or may not overtly explore Spirit-empowered Christianity in the counseling space, it yet remains a unique academic vehicle in its commitment to prioritizing and welcoming the research of Spirit-empowered scholar-practitioners.

Through the scholarship of these individuals, we gain important insights into how they approach the study of counseling and related topics in distinctive ways. The expression of their worldviews and shared spirituality in their scholarship is illuminating, and this is needed, precisely because there is still relatively limited information on how Pentecostal and charismatic counselors (and those who reflect on related topics or other forms of care) are unique in how they think about, approach, and engage in those endeavors (e.g., see Decker et al., 2022).

In addition to these foundational commitments of the journal, I feel it is important to highlight another central value that guides this publication; one that relates to the preceding discussion. It is our commitment to not only showcase the works of established scholars, but to also create a space for emerging practitioner-scholars to publish. In each of the three issues of *Salubritas* thus far, this one included, there are articles co-authored between seasoned scholars and students or recent alumni of graduate level counseling or theology programs, as well as articles solo authored by students pursuing postgraduate degrees. In addition to this, there is a space reserved in each issue for the featured work of a current graduate counseling student, or students, that is overseen and guided by ORU counseling faculty. The exercise of mentoring a graduate level counseling student through the process of writing a student article—especially related to the area of Christian integration in counseling—is an intentional and hopefully formational act.

To this end, this current issue is a wonderful collection of articles that span a range of topics, all of which have been contributed by ORU faculty, students, and alumni. These essays are what I would consider to be the fruit of ongoing labors at ORU to innovate, research, and write in the conceptual and practical ‘space’ in which counseling and related topics
(i.e., counselor education, Christian integration in counseling, mental health issues, etc.) and Spirit-empowered Christianity meet.

The first article, authored by recent ORU professional counseling alumnus and LPC and LADC Candidate, Kyle Stueber, and ORU Senior Professor of Counseling and Assistant Dean of the School of Counseling, Andrea Walker, is an intriguing outgrowth of their three-year process of intentional dialogue on topics of spirituality and Whiteness, as well as others. Having discovered their differing views, values, and assumptions on these important topics, they committed to dialoging regularly and over time, to demonstrate hospitality and a desire to better understand and learn from one another. Their article documents repeated efforts to resist assigning limiting, reductionistic, and harmful labels, and instead, to first seek to understand one another, ultimately experiencing transformation through meaningful conversation and relationship. In a day and age of many divisions, their article is a timely reminder of the power of caring presence, receptivity over reactivity, and a willingness to listen.

The second article, authored by Greg Meyer, Associate Professor of Professional Counseling and Director of the Professional Counseling program at ORU, is an exploration of the concept of ‘spirituality’ in relation to counselor education. In review of relevant literature, Meyer discusses the historically ambiguous use of the term ‘spirituality’ and the way this has impacted the training of counselors. Often the term is approached with personal bias and through the influence of one’s culture, with a tendency to conflate the meaning of spirituality with religion, or to overidentify spirituality with a particular faith or theological tradition. Meyer seeks to propose the use of an explanatory definition of spirituality that is multicultural in focus, and refers to the innate capacity and tendency of humans to make meaning and construct their realities; a self-reflective skill that allows them to consider their values, beliefs, biases, etc. Meyer distinguishes this approach to the idea of spirituality from those that are religiously, theologically, or inspirationally motivated or associated. Meyer suggests that by utilizing an explanatory understanding of spirituality in this way, counselor educators can assist
counseling students to better integrate their identities with and by their spirituality. Therefore, instead of feeling compelled to pit religious beliefs against one’s spirituality, for example, the focus is purposefully shifted to the innate spiritual and existential values of helping others, making meaning, and finding purpose.

The third article, authored by Robert McBain, a current ORU Ph.D. student and Research Coordinator for ORU’s Holy Spirit Resource Center, is the result of qualitative analysis of sermons preached on the topic of depression by Assembly of God (AG) pastors in Oklahoma. Through his qualitative analysis of 12 sermons, McBain demonstrates how these pastors frequently correlated depression with congregants’ faulty thinking. As a result of this faulty thinking, preachers described depressed individuals as progressively moving into ‘the cave’ of depression (pulling upon the Elijah story in 1 Kings 19), where there was hopelessness, isolation, and warped thinking, but also the sustaining ministry of God. Through a transformative encounter with God in ‘the cave’, congregants were described as moving out of depression, ultimately because of fixing their faulty thinking. Though not without his critiques, McBain highlights the important role of framing depression as a journey or process, and the way this aids congregants in their meaning-making efforts.

The fourth article was co-authored by Peter Althouse, ORU Professor of Theology and Director of the ORU Ph.D. program in Contextual Theology, and Audrey McCormick, a current ORU Ph.D. theology student and Co-Lead Senior Pastor at Sanctuary Ministries in Concord, CA. Graciously, both authors agreed to allowing Salubritas to reprint this article after its initial publication in Ma, Onyinah, and Bled (Eds.), The Pandemic & the Holy Spirit: From Lament to Hope and Healing, published by ORU Press (2024). Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, Althouse and McCormick conducted a document analysis of Pentecostal-charismatic websites, online content related to the pandemic, along with official P/c denominational statements, documents, and publications (both online and print form). Surprisingly, they discovered that P/c Christians were not engaging in eschatological, triumphalist claims of healing and a ‘better future’, in a naïve denial of the present suffering
of the pandemic. Rather, the data revealed that P/c Christians were acknowledging the grief and suffering of the moment, while actively seeking to evoke hope in the midst of suffering. In this way, Althouse and McCormick conceptualize the acts of grief and mourning as eschatological responses to the suffering of the pandemic.

The fifth article was authored by a current, second year ORU graduate counseling student, Nicole Biller, under the guidance of myself and fellow colleague, Kelly Dunbar Davison, Professor of Professional Counseling at ORU. In her article, Biller reflects on the importance and quality of training in Christian integration in counseling, within graduate level, integrative counseling programs. In her review of pertinent literature, she highlights students’ desire for faculty to increasingly and effectively model integration to their students in practical ways. And while integration is frequently posed as being of great importance for Christian graduate counseling programs and to the training they provide, Biller suggests that the quality of such training needs to be thoughtfully evaluated. In an effort to contribute to available scholarship and information on how to provide quality integration training, Biller identifies related areas of concern that she suggests shape integrative training and education in a well-rounded way. These include: a biblically informed worldview, intentionally crafted hermeneutics, and a well-developed theology that, in turn, produces faith-informed practices.

Circling back to what was noted at the beginning, I wish to reiterate the way this issue meaningfully gathers certain topics together—counseling, counselor education, the spirituality of the counselor, Christian integration in counseling, mental health in the church, and theological and practical elements of Spirit-empowered Christianity related to mental illness, suffering, and hope. The diversity of these topics is evident, but so is the strength of joining these interdisciplinary perspectives and fields of expertise together in one issue.

Since its inception only a few years ago, Salubritas now celebrates over 7,900 downloads of parts or whole issues of the journal, and readership in 96 countries. We are immensely thankful for the reach and impact of this publication. Our hope is that the research shared here will continue
to inspire others to bridge gaps, discover the value of interdisciplinary dialogue, and the importance of doing scholarship from a distinctively Spirit-empowered perspective, whether implicitly or explicitly.

References

Abstract

One day in May during a recent year, a conversation began that launched several years of ongoing dialogue. A graduate student, Kyle, reached out to a graduate counseling professor, Andrea, to discuss some concerns and anxieties he felt in some of his class discussions. What began as a conversation about racial diversity in the counseling setting evolved into an exploration of different ways of looking at the sociocultural context of race in the United States, a topic discovered to have political and theological underpinnings. As a result of the dialogue, we realized that specific preconceived labels identifying political, theological, denominational, and other potential perspectives of origin were insufficient at best and divisive at worst. The process of dialoguing revealed that the way we both saw various issues was not dichotomous, and the use of the labels initially created obstacles to our understanding of one another. Our focus here is on our process of creating understanding, so we intentionally limit the use of labels and rely on descriptions of our perspectives. The resulting dialogue was so transformative that both
Kyle and Andrea, co-authors of this manuscript, wish to share our experiences with other students and educators.

Introduction

Hebrews 12:14: Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy, without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Division within our current socio-political environment within the U.S. is astronomically high, particularly along the lines of the two dominant political parties. How has this fracture affected those of us in a Christian context who focus on spiritual matters as they relate to emotional and mental health? To be a Christian means to be a follower of Jesus and the spiritual counterpart, the Holy Spirit, but we tend to conflate our status as Christians with any number of political issues. The second author and colleagues have measured that a strong sense of community is a robust predictor of psychological flourishing (Munoz et al., 2020). If our faith communities become divided along party lines, the psychological and mental health benefits provided to Christians who connect to their communities could be in jeopardy. With this in mind, we wish to share about our own trust-building process. Our purpose here is not to argue our perspectives but, rather, to share our process of building a relationship and healing any perceived fractures. References to the content of our conversations are to provide context about our starting points so that readers better understand the work required to build a bridge between them. As a White male and a White female, we recognize that our perspectives of race are bound by our own experiences of being White within a Western European perspective and, therefore, refer to such discussions primarily as being about “Whiteness.” We hope this article helps to expand the dialogue about and within various ethnic groups and maintain that those voices are crucial to fully building bridges. Kyle initiated the original conversation, so here we present his voice first. Sometimes we present our experiences individually and sometimes collectively, as reflected in the use of plural personal pronouns such as “we.” After sharing our initial reasons for the dialogue, we describe our assumptions about spirituality and Whiteness, our interactional experiences, and our takeaways from the process.
Kyle

Several years ago, I began to discern certain patterns within our educational and broader sociocultural systems that appeared to isolate specific groups, including the one to which I belong as a White male. Through various media outlets, I encountered descriptions of the “White male” experience and perspective that felt unfamiliar to me. The portrayals of the advantages presumably enjoyed by individuals like me seemed disconnected from my own lived reality. It became apparent that this dissonance was not unique to me; many young men of similar age and ethnic background shared in the feeling of being increasingly misunderstood, dismissed, and even rejected. White men’s internal dissonance remained largely unspoken, as there seemed to be no safe space to address these concerns openly. I, too, carried this emotional burden into my graduate counseling program, but it was only after I began to apply the tools of self-awareness, assertiveness, and communication skills from my program that I could articulate my experiences more effectively. While studying for my Counseling Diverse Populations class, my previous dissonance was revitalized, leading me down an unexpected path filled with anxiety, depression, and frustration.

My concern revolved around the polarization of experiences related to race and ethnicity in dominant U.S. society. Full exploration of this topic is beyond our scope here, but in summary, it appears that, in our pursuit of justice, we are limited by our subjective perceptions of what is “just.” When we realize that a change does not benefit us, we tend to view the source as a malevolent force and run the risk of devolving into a ‘hero’ versus ‘villain’ dichotomy, further dividing an already chaotic world (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Whether the issues pertain to health, science, prevention, race, gender, or sexuality, polarized thinking tends to foster division and undermine our ability to find common ground (e.g., Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Chua, 2018). As a society, we seem to have lost the capacity to adapt effectively and to prioritize common interests.
over self-interest. We are caught in a relentless cycle of dichotomizing one another based on our perceived differences, making it nearly impossible to develop lasting and mutually beneficial relationships that are integral to a positive human experience. The unfortunate reality is that this pattern of dichotomization appears to be gaining momentum, much like a destructive snowball, threatening to engulf everything and everyone in its path. As individuals trying to avoid being swept up by it, our only recourse may be to anchor ourselves to sustainable moral principles that value all human life.

Following George Floyd’s death in 2020, the escalation of politically polarized reactions to racial issues caused my own dissonance concerning the assumptions made about White males to resurface. During this period, I approached the administrator of my graduate counseling program in an attempt to advocate for a more balanced perspective. However, during our mutual exploration of various viewpoints on Whiteness, I came to understand that I could fall victim to the same tendency to dichotomize that I had observed in some of the readings for my Counseling Diverse Populations class. Throughout our ongoing conversation, we delved into numerous points of discourse, always encountering an impasse around the fundamental question of “how we know what we know.” It was our differing views on the role of Scripture that appeared to underlie our divergent interpretations of the issue. Both of us professed belief in the “Christian” faith system, and both exhibited a strong desire to do “good” for those around us, a critical common ground that enabled our ongoing dialogue. Our discussions, when dissected into specific topics, revealed a majority of shared values, yet they consistently diverged over “how” those principles should be applied on a macro level.

Andrea

In my early interactions with Kyle, I will admit that I had a leaning toward placing him in a particular box with a particular label, and of course, my initial experiences became consistent with those leanings. I experienced him as a representation of an extreme political position, who
was defensive of that position and ready to argue to prove a point. As our interactions progressed, however, and we agreed to meet more regularly, I began to understand the inaccuracies and limits of applying such a label. Kyle was thoughtful and complex, and he deeply considered multiple aspects and perspectives of the topics that we discussed. I realized that he did not readily fit into any particular category.

Our early interactions centered around political issues with a particular focus on racial reconciliation, and at times it expanded to other issues such as gender socialization, gender roles in the church, and responses to the pandemic. I mused about how historical events shaped the sociocultural context through the development of laws and regulations that favored primarily the lawmakers at the time. I focused on the social construction of our current legal and political system, and Kyle focused on the equal application of the principles found in the pursuit of justice at the level of the individual. Those conversations typically began with curiosity and fairly quickly escalated to take on the tone of a debate. Kyle had also perceived a bias in my classroom toward what we eventually identified as a “more spontaneous” approach to spiritual issues, and he was eager to present another point of view.

In authentic self-reflection, I believe I perceived that his questions demonstrated a lack of understanding of the perspectives shared and discussions facilitated in class. The more he questioned my perspective and became eager to share his, the more I developed a desire to clarify my perspective. It seemed that our interaction had a cyclical nature of both attempting to explain ourselves and with each point made by either of us, the other became more intent on getting our own point across. As an educator who hopes to have something of value to offer my students, I experienced feeling a strong desire to be heard. At times, this desire took priority over hearing Kyle’s perspective and understanding where he was coming from. I recognized this desire to be heard early on, as I had noticed this about myself before, and marveled at how this personal issue of mine fueled the ongoing dialogue between the student and myself.
The Starting Points: How Our Spiritual Assumptions Shape Our Lenses for Viewing Race

As our dialogue ensued, and our conversations moved beyond the realm of Whiteness and into the realm of spirituality, the core of our differences, the underlying assumptions that both of us had and the resulting perspective through which we both viewed the authority and role of the Holy Spirit and scripture, began to take shape. We both believe in Biblical scripture and the Holy Spirit, but our starting points and methods diverged, reflecting apparent efforts to balance what both of us had internalized from our early experiences. Kyle was raised in a non-structured, even chaotic, household, in which he felt the pain of the unpredictable and craved the stability of objective moral principles. Andrea’s early experiences were embedded in a stable, highly structured, sometimes rigid, environment, in which she longed for a celebration of the spontaneity and life-giving moments of “being” fully in the present. In this section, we share our resulting guiding assumptions about scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit and how they inform our perspectives of race, as this turned out to comprise the core of our challenge in building the bridge.

Kyle

Authority of Scripture
The context in which I believe truth is presented is primarily through scripture and is revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. My idea around scripture is based on my belief in two theological concepts, known as the sufficiency and inerrancy of scripture. It is my core belief that these are the two areas of focus when it comes to understanding the authority of scripture. First, the Bible is inerrant, written by authors inspired by the Holy Spirit, and protected by God to remain His true word today. Because it is inerrant, we understand it to have all authority to prescribe an answer to all issues we face in the current age. Moreover, scripture is sufficient, meaning held within it is all we need as a lens to look at and address all issues concerning power, authority, and the establishment of a just structure by which we can all live. “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so
that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” *(New International Version, 2011, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).* I believe scripture when applied in the proper context never contradicts itself and can be interpreted as the objective truth that defines the standard and practice of every person who claims to be a follower of Christ.

**Authority of the Holy Spirit**

It is my observation that the more our society grows to promote instant gratification, the more we seem to be interacting with the “Holy Spirit” in ways that contradict scripture, tradition, and reason. The danger I see is the more we allow culture to define the nature of “good,” the more we might fall victim to an emotional response being viewed as a moving of the Spirit. The danger I see is living in a society that begins to seek what tickles its ear (2 Timothy 4:3). We, as lay Christians, see a framing of such desires as part of the Holy Spirit’s inspirational power and loosely apply the power of the Holy Spirit to validate our new predisposition to instant gratification. I believe it is by denying ourselves a pattern entrenched in instant gratification that we find the “good” we all seek. Incorporating the Holy Spirit as our primary lens to navigate this world is essential for living out our Christian faith. With the Holy Spirit promised to be both our comforter and our truth, when we rely on Him, we can experience the full promise of God’s grace and humility needed to navigate this sin-filled world. We cannot miss that the Holy Spirit is not limited to providing comfort as defined by a subjective worldly lens. In fact, He gives comfort by removing that poisonous lens as we walk with Him through the process of sanctification. He is also not here to confirm “my truth,” but The Truth. I see His truth as everlasting and immeasurable and cannot be corrupted for those genuinely leaning on the Holy Spirit in their interactions with His word. It appears to me we have confused the balance of compassion and grace and the need for truth to provide it. Truth can feel uncomfortable for those living outside of God’s infinite promise. Sometimes the truth that the Holy Spirit is there to provide will feel very uncomfortable and convicting, but it will give the ultimate comfort if we yield to His will. The role of the Holy Spirit is to confirm the scripture, comfort the believer, and empower the believer to do God’s good work during our time in the finite. When
attempting to balance what I believe and what is helpful in the counseling setting, I see an integration approach as the most viable (Johnson, 2010). At the core of my belief is a faith that God’s design provides a way to address the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of the formation of problems and solutions.

Integration with Science

I also believe there is a way for all areas of science to be integrated into a biblical worldview, and at each level of scientific theory, we can find God’s design at its core. In my limited understanding of science, I understand the complexity of trying to hold what appears to be a more traditional viewpoint of scripture’s prescription for morality standards. Moreover, I understand the belief that its interaction with emerging scientific theories seems to contradict it. Proving that there is complete compatibility between what we are learning through scientific discovery and God’s word would require a different platform, so for the sake of this paper, I will not attempt to bring the two into harmony. I will say that I have found peace in the tension that the two opposing sides hold. If I shift my perspective, I can see some validity in people’s hesitation toward a more rigid application of scripture. However, I believe that when scripture is applied within context, the structure itself is the comfort we need to function well as a society and balance the tension. While the extreme focus on the structure is damaging, it is within the chaos, where truth is unobtainable, that I see the most damage being done. Maybe the gift of the simplistic prescription of how we are to be set apart from this world is more internally and externally holistically healing than boiling down our existence to the pursuit of the instant pleasures of the world. Perhaps His purpose is not to affirm our way, but perhaps our purpose is to find Him, and that is the most sustainable and loving path in this finite world.

Selective or misapplication of scripture, antithetical to the spirit of Jesus’s message, has led to some people’s dissonance with a more rigid application of scripture. I hold to the belief that scripture serves as the most viable solution for our present societal discourses and would have been for all previous societal issues if we sought a proper balance between the
Building Bridges

grace and truth it provides. This belief leads me to hesitate to accept post-positive perspectives, as they lead to the potential of misdirection away from the infinite promises of scripture. One recent perspective that has been presented is the new identity-driven development of the oppressor vs. oppressed model (differing from the original Marxist economic presentation of it). One recent example of this is the analytical framework of intersectionality applied on the macro scale, not unlike the Russian revolution starting in the 1920s based on class. It is my observation that these frameworks cultivate dichotomies and thus polarized thinking. My objection to reading God’s word through the oppressor vs. oppressed lens, such as intersectionality, is it feels like we are allowing this dichotomous way of thinking to interpret scripture. It is not uncommon for people to reject the gospel because it is not inclusive, and therefore oppressive. What is happening is rather than letting scripture determine if this way of thinking is compatible with God’s design and structure throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we instead reject the message of the bible when it is not compatible with whatever the current worldly lens promotes. I believe that allowing the dominant world’s culture to interpret the Bible has led to the very misapplication of it.

For example, as a country, we did not apply the proper biblical context in the battle against slavery, and this resulted in the dominant worldview interpreting it for us. We can look back on that and determine that what some churches did, in support of slavery, was not in congruence with the message of scripture. This country, even “the church”, validated chattel slavery, they supported it, and they preached it. We dehumanized image bearers of God because the dominant worldview was allowed to be the lens through which we viewed scripture. In contrast, if we had sought to use scripture, in its full context, to answer the questions about the legality and morality of slavery, we would have taken no part in slavery. Still, even minimally, we could point out the lack of context one might use to compare the version of slavery referenced in the Bible to the abhorrent chattel slavery that had no place in any society (see Exodus 21). Morally, we would see the slave trade as antithetical to the Bible based on the treatment of other image-bearers of God (see Philemon). Legally, we could have used
the context of the biblical description of slavery to denounce any use of the Bible to affirm chattel slavery’s existence since they are not comparable. Allowing culture to dictate the way we view scripture can be dangerous, but allowing scripture, in its totality, to guide the building of structures allows no room for the travesties done by selfish humans.

Summary
Viewing the Bible through the oppressor/oppressed lens feels like the reductionistic outcome of labeling specific physical characteristics of people and associating those descriptors with identities that follow the oppressor/ oppressed dichotomy. Because that tends to be how culture is interpreting and implementing ideas today, I see this movement as insufficient and antithetical to the prescribed solution by scripture for the very issues we should all be in line to oppose. “We ALL, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (New International Version, 2011, Isaiah 53:6). The oppressor/ oppressed narrative needs only to be seen through a biblical lens to destroy the growing dichotomy. We all have been oppressed by sin. The villain needs to be labeled only as the sin found within all of us. We are freed from the villain’s oppression by following Jesus in both the passive and active ways he showed us in his life. We do this by dying in each of our own ways, and God delivers us from the pain of that oppression. The villain is not found in any physical characteristic but in the manifestation of sin, and we need only to condemn that sin found within ourselves for us to find the peace we all crave.

Andrea
Authority of the Holy Spirit
My perspective is that ultimate authority lies in the living, breathing, active presence of the Holy Spirit. Part of my own struggle has been related to an orientation toward truth-seeking that is dependent on cognition, to the detriment of being and of action. Cognition is good, and as educators, we teach our students critical evaluation skills. Thinking without implementing knowledge into one’s life, however, can be useless.
Following Jesus without relying on the Holy Spirit to guide our steps, as we are currently in motion, can be empty. I can live completely in my head and “think” my way into a Christian orientation and life, but the risk here is that I fail to see opportunities to live godly right in the present moment. Thinking also lends itself well to judging, criticizing, and competing, all of which are antithetical to Jesus’s message (Buker, 2021). As such, I believe that Jesus’s “Good News” is that we can all relate to God right now. After Jesus’s body left the earth, the Holy Spirit remained, allowing us to continue to live a godly life in the present moment, as life continues to unfold. Ultimate authority thus resides within the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is certainly relevant, and it is also largely a product of memory and of cognitive, rather than of present, visceral experience. Though I assume scripture contains ultimate authority, I lean more toward the Holy Spirit as my guide and interpreter of ultimate authority and scripture as a reflection of that authority.

**Authority of Scripture**

From the launching point of the Holy Spirit being necessary to inspire godly living, including the writing of the scriptures, I see the role of the scriptures in today’s world as a reflection of the dynamic, living word. This suggests that the relevance of scripture can actually evolve as an individual grows in Christ and expands their sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. One way to explain this is through the consideration of context, during which multiple layers of variables interact to create an overall setting through which Truth is experienced and interpreted. In the world of family therapy, counselors consider that the family unit is an interaction of multiple factors, including (a) each member and their individual emotions, thoughts, and interpretations, (b) the values and culture of the family as a whole, (c) the social systems, such as religious, cultural, ethnic, regional, etc., within which the family is nested, and (d) the place in time of the family’s current experiences. When considering these many layers, it is clear that the family as a whole is much greater than merely the sum of each individual family member’s unique experiences and perspectives. Because of the various ways in which each person is influenced within their multiple systems, I believe it necessary to consider the context within
which scriptures are written and the individual perspectives of each writer, along with the acknowledgment that though each writer has their own limitations, their perspectives contribute to Truth as a whole. As each new piece of information about context expands the understanding of the purposes of scriptures, so does our understanding of its relevance for our lives. For these reasons, I take a “levels of explanation” perspective on the integration of psychology and Christianity (Johnson, 2010), which starts with scientific research, scrutinized to the highest humanly possible levels of validity, and moves to consider scripture within what we know about God’s creation. The consideration of scripture in light of science requires the interaction of the Holy Spirit to create moments of transformation in how Truth is understood and experienced. In this way, scripture is assumed to contain authority, but our interpretations of scripture are assumed to need the Holy Spirit to guide our ongoing scrutiny of and greater awareness of what is real.

Integration with Science
My value of science in the process of understanding God and scripture, and the importance I place on context to understanding truth, lead to certain implications about scriptures in today’s world. First, the history of how our current ways of knowing have evolved has led us to the necessity of considering what reality might be constructed from social interactions. Traditional positivist and post-positivist ways of knowing, relying on control and manipulation of variables, assume that variables can exist separately from people whether they can be accurately measured or not, an assumption that does not seem to hold up with emotional experiences (Heppner et al., 2016). Newer ways of knowing recognize that an individual experiences emotionality and cognition in unique and overlapping ways, acknowledging that the individual’s perspective “constructs” their reality. Despite the individual accuracy in the constructivist way of knowing, it does not consider systemic variables. Without considering systemic variables, systems that grow in ways that are not supportive of certain individuals are never measured or scrutinized, such as is the case in Kyle’s concern with the oppressor/oppressed model. Given what has been understood in family therapy,
the lack of scrutiny of systems can result in permission given to ongoing structures that are not supportive of the growth of certain members. In the case of family, for instance, failure to scrutinize the system can result in (a) blaming the scapegoat, such as a person experiencing an addictive disorder, for the problem in how the family functions as a whole and even (b) enabling ongoing abuse in the family.

If we rely only on constructivist ways of knowing to learn about individual experiences, then the solution to larger problems, involving many factors that may be out of any one person’s direct control, relies only on the individual. In this sense, the individual is expected to rely only on themselves for recovery and sometimes even blamed for their experiences, while the systemic issue remains. To better detect and measure systemic influences and interactions, social constructionism has developed. Social constructionist perspectives consider various levels of an experience, from an individual to their interactions with significant others, to the embeddedness of their interactions in various systems, and how this all changes over time (Erford, 2015). One such example focuses on the social dynamics of race, which has been present in academic research design textbooks for decades. The original purpose of a social constructionist perspective is to move away from dichotomizing individual experiences to a broader consideration of the multiple factors that generate an individual’s, or even a group’s, experience. In my professional observation, it has been successful in doing so until recent political motivations have used the social constructionist language to dichotomize experiences to “us” vs. “them” thinking.

Second, the nature of using reductionism to scrutinize interactions, which are more and more complex as the system grows, can lead to misrepresentations of truth. Using reductionistic methods, a piece of the truth can initially be uncovered, such as in the example of multiple regression, which measures how two or more independent variables predict a dependent variable. For example, past research has measured that both religious pressures and support for religious autonomy predict Christian religious development (Walker & Lang, 2023; Walker & Rhoades, 2021). Reducing a group of Christians to these measured relationships may lead us to conclude that Christians experience pressures in a positive
way. When we add complexity to the analysis and listen to Christians’ voices about their experiences with religious pressures, however, we see a different story. Support for religious autonomy predicts positive growth, but when religious pressures are introduced, its ability to predict growth weakens (Walker et al., 2021). Furthermore, when individuals experience doubts about God that are normative for their development and experiences, simultaneously experiencing religious pressures can undermine their ability to proceed through doubtful times and continue to grow in their faith (Walker et al., 2023). Analysis of a large sample helps us uncover some important trends embedded in a system, but if we reduce people to general conclusions without considering their voices describing various nuances to the results, we misunderstand what is going on in the system.

To truly understand people, sometimes we must learn humans’ experiences as narrative wholes. This means we must hear their stories in their entirety, rather than reducing learning to select variables. Though we must be careful to maintain validity in inquiries involving story-telling, which often utilize qualitative data, this is within the realm of science (for example, see Walker & Balk, 2013). When individuals report having similar experiences that are not due to personal mental health problems, that is a sign that a system might need improvement. If we do not hold systems accountable for their constructed values that create experiences for members, then very unhealthy environments can result. But if we rely only on reductionism and determinism in our scientific inquiry, we may fail to detect unhealthy environments. The way I discover knowledge and conceptualize racial issues in today’s world involves both individual reports of experiences and scrutiny of systems. In the process of discovery, involving the highest possible level of human scrutiny of the methods, I then integrate this new knowledge with scripture and rely on the Holy Spirit to provide illumination. Sometimes this new information with the quickening of the Holy Spirit generates a new interpretation of scriptures understood differently in the past. Without the Holy Spirit, knowledge of research and scripture can be inaccurate at best and stagnant or irrelevant at worst.
Summary
Living with these assumptions moves Christianity from a set of cognitions to a way of being fully in the present. It recognizes that Truth is living and dynamic. It is a courageous way to live, not depending entirely on a written script but, instead, leaning on a presence that is within us, if we allow it. It requires openness and leads to spontaneity, things that may be uncomfortable for many, including myself. This perspective is vulnerable because one must recognize that they could be wrong, and is authentic because it relies on a genuine connection with God in the present time. But it is life-giving, and it allows for the necessary social changes that bring more congruence with Jesus’s mission. Anxiety-provoking for some who prefer the structure of an external measure, my perspective relies on the meaning within the text of Jesus’s words. If an external measure is needed, the life of Jesus is that measure. Let goodness, in any given situation or behavior, be determined by whether or not it reflects Jesus’s path, whether or not it is loving.

The Process: Our Experiences of Interacting Around Issues of Spirituality and Whiteness

Kyle
One of the main principles found in systems theory is the idea of circular causality. As I begin to identify the key moments that, from my perspective, propelled this conversation, I am concerned about the appearance of linear causality framing. Believing wholeheartedly that circular causality is a superior way to consider the issue, as it prevents dichotomization, I want to stress that I have currently a deeper understanding and appreciation for the complexity of the problem that drove me into this conversation than I did initially. Entering the summer courses of my first year of graduate school, my journey with the dissonance of the current climate had reached its tipping point. A concept within systems theory highlighted the complexity I was beginning to understand how sometimes, “the solution is the problem” (Watzlawick et
al., 1974, pp. 31-39). I had spent some time trying to figure out why that was true of everyone else’s solution to their problems, and I now began to learn to do that for myself on these issues.

Walking into Dr. Walker’s office that first time was incredibly intimidating. Having only ever experienced conversations about these issues vicariously through social/media sources, my fear was that this conversation would villainize me like I had seen in my own “echo chamber” in the summer of 2020. It is now clear, that the network you were watching and/or the social media influencers you were following, gave only a version of what was happening in the world around that time. When I refer to “my echo chamber,” I also acknowledge my belief that everyone, including myself, fell victim to seeing the most fearful version of the social dynamics around race as it related to their self-interests and was propagated by their affirming spheres of influence. When presenting my view of these exhaustive issues for the first time, it was clear that Dr. Walker and I had very little real exposure to the other person’s side of the dichotomy.

The first pivotal moment happened when, in my frustration, Dr. Walker attended to my frustration by moving from behind her desk and into the chair across from mine. This became a crucial part of our conversational pattern, as it became a symbol of a safe space where I felt comfortable, as a graduate student, to express my points of disagreement without having to be reminded of the power differential I had built up in my mind due to our educational positions. We became two humans, intent on finding answers, and intentional about doing so in the least polarized way. I can reflect now on how crucial this move was for Dr. Walker to engage this way. The second was the pattern I set, in which after every conversation I would initiate a follow-up email pointing out the most positive aspects of the conversation and focusing on gratitude for the time Dr. Walker took to engage in the conversation that day. These two consistent practices set the tone for the intention and execution of a positive experience around each meeting.

The point of contention about the existence and solution to race relations was the most powerful motivator in my approach to the conversation. The pattern usually circled around what we saw as the problem, why we thought the problem existed, and most importantly to me, how we attempted to
solve the current issues around race. As a graduate counseling student, I was learning about the importance of demonstrating unconditional positive regard in the therapeutic relationship while simultaneously experiencing dissonance about how others consider and value me as a White male. I had noticed a pattern of unconditional positive regard being applied in all directions and to all groups, except in the direction of the White male.

As with many issues, finding what was “true” became nearly insurmountable for us early in the conversation. I had spent enough time in research and interacted with enough content that my schemas around these issues seemed unquestionable. I quickly realized Dr. Walker operated from certain schemas as well, but they affirmed a different position. The hardest part of the conversation pattern was initially having my concerns dismissed because of my physical characteristics as a White male, as had been the case in numerous interactions prior to this one. The assumption seemed to be that my desire to defend my “privilege” caused me to object to certain perspectives of race and Whiteness. Since my undergraduate years, I have struggled through the same assumptions made about these issues albeit being significantly more passive in my approach to my dissonance. During these earlier years, I had a hard time accepting the label of the “oppressor”, due to the complexities of my own chaotic experiences in my systems throughout childhood. After being educated on my “privilege”, I struggled with depression and anxiety while navigating credentialing to become a high school teacher in California. I then enlisted in the military to serve my country at a search and rescue unit and finally struggled again to transition back into society upon exiting the military. My not expressing my perspective and staying quiet had led to a very unhealthy pattern of processing emotions throughout my journey. I struggled and was not as successful as I would have liked to be in those other attempts at building a life to help people. I believe now that my lack of success was due to not knowing how to process my own pain and help myself, subconsciously believing the narrative that as a white man, I had no reason to feel anything less than privileged. What I felt after George Floyd’s death, and the direction of the mainstream narrative to find the villain of his story, was that despite my own story, I was disqualified from sharing in the experience of pain and suffering,
strictly because I was a “White male.” It took me several years to begin to express these objections and the pain associated with them, and it was the skills I had learned during my little time in the counseling program that led me to believe I needed to do so.

Within the initial stages of our conversation, I perceived the automatic assumptions of intent that influenced the direction of the conversation from both Dr. Walker and myself. At first, it seemed to me that when I would begin to present my objections against the unquestioned assumptions of “White male privilege,” it was met with responses like, “So you are saying you don’t believe that minorities experience oppression?” It was the most challenging part for me to show my unconditional positive regard for all people while simultaneously objecting to what I was experiencing as the application of the one perspective that seemed to have a monopoly over how we were to show this compassion. In the initial few conversations, it felt that each point of disagreement I stated was met with the assumption it was coming from a place void of compassion. The work then became to discover how my assumptions about Dr. Walker’s view of these theories were vastly different than how she would describe and utilize them. I had sometimes seen dismissal from her when it was her own “desire to be heard” responding, and I was ill-equipped earlier on to recognize that dichotomous “us versus them” mentality in my own process. My desire to be heard also quickly became the focus of my wanting to continue the conversation. I switched from wanting to be there to convince her to change her mind, to seeking the acknowledgment that it is possible for me to have my objections to assumptions about White, male privilege and still be seen as a compassionate future counselor. It was not until we approached different aspects of these issues that I saw the same motivation for her continuance of the conversation. She too had a story, a dissonance felt within culture, and had the desire to balance what she saw as painful to those like her.

The hardest part for me in this phase of the conversation was to admit my solution to the problem was as much part of the issue as what I was accusing the opposing side of. The irony was I had to acknowledge my own significant role in perpetuating the conversation in the “us versus them” pattern. I was wrong to believe that opposing views came from a place void
of positive intent. I was wrong to believe by fighting back I was becoming the “hero” against the “villain” of the opposing side. I slowly realized the lens I opposed was the one I was using to approach the issue, and I was wrong for doing so. I realized, “we all, like sheep, had gone astray”, I too needed to separate from the dichotomization and find the commonality in our shared struggle with the broken human experience. It was only by engaging with someone, like Dr. Walker, assuming positive intent, and finding our commonality that I was able to truly grow, which feels antithetical to the general solution of many on both sides of each issue we face.

One area of note, it was in the tense moments of disagreements that I slowly realized the impact that humor and humility, on my part, could play in these issues. Because I am in constant need of reminding that God does not need me to solve the world’s problems, I need to find a way to show that in the conversation. I started joking about looking forward to the day when we were both sitting in front of God laughing about how silly it was to think that any of us could figure out His way on our own. I was seeking to show awareness of my need for humility when discussing any hierarchical system, with the infinite perspective that we “are all one in Christ Jesus” (New International Version, 2011, Galatians 3:28). The work to me was our realization that we might not win the other over to our perspective entirely, but we could make a choice to find peace in our differing views, knowing that God’s will is more powerful than our preferred solutions.

Andrea

This desire to be heard channeled into a passion felt for the issues discussed, and each topic triggered a deep stirring within me that appeared initially to be centered on a desire for more social justice in the world and an awareness, growing within me in prior years, of my privilege as a White woman in that world. In those years, I had been blissfully unaware of the struggles of many of my Black compatriots and have had to undergo the realization that my experience does not generalize to all people. The process of understanding this involved many “aha” moments and recognition of my need to humble myself to honor the experiences of others. Hearing Kyle’s perspective on race and the feeling he described that young, White men are starting to
report experiencing collectively was triggering for me. I questioned, “How could a White male feel marginalized in contemporary society?”

After more dialogue, I began to see that we were focusing on different aspects of the same issue. My focus has been on understanding the needs of other less dominant and thus less privileged groups and, in so doing, becoming more sensitive to their experiences. In this way, I hope to continue to be an alibi to those experiencing oppression and an advocate for social justice. As I pressed Kyle to try to understand their experiences, I began to realize that he was focusing on something else. When asked directly, he stated that racism and oppression have existed as part of the sociocultural context in the U.S. and that it was uncompromisingly wrong. His focus, however, had been on what he perceived as proposed solutions to racism and oppression, rather than understanding the experience. Our initial miscommunication about this fundamental point had fueled the tennis match. I gradually began to acknowledge that if systems could be created with a bias against one racial group, it might also be possible that systems could be created with a bias against another. Seeing Kyle make adamant and passionate claims that young, White men are feeling damned before being given a chance required me to acknowledge this experience as different and unique from what I have understood to be true. It was not helpful for me to express a foregone conclusion as if I knew more about his experience than he did. When I initially did so, it resulted in more obstacles for our communication to overcome. The key to understanding this appeared to lie in suspending judgment and listening to Kyle’s perspective.

One of the quickest reactions I had of all was when Kyle brought up the opinion that we overreacted to the pandemic as a society. With certain individuals being far more vulnerable to the virus than others, and the number of deaths due to Covid and covid-related complications, I viewed it as another social justice issue. To me, it seemed insensitive at best, and egocentric at worst, to make such claims. It triggered an anger in me that brought me to a shortened temper and an escalated response of, “This is where I draw the line. People are dying.” At that moment, I failed to hear or understand Kyle’s perspective and why he holds this perspective. Our conversation that day, and any meaningful communication about the
issue, ended soon after my reaction. I began to reflect on whether it is even possible for individuals with such divergent perspectives on contemporary issues to understand one another. Worse, was I selling myself out by engaging in dialogue about a perspective that seemed so contrary to Truth to me? I continued to battle with these conflicting thoughts, of wanting to connect with this student and also wanting to not compromise and enable perspectives that I had considered to be destructive.

In retrospect, I felt very passionately about the issues, and I wish to examine that passion. It seems to emerge from a desire for social justice, yes, but also from an inner desire to be a person who cares about those things. Doing so makes me feel good about myself, and in this way, it can sometimes be self-serving. This also assumes that my perspective, typically reflecting my political leanings, is the only or the best way to solve problems related to social justice. The humility required for me to make this observation also fueled a growing realization that my perspective may not be the only way to address such things. This realization allowed me to see the limits of my perspective, that I had actually become somewhat attached to the way that I believe things should go, just as I had made a similar realization of my White privilege in recent years.

Kyle appeared to feel a similar passion about the issues, and the process of dialoguing about them led to heightened emotions, an intensity of frustration when combined with each of our own desires to be heard, and verbal escalations. I learned that there are times when I simply needed to stop talking and listen, such as the times when Kyle shared about his childhood struggle, his emotionally chaotic and financially disadvantaged background, and a painful experience in the Coast Guard of being passed over for an opportunity due to an affirmative action policy. During these moments, when I could sense his vulnerability and see the pain on his face, my egocentrism started to fade. Our interactions became less about proving a point, which I actually still hold, and more about connecting with this young man. Sharing my perspective and being heard and understood seemed less important, even trivial, in the face of this person who had himself experienced suffering. I yielded my so-called “need” to be understood to what I discovered was an even
greater yearning, coming from a deeper, even more relevant spiritual place, the desire to understand. I continue to marvel at the courage Kyle had in sharing his views, as well as the experiences that very reasonably and rationally informed them.

The transformation in how Kyle and I related to one another came with this discovery. It was a metamorphosis, with me starting as an individual being somewhat influenced by her environment, to movement toward a strength of resolve in standing in my own autonomy, to ultimately having an impetus to support Kyle while he genuinely searches for truth. Our conversation played out a developmental process that has paralleled in occurrence over my life span, a process in which I have gradually learned how to give support, without condition, to another person. As I developed in our relationship, my role in our interaction required a detachment of sorts so that another person, in this case, Kyle, could rest in the safety of the relationship while they continued to find the truth. In this way, my own search for truth continues in the process of expanding and contracting like breath, and with each sequence being more able to understand and accept (though not necessarily agree) than previously. As the dialogue between Kyle and me continued, what emerged was an understanding that though his methods and starting points are quite different, Kyle wants the same things that I do. He wants peace in the world, justice (in terms of equal opportunity though not necessarily outcome), and safety. As time progressed, I became less interested in dialoguing about the issues that started our conversation, through the usual two-hour tennis match, and more interested in how he was doing with it. I was more concerned about hurting him than before and chose my words very carefully when we did dialogue. I cared deeply about the person with whom I was dialoging. What I am describing is the development of care.

**The Takeaway: What We Learned from the Process**

**Kyle**

In the fall of 2021, as I read through the book, *Coddling of the American Mind* (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019), I significantly resonated with the
content found in chapter three. The title of this chapter was “The Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle of Good and Evil.” About six months into our conversation, I read this chapter and shifted the lens through which I saw the discussion. Until this point, I can reflect on how much the “us versus them” mindset framed the conversation. I entered with the goal of addressing this very mindset, but the goal was coming from the lens reflecting an “us versus them” mentality. I had seen the other solution to the problem being the problem very clearly, but I had not yet considered I might be on the same path in my patterns of dichotomous thinking. It is worth noting that, despite initially falling into the “us versus them” dichotomy in our early interactions, both of us recognized the harm inherent in this perspective. This acknowledgment formed the cornerstone that allowed our constructive dialogue to flourish. Assuming positive intent, even when Dr. Walker and I proposed differing solutions to a shared problem, fostered the patience and grace necessary to maintain this productive conversation.

Relationally, the most notable takeaway from this experience is finding peace with another person with such a distinctly different worldview. The “us versus them” is not a new concept, nor is it a trivial one. It appears to be the view we all resort to. Neither myself nor Dr. Walker would allow us to fall into that pattern. It was a time in my life when I needed to act out the concepts of truly having unconditional positive regard, empathy, grace, and love. These phrases are easy to model when all we do is surround ourselves in our echo chambers and dichotomize those who oppose us. It would have been easy for me to do so. The bittersweet result of this three-year (and counting) experiment is that I no longer can allow myself to stay in that very chamber. My views have not changed in principle, but I no longer see any one of my fellow men or women as the villain for holding an opposing view. I now crave more of these types of conversations. I crave those seeking conflict, not to prove them wrong or right, but to continue challenging our current climate’s pattern of dichotomization. It was hard work to navigate the forest of polarity, but I feel I have found a way out of being lost in the endless loop of polarity only ever leading me to more dissonance. I aim to pull as many people
down the path with me as possible. We as humans deserve to find our way out of this destructive dichotomy, and my prayer is that this experiment provides a method.

Biblically, I understand more now the complexity of finding what the truth is. It reminds me of that ancient proverb of blind men identifying the elephant. Based on our individual experiences with God, we have part of the story, but it is ignorant of us to present our findings as though they show the whole picture. It took three years of interacting in this dialogue, sharing differing views and interpretations of scripture, applying them in different ways, and finally trying to bring ourselves back to our shared view of the authority for me to figure out how it was possible to come to such different conclusions about what was right. I had only ever known the opposing view to be “just wrong.” Moreover, I applied hostile intent to why they would espouse such antithetical beliefs. At the end of our conversation, there was no negative intent to be found. We both profess a love for Jesus, seek His will over ours, and find ourselves missing the application of grace aspect of the balance between truth and grace Jesus modeled. It is essential to show the grace Jesus modeled in the pursuit of showing us the truth. He presented Truth but did so in a way where his intent was always clearly motivated by his love for us. “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’” (New International Version, 2011, Luke 23:34). He understands human struggles, and lovingly propels us to a life free from the patterns of sin that lead to pain (Hebrews 5: 15-16). I can say, from my perspective, that it was because I leaned into seeking the balance that Jesus modeled; I now feel less hate, less anxiety, less frustration, and less animosity. I feel more peace, love, passion, and purpose than when I entered. I continue to engage, but allow the Holy Spirit to guide how I do so (most of the time).

Deepening My Faith
The most crucial part involved in this process is the deepening of my faith. It was no longer okay to sit with the “well, that’s what the Bible says” argument. It is not that my belief in the sufficiency of the Bible changed, but the depth in which I knew what it was addressing, contextually and spiritually. Having conversations in long forms, such as with Dr. Walker,
served as the necessary motivation to deepen my understanding of what it was I was believing and, in turn, deepened my faith in it. One thing to note, like the scientific method, I had to engage in this journey with the assumption that I might be wrong and be hungry for something that might disprove what I believed. At the same time, I would balance these conversations, along with the content they drove me to, with the exploration and conversations with those who played a part in developing my schemas in the first place. Holding the two divergent ideas up against each other equally allowed for clarity on where we differ and why we do. I could go forth and use this deeper understanding to pull those on my side of the dichotomy away from the polarity pathway they were on.

Andrea

My takeaways from this experiment involve living within an Ethic of Care, forming a habit of recognizing common experiences among us and cultivating self-awareness. What does it mean to live with an Ethic of Care? Jesus, religious scholars, and counseling researchers all point to the importance of this component. For Christians, Jesus’s primary command offers the most meaning. This command was articulated in John 13:34 as, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (*New International Version*, 2011). For many Christians, this is the most important command and central to what it means to be a Christian. Religious scholarship also mirrors this with Karen Armstrong’s writings, who studied all the major world religions to identify what these religions have in common (see Armstrong, 2011). She discovered that the common thread is compassion and the importance of being intentional about not harming others. This is meaningful to Christians through the Golden Rule, “do to others what you would have them do to you” (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 7:12). Armstrong’s words, “It is more important to be compassionate than it is to be right” (Armstrong, 2008), speak well to any tendencies we have toward debates or intellectual conversations over presumed truths. Finally, the counseling literature has replicated a similar finding in empirical studies on predictors of positive change, finding that the single most
important predictor of positive change is the therapeutic relationship (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Experiencing a safe, supportive relationship, in which a person can be “held” while managing their thoughts and feelings appears to be a necessary condition for finding resolution and creating a peaceful existence. Given all of this evidence, it was necessary for me to live out the dialogue with Kyle within an Ethic of Care, in order for me to remain consistent with my values and the scientific evidence. But doing so was not something that was forced or took a great deal of effort. Recognizing the human behind the perspective came naturally in this situation. As Kyle described his early family, emotional and health struggles, and the challenges his current family faced relocating to Tulsa, it was easy to understand his perspective and how it came to be. It is difficult to stay polarized after understanding how a person’s lived experience comes into play. And this has the effect of melting the polarization in the conversation.

The next major takeaway is engaging in dialogue in which one is searching for what is similar and common to both perspectives. This involves wholehearted acceptance that neither person is inherently better than the other. For Christians I would hope that this comes naturally; for instance, Romans 3:10 states, “There is no one righteous, not even one”. Further, Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (New International Version, 2011). In addition to adding to our sense of humility, these verses speak to the idea that we are all in the same boat. In addition to Biblical scripture, counseling research also speaks to the importance of a sense of common humanity. Deliberately recognizing how our situations are similar to others increases a sense of compassion and connectedness and protects against narcissism (Neff, 2011). Finding a sense of common humanity also helps build self-compassion, which, ironically predicts higher levels of altruism, empathic concern, and compassion for others (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Though Kyle and I originally occupied very different perspectives on the topics mentioned in this manuscript, similarities emerged. We both highly value and seek more social justice in the world. We both want a world that values every person equally while recognizing and appreciating individual differences and unique paths. We
both want safety and peace in our worlds for our children and ourselves. Though we describe quite different ways of getting there, our similarities are stronger and more prevalent than our differences.

The final takeaway for me is being aware of what I feel and why I feel it. This is especially important in terms of one’s ego and when it creeps into the process of dialoging. When one becomes so attached to a perspective that they identify with it, a dangerous thing can occur; they stop questioning it. In this way, it is very important to maintain humility, in terms of honesty with oneself about what one believes and how one interacts with others about it. Remember I Corinthians 13:4-7, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (New International Version, 2011). Another important outcome of self-awareness is lightheartedness and humor; when we are humble, it is okay to laugh at ourselves when we notice ourselves being too attached to a perspective. Over time, my conversations with Kyle took on a playful tone, and the intensity of our conversations would relax into laughing. In this way, we became willing to accept influence when appropriate. I am now much more aware of what I say, both in and out of class, related to Whiteness and other political perspectives, and seek to find ways of expressing myself honestly while promoting relationship development with others and avoiding triggering others with different perspectives. I do this by, again, looking for areas of agreement and common experiences we share.

There is a necessity for commitment to and engagement in the work. There are times when the dialogue feels uncomfortable, frustrating, and confusing. The work involves the transformation of these experiences into a willingness to manage the tension, acceptance, curiosity, and commitment. At any point, one of us could have made a judgment about the level of productivity of our discussions and gotten too busy to reschedule. But we both seemed to recognize the importance of our interactions, that there was a higher truth guiding us to continue to try
and understand one another. We both committed to the process and in this way, we both became more hopeful about the fractured division that is our current social milieu. Without this inner guidance of the Holy Spirit, I do not believe we would be writing this article today. The lesson would have been lost. Putting forth great effort yields great rewards.

Implications: One Unified Voice

To summarize, we both discovered and/or deepened our understanding of several truths, and we speak to them here in our collective, unified voice.

1. Christianity is a non-political orientation. Being Christian means being a follower of Jesus and Jesus’s spiritual counterpart, the Holy Spirit, and is not synonymous with aligning with a particular political party.

2. Integration is complex. In a higher education context for counseling, being both Spirit-Empowered and Christian involves a complex process of integrating our understanding of human development, creation, and the scientific process with the teachings and message of Jesus as depicted in Biblical scripture. What appears as a straightforward process can become quite complex as we consider the views and assumptions held by Christians based on unique life experiences and influences of family values.

3. Those who follow Jesus are diverse. While Christians from a myriad of backgrounds generally try to adhere to Jesus’s commandments to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (New International Version, 2011, Mark 12:30-31), the ways in which Christians seek to fulfill these commands vary significantly. Although we may not agree with all the methods each other uses and may strongly disagree with some, we believe that people across the entire political spectrum can fulfill this command.
4. It is important to assume positive intent in others with different views. At times, our both holding this assumption was the strand that kept us committed to bridge-building.

5. Commit to the process, but do not try to control it. We never succeeded in “winning the other over to our side.” The purpose of dialogue must be to understand, not to change, the other. Express gratitude for the opportunity to learn from the other person.

6. Dichotomies are almost always false, and false dichotomization leads to polarization. We found that when we viewed the topics of our discussions through a socially constructed dichotomy, such as “Democrat vs. Republican,” it led to an oversimplification of the issue and, inevitably, assumptions made about the other. We learned to embrace the complexity of each issue.

7. Staying connected keeps us healthy. Psychological flourishing, which encompasses positive change, occurs in the context of connectedness to the community (Munoz et al., 2020). In maintaining relationships, we fulfill God’s command to love one another, and by continuing to love each other, despite our differences, we will heal our political fractures and our communities.

**Conclusions**

In retrospect, we both see that, though frustrating and difficult at times, the three-year dialogue became a relationship-building, grace-embodying, and Truth-discovering process. Our commitment to this process led to the realization of solutions to the initial problem we identified, society’s tendency to forego what is in the best interest of the community for the sake of self. The process was helpful for the student to develop his professional counselor identity and for the instructor to better understand the perspectives and needs of some students. We built a bridge across the expanse of our political perspectives to create a separate space in which we could appreciate our differences without
judgment of the other. Perhaps more relevant was our realization of the diverse ways of integrating Christian faith principles into our real-world experiences and our expanded appreciation for that diversity. In this way, our Spirit-empowered, Christian university community is strengthened, and we are better able to draw upon the psychological benefits of its membership.

Kyle N. Stueber (kandkstueber@gmail.com) is a Licensed Professional Counselor Candidate, Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor Candidate, and Integrated Team Manager at Grand Mental Health in Tulsa, OK. He is an alumnus of the Graduate School of Counseling in the College of Theology & Ministry at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA. Andrea C. Walker (awalker@oru.edu) is Senior Professor of Professional Counseling and Assistant Dean, Graduate School of Counseling, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA.

References


THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIVES OF COUNSELORS
REFRAMING THE FOCUS

GREG A. MEYER

Keywords spirituality, counselor education, counseling students, reframing, lives

Abstract

The term spirituality is often hard to hear without prior, preconceived ideas and bias attached to it, and is often used interchangeably with other words, depending on one’s past and culture. The field of counselor education and supervision has also used the term in ambiguous ways, which has led to apprehension and a lack of clarity with which the term is taught and understood. This paper explains the historical focus of spirituality within the counselor education field, then redefines the focus towards the lives of counselors, but more specifically the lives of counseling students and the impact counselor educators might have on reframing the term as an explanatory definition that is innate and unique to all people. Implications, exploration, counseling ethics, and future considerations are also presented.

Spirituality has become an unavoidable topic in the field of counselor education. Professional counseling organizations (e.g., the American
Counseling Association [ACA], 2005, 2014), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009, 2016), the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES, 2011), the Association for Spiritual Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC, 2009) publish documents and guidelines demonstrating the standards and necessity for counselors to have an awareness of spiritual issues, particularly as it relates to working with clients from various faith or religious backgrounds. In turn, counselor educators would likely model these standards through teaching and supervising activities, understanding one’s students’ and supervisees’ unique faith, religious, or spiritual backgrounds, and mirroring the different guidelines published by professional organizations.

It is also important that students are able to understand and recognize the differences between beliefs based on religious doctrines and those based on spirituality (ASERVIC, 2009). Spirituality and religion tend to be used interchangeably (Hall & Edwards, 2002; Pargament, 1997; Slife & Richards, 2001; Watts, 2001) and spirituality is often used to refer to generic religious concerns, other-worldly, or theological concepts (Helminiak, 2011). Differentiating the terms spirituality from religion has become quite a large task and is the origin of this article, as attempting to synthesize and integrate the range of descriptions might provide an opportunity to utilize the proposed spirituality definition in the counselor education field. Religion, on the other hand, is less difficult to define, and assists to frame spirituality as a unique term offering direction for the counselor education profession. Religion can be defined as the communal and creedal expression of spirituality that orients individuals to the sacred and divine (Benner, 2007). In other words, religion is the structure for a socially defined spiritual community, whereby practices and external traditions are enacted (Cashwell & Young, 2020).

This conceptual article is meant to draw attention to an aspect rarely considered by counseling education programs and, subsequently, in the lives of counselors, which is the role spirituality plays in the counseling practitioner’s life, both professionally and personally. There is a need for counselors to be aware of and examine their own spiritual
constructions and the role these constructions have played in their own developmental processes (Burke & Miranti, 1995; Grimm, 1994; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000). Attention is focused on the term *spirituality* and the conceptualization of the term. Discussion will center on considerations of a more explanatory definition of spirituality, and its implications for teaching and supervising counseling practitioners. The purpose of this article is to bring forth the possible strengths of understanding spirituality from a non-theological framework and how this produces the need to examine the spiritual identity of the counselor. Considerations for ethical practice of counselor education and supervision as it relates to examining and exploring graduate counseling student spirituality are discussed.

**Spirituality in Counselors**

Despite the call for counselors to self-reflect upon and become aware of their spiritual constructions (Burke & Miranti, 1995; Grimm, 1994; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000) there has been unclear consensus in how counselors have come to understand the religious and spiritual elements within the counseling profession (Cashwell & Young, 2004). Historically, professional counseling organizations have brought up the topic of spirituality, religion, spirit, values, and more recently how these constructs relate to multicultural respect or honoring the systems within which clients seek to build community and meaning in their lives (ACA, 2005, 2014; ACES, 2011; ASERVIC, 2009; CACREP, 2016). ASERVIC created a more detailed awareness of the topic of spirituality by publishing spiritual competencies, first in 1996 and later the revised 14 Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling (2009). In 2011, ACES addressed the multicultural element of supervision to include spirituality, religion, and values. The ASERVIC competencies also influenced CACREP’s counselor education core curriculum standards (2009) to include counselor training in spiritual and religious topics, however training has primarily focused on assisting counselors in working with the client’s spirituality rather than the importance of the counselor’s spirituality.
Despite the progress made by CACREP, ACA and the ASERVIC division, there are significant variations in counselor education program course syllabi addressing spirituality in counseling (Cashwell & Young, 2004). ASERVIC Competencies (2009), numbers three, four and five all relate to counselor self-awareness: The professional counselor actively explores his/her own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion; the professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his/her own spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on the client and the counseling process; the professional counselor can identify the limits of his/her understanding of the client’s spiritual and/or religious perspective and is acquainted with religious and spiritual resources and leaders who can be avenues for consultation and to whom the counselor can refer.

The counseling and spirituality research focuses on a select number of topics, rarely dealing with ASERVIC (2009) Competencies three, four and five. Most of the literature deals with the following issues: what must counselors know to be effective with spiritual/religious issues (Cashwell & Young, 2020); the past neglect of working with client’s spiritual issues (Bergin, 1980; Frame, 2003; Hodge, 2001; Richards & Bergin, 2005); a lack of formal training in working with spiritual issues (Burke et al., 1999; Frame, 2003); addressing the need to include spiritual concerns in counseling programs (CACREP, 2009); and the spiritual competencies required within practitioners and throughout counselor education curriculum (ASERVIC, 2009; Cashwell & Young, 2020; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009). A paucity of literature focusing on the spirituality within counselors and counselor educators has potentially created a lack of clarity and understanding of spirituality and specifically, spiritual identity development of the counselor (Hage, 2006; Poll & Smith, 2003). Counselors are asked to examine their own spiritual constructions and the role these constructions have played in their own developmental processes (Burke & Miranti, 1995; Grimm, 1994; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000), and yet, counseling students report feeling confused from their counselor education experiences about addressing spiritual and religious issues, unsure if addressing the issues may be causing...
The Role of Spirituality in the Lives of Counselors

harm, imposing personal values, or unethical (Adams, 2012). The ethical climate of the counseling profession may have also deterred counselor educators and supervisors from being willing to engage in these self-reflective discussions regarding individual counseling student’s spirituality for fear that personal values may conflict with professional ethical codes leading to ethical gatekeeping requirements. Notably, cases based on incidents at two separate institutions, where personal values related to sexual orientation, were determined to be in conflict with the requirements of the ACA Code of Ethics (Shallcross, 2010). Jennifer Keeton, a counseling student at Augusta State University, was required to enter a remediation program after stating she planned to tell gay clients that homosexuality was wrong, based on her religious beliefs. Additionally, Julea Ward was dismissed from her graduate program at Eastern Michigan University, for refusing to counsel clients who might wish to discuss homosexual relationships, as it did not coincide with the personal morality associated with her religion. These incidents illustrate the necessity to explicitly focus on the spirituality of counselors during their training, as the concern for beliefs and ethics that characterizes religion has existed from the start of humanity (Helminiak, 1996), and while counselors are ethically trained to avoid imposing their values on clients (ACA, 2014); most researchers agree that therapist values are inescapable (Slife & Richards, 2001).

Explanatory Spirituality

The term spirituality is often difficult to hear without bias as personal definitions of the term are often based on one’s deep culture (Shaules, 2007) which fuses together often unquestioned ideas and themes from one’s past and perceived identity. Defining spirituality outside of the counseling profession, Sheldrake (2012) states that contemporary definitions of the term are less well-defined but consistently relate to fully integrated approach to life, or a style that is engaged with a search for the sacred which may be related to a belief about God, or perhaps the numinous, depths of human existence, or mysteries of the cosmos. Often linked to
thriving, spirituality is engaged in finding meaning, identity and personal development. Spirituality relates to a sense of ultimate values rather than instrumentalized attitude of life, and this might suggest a self-reflective existence rather than an unexamined life (Sheldrake, 2012).

Within the counseling field literature, the term spirituality has historically been difficult to define as it is a complex, multidimensional construct, sometimes used synonymously with “religion” or “faith,” sometimes there is little connection (Benner, 1998). While the term spirituality is often thought of, in general terms, as linked to religion, the practice of spirituality may be considered to go beyond religious practices and connect individuals with something larger than the self. However, within the counseling and counselor education profession, there has been little consensus within the literature over the last 20 years, and the terms are often used interchangeably, as many still make no distinction between the two terms (Cashwell & Young, 2020). Counseling educators have mostly used anecdotal accounts of personal experiences when educating counselors-in-training on spirituality or spiritual topics (Horton-Parker & Fawcett, 2010). In addition, the term spirituality, has been used in less than intentional ways, oftentimes conveying a general, descriptive, and often inspirational emphasis, based on traditions, sacred texts and the how-to’s of spiritual practice; rather than an explanatory (Helminiak, 2011, p. 598), inherently human structure, which influences all persons’ ultimate perception of value in one’s life.

For the purposes of this conceptual article, notable definitions from the counseling field have been integrated to comprise a thorough definition of the term spirituality, which may demonstrate the usefulness of counselor educators and supervisors adopting an approach of humility and curiosity regarding counseling students’ and supervisees’ spiritual constructions. Spirituality is a universal human capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons (Cashwell & Young, 2020; Helminiak, 1996; Lonergan, 1972; Myers & Willard, 2003; Piedmont, 2007; Young et al., 2007). This human phenomenon becomes motivated to generate, search for or construct a set of meanings, concerns, values, beliefs or ethics about life and the ultimate reality or existence (Gilchrist, 1992; Helminiak, 1996,
This creates an individual’s essence (Gilchrist, 1992) and typically increases or produces growth, responsibility, awareness, or self-other compassion and love (Cashwell & Young, 2020; Myers & Willard, 2003).

Implications for an explanatory definition of spirituality suggest that to be human is to be spiritual, only differing in intentionality or spiritual practice and response. Additionally, not all spiritualities are religious, as it relates to what makes life meaningful, provides identity, and produces personal development, growth, or transcendence. In other words, one’s spirituality does not need to be introduced to an individual, only attended to, listened for, or explored. This would include paying attention to lifestyles, themes, motivations, resistances, or defenses.

Because spirituality is a universal human phenomenon, even counselors are motivated to generate meaning, values, beliefs or ethics about their existence and purpose, including their role as a counseling practitioner. A counselor’s professional identity is a significant component to the structure of his/her meaning, beliefs about existence, or spirituality. A definition that assists counseling students and supervisees to understand their individual spirituality comprises many different parts of their existence, including vocational and religious aspects that might have positive ramifications in the counselor education and supervision field.

Ethical and political cases regarding counselor education and freedom of counselor values have drawn attention to the role religion and spirituality play in counselor education. Because the general population, and counselor education field, lack clarity in differentiating between spirituality and other similar words (i.e., religion, faith) (Cashwell & Young, 2020), spirituality could be a difficult word to hear clearly, without stimulating strong emotional responses, laden with moral overtones of critical images and possibly producing reactions of guilt, rules, and punishment. These challenges may negatively impact the overall value and usefulness of the spirituality construct. Ethical battles related to counseling student freedom of values have highlighted the importance of considering the way in which we educate and encourage counselor development. Counselor educators and supervisors would be wise to
explicitly focus on the explanatory definition of spirituality, relating it to a curiosity and willingness to discuss the spirituality of the counselor, without confusing the term with other terms (i.e., religion) while counselors are trained. This would likely model how to demonstrate curiosity about one’s spirituality while avoiding imposing their religious values (ACA, 2014).

**Implications**

Counselors are humans, motivated to generate meaning, values, beliefs, or ethics about their purpose, including their role as a counselor. CACREP (2016) has indicated the value and necessity for counseling practitioners to consistently reflect on their professional identity and development. Throughout counselor education programs, counselors are told repeatedly to become aware of their values and bias so that they are aware when personal bias has the potential to negatively impact the counseling relationship. If an explanatory definition of spirituality is utilized in counselor education and supervision, and approached from a multicultural perspective, rather than a religious, inspirational, or theological perspective, whereby students are encouraged to explore how their spirituality and values impact their philosophy and practice of counseling (Osborn et al., 2012), then spirituality could be the word we use to comprise the self-reflective skill in examining values, bias, and meaning making. Utilizing spirituality as the multicultural perspective to facilitate focus on the universal human capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons, including counseling practitioners, then the basis of spiritual exploration might influence counselor educators and supervisors to explore and encourage counseling students to begin the integration of all of their identities with their spirituality, thereby creating less of a need to sacrifice one’s religious beliefs, than to reflect on the value of being a people helper, their spiritual longings to help others, and how this informs or conflicts with their religious or theological preconceptions. This integration of values would only create congruence for counseling practitioners.
Exploration

When counselor educators model genuine interest in the counseling students’ process of making meaning, they assist students to pay attention to their own spiritual and existential constructions. This exploration would likely result in counseling students’ increased level of self-exploration. The needs of any counseling practitioner include personal development, encompassing personal understanding, awareness, and knowledge; as well as self-discovery and clarification (Henrikson et al., 2015). Personal examination of counseling students’ and supervisees’ spiritual values may constitute experiential learning (e.g., spiritual life inventories, process groups, spiritual retreats, etc.), and they should be assisted to purposely integrate experiential exercises and discussions to facilitate deeper exploration of belief systems (Adams, 2012). The curiosity of the counselor educator and supervisor is essential in drawing out counseling students’ existential attempt to construct meaning in pursuing their specific career as a counselor.

It is relevant to explore one’s values as counselors and how one’s spiritual (existential) values influence one’s philosophy and practice of counseling, so as to draw attention to the “counseling” activity having a presence within the practitioners’ spiritual values. As the counseling student engages in self-exploration, resistance to opening up about their own spirituality, which could produce defensiveness from the outset, may be minimized. Counselor educators and supervisors can help dissipate the disconnect between the exploration of religious and spiritual issues with graduate training programs (Adams, 2012). This would also facilitate and encourage the use of developmental theories of spiritual development (e.g., Fowler, 1981; Helminiak, 1987). Demonstrating curiosity of the counseling student or supervisee would include asking questions and designing educational activities to draw out where the counseling students’ desire to help others fits with their spirituality. Additionally, asking about what part of their faithing (Fowler, 1981) motivates them to seek to help others demonstrates curiosity. Focusing on counselor’s spirituality in counselor education has the power to significantly impact therapeutic, educational, and supervisory relationships. If counselor educators
continue approaching the term *spirituality* from a theological, religious, or inspirational framework, they may risk consenting to counseling students’ and supervisees’ failure to question their individual biases and motivations for becoming counselors; directly impacting their ability to actively seek to understand the diverse spiritual backgrounds of the clients they serve (ACA, 2014). In other words, assuming a counseling student’s spirituality consists only of their religious or theological values is likely to create tension within the counseling student to seek to avoid or discriminate against diverse clients, or perhaps to feel compelled to share their own theological opinions or inspirational values with a client who does not share those same values. As counselor educators participate in this explanatory spiritual exploration of counseling students, they become participants in the parallel process (Gross Doehrman, 1976) of embodying spiritual exploration and, in turn, theoretically the counseling student then is likely to demonstrate that same ethical process to their clients in the therapeutic exploration.

**Ethics**

Both religion and spirituality can have a positive impact on physical, emotional, and psychological wellness and serve as an important coping resource during difficult times in life (ASERVIC, 2009). Individuals come to counseling somewhere along a continuum of psychospiritual development, and with a belief system that answers important questions for them, as do counseling students entering graduate school. As counseling students experience the stresses and challenges of graduate counseling didactic and experiential work, diverse and complex ideas and experiences transpire, significantly shaping and transforming graduate counseling students to reimagine their world and ideas of what it means to be human, to experience pain, and what it means to help another human with unique experiences and values of their own. Counseling students experience moments that bring into focus their own coping strategies, forcing them to utilize aspects of their identities and existential frameworks and inevitably to develop psychospirituality, emotionally, theologically, and interpersonally. Regardless of an individual’s particular religious conviction, or the lack
thereof, everyone is making meaning of their lives and developing values in some way, as they progress through a graduate counseling program. The values of the practitioner are generally recognized as not only pervading the therapy session but also inevitably influencing the client (Bergin et al., 1996; Tjeltveit, 1999). Therefore, one of the most valuable actions as a professional counselor is to be client focused, and by modeling this focus as a counselor educator or supervisor to counseling students and supervisees, they experience the same ethical parallel process (Gross Doehrman, 1976) in the training relationship.

Through understanding spirituality as the process by which humans structure their individual set of meanings, values, beliefs and ethics (Helminiak, 2011), it appears the ACA is not asking practitioners to sacrifice their religion or what they believe; rather, they are requesting practitioners to reflect on their personal desires of being people helpers, especially if one holds such a definitive theological agenda. This allows an opportunity for the practitioner to integrate the two values (i.e., religious beliefs, professional/vocational motivations) of meaning in the practitioner’s life. By modeling the curiosity and focus on the counseling student’s or supervisee’s values—rather than instructing them to not consider their values, or by sharing their own personal values—counselor educators might facilitate the process of self-reflection necessary to integrate students’ professional motivations with their religious beliefs. In a similar way when counselors offer reflection and genuine exploration of their clients, they assist clients to integrate spoken values with lived experiences to create congruence. Counselors should consider if their spirituality centers on helping others or possessing the correct religious/theological belief, as these two values may comprise an ethical inconsistency, and integrating the two may create a healthier spiritual congruence.

Cultural competence, curiosity, empathy, and a complete understanding of spirituality may be the most ethical way to approach counseling. Ethical practice and cultural competence are naturally intertwined: one must have cultural competence to counsel ethically, and an understanding of ethics is necessary for cultural competence (Lee, 2015). The first step toward working ethically and culturally with clients is to explore their
own cultural identities and how these affect their values and beliefs about the counseling process (ACA, 2014). There is also a risk of confusing a religious or theological belief or agenda with the humanistic root of the counseling profession, which may justify neglecting ethical and legal responsibilities. Again, the values of the practitioner tend to exist in the counseling sessions, and inevitably influence the client, despite practitioners’ best attempts to remain value neutral (Bergin et al., 1996; Tjeltveit, 1999). Therefore, self-awareness of one’s spirituality may allow counseling practitioners to increase empathy, remain client focused, affirm diversity without interference of personal bias, avoid burn-out, as well as seek personal wellness. Inconsistencies between one’s assumed ultimate concerns and values with his or her lived ultimate concerns and values may be responsible for discomfort, anxiety, or professional stagnation. In-depth exploration of spirituality, religion, and counseling values or existential meaning-making within a safe and affirming counselor education program may provide the opportunity for graduate counseling students to reconcile, integrate, and develop the inconsistencies between the counselor’s assumed ultimate concerns with his or her lived ultimate concerns.

Discussion

With the explanatory definition of spirituality specifically focusing on the uniqueness of all people to construct their own ultimate reality or existence, one may question ways counselor educators might work to facilitate the counseling student’s progression of spiritual construction. If the following serves as the definition of spirituality—the universal human capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons (Cashwell & Young, 2020; Helminiak, 1996; Lonergan, 1972; Myers & Willard, 2003; Piedmont, 2007; Young et al., 2007), whereby a phenomenon exists where individuals are motivated to generate, search for or construct a set of meanings, concerns, values, beliefs or ethics about life and the ultimate reality or existence (Gilchrist, 1992; Helminiak, 1996, 2011; Lonergan, 1972; Myers & Willard, 2003; Piedmont, 2007), creating an individual’s essence (Gilchrist, 1992) and typically increases or produces growth,
responsibility, awareness, or self-other compassion and love (Cashwell & Young, 2020; Myers & Willard, 2003)—then various activities may positively impact the counseling student’s ethical growth as a counselor. In turn, counselor educators must also be aware of the limitations and boundaries with which to approach the exploration of counseling students’ and supervisees’ explanatory and innate spirituality.

The ACA (2014) code of ethics indicates that counselors are to explore their own cultural identities. An individual practitioner’s personal existential constructs directly link to their own cultural identities, so the goal through counselor education would be to design activities to empower counseling students, in a safe and open environment, to explore, question, and integrate his or her existential constructs, or spirituality. Activities and relationships introduced by the counselor educator and supervisor to facilitate counseling student self-reflection is what influences theoretical underpinnings and therefore directly impacts a counselor’s ethical and multicultural counseling identity, among other things. Additionally, the potential to develop specific courses to address the spirituality of the counselor, or explicitly addressing the spirituality of the counseling student in legal and ethical courses (likely unavoidable as case law progresses) or multicultural counseling courses is paramount. Legal and ethical counseling courses, as well as multicultural counseling courses often touch on the topics of religion or spirituality, but this is mostly through the lens of the client and teaching the counseling students to maintain awareness of their bias as to not influence the client. The shift toward explicit exploration of the counseling student’s personal spirituality might involve activities like religious/spiritual autobiographies, religious/spiritual genograms, or spiritual life maps (Hodge, 2001, 2005). Utilizing encounter (process) groups, and exposure to research on spirituality would also allow counseling students to focus outside of their underlying assumptions, while creating an environment of support for the counseling student, directly addressing issues related to the spiritual domain, in order to self-reflect on the multi-faceted parts of his or her identity they are allowed to integrate together to create spiritual congruence.
Typically, graduate counseling students are referred to traditional psychotherapy or counseling, especially within the humanistic or holistic traditions, to further their individual spiritual development and awareness (Helminiak, 1996). However, this historical practice might be more out of fear of handling this development and awareness in-house, as part of a counseling student’s professional identity development. Graduate counseling schools tend to become risk-averse when approaching graduate counseling student values exploration due to the myriad of instances previously discussed. However, religiously affiliated counselor education programs may be uniquely positioned to offer traditional religious techniques to assist in similar functions of spiritual development and awareness (i.e., meditation, prayer, retreats, fasting, isolation, readings, spiritual direction, service opportunities, and worship). Helminiak (1996) recommends these techniques should be understood scientifically so that those who prescribe them to counseling students recognize and highlight their valid aspects, rather than focus on the superstitious or even harmful properties or byproducts of the techniques. Much of Helminiak’s academic career was devoted to understanding these specific properties, and this is a direction the field of counselor education and supervision has yet to explore thoroughly. Additionally, the counselor education field would benefit from the development of a text that addresses both the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (2009) with the psychology of spirituality, for potential use in exploring counseling student spirituality and spiritual identity, as there is with courses in multicultural counseling (i.e., Sue & Sue, 2008). A text like this might include topics such as spiritual lifespan development, spiritual identity, motivational orientation of a practitioner’s intrinsic or extrinsic quest, the relationship between spirituality as a humanistic paradigm and a theistic paradigm, transcendent experiences, meaning-making, and the impact these topics have on the therapeutic relationship with clients.

Utilizing the explanatory definition of spirituality, specifically focusing on the implication of practitioners constructing their own ultimate reality or existence, the counselor education and supervision research base is in need of development. An area of research that is both limited and in need of updates is the mysteries surrounding the reasons and purposes for why individuals
choose to become counselors, and then what shifts along the process of counselor education to facilitate spiritual and professional congruence within individuals, to produce counselor wellness and sustainability in such a personally challenging profession. The ACA doesn’t appear to be asking practitioners to sacrifice who they are and what they believe, but the counselor education and supervision process naturally affords the opportunity for practitioners to explore the intentions of their personal desires of being people helpers, especially if there is a definitive personal agenda. There is a risk of assuming they are fulfilling a higher calling, which sometimes prompts counseling students to attempt to justify neglecting ethical and multicultural responsibilities. Historically, this is not uncommon among counseling professionals who justify their actions or unethical approaches through religious or spiritual beliefs, but more research needs to be conducted on counselors’ ultimate concerns for existence, the way they structure personal and professional meanings, as well as values and beliefs, and this could be all encompassing of the term spirituality. These are only a few directions the professional counseling and counselor education field could explore the process of professional identity development pertaining to counseling practitioner values. This article is an attempt to draw attention to the potential benefits of using the term spirituality as an explanatory definition that is innate and unique to all people.

Greg A. Meyer (gmeyer@oru.edu) is Associate Professor of Professional Counseling in the Graduate School of Counseling at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA.

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EXPLORING HOW PENTECOSTALS PREACH ABOUT DEPRESSION

ROBERT D. MCBAIN

Keywords depression, mental health, church, Pentecostalism, homiletics, preaching, Assemblies of God, United States

Abstract

A qualitative analysis was completed on twelve sermons into how Pentecostal preachers talk about depression from the pulpit using the Assemblies of God (AG) as a purposive sample. Findings illustrate that preachers talked about faulty thinking as the source of depression and interpreted depression as a transformative journey occurring within the context of a God encounter where the believer fixed their faulty thinking. While the way the preachers interpreted depression is not without critique, the article suggests that preaching about depression as a journey of encounter may help listeners frame their depression experiences within a narrative framework that helps them find meaning amid their depression experiences.

Introduction

This article is an exploratory study into how Pentecostal preachers talk about depression from the pulpit using the Assemblies of God (AG) as a purposive sample. American Pentecostalism emerged in the early 1900s due to various historical, theological, and sociological factors that led to
a new expression of the Christian life (Cerillo, 1997). Pentecostalism now consists of many diverse groups whose primary focus is the experience and working of the Spirit in their lives (Anderson, 2010a, pp. 4-6). The AG is a Classical Pentecostal denomination with diachronous and synchronous links with early twentieth-century revival and missionary movements and a theology of a subsequent experience of Spirit baptism (Anderson, 2010b). The AG consists of 13,000 churches and 3 million members in the USA and 464 churches in Oklahoma (Assemblies of God, 2021). The study holds to a constructivist understanding of depression in that how sufferers understand, interpret, and respond to depression is shaped by personal, social, and cultural contexts. Because preaching plays a formative role in Pentecostalism, this study assumes that how depression is presented from the pulpit will contribute to shaping a Pentecostal’s experience of depression. While the study does not extend towards discussing how preaching shapes depression experiences, the study does take the first step by providing a qualitative analysis of how depression is talked about from the pulpit and discusses the significance of these findings.

Research Background

Pentecostalism And Depression

Koenig (2005) argues that depression is a psychological-biological state in which a person feels sad, loses interest in things, and has little energy or motivation to do anything and that people who are depressed may have trouble sleeping, concentrating, or eating and have thoughts of suicide and self-harm. While everyone will experience the mental states associated with depression at some point in life (Jackson, 1986), these states become a clinical disorder when experienced in greater severity and duration than usual (Koenig, 2005). Diagnosis involves the clinician medicalizing the patients’ experiences according to the psychiatric diagnostic manual’s criteria. The perspectives that dominate clinical diagnosis are criticized for dismissing the role sociocultural context plays in depression’s etiology, expression, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment (Marsella, 2003). Many studies substantiate claims that how sufferers understand, experience,
interpret, and respond to depression is embedded in personal, social, and cultural contexts (Abrams & Curran, 2009; Fenton & Sangster, 1996; Foli, 2010; Huang & Fang, 2015).

There is little research about how the Pentecostal context might contribute to shaping Pentecostal depression experiences. What research there is about Pentecostals and depression is generally written within the disciplines of counseling and psychology (Calbreath, 2013; Dobbins, 2014; Trice & Bjork, 2006). These studies discuss clinical issues, Pentecostal perceptions of depression, implications for counseling and psychotherapy, and suggested treatments and interventions. While these studies helpfully describe Pentecostals and depression, they are objective and draw their assumptions and practices from the positivist paradigm. Resultingly, the studies do not contribute to a thick description of what it is like for a Pentecostal to suffer from depression that subsequently helps to understand how factors in the Pentecostal context might shape their depression experiences.

Allan (2019) conducted a phenomenological study into experiences of depression amongst Pentecostals and Charismatics in the UK. Allan’s study revealed that Pentecostal depression experiences are shaped within a relationship nexus of other people, their selves, their diagnoses, their church communities, and God. Her findings were similar to Swinton’s (2001) phenomenological study into the depression experiences of non-Pentecostal Christians. Swinton showed that a Christian’s experience of depression is entwined and shaped by their perception and experience of God, how they read the Bible, their Christian tradition, and their relationship with other Christians. The main difference between Allan’s and Swinton’s findings is that Swinton’s participants did not mention the Spirit or spiritual gifts, whereas Allan’s participants regularly mentioned both. Allan’s participants’ views of the Spirit and spiritual gifts appear to be the main factor that made Allan’s study distinctively Pentecostal compared to Swinton’s. Allan’s different emphasis on the Spirit corresponds with Cartledge’s (2012) claims about Pentecostal spirituality being more distinctively pneumatological than other Christian expressions of spirituality.
Pentecostal Preaching and Depression

Allan’s (2019) and Swinton’s (2001) studies show that many factors shape a Pentecostal’s depression experience. This study concerns preaching, specifically how Pentecostal preachers talk about depression from the pulpit. Preaching is typically embedded within the context of the worship service. Wilkinson (2020) argues that worship is central to who Pentecostals are and how they understand God, themselves, and the world. He describes worship as a kinesthetic, therapeutic, and socially engaged Spirit-energized Christocentric transformative encounter between the gathering faith community and God. Albrecht (1992) similarly explains how the Pentecostal worship service provides the space for personal and collective reflexivity that causes transformation, personal conversions, healings, empowerments, Spirit baptism, and missions, thereby producing an ordered social group. Wilkinson’s and Albrecht’s upbeat assessments of the worship service do not correlate with how Allan’s participants experienced it. They felt they were not given the space and time they needed to connect with the Spirit to express their authentic depressed selves in a way that would help them process their feelings. They instead had to perform enthusiastically for fear of not displaying the ‘correct emotions’ before their faith community, among whom they remained uncomfortable (Allan, 2019). Considering that Wilkinson and Albrecht understand the Pentecostal worship service differently from how Allan’s participants experienced it, it is possible that how academics understand the worship service might not accurately reflect how depressed Pentecostals experience it. Could the same be true of Pentecostal preaching?

Warrington (2008) claims that preaching is crucial to Pentecostals because they have traditionally learned about their faith more through preaching than reading. He notes that Pentecostals preach to facilitate personal spiritual development, anticipating an encounter with God that results in a lifestyle change or response. Martin (2015) similarly describes Pentecostal preaching as an encounter that unites the Spirit, the word of God, the preacher, and the listener. With such a high opinion of preaching, one expects preaching will shape depression experiences
positively. Unfortunately, Allan’s (2019) participants mentioned nothing about the effects of preaching on their experiences of depression to draw from concerning this point. However, given that Wilkinson’s (2020) and Albrecht’s (1992) assessments of the worship service did not line up with what depressed Pentecostals experienced during the worship service, then we should not assume Warrington’s and Martin’s assessments of Pentecostal preaching will line up with how depressed Pentecostals experience it. Neither should we expect how preachers talk about depression from the pulpit to line up with a depressed Pentecostal’s experience, especially considering Payne’s (2008) study into how African American Pentecostal preachers preached about mental health services and mental illness from the pulpit. These preachers described depression as a weakness caused by a negative attitude. They were dispassionate about medication and psychiatry and did not advocate for relying on systems outside the church. The preachers instead encouraged believers to trust in Jesus and their church family for help. Payne’s findings correlate with the psychological study of Trice and Bjorck (2006). They investigated 230 Pentecostal university students’ perspectives on depression, some of whom had experienced depression. Trice and Bjorck noted that Pentecostals expect believers to live above tragedy and see negative emotions like depression as the devil’s works. They also observed that Pentecostals avoided medical explanations and interventions and believed those who struggled with depression were weak and not practicing their faith with sufficient devotion. Was this type of attitude evident among the preachers sampled for this study?

Research Method

The Research Topic

This study used the AG as a purposive sample to explore how Pentecostal preachers talk about depression from the pulpit. The study holds a constructivist understanding of depression, assuming that how preachers talk about depression will contribute to how Pentecostals understand, interpret, and respond to depression. While the study does not extend
toward how preaching shapes depression experiences, the study does discuss the significance of the findings. One hopes the discussion helps interested parties like counselors, researchers, and mental health practitioners gain further insight into the Pentecostal context.

**Sample Selection and Data Collection**

Data came from sermons preached by Oklahoma AG (OKAG) preachers. The sermons were selected using a random number generator ([https://www.random.org/](https://www.random.org/)) to select churches from the OKAG church directory. Since online sermons would provide the data source, churches required an online presence. Inconveniently, few churches were online, so the random number generator was used several times to pick suitable churches. When suitable churches were found, I reviewed sermon titles and summaries. I listened to sermon excerpts for keywords and themes like depression, anxiety, grief, hope, and other emotions associated with depression. Some churches had no suitable sermons, so the selection process began again. Suitable sermons were transcribed using an online transcription service ([www.otter.ai](http://www.otter.ai)) and saved as Word documents. I reviewed transcripts against the recorded sermons and made minor adjustments for clarity.

**Data Analysis**

The transcripts served as extant texts providing data to address the research question (Charmaz, 2006). The transcripts were coded using keywords and phrases to describe what occurred in the data, thus generating the main structure of the analysis. Coding occurred in two phases: an initial line-by-line coding phase from which specific codes stood out that then transitioned into a more focused coding phase in which codes were organized into thematic categories (Charmaz, 1995). Memos were written around the most prominent codes and used as informal notes that helped compare data and explore ideas. Memos further directed the research process and gave insight into emergent relationships within the research context (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling occurred as the coding and memoing progressed and helped refine the findings by gathering
more data (Charmaz, 1995). Ideally, I would have liked to gather more data from the preachers’ written resources, the churches, and the AG, in general. However, I stuck to the goal of finding out how preachers spoke about depression from the pulpit and gathered more sermons from OKAG preachers.

The analysis reached saturation when no fresh insight arose from the data. I then wrote a first draft that clarified and explained the analysis and worked towards constructing a theory that interpreted the data (Charmaz, 1995). I drew upon colleagues for their feedback. Some directed me to other sermons that further saturated my leads. I then incorporated literature from the broader Christian tradition, Pentecostal theology, and the social sciences into the draft. The reason for utilizing the literature late in the research was to avoid importing preconceived ideas into the work. Two OKAG preachers reviewed the final draft who did not attend the churches involved. Both affirmed the findings resonated with the messages they heard from other Pentecostal churches or preached themselves. By the end of the study, twelve sermons were analyzed from ten preachers; all of whom were men.

**Limitations**

This study is limited in that it is an exploratory study. Considering that twelve sermons were analyzed, the responses reflect the views of a small group of preachers. That all the preachers were Caucasian males except for one Black American male also limits the study. The fact that only AG sermons were analyzed further limits the study and the extent that the findings can be generalized to the broader Pentecostal population. Nonetheless, Charmaz (2016) argues that the findings can be extended beyond the immediate sample in light of how the preachers’ opinions, expressions, and experiences are shaped within a shared social world from which they draw from a shared language, rules, and traditions. Considering that other preachers in the USA are shaped by and draw from the same social world, the way the research sample understands and talks about depression may, to some extent, be considered representative of a broader population of USA Pentecostal preachers.
Findings

Summary of Findings

The preachers used biblical themes to speak about depression as driven by faulty thinking that negatively affected believers’ abilities to process life events positively, respond to their circumstances, and regulate their emotions. Faulty thinking moved the believer toward “the cave,” a term the preachers adopted from the Elijah narrative. Although faulty thinking was still evident in the cave, the cave was a place where the believer became isolated and stuck. It was a place of hopelessness, warped thinking, being overwhelmed by emotions, and not giving prominence to the Bible. Although God was still present at the cave, nourishing and sustaining the believer behind the scenes, only a tangible encounter with God could jolt the believer onto the second journey of enlightenment and self-discovery through which the Spirit helped the individual to fix his or her faulty thinking.

The following subheadings provide a summary of the findings. The pastors’ names are changed to maintain anonymity. The research is not meant to belittle or pass judgment on Pentecostal preachers.

The Journey of Faulty Thinking

The inability of believers to process and respond to life events, their circumstances, thoughts, feelings, relationships, medical problems, and unmet expectations of God and others typify the believer’s journey to the cave. Faulty thinking includes false assumptions, not handling emotions well, negative self-talk, false perceptions, and paying more heed to world events than the Bible. Anything in life can potentially put believers on the journey toward the cave if processed negatively through faulty thinking. Preacher Frank said,

You know, our thought life can really be a very scary place. You know, it can drain us emotionally, mentally, and it can drain us physically. Or it can encourage us, guide us, and give us peace. Our thinking process is really an amazing thing because, once again, as a person thinks, that’s how they become. You know, you can think yourself happy. And you can think yourself miserable.
Another preacher used King David as a biblical example of someone on the road to depression. In 1 Samuel 30, David and his men returned to Ziklag to find their homes destroyed and their wives and children captured. Preacher Bert explained that David became hopeless and depressed because he did not process these events positively by bringing them to God,

See, the problem David had, he was allowing discouraging thinking to direct his life. Can I tell you what discouraged thinking will do? It’ll send you to a cave because you’re despondent, you’re hopeless, you’re not feeling good, you’re just down, and it will send you to a dark place. And when we are discouraged, we lose focus. It’s amazing how dim life gets when we lose our focus. And when we’re so discouraged because of what happens, we start playing the blame game. We blame other people. We become negative. We become angry, hard to live with. We withdraw.

Out-of-control emotions were a significant outcome of faulty thinking that, if they remained unregulated, could put people on the journey toward the cave. As Preacher Willie said, “Emotions are like kids, you don’t want them driving the car, but you don’t want to stuff them in the trunk either.” The preachers often used Elijah as an example of someone whose faulty thinking caused him to have out-of-control emotions and mishandle life events. Preachers made this claim regarding how Elijah fled into the wilderness shortly after his victory over the Prophets of Baal (1 King 18–19). Preacher Bert says, “One of the major reasons Elijah ended up in depression was because his emotions were out of control. Elijah had out-of-control emotions. Let me say this to his church: the hardest person to lead is yourself. And when you don’t lead yourself well, it will impact your mental health. Elijah did not lead himself well. He was all over the place.”

**The Cave**

The preachers’ description of the cave transitioned through three phases. The first phase sees the cave as a place of hopelessness and darkness. The second phase portrays the cave as a place where God comforts and
sustains believers without them knowing it. The third phase involves the cave as a place where a tangible encounter with God can potentially occur. The transitions between the phases occurred naturally in the sermons, making it difficult to pinpoint when shifts occurred other than a noticeable difference in the sermon’s content. The following sections will present each phase.

The cave is a place of hopelessness
The metaphor of the cave came from Elijah’s experience. Although the faulty thinking that drove people to the cave was still evident, preachers described the cave as a place where the believer became more isolated and stuck. Preacher Bert said, “When Elijah was struggling with depression, the Bible says that Elijah went into a cave. And that’s what depression will do. It will drive you into a cave. You’ll find yourself in the cave of depression. And caves are dark. They’re cold. They’re lonely. Caves are creepy and scary.”

The cave is a place of hopelessness, warped thinking, isolation, and being overwhelmed by emotions. It is where people experience and exude many negative qualities, further harming and isolating them. Preacher James said,

Elijah does something I think a lot of us do. He shows us that extended times of isolation can fuel feelings of desperation… We all do this. We get rocked by something, and there are moments that we convince ourselves that being alone is the answer. That running is the answer. We call it “work.” We call it “the kids are busy.” We call it “I don’t feel good.” We call it “nobody talks to me.” [Elijah’s] fear caused him to run, and he ran in the wrong direction. But that’s what worry, and doubt, and anxiety do. They cause us to run. Then he [Elijah] did something else. He left his servant. Things get dangerous when we get alone. [Church] family, you need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you. [Elijah] ran in the wrong direction. And he isolated himself and then tried to convince himself with something that wasn’t true.
The cave is a place where God comforts

Despite the negative aspects of the cave, a transition occurred where preachers described the cave as a place where God was present comforting his people. Preacher Phil described the comfort one received at the cave.

The Bible says he’s the father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in our trouble. Folks, that’s the God who’s here with us today. The father of all mercies and the God of all comfort. He wants to hold you and restore you. He wants to help you restore balance in order to [help you live] your life and to get you through this season of depression. He’s the good shepherd. He wants to restore your soul. The scripture says. God comforts the downcast. You that are downcast in your Spirit and overwhelmed. He wants to lift up your countenance and give you peace.

Pastor James succinctly said, “While we rest, God works... God can turn your mess into a message. Why? That’s how God operates, amen. He will remain faithful even when we fail, even when we are faithless.”

According to the preachers, God comforts and nourishes people in the cave because Jesus also suffered and associates with their suffering. Preacher Homer explained it this way:

Jesus faced everything you’re facing. While it might have looked and felt different many years ago, the heart was the same, the enemy was the same, the goal was the same, and Jesus faced it and yet kept his faith. So today, I want to encourage you. You are never too far gone for Jesus to do something in your life. You have a Savior who says, “I did it. I love you. We will get through this together. It’s gonna be okay.”

Because Jesus associates with what listeners are going through, part of the comfort they experience comes from expressing themselves honestly, knowing that God understands what they are going through. Preacher James said,

Isn’t it wonderful that in times when we are anxious, when we are worried, and maybe even praying and saying things that don’t line
up with the word of God… God can interpret my prayers… And there are some moments where you and I don’t have the words, but we’re whining, “God kill me.” “God, get me out of this.” “God help me.” And God is able to interpret, and I’m so thankful he gives us what we need before he gives us what we asked for.

Preacher Bert similarly said,

God allowed Elijah to express his feelings. He even allowed him to express his anger and frustration at God. And so Elijah says, “I’ve been very zealous for the Lord, God Almighty, and the Israelites. Your people rejected your covenant, broke down your altars, and put all your prophets to death. And I’m the only one that’s been zealous for you. And now they’re trying to kill me too.” The Bible doesn’t record it, but what Elijah was thinking was, “It’s just not right or fair. You should have done something about it. Now here they are, trying to kill me.” And God allows Elijah to say all this and get it off his chest.

The cave is a place of encounter

Preachers transitioned from the notion of God’s comforting presence to speaking about a personal encounter with God that could potentially affect the believer’s life. The preachers were vague and often gave mixed messages about the level of involvement and responsibility God and the believer had in initiating the encounter. Although both God and the believer are involved, it seems preachers placed more emphasis on the believer initiating the encounter. For instance, Preacher Moe insists that believers must “Press into God’s presence with realness.” He tells believers to “muster up enough faith and enough strength to position yourself in the presence of the Lord.” Preacher James implores his audience to “Let go, and let God do what God does.” The urge to “Let go” is an act where the believer lets go of being self-dependent.

The encounter resulted in a change of thinking that allowed believers to see things differently. Preacher Bob explained,

Elijah went into the cave. He wasn’t ready to hear God’s direction. He said, “Lord, I want to die.” He didn’t want to die. He just
didn’t want to live; there’s a difference. And so, he said, “I just can’t handle this.” He was so down [that] God wasn’t gonna bring him instruction or any guidance at all. So, God was patient with him. He fed, nurtured, encouraged him. And finally, when Elijah began to get his act together, and he began to trust God, and found strength again, then the Lord brought him direction.

Perhaps “repentance” is a suitable term to describe the result of the encounter because the encounter resulted in the believers turning their focus from the situations and life events that impacted their mental well-being and refocusing on God. However, the preachers never used that term. They saw the result of the encounter as an epiphany (although they never used that term either). Still, for the outcome of the encounter to be positive, the preachers strongly emphasized that believers must be obedient to God. As Preacher Bert said,

To get out of the cave of depression. You have to listen to God and do what he says. Listen to God and do what he says. Everybody wants to get out of the cave of depression. But many people want to get out on their own terms. But breakthroughs don’t happen by doing things your way. Breakthroughs happen by doing things God’s way. Listen to God and do what he says. Listen to God and do what he says. Are you listening to God and doing what he says? Are you praying? Are you reading your Bible? Are you serving? Are you forgiving? I get tithing, but are you loving? Are you living holy? Are you worshiping? Are you listening to God and doing what he says? Have you been water baptized? Are you listening to God and doing what he says?

The Second Journey

The encounter launched believers from the cave onto a journey of enlightenment through which they fixed their faulty thinking. Sometimes preachers described the journey as “coming back the way you came.” Others referred to the journey as “moving forward.” Either way, preachers understood the journey as a healing process through which believers
unlearned wrong ways of thinking and learned new ways of thinking that impacted how they managed their lifestyle. Preacher Barney said,

And for you that are struggling this morning? Go back the way you came. Can you see causes and things in your life that may have brought you to a place of depression or despair? Is there something in your body, or your life, or your lifestyle, that’s telling you something that you recognize [that you] need to change in this area? There needs to be discipline here. There needs to be rest here. I need to make some changes. With God’s help, begin today. Make those changes because he wants to lead you in healing and restoration.

**Discussion**

The analysis suggests that AG preachers spoke about depression as a journey driven by faulty thinking that negatively affected believers’ abilities to process life events positively, respond to their circumstances, and regulate their emotions. The following subsections provide further discussion of the research findings.

**How Preachers Understood Depression**

The first observation concerns what kind of depression the preachers were discussing. Were they speaking about major depression, persistent depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, or some other type? The way they connected depressive episodes with the stressors placed on people in everyday life shows that the preachers spoke about situational depression to some extent. Overall, the preachers conveyed a generalized view of depression by believing everyone will experience the mental states associated with depression at some point in their lives; a view which aligns with Jackson’s (2006) judgment. Preachers did not discuss the point where the mental states could become so unusual in their severity or duration that they might be considered anything other than normal.

Their generalized understanding of depression may succumb to Swinton’s (2020) critique that society’s perception of depression is
linguistically thin. According to Swinton, many people talk about depression using mundane terms, never understanding the depth of the pain that those suffering from depression actually experience. As such, the word “depression” loses its ability to convey the “raw power” of the experience. The preachers’ descriptions of depression as hopelessness, etc., may fail to fully capture what Swinton describes as the “antifeeling” of depression, in the way that depression is less of an emotion or feeling (although people often describe it as such), and more of an inability to emote; to articulate what one experiences inside themselves. Therefore, there may be a disconnection between how the preachers preach about depression and how their listeners experience it.

**How Preachers Interpreted the Bible**

The preachers appeared to interpret the experiences of the Bible characters through a Western scientific lens, assuming that the same mental health experiences the text described were the same people experience today. They generally omitted an understanding that health, disease, and misfortune are culturally perceived and interpreted (Pilch, 2020). Nevertheless, their interpretation contained the biblical view that the consequences of poor (mental) health affect people’s relationship with God and quality of life and vice versa (Wilkinson, 1998). A therapeutic application of the text emerged that appealed to listeners to encounter God. Preachers exhorted listeners about how to help themselves and others and encouraged listeners about God’s attitude towards depression, his character, and how he wanted to help.

**Depression as a Journey Towards Encountering God**

The preachers depicted depression as a transformative two-phase journey. The first phase is a journey to depression driven by faulty thinking that negatively affects believers’ abilities to process life events, respond to their circumstances, and regulate their emotions. An encounter with God begins the second phase of the journey *away from* depression, which involves a voyage of enlightenment and self-discovery where they fix their faulty thinking. Although interpreting depression as transformative is not unusual,
there are objections to this approach (Scrutton, 2020). Still, it is possible that preaching about depression as a journey helps listeners locate their depression experiences within a narrative framework that positively affects their well-being by supporting meaning-making and personal identity.

Archer (2020) argues that narrative is significant in Pentecostalism. He claims that the Full Gospel narrative helps Pentecostals understand their experiences and constructs their theological identity (Archer, 2010). However, what perhaps made the preachers’ understanding of depression truly Pentecostal was that they set the narrative within the context of an encounter with God. Warrington (2008) notes that an experiential encounter with God that leads to personal transformation is fundamental to Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal concept of encounter is deeply embedded in Pentecostal spirituality in how Pentecostals expect to experience and encounter God in their daily lives through the same process and types of encounters the Bible describes. Therefore, by preaching about depression as a journey of encounter, the preachers are enabling listeners to interpret their depression within a Pentecostal narrative. Enabling listeners to understand depression through a narrative framework is critical when we consider Radcliffe’s (2015) suggestion that sufferers find it difficult to describe and comprehend their depression experiences because depression alters the area of pre-reflexive human experience where people make sense of the world. As such, the Pentecostal narrative may equip sufferers to ‘make sense of their world’ by helping them understand and describe their depression experiences, which are themselves particularly difficult, if not impossible, to pin down.

A Voluntaristic Understanding of Depression

How the preachers spoke about depression assumes listeners have a high degree of free will about how they govern their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors and that the conscious and unconscious decisions made over time can make people depressed or less depressed. This interpretation may hold people accountable for being depressed by inferring that if listeners had thought positively enough, acted appropriately when faced with stress, and surrounded themselves with the right people, they would have avoided
becoming depressed. This understanding corresponds to what Swinton (2020) describes as “spiritual thinning,” which occurs when depression is reduced to spiritual explanations emphasizing a lack of human effort.

The preachers’ assumption that listeners can regulate their lives to be less or more depressed displays a degree of voluntarism that may not reflect how people experience depression. For instance, Radcliffe (2015) claims that depression negatively affects how sufferers perceive themselves concerning the world, which diminishes their sense of agency and hinders their ability to act. That depression reduces a person’s ability to function is problematic, considering how the preachers admonished listeners to position themselves (align their hearts and minds) to encounter God. Scrutton (2020) detects a hint of Pelagianism in appeals like those of the preachers’, who emphasize human freedom’s role in choosing Christ. She cautions that God’s grace is needed for people to make good choices, regulate their emotions, and think in ways that lead them away from depression.

I do not suppose the preachers would argue against Scrutton’s (2020) comments. Still, the preacher’s voluntarist understanding of depression and their emphasis on human involvement may be seen as victim blaming, compounding the guilt that depressed people, who are already vulnerable to those feelings, may already feel. It could be argued to the contrary that the focus on voluntarism and human involvement is liberating because it helps listeners realize they have free will and, by God’s grace, can be relieved from depression. As such, the preachers’ appeals for listeners to position themselves to facilitate an encounter with God may be seen as resistance against depression; a resistance that, within the worship context, helps create a sacred space where people can encounter God within the struggles of depression.

**Summary**

This study was an exploratory study into how Pentecostal preachers talk about depression from the pulpit. The analysis showed that preachers talked about depression being driven by faulty thinking and interpreted depression as a transformative journey occurring within the context
of a God encounter where the believer fixed their faulty thinking. While the study discussed the research findings, it did not extend the discussion toward how preaching might shape the depression experiences of Pentecostals. Further study could explore this avenue or determine if this study's findings represent a more significant number of Pentecostal preachers. Further study will also help interested parties gain further insight into the Pentecostal context and the experience-shaping voices to whom Pentecostals listen and which impact the help depressed Pentecostals receive.

**Robert D. McBain** (rmcbain@oru.edu) is the Research Coordinator of the Holy Spirit Resource Center and a Ph.D. Candidate in Theology at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK.

**References**


Exploring How Pentecostals Preach About Depression


Keywords  *pandemic, COVID-19, coronavirus, eschatology, hope, grief, trauma, healing*

Abstract

This research sought to identify how Pentecostals and charismatics responded to the Coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, what role did eschatology play in provoking hope, and how did theologies on healing influence responses? Data revealed that Pentecostals were generally not casting their responses to the pandemic as a millennial expectation of a better future but were grieving their losses and seeking to provoke hope amidst suffering. While minimal miraculous healings were reported, healing was cast primarily as the ongoing presence of defiant hope amidst trauma, grief and suffering. We propose that grief and grieving is an eschatological response to loss and death.

Introduction

On the eve of 2020, the world was about to change. An unknown, virulent coronavirus was in the air and would quickly spread throughout the world. COVID-19 was a harbinger of the death of countless lives, would overrun hospitals, disrupt economic livelihood, educational settings, and social structures such as families and churches. What was expected to be a short-term situation that would end as quickly as it started is still ravaging...
the world. As of this writing, more than 5 million deaths have been reported worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), with over 807,000 deaths in the United States (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Despite the fact that we now have vaccines, the first half of 2021 reported more deaths from COVID-19 than all of 2020 (Kamp et al., 2021). The untold costs to the survivors of COVID-19 have yet to be reported. Many survivors have experienced long-term health effects, families have buried their loved ones, and people have lost their livelihood, not to mention the mental and physical deterioration of those who remain behind.

Churches in the United States and abroad have been hit hard by COVID-19. Stay-at-home orders and quarantines have forced churches to close their sanctuaries or to significantly curtail the number of people allowed to congregate. Congregants have become sick, and some have died. In some instances, ministers have contracted the disease and passed away. Many churches have struggled with a loss of revenue. Churches have experimented with digital technology to offer media-based services and liturgies with varying degrees of success. What is lost, however, is the relational interaction that is so important for what it means to gather as a body of believers. This is true of Pentecostal-charismatic churches as well. But what theological resources and practices have Pentecostal-charismatic churches drawn on, or developed, to help them navigate through the pandemic?

This research is guided by the following questions: What theological resources, if any, do Pentecostals and charismatics employ to support their responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic? Does eschatological hope play any part in the Pentecostal and charismatic responses to the pandemic? If so, what mode of discourse is used? How is the Pentecostal-charismatic theology of healing related to its response(s) to the pandemic? Rather than presupposing a speculative Pentecostal response that is then applied to how the Pentecostal church should respond, we conducted a document analysis of selected Pentecostal denominational websites and official publications to determine how Pentecostal churches responded to the pandemic. We examined websites and online content dealing with the pandemic as well.
as official statements, documents, and publications either in digital or print form. The period of examination ran from January 2020 to August 2021. The organizations sampled included historic Pentecostal denominations such as The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), The Assemblies of God (AG), Church of God, Cleveland (CG), and The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). We also sampled network churches such as Bethel Church, Redding, CA (Bethel), The International House of Prayer (IHOP), and Hillsong Church. Although many of these organizations were located in the United States, we included Pentecostal-charismatic churches from English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia. What we found was unexpected. As will become evident, both eschatological and healing theologies were either muted or absent, and the focus was on the personal and social grief Pentecostals and charismatics were experiencing as they dealt with the effects of COVID-19. It should be noted that our findings are illustrative in nature rather than representative.

**Hope in the Face of Despair**

Fundamental to eschatology is Christian hope. While the details of eschatology can differ substantially, Christian hope is at the root of faith in the ultimate coming of Christ. With the exception of IHOP, which cast its discussion in dispensational millenarian terms, the discussion of eschatology in relation to the pandemic was rather muted, except for references to hope in the face of despair, fear, and anxiety. PAOC writer George Werner (2020) stated, “People’s hearts are more open than ever before as they are searching for hope in the face of disaster” (p. 29). The editor of *Testimony* referred to the situation as “deferred hopes” in the face of COVID-19, politics, national disaster, and gross injustice (in reference to the George Floyd murder). She says, “what we are experiencing during COVID-19 resembles the discomfort—even despair—that people in the margins have been enduring... loss of freedom. The lack of structure. The heightened sense of despair. The hovering threat of illness. Insecurity about what will happen tomorrow” (McKenzie, 2020, p. 3). As one writer for the *Testimony* claimed, “We have all experienced the overwhelming feelings of chaos in life through illness, loss, pain, and our own choices”
“Unpredictable friendships. Loneliness. Strife. The pure loss of opportunity” (McKenzie, 2020, p. 3). Bethel Church (2020) advocated for faith for healing but also encouraged wisdom by following the health protocols implemented by city officials. Bethel Church (2020) also advocated for hope, “... we do not partner with fear, but choose to lean into faith and hope, as well as practice wisdom and safety” (para. 1). For Hillsong (2020), holding onto hope was a way to cope with the pandemic as the church encouraged people to live in gratitude and rely on Jesus to gain strength in times of pain. The most overtly eschatological millenarian position was offered by IHOP (2020), which saw the pandemic as a “sign of the times” of the Lord’s return, provoking eschatological hope and an urgency to prepare for greater tribulations to come.

While an overt eschatology is mostly muted, an implicit eschatology threads the discussion of the pandemic through a discussion of hope and despair. At this point, it is germane to state that eschatology is a term first coined in seventeenth-century Protestantism. However, its meaning has never been clear. On the one hand, eschatology points to the belief in the future and afterlife. On the other, it refers more specifically to an older theology of the eschata (Greek) or de novissimus (Latin) of the last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. The nineteenth century witnessed a new and controversial development by adding an historical millennium or chiliastic component that was more in tune with popular Protestant piety than theology proper (Mühling, 2015). And yet, eschatology is not just about the future, but it is about present hope as well. The whole of theology is perceived from the perspective of hope, a hope that has transformative implications for the present (Moltmann, 1967). In the midst of despair, suffering, and grief, the hope is for a new beginning and new life (Moltmann, 2004). That being said, the last things remain still a constituent part of eschatology. “What happens when I die?” is an existential question that probes one’s personal eschatology, but one can also talk about the consolation of grief that lingers in the orb of death as the penultimate to death. Moreover, death is not, strictly speaking, solely an individual matter, but takes on social, historical, and cultural forms in the context of the pandemic so that one can speak about the death of the way things used to be, and the new reality in the middle of a pandemic (and hopefully post-pandemic) world.
Scholars of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity have highlighted the importance of eschatology in the ethos of the movement. Cox (1995) argues that the genius of Pentecostalism is its recovery of primal spirituality, in which primal hope is a constituent aspect. For Cox, Pentecostal hope is rooted in Pentecostalism’s millennial expectation for a better future. Land (2010) locates Pentecostal eschatology in its spirituality and eschews a dispensational fundamentalism for an anticipatory millennial hope of the not yet. However, in the context of the pandemic, Pentecostals appeared to hope for a better future, but this hope was not placed in a dispensational millenarian framework. What does it mean, though, to expect a better future in the throes of a global pandemic when millions have died and those who remain are left to pick up the pieces? Thompson (2005) convincingly argues that Pentecostal eschatology is not about predicting the future, but about explaining the present using eschatological and apocalyptic symbolism. Eschatological imagery were ways in which people were able to make sense of the world in which they lived. Bialecki (2017) makes a cogent point in his analysis of the Vineyard, but applicable in this context:

On the one hand both past and future are only available in the present, but likewise the present encompasses both a “becoming future” and a “becoming past.” This is because the past is never past, and the future does not [yet] exist. For either the past or the future to have effects, they must be active in the present despite the fact that the present is always splitting into past and future. (p. 75)

In other words, anticipatory hope is focused on present realities. Our data revealed that Pentecostals were generally not casting their responses to the pandemic as a millennial expectation of a better future. The data revealed that Pentecostals were grieving their losses to the pandemic. Death was at the forefront, and those who remained were trying to cope with the trauma—loss of loved ones, loss of safety and security, loss of job and economic well-being, loss of familial and religious networks that sustain and comfort in times of grief. Yet, hope remained despite trauma and grief.
Grieving Losses

Throughout our analysis of official documents, the expression of grief and the desire for relief from despair was constantly in the background. Jones (2021), for instance, wrote on the place of lament in the pandemic. He asked, “Is it OK not to be OK at your church?” (p. 30). Jones cautioned about using church worship, or shallow forms of compassion and empathy, to make people feel better. Citing Ed Stetzer positively, Jones encouraged the church to “. . . allow space for people to lament—to wonder why, to ask questions, and to work through grief” (p. 31). He proposed that lament leads to “deep transformation in our perceptions of suffering,” and “engenders healing and intimacy,” because “community is built on real-life joy and pain” (p. 31). Lament, argued Jones, was critical support to raising awareness of mental health.

Church of God in Christ (COGIC) Bishop Anthony Gilyard joined other COGIC leaders to discuss how church life has shifted during the pandemic. Gilyard (2021) stated that he lost four members of his church to COVID-19 and twenty-six individuals in his jurisdiction. He said, “There was so much death, disease, and hospitalizations that people of faith became weary and tired. They didn’t want church or even worship music because they were too depressed from the season” (50:32). The bishop talked about how he found it necessary to rebuild the people by simply reading scripture over them for up to thirty minutes at a time in an effort to bolster them without any programs or expectations. After doing this for some time, some of the worship leaders felt encouraged enough to ask to start leading musically again, but he explained how this was a slow process of grieving that needed to occur before rushing onward in the work of ministry.

Similarly, Allen Hood (2020) of the International House of Prayer admonished the leaders and members to take time to grieve, saying that any other response could reveal a disconnected, untouched heart. He said, “God’s desire in times like these is that the eyes would cry before the mouth would speak. Hollow words from faces that shed no tears bring no true change” (para. 18). He encouraged people to embrace the pain, let it touch the heart, and avoid “false comfort and false bravado.”
The acceptance of pain was quickly partnered with hope and purpose. He wrote:

We must use this crisis to prepare the way of the Lord. We have a mighty calling to be in this world yet not of it. We must do more than alleviate the shock of the moment with quick public statements, sermons, and prophecies. We must let this crisis touch us to the core, embrace the fear of the Lord, repent, and bear fruit!” (para. 21)

Grief is a human response to irretrievable loss that consists of various feelings, both transitory and enduring. Grief is complex in that it is constructed from a multiplicity of other emotions such as sorrow, disbelief, numbness, fear, shame, and relief, to name a few. Grief can range between weak and strong intensity, the former including unsettled feelings, sadness, regret, and anxiety, and the latter provoking mental and physical distress that disrupts and destabilizes (Garmaz & Milligan, 2006, pp. 517-519). Grief is known to pass through different stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). However, these stages are seldom linear but ebb and flow, weaving forward and backward and turning in on themselves. Although grief is most often associated with death and dying, grief can also be a response to other losses such as the loss of employment, security, living quarters, childlessness, or friendships. What appears to be the case with Pentecostal and charismatic responses to the pandemic is that people are grieving real physical, social, cultural, and symbolic death and loss. The Assemblies of God produced an article that focuses on the multi-faceted layers of grief within churches during the pandemic (Castleberry, 2020). In analyzing the choice of some leaders to meet in large gatherings during the pandemic despite public health orders to refrain from doing so, the author speculates this could be a form of denial. He says, “What seemed like bold faith turned out to be denial and presumption. Even the most cursory reading of the Bible makes it clear that our faith doesn’t make us immune to suffering. Yet denial in grief can cloud our thinking and trump rationality” (Castleberry, 2020, para. 2). The article gives tips for how to deal with each stage of grief at both the personal and corporate levels. The author
emphasizes the importance of leaders and churches in processing grief because it is when one successfully maneuvers through these dark waters of grief that a sort of rebirth of hope can occur.

Grief and despair are intricately related to eschatological hope; however, Moltmann (2004) argues that hope is rooted in love, but love is only possible at the risk of vulnerability. People experience loss and grief because they have loved and because they have hope. Even the spiritually strong can be overwhelmed by the pain of death and the grief and despair this event produces. “Often, the pain comes over grieving in waves. If this is so, the ability to weep is better than dumb frozen calm. Even to lose consciousness can be a blessing in the pain of mourning” (p. 124; see also Althouse, 2006). To downplay or reject the reality and effects of the pandemic, or to eschew the use of medical intervention and technologies to treat the virus, points to a deep denial in people who are experiencing overwhelming grief. To turn back to the question of eschatology, we propose that grief and grieving is an eschatological response to loss and death, whether personal, familial, physical, or symbolic in nature.

**Trauma and Hope**

According to Jones (2019), an event is considered traumatic when persons perceive that they or others are threatened by annihilation from an external force that they cannot resist and are overwhelmed to the point of being unable to cope. Trauma must also be differentiated from stressful or disturbing events (p. 13). An event is considered traumatic when a person perceives it as such. Trauma is an injury to the body, mind, and/or emotions. However, while a bodily injury is evident, psychological and emotional injuries, which may include a range of psychological ailments, are more difficult to ascertain. The experience of the pandemic is not only death but can at times be experienced as traumatic death. This death is not just personal death, or death in the context of families, but a death that is social and global in scope. Trauma, and the grief it elicits, presents a challenge to those who are left to make sense of the senselessness of death. We cannot simply return to a normal course of life, but we must persist in life as we now know it.
The Assemblies of God was more explicit in identifying the link between grief and trauma. *Influence*, one of the denomination’s official publications, published several articles that connected the pandemic to trauma. Grant (2021), for instance, bluntly stated, “Like everyone else, Christians are facing the raw uncertainties of life, the loss of loved ones, family tensions, and unemployment. People everywhere are dealing with overwhelming challenges, fear, and trauma” (p. 40). This statement was framed in the context of the pandemic, racial tension, political chaos, and natural disasters. Similarly, Kim (2021) discussed the role of lament during the pandemic, and writes, “Within every congregation, there is grief, physical pain, emotional trauma, stress, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thinking” (p. 49). Later, he concluded, “Pain comes in waves. Chances are many if your people are experiencing a tsunami of trauma” (p. 54). In response to this tsunami of trauma, the AG placed a special emphasis on bolstering counseling services for ministry leaders. In one article, Robert C. Crosby, the president of Emerge Counseling Ministries, was quoted saying, “The fallout from the pandemic is emotional trauma. The intensity of this season is more multi-faceted and challenging than the Great Recession of a decade ago” (as cited in Kennedy, 2020, line 7). He also speculates that COVID-19 will result in a myriad of post-traumatic stress disorder diagnoses. The grief is overwhelming, “… [families] have lost loved ones during the coronavirus and couldn’t say goodbye face to face” (as cited in Kennedy, 2020, line 23). According to Crosby, the COVID-19 therapeutic fallout is yet to come.

The theological relationship between death and trauma is addressed by Rambo (2010) in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. According to Rambo, “Trauma is described as an encounter with death. This encounter is not, however, a literal death but a way of describing a radical event or events that shatter all that one knows about the world and all the familiar ways of operating within it” (p. 4). Trauma is not just personal but includes multiple levels of historical trauma, institutional trauma, and global trauma. Rambo focuses on the middle ground between death and life. In this middle ground, trauma is that which exceeds categories of
comprehension in the human capacity in taking in and processing the external world. Trauma grapples with the relationship between death and life. Life and death are not opposites, and therefore theology must account for what remains of death in life. To cast this insight into theological terms, there is no linear path between death and resurrection, but one must remain in the in-between of Holy Saturday. Triumphant predictions of life’s victory over death fails to account for the traumatic suffering of those who remain. This remainder or middle ground is the locale of trauma. There is a difference, however, between suffering and trauma. Suffering is eventually integrated into one’s understanding of the world, while trauma remains as a disintegrated and open wound.

Note that the trauma of death is not focused on those who have died. Trauma is experienced by those who perceive an event, or series of events, as traumatic. But trauma is experienced by those who witness the event as well (Jones, 2019). The trauma of death is focused on those who remain in their grief and grieving. “The dynamics of traumatic experience press Christian discourse beyond the site of the cross to think about what it means to live in the aftermath of death” (Rambo, 2010, p. 7). Rambo’s (2010) theological focus is on the followers and disciples of Jesus who remained after his crucifixion, the time in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Those who remain alive yet in a stupor regarding death—neither alive nor death but death in life—experience the trauma: a mother’s loss, a disciple’s despondency, a follower’s confusion. “. . . [D] eath pervades life: it entails attesting to the temporal distortions, and epistemological ruptures of an experience that exceeds a radical ending yet has no pure beginning” (p. 15). In this way, trauma has a double structure in both the occurrence of the violent event(s) and the later awakening to the event. “Trauma is not solely located in the actual event but, instead, encompasses the return of the event, the way in which the event has not been concluded” (p. 7).

Returning to Robert Crosby, “Even when we are able to breathe a sigh of relief as the pandemic abates, we still need to be vigilant regarding emotional, spiritual, and mental health needs” (as cited in Kennedy, 2020, line 26). He recalls spending several days counseling pastors
who had lived through the decimation of West Florida with Hurricane Michael in 2018, and many of them were not ready to discuss the matter until sixteen months afterward. This comment gives perspective to the way trauma traps us between the loss of the way it was and an inability to imagine the future.

Jones (2019) suggests but does not propose a potential eschatological response to the crisis of trauma. The vision of the world to come told through stories and images insists that the Christian lives in the tension between this world of pain and the utopian expectation of a world without tears. However, she proposes a different theological path aimed at reconstructing the collective imagination through creative storytelling in order to reconstruct the world that we inhabit. The problem is that those who suffer trauma are no longer able to tell their stories. However, scripture is a critical resource for imaginative storytelling that can speak to trauma as we find our life stories reconstrued within the grand story of the Christian faith. Through story, the imaginative crafting and recrafting of the world has the potential to heal the rupture and disorder of trauma. This is what Jones calls the “healing imagination” (pp. 19-20). Rambo (2010) concurs. Christian hope that is founded in the Spirit of resurrection is the promise of new beginnings that has a forward pull. However, when hope is filtered through the perspective of trauma, it requires an emphasis on the imagination.

The Assemblies of God looks to have been deliberate in emphasizing hope in stories of healing and community outreach. The COVID-19 website for AG (2020) includes 257 short stories telling of healings from COVID-19, provision, outreach, acts of kindness, and highlighting good deeds. This effort to help people to process their trauma was a way of moving people toward a path of healing while admitting it would be a long process. Many of the stories emphasized the importance of prayer and holding onto hope for healing despite bad reports and dismal circumstances. One story in particular tells of a woman, Sharon McClennan, who was rushed to the hospital by ambulance after collapsing in the middle of the night. Upon arrival at the hospital, X-rays revealed she had “COVID-19 pneumonia” in both lungs. She was transferred to the ICU with the expectation of a long,
critical road to recovery. The McClennan family began to pray and declare scripture over the hopeless situation. To the surprise of medical staff, a new set of x-rays revealed no trace of COVID-19 or pneumonia (Van Veen, 2020). The story encouraged prayer despite bad reports. However, this report was the exception. Other stories described longer paths of healing but emphasized the importance of faith, prayer, and worship through a severe illness. One missionary described how the Holy Spirit urged her to praise God through the night while she sensed a spirit of death lingering in her room during the peak of her illness. While praising God, she sensed strength enter her body, and she described the victory over COVID-19 that was gained through spiritual warfare and praise (Ennis, 2020). Each story of healing is unique, but each carries the common thread of defiant hope in the face of bad reports and a looming sense of death. Also, it must be noted that only three of the 257 stories included descriptions of “supernatural healing.” Most reports emphasized hope, care, outreach, and acts of kindness amidst grief and suffering. Similarly, Bethel Church (2020) focused on provoking hope in the midst of suffering by encouraging people to “partner with heaven’s perspective” and to “stand on the promises of God” amidst suffering.

To be clear, healing in the context of traumatic grief is not a shallow homage to the supernatural and unexplained. Nor is healing, strictly speaking, a therapeutic response though the therapeutic is a part of the response. Healing is hope in the face of loss and despair. The documents only peripherally mentioned healing, and when it was mentioned, healing was not linked to the instantaneous, physical cessation of the disease (known as the divine cure) but to the slow process of recovery as the body through the aid of medical science regained health. Healing was also associated with recovery through the process of grieving. The healing hinted at in the documents is more akin to what MacNutt (1988) defines as inner or emotional healing. Space is afforded to allow people to “be okay that they are not okay.” The pandemic and its effects have traumatized the world. The question that remains is how a healing imagination might allow people to tell their stories of grief and hope to recraft the world as part of the story of the faith.
Conclusion

COVID-19 is a global virus that will likely be with us for many years to come. At this point, people are navigating mitigation measures that lessen mortality rates and long-term health effects. The crisis presents a theological challenge to Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in that triumphalist tendencies will not soothe the world’s pain. More to the point, expectations of triumph over the coronavirus may be a form of denial in the face of grief. Yet, despite the grief and trauma triggered by the pandemic, hope remains. This hope is borne of the ashes of grief, when we can finally look up to the sky and smile at the radiant sun/Son, while carrying the burden of the departed and the loss of the way things used to be in our hearts.

Peter Althouse (palthouse@oru.edu) is Professor of Theology and Director of the Ph.D. program in Contextual Theology at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA.

Audrey E. McCormick (amccormick@oru.edu) is a Ph.D. Candidate in Contextual Theology at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, and the Co-Lead Senior Pastor at Sanctuary Ministries in Concord, CA, USA.

Notes

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2 Special thanks to Betty Gilliam, who conducted some initial research into the responses of the historic Pentecostal denominations.
References


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EFFORTS TO INTEGRATE FAITH WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE AND COUNSELING HAVE BEEN PRESENT WITHIN CHRISTIAN GRADUATE PROGRAMS FOR DECADES; HOWEVER, QUESTIONS REMAIN ABOUT HOW TO DO THIS EFFECTIVELY. A BRIEF REVIEW OF INTEGRATION EFFORTS AND A SURVEY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITHIN THESE PROGRAMS REVEAL A DESIRE TO FURTHER MODEL THIS PRACTICAL INTEGRATION WITHIN THE CLASSROOM. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS EMphasize A BIBLICALLY INFORMED WORLDVIEW, INTENTIONALLY CRAFTED HERMENEUTICS, AND WELL DEVELOPED THEOLOGY, WHICH CAN LEAD TO FAITH-INFORMED COUNSELING PRACTICES.

INTRODUCTION

Does the integration of psychology and theology matter to the Christian counselor? If so, how—and what does that look like practically in the counseling room? As a second-year student in ORU’s Master of Arts in Professional Counseling program, these questions have been at the forefront of my mind. Christian integration in counseling includes the union of faith and professional practice in the lives of practitioners. It recognizes a partnership with the work of the Holy Spirit within the counseling
room and allows one’s theological worldview to inform the psychological theories and counseling methodologies utilized. While Christian programs emphasize the importance of integration, student testimonials point to the inherent challenge of properly joining the science of psychology and the art of counseling with Christian theology. A brief overview and review of student perspectives explain the goals and application of integrating counseling and theology in practice.

**Brief Overview of Integration**

The efforts to integrate Christian theology with psychological science or related counseling approaches have occurred for many years. One of the primary facets of proper integration is the recognition that every person interprets the world through his worldview, which is made up of held beliefs about the world that color the way current affairs and information are interpreted. Slife and Reber (2009) have done good work exploring the concept of worldview and recognizing the inherent incompatibility of some facets of psychology with a Christian worldview (pp. 68-70). Whether psychology and theology are complementary or competing disciplines depends on how integration occurs. McMinn (2011) explains that “beneath every technique is a counseling theory, and beneath every theory is a worldview” (p. 16). He also stresses how counseling programs frequently fail to properly explain to students how to integrate faith and practice, with training being “experiential and often private” (McMinn, 2014, p. 11).

In their text, *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, Greggo and Sisemore (2012), present the five dominant approaches for integrating Christianity and counseling—the levels-of-explanation, integration, Christian psychology, transformational, and Biblical counseling approaches (p. 17). These approaches, as outlined by Greggo and Sisemore, are intended to be practical considerations and applications of the content presented in Johnson’s (2010) earlier text, *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*. Regardless of which approach one takes, the Christian practitioner must recognize that modern psychology, emerging in the late 1800s with Sigmund Freud, largely abandoned the idea of the soul in favor of a godless
worldview, which has informed psychological theories and counseling methods that have since been developed. These theories and methods have prioritized materialist resources and overwhelmingly eliminated the supernatural’s relevance to therapeutic change processes (Slife & Whoolery, 2006; see also Greggo & Sisemore, 2012). Objective versus subjective levels of explanation greatly impact the treatment methods accessible to the clinician and implicitly place all the impetus of change onto the practitioner and client, disavowing any options not based on empirical evidence. It is unwise to assume that the methodologies created by a psychologist operating from a materialist worldview can always be converted for practical use by the Christian counselor. Thus, great discernment is needed to determine when to incorporate psychological theories into the Christian counseling framework. Science is not neutral; therefore, practitioners must distinguish the differences between materialist and faith-based worldviews (Slife & Whoolery, 2006; see also Slife & Reber, 2009).

Graduate School Experience

There is tension for the Christian counselor between making room for alternative perspectives while remaining steadfast to the Christian faith—where unity and acceptance meet the truth presented in love. This effort can be envisioned as inviting ideas to sit at one’s table. In doing so, the counselor is not obligated to adopt or personally accept the ideas considered; rather, it creates a space to listen, evaluate, and potentially integrate new information (see Swinton & Mowat, 2016). The emphasis is on sitting with another person rather than trying to fix him. However, questions remain regarding the Christian counselor’s role in presenting the truth to clients: how does the counseling experience with a Christian counselor differ from that of a spiritual or nonreligious practitioner?

The bottom line is that questions of theology underlie questions of ultimate meaning, which counselors engage with in their counseling rooms daily. Because of this, each Christian practitioner is charged with critically reflecting upon his or her worldview (i.e., interpretive grid) that inevitably shapes praxis: is naturalistic science the dominant influence
upon the counselor’s worldview by which he or she views the rest of the world, including the theories and methods that inform and guide the counseling process? Or, is a biblical foundation dominantly shaping the counselor’s worldview through which the counseling process and related methods are critically assessed and engaged? If one supports the integrative effort to join Christianity and counseling, the goal is to connect scripture and science. However, the question becomes a matter of how these two can be thoughtfully drawn together to shape the person and actions of the counselor.

To this end, psychological science is an example of a lens through which one can view the world, and the assumption of its ‘neutrality’ should be questioned (Slife & Reber, 2009). Science is not all-knowing—it must be interpreted by interpretive beings (i.e., humans), and it is constantly changing. Looking at the history of the DSM is enough to witness how the “objective” science continues to be changed and influenced by the opinions of the time. Homosexuality, long viewed as a mental disorder, has now, after a series of rewrites, been removed entirely from the handbook as the societal view of homosexuality has changed from taboo to acceptance (Dresher, 2015, pp. 565-575).

Faced with the common dissonance between personal belief and professional practice, graduate counseling students in Christian programs often ask genuine questions as they wrestle with the implications of ethical dilemmas faced by the integrative Christian counselor. Even at Christian institutions, students in classrooms require further theological training and individual guidance to parse what integration looks like personally and practically. Research has indicated that counseling students can distinguish between effectual integrative efforts in their graduate counseling programs and those that are less so (Hall et al., 2009). With this, studies have shown that students learn how to integrate best through mentoring relationships and personal examples, which model how to bring together faith and practice effectively on an experiential level (French, 2023; Neff et al., 2020). Leaving the integration of psychology and theology to each student is a recipe for confusion. In no other area of the Christian life are believers called to walk alone. Rather, Christians are called to walk out their faith
in community, iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17), and share the truth each has gleaned on their life journey. Autonomy at the expense of proper training and formation is a bad trade.

The desire to cultivate an integrative program is a good and worthy enterprise. However, the desire to be integrative alone is insufficient to ensure proper integration. Integrating faith and psychology necessitates lived-out theological training that transforms the counselor into a living agent of hope to clients (French, 2021, p. 270). This is best transmitted to students through effective modeling by professors, mentors, and professional connections who can practically model what faith in action looks like within the professional counseling context. Neff et al. (2020) suggest that a shift from teaching integration (with an emphasis on models) towards training integrators (developing ears to discern spiritual themes and embody principles) could be a relevant change in perspective within the integrative effort (p. 77).

**Integration Problems**

Critical reflection is hard work. It is easier to accept concepts at face value rather than analyze their underlying claims regarding the world and the human person. Before engaging with psychological theories or counseling practices, proper consideration of their congruence with the Christian faith is necessary. Christian practitioners must grow in their ability to submit to scrutiny the psychological and counseling perspectives and methods in which they are trained rather than uncritically or passively receiving them without evaluation. Holeman (2012) frames this reflection as engaging in “strong-sense” rather than “weak-sense” theological thinking (p. 27). It necessitates moving beyond simple answers to simple questions into a place of wrestling with theology and reflecting on how it interfaces with contemporary issues (Holeman, 2012, p. 27).

The field of psychology, which shapes and informs the art of counseling, has defined its worldview perspective as being “neutral,” “objective,” and “scientific”; however, all therapeutic techniques are built upon philosophical and moral assumptions (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p.
217). One cannot be unbiased in viewing the world; psychologists and counselors are no different. Often, practitioners focus on the surface of psychological theories, neglecting the philosophical assumptions these methods are built upon (p. 218). Naturalism assumes that God is not required to understand the world, and ‘not required’ is often viewed as meaning ‘theologically neutral’ (p. 219). If God is not required, as naturalism stipulates, then no bias toward or against views of God should be involved. C.S. Lewis (1970) recognizes that the Christian and Materialist view the world through fundamentally different lenses—they cannot both be right (p. 110). “The one who is wrong will act in a way which simply doesn’t fit the real universe” (Lewis, 1970, p. 110). Nothing one does is neutral. The integrated practitioner is aware of his worldview through which he interacts with the world and recognizes the worldviews of his intervention methods. Pearcey (2019) explains that a worldview is attached to every practice; it is important to be aware of this because not all worldviews are true or attractive upon close inspection (p. 30).

Furthermore, the scientific community has embraced the worldview of ontological naturalism, which is held up by the three pillars of objectivism, materialism, and reductionism (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 222). Objectivism is the study of objects external to the observer’s mind, making the relevant subject matter of study the objective world—values and beliefs need not enter the field. This objective/subjective split helps the researcher dismiss the supernatural within events, as the researcher is told to excommunicate the subjective self within which religion resides. Religious values are viewed as bad, distorting the true knowledge found within scientific methods. Materialism holds that only those things that are tangible and visible are relevant to scientific discourse (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). This viewpoint is linked with empiricism, as only behavior that is seen and observed is considered valuable (Greggo & Sisemore, 2012). Reductionism is the final pillar, claiming that all change can be reduced to natural laws and principles. Everything is thus determined, and any true knowledge can be replicated and repeated (Slife & Whoolery, 2006).
Solutions

So, where do we go from here? Are there ways to challenge the naturalistic framework that has permeated the counseling profession? The most effective way for an integrative program to equip its students is a three-stranded chord: training students in a biblical worldview, developing intentionally-crafted hermeneutics, and promoting sound theology (French, 2021; 2023).

Biblically Informed Worldview

The scientific notion of worldview neutrality or bias-free research must be challenged. Whenever one works within an academic endeavor (and throughout the rhythms of daily living), philosophical assumptions and propositions are in place, regardless of whether the scholar is aware of them. Theories regarding the acquisition of knowledge, the nature of reality, and the view of the human person are constantly being promoted as underlying assumptions of the theories and methods utilized within one’s professional practice (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 217). We cannot simply assume that materialistic philosophy is compatible with Christian belief; thorough testing and analysis need to ensue to ensure faithfulness to God through our practice.

Hathaway (2021) frames integration as occurring when a “fusion of horizons” occurs between Christianity and psychology—fusion has not occurred “if either perspective has been distorted or is not faithfully present” (p. 262). Some questions worth positing to Christian counseling students are: What are the presuppositions through which we view the world? Are we theologians incorporating the truths found in psychology into our practices? Or, are we crafting our theology into a preestablished framework and “search[ing] for a place for religion within the limits of reason?” (Bartholomew, 2000, p. 13). Christian integrationists need to be careful about the “naturalistic, humanistic, transpersonal, [and] or other non-Christian assumptions present in much of psychology” (Hathaway, 2021, p. 265). Look to the foundation. If divine intervention in the world is consistently subordinated to autonomous rationality within one’s worldview, it could point to a disconnect, an artificial separation, between faith and professional practice.
As Christian integrative counselors, we believe in the worthy effort of mining truth from the beds of psychology; however, we must be aware of the underlying theological foundations by which we live and move and have our being. Otherwise, the lines between truth and falsehood will remain vague and opaque, leaving us in danger of swallowing poison alongside medicine—not all psychology is beneficial, and discernment must be used when integrating.

**Intentionally Crafted Hermeneutics**

Christians in the 21st century are exposed to a wide range of various biblical interpretations. When opinions on scripture vary widely, how can counseling students determine the faithfulness of their beliefs and practices? One way this may occur is through intentionality in congruent biblical hermeneutics. Learning to interpret scripture faithfully revolutionizes how Christians relate to the word of God. In Bartholomew’s (2000) translation of Hans Robert Jauss, Jauss explains that a hermeneutic “is no esoteric teaching but the theory of a practice” (p. 3). Those studying scripture are properly oriented to the text when they aim to excavate the truth; however, as discussed previously, everyone approaches the world with prior foundational commitments through which experience is interpreted. Before exploring integration at the disciplinary level, the “contours of a Christian worldview” need to be developed (Entwistle, 2021, p. 79). What, then, are the proper commitments for Christians to hold to? For the Christian, the starting points for understanding the world begin with God, who has revealed Himself in scripture and tradition passed down through the ages by the Christian church (Bartholomew, 2015, p. 5). Other men may hold fragments of truth, but Jesus is divine Truth itself. As such, all other beliefs need to stem from this Christocentric awareness.

If one claims to be a follower of Christ, he must carefully consider his core tenets of belief and how they affect his life. Does he believe scripture is the authoritative Word of God? What makes up scripture—the Old Testament, the New Testament, or both? Is the God revealed in these testaments the same? Does tradition play a role in biblical interpretation? These are the
types of questions that shape how one approaches the text. Hathaway (2021) warns that Christian integrationists must reject hermeneutical approaches that are “hijacked with Enlightenment worldviews” and lead one to read the Word of God incorrectly through “their a priori commitments” (p. 266). Without proper consideration, one can come to scripture through an unexamined amalgamation of beliefs, detached from the historical and ecclesial guidelines that can help discern the text’s true meaning. According to Hathaway (2021), some “broadly recognizable theological framework” needs to guide the exegesis of scripture so that each passage is understood considering the whole Canon (p. 266).

Recognizing the literary and historical contexts of scripture helps the reader to understand and draw inferences from the text intended by the author and in line with its original design as opposed to the personal creations of the reader (Keener, 2019, p. 22). Bartholomew (2000) asserts that a biblical hermeneutic “has theological and philosophical dimensions, and both need to be informed by faith seeking understanding” (p. 33). As this is recognized and implemented, the philosophical and theological presuppositions that shape current scholarship will surface more readily and be easier to notice, critique, and correct (Bartholomew, 2000, p. 34). Vanhoozer (2005) explains the importance of receptivity to the Holy Spirit throughout the process of interpretation, noting “the Spirit’s sanctifying work in their lives in order better to cultivate the interpretive virtues such as openness and humility” (p. 36). When psychological data and related counseling methods appear to conflict with scriptural teaching, the Christian integrative counselor is right to consider the accuracy of his understanding; however, with “well-established interpretations anchored in Christian community,” exploration of alternative explanations for the data “would be the more natural course” (Hathaway, 2021, p. 262).

Recognizing the wisdom of those who have come before is also critical. A tradition of study and truth-seeking has been promulgated through the Christian church, and this tradition is available to Christians to glean from today. Piper (1946) posits that proper interpretation requires awareness of the ecumenical structure in which one has established himself: “The faith
by which the exegete is guided will be the historic faith of his Church. There is no way of approaching the Bible as a Christian in general” (p. 204). Having the humility to submit oneself to Christ’s authority, as revealed through scripture and the scholarly thought of the Christian saints of the ages, goes a long way to helping orient oneself in the world. The Christian in today’s world is given a remarkable heritage in tradition. From the early church of classical creeds, through the medieval church of Aquinas, and into Protestant scholasticism, the Christian can glean from the wisdom before him. While faithful Christians may not be bound to every doctrine posited throughout church history, extreme caution should be taken when explicitly detethering oneself from doctrinal positions of the church that have existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years (e.g., see Wright, 2020).

Thick, Complex, and Secure Theology
Holeman (2012) claims there is “nothing more practical than good theology” (p. 9). A primary question to ask when considering theology is, “How does one approach scripture?” Good theology is yielded from good interpretation, which means the one who wishes to be faithful to scripture benefits greatly from learning how to interpret properly. Theology is the primary source of knowledge for the Christian; it guides him and provides a hermeneutical framework (Swinton & Mowat, 2016, p. 19). Because of this, Christian counselors need to continue exploring and developing their explicit theology—for the sake of their formation and the good of their clients, who will receive counseling from a better-sharpened view of God and the world.

Good theology involves thinking rightly about God and developing a perspective from which to view the world and make congruent decisions reflective of one’s beliefs. For the Christian, professional competency requires theological reflection. Because his identity is rooted in being a Christian who counsels, he recognizes the omnipresence and omnipotence of God in the counseling room. Anywhere the counselor is, he can invite the presence of the living God to dwell and work. The Christian counselor can be an agent of hope, mirroring the Kingdom of God by recognizing
the pain of the counselee while also holding onto hope for the future (French, 2021, p. 271).

For the Christian counselor to be equipped for properly integrated work, he needs to move from an embedded, implicit theology into the study of theological resources and personal growth in faith.Obtaining theological knowledge does not make one integrative; however, as theology informs practice, theology necessarily permeates the lifestyle of the counselor, including professional practices (Holeman, 2012, p. 31). One’s theology guides the methods utilized in client sessions and undergirds every interaction; it is critical that the integrative counselor carefully consider his beliefs, committing to a lifetime of the study of God for his own sake and the sake of his clients.

**Integrating Biblical Worldview, Hermeneutics, and Theology into Practice**

As the student develops a biblically sound worldview, intentional hermeneutics, and theology that points to Christ, she can properly assess her counseling methods and practices. Her training in developing a worldview corresponding to biblical truth is immediately relevant in helping her recognize truth from falsehood within the psychological community. Discernment is required of the Christian counselor—she is called to distinguish between theories that can be properly integrated into the biblical framework versus those situated too firmly upon humanistic assumptions to help point people to true freedom. Counseling encompasses all aspects of the person, and the domain of spirituality is not exempt for the client or the counselor. As A.W. Tozer (1987) famously said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (p. 1). Beliefs about God permeate all of one’s life, and the counselor must intentionally build her practice in congruence with theological truth.

Choosing methods congruent with one’s faith necessitates careful examination of the underlying propositions upon which each method is built. What does this method assume about the world and/or the human
person? Our practices are “theory-laden,” whether we recognize the theories behind our practices or not (Swinton & Mowat, 2016, p. 19).

In our post-Enlightenment culture, one of the most permeating belief structures is that of reason above all else. Philosophies that elevate reason above the supernatural contradict a Christian worldview, as the believer claims God is both beyond reason and currently active in the world today, directly refuting naturalistic conceptions of the world in which God is not required (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 219). Elevating oneself and reason above God is exactly the sin of pride by which Lucifer fell (Isaiah 14:12-17). To avoid using practices with incongruent belief structures, intentionality in leaving room for the supernatural and scrutiny of the methodologies and practices utilized are necessary for the Christian integrative counselor. Helping students see how a biblical worldview, a strong hermeneutic, and informed Christian theology practically impact the counseling profession and their role in the ongoing work of the Christian counselor thus needs to be a primary goal of Christian counseling programs.

**Conclusion**

Christian counselors and training programs must reflect on their theological beliefs and professional practices. One of the lessons taught early on in counseling classes is that the counselor is one’s greatest tool—the counselor can best offer help to others through careful reflection and intentional growth of herself. This necessitates reflexivity on the part of the counselor: she must take the time to reflect on her professional practices, practical theology, and psychological information to ensure the three domains are congruent. McMinn (2011) explains the profession of counseling as both professional and personal, as therapeutic relationships “grow out of the person’s inner life” (p. 12). Though integration is not an easy enterprise, it is worth the effort required. The key distinctive that separates Christian programs from their secular counterparts is explaining to students how to connect their faith with daily professional practice. Through careful
attention to worldview, hermeneutics, and theology, Christian counselors will be properly equipped to minister to clients through faithful, Christ-reflecting methodologies and practices.

Nicole C. Biller (nicbiller@oru.edu) is a second-year student in the Graduate School of Counseling at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA.

References


The Soul of Desire: Discovering the Neuroscience of Beauty, Longing, and Community  By Curt Thompson.

The follow-up to psychiatrist Curt Thompson’s notable work, The Soul of Shame (2015), The Soul of Desire speaks not so much to shame which mars the soul, but to the community and lived commitments that heal it. Weaving together theology, Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), and narrative, Thompson offers a vision for creating beauty out of shame and trauma. Thompson anchors the book in Psalm 27:4, using the words “dwell, gaze,” and “inquire” from this scripture to structure the application of his foundational concepts of desire and longing, beauty and imagination, trauma, and shame.

The first three chapters wed beauty and desire together as both central longings and callings of the human heart. True to Thompson’s earlier works, The Soul of Desire does not shy away from the concept of shame, but rather invites the reader to look beyond the seeming final reality the context of shame creates and towards a new, beautiful, and embodied creation (p. 52). To do this, Thompson begins several narratives, introducing characters from his own psychotherapy practice, detailing the issue and/or circumstance which brought these specific people to his office. Thompson does not complete these stories until later chapters but invites the reader to identify with the experience of thwarted realization of longing. The metaphorical table thus laid, Thompson then turns, framing the “problem of desire” (p. 27), as a call for the reader to pay attention to the rich longing which saturates life and acts as a clue to our calling if only we will pay attention (p. 25). The first three chapters delve into attachment theory (pp. 18–22; 46–50), IPNB (pp. 23–28; 37–40), integration and disintegration (pp. 28–38; 51–53), and an introductory theology of joy and beauty (pp. 41–46).
Section two, comprised of chapters four-six, begins with the question posed by a client of Thompson’s: “why can’t you just fix me?” (p. 70). Thompson shares details of the client’s situation concluding, “We are people of grief” (p. 71). Indeed, Thompson reflects, “Evil seeks to devour beauty at every turn, and it does so by wielding the traumatic experience of shame as its primary weapon . . . it intends to annihilate beauty and tempts us to do the same in our response to shame and fear” (pp. 52, 72). Though Thompson devotes significant space in these chapters to grief, trauma, and shame, he notes it is these experiences which form the fertile soil of new creation (p. 73). How, exactly, a new, beautiful, and longed-for creation can spring from places of desolation are the focus of the third and final section of the book.

Using the psalmist’s entreaty to dwell, gaze, and inquire (27:4), Thompson introduces the reader to the transforming power of the confessional community, committed to seeing the inherent beauty within each individual and calling forth the new creation Christ is making in and through that community. Thompson refers to this communal calling forth as “looking at what we do not yet see” (p. 113). He expands: “Human flourishing, then, is about our being able to imagine in embodied form the new creation, the new works of art, that God is creating in, through, and with us” (p. 116). Noting how embodied experiences of shame and trauma shrink our imaginations, Thompson gives confessional communities which will stay in places of grief long enough to see beauty emerge significant import: “Being joyfully known enables our imaginations to expand” (p. 116). Indeed, Thompson describes this work of joyful knowing anchored in biblical narrative as what it means to co-labor with Christ to “bring new creation” (p. 115). The movements of this co-labor are dwelling, which Thompson describes as remaining present through discomfort—ours and others’—gazing or seeing the image of God and the promise of new life in the other, and inquiring, described as “telling our stories more truly” (p. 91).

Thompson’s characteristic style weaves together poetic narrative, generous reference to art, both musical and visual, scripture, and clinical psychology. His style is warm, winsome, and inviting, beckoning the reader into
previously unexplored connections between these genres. In Thompson’s capable hands, for example, “the cellist of Sarajevo” becomes a four-word reference to what is both possible and required for new creation to spring forth from devastation. Referencing the cellist of Sarajevo, Thompson states, “The transformational power of gazing and being gazed upon with intention in the very presence of our hideousness becomes the solid ground on which the community stands, creating beauty in the middle of bomb craters” (p. 164). While indispensable reading for those in helping professions, *The Soul of Desire* provides an accessible invitation to all who experience shame and trauma to dwell, gaze, and inquire, and in so doing, be transformed.

**Rebekah Bled** (rbled@oru.edu) is the Administrative Assistant for the Center of Spirit-empowered Research and a Ph.D. student in Contextual Theology at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA.

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*The Bible and Mental Health* is a multi-authored work edited by Christopher C. H. Cook and Isabelle Hamley. Cook is a psychiatrist who has authored, edited, and co-edited extensively in spirituality, theology, and mental health. He has served as President of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality, Executive Editor of the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, and Chair of the Executive Committee of the Special Interest Group in Spirituality & Psychiatry. In 2020, he received the Canterbury Cross for his interdisciplinary work on theology and psychiatry. In 2021, the American Psychiatric Association awarded Cook the Oskar Pfister Award for his work on psychiatry and religion. Isabelle Hamley is Secretary for Theology and Ecumenical Relations and Theological Adviser to the House of Bishops. She has held posts as Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, taught Biblical Studies and Practical Theology at St John’s
College, Nottingham, and served as a parish vicar. Her research interests include integrating theology, ministry, and social engagement.

*The Bible and Mental Health* brings together an eminent list of contributors, including Walter Bruggeman, John Swinton, Paula Gooder, and Joanna Collicutt. The text is part of the continued collaboration between mental health and faith practitioners. It interprets the ongoing discourse in the field of mental health and faith through the lens of Scripture. Thereby helping church leaders and mental health practitioners better understand their patients and integrate faith-based intervention into their practices.

The text contains fifteen chapters, divided into three sections. Section one looks at modern conceptions of humanity within scriptural contexts. The section begins by reflecting on how Scripture and humans use narratives to construct meaning and identity. The section explores what it means to be human and healthy in a non-perfect world in the light of Scripture. Although the section recognizes areas of overlap between the biblical world and our own, it teaches readers to be careful not to project today’s worldview (including today’s psychological theories) onto the biblical context and vice versa.

Section two examines specific biblical texts and how they can help readers understand mental health. Many of the texts in this section are from the Old Testament. The main emphasis is that human struggle and survival, in which pain and oppression were ever-present, shaped the Old Testament. Therefore, the Old Testament is a collection of reflections and responses as the authors sought to find meaning amid the trauma. The correlation between the Old Testament and the contemporary context is that life is not always easy; it is sometimes difficult to find meaning, understand, and respond to the reality of pain. Section three is more practically focused. The first two chapters explore how Scripture impacts and shapes the experience of church members with mental health difficulties. The third chapter in this section focuses on communal habits and formation in the face of trauma. The last chapter considers how Scripture reshapes our understanding of the nature and value of resilience.

The writing style is an engaging blend of scholarly thoroughness and easy reading. The breadth of scholarship provides readers with fresh insight
and understanding into the engagement between mental health and faith within the context of Scripture and its implications for the contemporary context. *The Bible and Mental Health* demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary dialogue by contributing toward the continued collaboration between mental health and faith practitioners. To this point, the text performs remarkably well.

Scholarly voices from the Pentecostal (i.e., Spirit-empowered) community are missing from the engagement. Since Pentecostalism is a distinct Christian tradition with its own contexts, theologies, and ways of interpreting the Bible, one wonders how a Pentecostal reading of some biblical texts might have added value to the conversation (at least so far as this journal’s readers might be concerned). That is not to say that the book does not add value to Pentecostal thinking. The book reminds readers that the human condition is lived within the boundaries of frailty and hope. Considering that the Pentecostal community is sometimes critiqued as being too otherworldly and holding to an over-realized eschatology, this book can balance such an over-emphasis.

*The Bible and Mental Health* is one of those books where the introduction and the conclusion so thoroughly summarize the contents that readers could easily read the introduction and conclusion without reading any of the chapters and still obtain a thorough understanding of the book. Some people may see this as a disadvantage. However, this may attract busy mental health practitioners who need a comprehensive summary before diving into any particular chapter topic. Each chapter is illuminative and provides an excellent entry point and good discussion. The text is well-referenced with many citations, so the reader can easily go deeper if they wish. Overall, *The Bible and Mental Health* will help readers think about Scripture, the people they encounter, and how they can apply Scripture to bear on the fullness of human experience.

**Robert D. McBain** (rmcbain@oru.edu) is the Research Coordinator of the Holy Spirit Research Center and a Ph.D. Candidate in Theology at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK, USA.
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