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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/) 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) 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
deression. 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.

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References


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