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Counseling in the Already, Not Yet: Reflections on the Work of the Christian Counselor Through an Eschatological Lens

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COUNSELING IN THE ALREADY, NOT YET

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

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Abstract

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

Introduction

Being a counselor during the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique and trying experience. Counselors and their counsees, along with untold others across the globe, have shared in a “collective grief” (Berinato, 2020). The pain of a broken creation has become particularly evident as a result of the Coronavirus, and counselors and their counsees are experiencing similar traumas, grief, distress, and dysregulation due to the pandemic (Madani, 2020). In an unprecedented, worldwide loss of life, loss of physical contact, loss of hopes and dreams, and the loss of normalcy (Walsh, 2020), there has been a substantial increase in anxiety and

depression, domestic violence, substance use, and loneliness (Galea, Merchant & Lurie, 2020). Therapists—the ones who are skilled at “holding hope” for their clients (see Flaskas, 2008)—may find their reserves and resources tapped and strained as a result of their own COVID-19 experiences, as well as the emotional demand of caring for others while being in need of care themselves (Gold, 2021).

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

Theologically speaking, these are matters and cries of a largely eschatological nature. Eschatology is generally understood as an area of Christian dogmatics that concerns the study of the “last things” (i.e., death, judgment, heaven, hell, the end of world history, the return of Christ). However, eschatology does not only pertain to the “end,” but very much involves all of human history, including social-historical life (Althouse, 2010). Moreover, the whole of the Christian life is truly an eschatological reality ushered in by the eschatological gift of the Spirit of God. Said otherwise, in the words of Volf (1990): “Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new creation or it is not Christian life at all. And the Spirit of God should determine the whole life, spiritual as well as secular, of a Christian, and not only some aspects of it” (p. 28; see also Volf, 1991). This is to include the social responsibilities and cultural labors of the believer, who undertakes those efforts *in* the Spirit, in light of the coming, promised new creation. As such, it is in the area of eschatology in which one can reflect on the theological significance and impact of human cultural labors in light of eternity. It is also this area of theology that helps us to grapple with the suffering of the present that exists in tension with the already-but-still-coming eschatological fulfillment of God’s tomorrow.

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

Considering, then, the work of the counselor, in particular, this article will be concerned with reflecting on the labors of the Christian counselor through an eschatological lens. And, specifically, this article will explore the idea of “counseling in the already, not yet”; a reality that has been profoundly felt in the midst of COVID-19, making counselors and counselees hyperaware in many regards of the pain of the “not yet,” but perhaps profoundly more eager for and attentive to hopeful signs of the “already” that break forth in our midst by the Spirit. To this end, the work of the counselor will be proposed in this article as being a cultural, penultimate practice that is intended to assist individuals with their problems of living now, while also being a practice that holds eschatological promise, serving as a signpost to the ultimate (Kunst & Tan, 1996; see also Bonhoeffer, 1955, pp. 125–142).

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

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

Brief Overview of Selected Literature

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

On a cursory level, it has been suggested that “the overarching context of the counseling session [is] the ‘here, but not yet’ tension” (Serrano, 2003, p. 222). Similarly, Decker (1996) proposes that the eschatological task of counseling is “intended to produce hope, but it is also intended to provide a context for measuring present pain against ultimate gain” (p. 60). It has also been suggested that because of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing life where there is death, “one can have a realistic hope regarding the process of therapy” because “[r]eal transformation can take place, though one tempers this with the understanding that not all things occur quickly” (Parker, 2016, p. 62).

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

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

struck down, but not destroyed,” followed by an echoing of Paul’s concluding remarks in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 (*New Revised Standard Version*, 1989):

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

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

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

[W]hatever I do with a client, whatever work I am able to accomplish, I see it as my contribution to the work that God is doing in the world, and the healing and hope that God is bringing to the world. . . . It means that my life and my work has meaning and significance in a grander scheme in the world that God is doing and it's not just me doing something with a client here I don't go into these situations trying to control the outcome. We have our goals set in assessment and in treatment planning, but as a Christian, I see myself as a tool in the Holy Spirit's hand to bring healing and wellness to those people, and to achieve those goals. (French, 2019, p. 184)

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

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

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

Further Theological Considerations: Living as the Resurrection Community

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

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

Thus, through God’s own divine action in the cross and resurrection we have been provided a model of Christian practice that fully embraces and enters into humanity’s pain in the present, yet also lives in such a way that acknowledges that there is hope and a future that, itself, informs our present circumstances. To this point, Swinton (2020) notes that Christian hope is both an idea *and* a practice.

This understanding yields a different way of being in the world that enables the church to live as the “resurrection community” and to be a prophetic witness to life and hope as suffering remains very real and present; even as pandemics sweep through the earth (see Swinton, 2000, pp. 130–132).

The Already, Not Yet Tension of the Counseling Process

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

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

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

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

To this point, one cannot properly consider the eschatological significance of human labors, including those of the Christian counselor, without affirming the pneumatic empowerment that makes the practices of the believer, and church at large, an “expression of life” and “proclamation” of the future in Christ (Self, 2013, p. 49). Without the pneumatic empowerment of the Spirit, flesh is flesh and human practices are bound by the limitations of a fallen humanity (i.e., sin, finiteness). But, by the infilling and empowering work of the Holy Spirit, human flesh becomes a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19) through which flows life, hope, healing, and other inbreakings of eschatological promise. Moreover, through the indwelling and empowerment of the Spirit, human practices become capable of transforming the brokenness of the current state into first fruits of what is to come.

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

It is therefore beneficial to consider *how* the Christian counselor may effectively counsel in a way that rightly grapples with the realities of the already, not yet, not denying one for the other, but rather intentionally practicing with an awareness of where she is located in salvation history. More specifically, we might ask how the Christian counselor can 1) enter into human suffering to stand in critical solidarity with the sufferer, and, also, 2) prophetically protest all forms of death, suffering, and oppression through practical strategies that are intended to

bring change and hope, as informed by the eschaton and empowered by the ministry of eschatological Spirit of God (see Swinton, 2000, pp. 129–130).

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

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

Companioning

Grief expert Alan Wolfelt (2006) bases his approach to bereavement care and counseling on the premise of “companioning.” This is a term he developed to define a particular attitude and posture taken in the care of the bereaved. Central to the practice of companioning is a being-with and coming alongside the one who suffers, in sharp contrast to a “treating” or “curing” approach. Companioning, true to its Latin roots, evokes imagery of sharing a meal together, (messmate—*com* for “with” and *pan* for “bread”) and indicates a particular way of being in which the counselor is present to the one who suffers, “sharing, communing, abiding in the fellowship of hospitality” (p. 17). Amongst the many tenets of the companioning approach, Wolfelt states that it is “about walking alongside; it is not about leading”; it is “about bearing witness to the struggles of others [. . .] not about directing those struggles”; it is “about being present to another person’s pain [. . .] not about taking

away the pain” (p. 6). Moreover, to companion is to “observe,” “watch out for,” “to keep and honor,” and “to bear witness” to the experiences and the one who grieves (pp. 17–18). To companion is to seek to understand and to learn from the one who suffers. Companioning is therefore a particularly helpful practice to explore when considering the Christian counselor’s care of clients in the tension of the already, not yet; and it can be suggested that this posture should not only be utilized in the care of those specifically seeking bereavement counseling, but for those enduring any and all types of suffering in this life, including the suffering brought about by COVID.

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

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

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

Lament

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

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

Lament carries within it an ability effectively and deeply to acknowledge the pain of the present world and the wounds of a broken creation within the broader framework and understanding of God’s faithfulness. As Swinton (2007) explains, it is a practice taken up and enacted by a covenanted people, bringing their cries of distress, rage, pain, and sorrow to God, repeatedly. Lament gives voice to the grievances of God’s people and demands that God respond and take action. It is prayer—a specific form of prayer that is “not content with soothing platitudes or images of a God that will only listen to voices that appease and compliment,” but, rather, “[l]ament takes the brokenness of the human experience into the heart of God and demands that God answer” (p. 104). Lament is therefore more than

catharsis and the venting of emotional anguish. It is the expression of deep emotional pain to God, specifically, and not only for the purpose of expressing sorrow but for calling God to respond through action. Interestingly, biblical lament also contains a surprising element that differentiates it from the sole expression of sorrow or unhappiness—the inclusion of passionate praise to God, at times (Hall, 2016).

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

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

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

Placing focus on the counseling endeavor, these comments can highlight the power of the practice of lament for the Christian counselor who companions the Christian client experiencing the very real pains of the “not yet,” framed within the greater hope that originates in God’s faithfulness. It is a practice that deeply acknowledges the ongoing flow of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation that characterizes the life of faith, as mentioned above, allowing the counselor to

serve counselees well as they navigate places of suffering, experiences of hope, and the liminal wilderness spaces that characterize Holy Saturday experiences.

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

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

As Hall (2018) explains, lament restores a semblance of order out of the chaos of one’s experiences. Like the practice of many other rituals that mark life transitions (e.g., weddings, funerals, graduations), lament provides opportunity for the creation of new meaning. Thus, even when God has not appeared to act on one’s behalf, the “ritualized movement” that occurs through the structure of lament brings the mourner to a place of praise (p. 224). More importantly, we find that,

“[a]s we pray through the psalms, our desires, affections, and perspectives are *reshaped*” (p. 230). This is a significant point that moves us to the idea of re-storying.

Re-storying

In Narrative Therapy, the term “re-storying” is central to its philosophy and practice. The therapeutic process revolves around narratives and involves the “storying” and “re-storying” of clients’ lives and their experiences with the intention of co-creating new, more liberating narratives (White & Epston, 1990). This is based on the premise that humans give meaning to their lived experiences by storying them. Consequently, humans not only story their lives, but they also perform the stories of which they hold knowledge. Stories are therefore understood to be both an asset and a liability. They are the means by which individuals understand themselves, others, and their relationships. Some narratives have the potential to foster wellness through being “reassuring, uplifting, liberating, revitalizing, or healing” while others “constrain, trivialize, disqualify, or otherwise pathologize” an individual, others, and their relationships (Tomm, 1990, p. x). As can be imagined, the most dominant story that shapes a person’s life can determine the nature of his or her lived experience and habitual actions.

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

In light of this, it is important to provide clients with the opportunity to explore their narratives and the stories that weave their lives together and help them

to make sense of suffering, including that which has been experienced as a result of COVID-19. On one level, the story that dominates a counselee's life will powerfully shape that individual's worldview and, therefore, his or her experience of the world. What is explored in therapy will, in many senses, be the outworking of the counselee's worldview and the stories that generate it, resulting in particular behaviors and ways of operating in the world. How the counselee views his current circumstances, future, and outcomes will also be largely dependent upon the narrative and "script" by which he is living. Likewise, the story that dominates the counselor's life will also radically inform her worldview, experience of the world, and, also, her approach to, and work as, a therapist—including her view of a counselee, the present circumstances, future, and outcomes. For Christian counselors and clients, then, specifically exploring the Christian narrative and the promise of hope will be crucial to their meaning-making processes and reestablishing a sense of coherence after the distress and disruptions of the pandemic. The eschatologically-informed counselor must therefore be intentional about discussing clients' Christian spirituality and helping them to frame (and/or re-frame) their experiences of the "not yet" within the overarching promise of hope in Christ that serves as an anchor for the soul (Hebrews 6:19).

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

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

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

universe-wide, transcendent answer of the hope of a renewed and restored creation itself” (p. 44).

Thus, as the Christian counselor is deeply imbued by the Christian story and its eschatology, it will begin to “re-story” the counseling process itself—the language used, the interventions chosen, and the manner in which the counselor understands and attends to the two dialectics of the Christian reality in the counseling process, suffering and hope. In the face of immense suffering, such as has been encountered in the pandemic, the Christian story will be crucial for reorienting the Christian counselor and client to a place of hope. And, ultimately, this will occur with the help of the eschatological, story-telling Spirit of God, the one who gives the believer the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16; see also Keener, 2016; Smith, 2013, pp. 14–15).

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

Conclusion

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

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



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