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USING SCRIPTURE IN COUNSELLING EVANGELICALS

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THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the Bible can be used beneficially and ethically as a resource in counseling evangelicals. For evangelicals the Bible is their “primary text”—an unequalled source of authority and comfort. Evangelicals begin with the self-attestation of scripture to its own reliability and usefulness (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). When the scriptures are used in a responsible way using sound exegetical method there can be real dividends for the hearer. With proper preparation and informed consent, the counselor who ministers to evangelical clients can appropriate the message of the scriptures in a way that brings emotional and spiritual health. The responsible counselor uses the scriptures in an ethical way and does not apply them with insensitivity, imposition, or superstition.

Three therapies are discussed and in each case, the scriptures can be integrated in a therapeutic way. In grief and loss counseling, clients identify with the deep meaning and emotions of the psalms of lament and find words for their grief. The scriptures give a “formfulness” to grief and overflow with candid speech to the God who saves. Scripture is also a vital part of biblically informed cognitive-behavioral therapy. Many emotional difficulties are mediated by dysfunctional thoughts. Scripture can be used in thought stopping, thought shaping, and cognitive disputation. In the Bible there are examples of various cognitive distortions: perfectionism, magnification, discounting the positive, mind reading, all or none thinking, et al. In post-modern therapies like solution-focused therapy and narrative therapy the therapist and client are looking for “grace-events”—places where God is already at work in the life of the client, providing

solutions. When the dominant story is problem saturated, the Scriptures provide the client with exceptions to the problem and alternate stories of hope.

The thesis concludes with directions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

A significant percentage of the populations within Canada and the United States of America are evangelical Christians. A Canadian survey conducted by Ipsos-Reid in 2003 found that on the basis of 6 key indicators 19% of Canadians can be identified as evangelicals. In this survey, respondents were considered evangelical when they answered affirmatively to the following three statements:

(1) I believe that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God provided the way for the forgiveness of my sins; (2) I believe the Bible to be the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy; and (3) I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.

In addition to agreeing to the above, they also disagreed with the next two statements:

(4) The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in these modern times; and (5) In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine Son of God.

The final criterion involved weekly church attendance. Only when all six indicators were present in the survey responses was the respondent considered evangelical. The number of evangelicals so determined has increased from 16% in 1993 to 19% in 2003 (Van Ginkel, 2003). A similar poll conducted by Gallup (2005) in the United States found that 22% of Americans agreed with criteria similar to that used in the Ipsos-Reid survey. According to these statistics, approximately one in five Canadians and Americans are evangelical.

For evangelicals, the Bible holds a place of pre-eminence. Although there is some debate about issues of inerrancy and the limits of the canon, evangelicals

unanimously see the Bible as the “Christian’s primary text” (Johnson, 2007, p. 219). For most, the canon of scripture is the infallible standard for “faith and practice.” For the psychotherapist who sensitively and skillfully integrates the message of the Scriptures in counseling evangelicals, there can be real dividends. This project examines how the Bible can be used beneficially and ethically as a resource in counseling evangelicals. Chapter 1 looks at ethical and hermeneutical considerations in using scripture in counseling evangelicals. This is the foundation for the therapeutic perspectives that follow. Chapter 2 explores grief and loss counseling with the help of scripture. The psalms can provide ways of expressing grief to ourselves, others, and to God. Sometimes, however, feelings are rooted in destructive thought patterns that negatively affect emotional well-being. Chapter 3 looks at scripture and cognitive-behavioral therapy. There is a growing body of research on biblically informed cognitive-behavioral therapy, and this chapter surveys the findings. In chapter 4, the discussion is brought up-to-date with an exploration of using scripture with post-modern therapies, and the project concludes with a look at directions for future research in chapter 5.

At the outset, it should be noted that the relationship between psychotherapy and religion has been at times marked by hostility or indifference. Freud referred to religion as a “mass delusion” in which people “attempt to procure a certainty of happiness and protection against suffering through a delusional remolding of reality” (Freud, 1930, in Nelson & Wilson, 1984, p. 17). In fact, many writings in psychotherapy from the first half of the 20th century speak of religion as pathological or as evidence of psychological dysfunction (Bartoli, 2007). Albert Ellis maintained that “religious belief was essentially synonymous with emotional disturbance and that there was a direct and linear

relationship between degree of orthodoxy (religious commitment) and disturbance” (Johnson, 2001, p. 40). Ellis (1973) boldly claimed: “Man is man....When and if he fully accepts...the reality that there is no supernatural ‘force’ in the universe that gives a damn about him or ever will, he will then be truly humanistic” (p. 16).

Nevertheless, there have been many in recent decades who have challenged the psychotherapeutic community in this regard. Bergin (1980) claims: “Religion is at the fringe of clinical psychology when it should be at the center” (p. 103). Berenson (1990) echoes this growing sentiment: “the most underused resource in family therapy today is God” (p. 59). Prest & Keller (1993) speaking of the situation two decades ago lamented that there was “a glaring lack of professional literature addressing spirituality” (p. 137), and this lack has not been totally satisfied. From our statistics on evangelicalism, we can see the scope of the error in marginalizing what is significant and precious to many. The situation in the last quarter of the 20th century onwards has been a partial reversal of the earlier period with a growing body of professional and popular literature written about the importance of spirituality in therapy: “Viewing a person holistically means that one consider all aspects of the person. Spirituality is a piece of this puzzle, an integrative force that cannot be isolated from a person’s physical state, feelings, thoughts or relationships” (Hawkins, Tan, & Turk, 1999, p. 310).

In 1990, a study of the spiritual orientation of psychotherapists found that the majority of psychotherapists (55%; N=225) considered it inappropriate for a psychologist to use religious texts in therapy (Shafranske & Malony, 1990). One reason for this reluctance stems from the ideal of value-free psychotherapy. A belief in the Bible presupposes a theistic framework and a corresponding view of divine revelation. Some

would contend that this kind of presuppositional and metaphysical approach is contrary to the neutral, value-free stance of good psychotherapy (Smith & Counsell, 1991). Hunter (1976) disagrees: "...psychotherapeutic research has convincingly demonstrated that even the most, benign, empathetic, phenomenological therapist inevitably imposes values and moral judgments on his or her patients" (p. 151). Most would agree that there is simply no such thing as value free psychotherapy: "...all therapeutic techniques are underlain with philosophical and moral assumptions that entail unproven biases, whether or not psychologists are aware of them" (Slife & Whoolery, 2006; cf. Malony, 1985).

This hesitation to use spiritual interventions such as scripture reading and meditation also stem from a reluctance among clients who have not always felt free to discuss religious or spiritual concerns with therapists (Haug, 1998). Bergin, Payne & Richards (1996) list a number of reasons why evangelicals have apprehensions about secular psychotherapy: evangelicals share the concern that the spiritually unaware counselor may:

- (a) neglect religious concerns; (b) deal with religious belief events as pathological or psychological; (c) fail to discern religious language and ideas; (d) presume that religious clients share nonreligious cultural norms (e.g., living together, premarital sex, and divorce); (e) promote therapeutic conduct that contradicts their own particular sense of morals (e.g., abortion and homosexual conduct); or (f) make presumptions, explanations, and suggestions that their account of revelation is not valid epistemology (p. 315).

In view of the early history of psychotherapy and the antipathy toward religion shown by some, such client concerns are not unwarranted. Moreover, a study by Bergin & Jensen

(1990) revealed that there is a “religiosity gap” between therapists and their clients. Studies have shown that a “majority of the population probably prefer an orientation to counseling and psychotherapy that is sympathetic, or at least sensitive, to a spiritual perspective” and this need has not been met by those therapists “whose conceptual/clinical frameworks have room only for secular and naturalistic constructs” (pp. 6-7; cf. Bergin, 1980; Shafranske & Malony, 1996).

This increasing recognition that religion and spirituality are relevant to psychotherapeutic practice is reflected in the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Ethical Principles (2003). Principle E states in part:

Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, *religion*, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status and consider these factors when working with members of such groups (*italics added*).

Psychologists who lack the necessary preparation for dealing with religious issues are required to receive proper training and supervision or to make appropriate referrals (2.0.1(b)). Eck (2002) summarizes an attitude towards religion and spirituality which is becoming standard in the field: “religion and spirituality...are as much a part of a person’s orientation to life as their ethnicity, gender and culture” (Eck, 2002, p. 266). Yet, Bartoli (2007) notes that psychology’s emerging interest in religion and spirituality has yet to be matched by adequate graduate-level training in these areas.

There is a growing estimation of the Bible’s use in the therapeutic enterprise.

Some argue that using the Bible is simply using the best tool for the task: “Like any other practitioner who believes in his or her craft, my intent is to use the best resources I can for the helping of my client” (Malony, 1985, p. 118). Even Albert Ellis (1993), who disparaged religious beliefs (1980), gives high regard to the therapeutic usefulness of the Bible: “I think I can safely say that the Judeo-Christian Bible is a self-help book that has probably enabled more people to make more extensive and intensive personality and behavioral changes than all professional therapists combined” (p. 336). According to Smith & Counsell (1991): “With the rise of Christian populations and the popularity of fundamental religious movements and Scriptural study, therapists will probably be seeing more clients with whom the use of the Bible can be a meaningful part of the therapy process” (p. 151). Via the publication of study aids and contemporary translations of the Bible, the scriptures are becoming more accessible also in therapy. Lovinger (1996) makes a similar observation:

[T]he Bible, which is often seen as a monolithic, impenetrable structure, is considered as much more flexible in meaning, and having qualities of humor, depth, and awareness of the human condition, than many individuals are ordinarily aware of. It too, used properly, can aid the therapeutic enterprise (p. 360).

Even more mainstream Christians are coming to appreciate the value of biblically based counseling:

Seminarians and pastors are raising questions concerning the appropriate use of the Bible in pastoral counseling, and seminary professors in pastoral counseling are rethinking their views on the issue. Few want to return to the era when

pastors were armed with a list of Bible verses to cover every conceivable personal problem and hardly anyone has in mind turning counseling sessions into Bible study sessions. But many are asking whether it may be possible to recover the Bible as a resource in pastoral counseling and whether it might be useful to develop Biblically-informed methods of pastoral counseling (Capps, 1980, p. 252).

In counseling evangelicals, the Bible can provide an unequalled source of comfort and guidance.

The self-testimony of the Bible about its own reliability and usefulness is instructive. Paul underscores the divine inspiration of the Scriptures and commends its total adequacy in 2 Tim. 3:14-17:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.¹

While a number of versions have rendered the *hapax legomenon*: *theopneustos* with “inspired of/by God” (i.e. NASV, KJV, NKJV, RSV), B. B. Warfield has argued persuasively that compounds containing *theos* with endings in *-tos* are mostly passive in meaning and so the ideal translation is “God-breathed”:

¹ All quotations from the Bible unless otherwise indicated are taken from the New International Version, Zondervan, 1985.

From all points of approach alike we appear to be conducted to the conclusion that it is primarily expressive of the origination of Scripture, not of its nature and much less of its effects. What is *theopneustos* is 'God-breathed,' produced by the creative breath of the Almighty (Warfield, 1948, p. 296).

Therefore, Scripture "owes its origin and content to divine breath" (Hendrikson, 1957, p. 302); it is the product of God's "creative fiat" (Packer, 1979, p. 98).

The manner in which the Scriptures were "breathed out by God" is not addressed in this passage. In 2 Pet. 1:20-21, Peter, however, may be speaking *pars pro toto* of the origination of Scriptures:

Above all you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

If it is the case that Peter is referring to the corpus of Scripture with the phrase "prophecy of Scripture" then this is a strong statement about the divine control over the writers of Scripture (Pinnock, 1971).

This high regard for the Hebrew scriptures was extended to the New Testament corpus in time. In 1 Tim. 5:18, Paul quotes two passages, one from Deuteronomy (25:4) and one found in Luke 10:7. He makes no distinction of value between the two and introduces both with the formula: "Scripture says...." Already at this early stage in the development of the canon, part of the biblical tradition which later was expressed in the New Testament writings was considered on par with the Hebrew Scriptures.

In 2 Tim. 3:17: Paul elaborates on the value of the scriptures in equipping the servant of God "for every good work." The scriptures are a resource in "teaching,

rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Mack (1998) expands on this usefulness of scripture: “It has utilitarian value; it enhances life; it is profitable in every way—for time and eternity, for our relationship with God and our relationship with our fellow man, for our spiritual and emotional and mental well-being...” (p. 80). Mack expounds the value of scripture in teaching: “It is useful for teaching; it is the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to provide for us a standard of what is right and wrong, good and bad, true and false about all of the truly important matters of life” (p. 80).

Malony (1985) draws out some of the counseling implications from the passage in 2 Tim. 3:17. “Rebuking” sounds harsh for counseling but there are times when it is appropriate:

Rebuking is a synonym for confrontation with which every good therapist is familiar. In this case the Scriptures are to be used in helping the client to become aware of those misplaced perceptions, those erroneous understandings, those mistaken cognitions and those deceptive feelings which are contrary to the understanding of life noted above (p. 120).

The third action fitting for the Scriptures is “correcting”; this sounds much like “rebuking” but Malony takes this passage in the direction of “correcting faults” or problem behaviors:

Faults have to do with behaviors whereas error has to do with thoughts.

Inconsistencies between behaviors and the Jewish/Christian view of life are to be, not only pointed out, but corrected through the use of scripture and what might be called ‘religious behavior modification’ (p. 120).

The fourth and final result of incorporating scripture into counseling is for “training in righteousness”:

Right living is that type of existence which occurs when the Jewish/Christian understanding of life is put into practice both at the level of thought and action. Instruction is what all good therapists do when they become prescriptive and supportive. It is to be undertaken sensitively and affirmatively (p. 120).

In the chapters below, we will have an opportunity to apply this passage in specific clinical situations.

A few guidelines are needed to form a corrective to a heavy-handed approach which some might feel is warranted in the passage in 2 Tim. 3:14-17. The scriptures also have much to say that can be considered a soft-handed approach. The same Paul also directs the mature believer to: “...encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thess. 5:14). Again the apostle explains: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). There are times in cognitive therapy when it is necessary to use rational disputation to challenge distorted patterns of thinking (chapter 3), but there are also many other times when the counselor should emulate the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21). As the incarnation of Christ in the world the therapist has a role in “binding up the brokenhearted” (Is. 61:1); the therapist is to embody compassion for the weak, the discouraged and the despairing (cf. Benner, 1983).

The orienting work of the Holy Spirit must guide our steps; we need to employ the Scriptures in ministering to people with all patience and kindness: “The therapist of faith should be sensitive to and aware of the Holy Spirit’s guidance in themselves and the

client, using spiritual interventions only in concert with the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit” (Eck, 2002, p. 272). As biblically informed therapists we must “emphasize the Holy Spirit’s ministry in bringing about inner healing as well as cognitive, behavioral, and emotional change” (Tan, 1987, p. 108). The Holy Spirit is so central to our efforts that spiritual interventions are perhaps better called the “disciplines of the Holy Spirit” (Tan, 2007b, p. 329).

For the counselor who serves evangelical clients, it is imperative to note an important distinction. While the Bible can be considered infallible or inerrant, our interpretations of the scriptures are not. We need a good dose of caution in applying the scriptures to other people’s lives. The Bible should never become a club to beat the already weary into submission. Furthermore, I believe that the farther we are from that original context in which the scriptures were given, the more we need humility and tentativeness in our interpretations. This is not a validation of every possible interpretation of a passage; there is still good and bad exegesis and interpretation. Rather our interpretations and biblical interventions need to be seasoned with grace and humility.

1. ETHICAL USE OF SCRIPTURE IN COUNSELING

There are a number of ethical considerations when using scripture in counseling evangelicals. As early as the first intake interview, it is important for the therapist to begin to sensitively investigate the religious or spiritual dimension to determine what kind of spiritual intervention, if any, is appropriate. In setting goals for therapy, the counselor should begin to clarify whether spiritual concerns are important and what spiritual resources would be appropriate in the treatment plan. Before scripture is used as

an “explicit intervention” it is imperative that the client give informed consent, preferably in writing (Tan, 1996). Furthermore, it is wise to revisit this issue periodically to determine if the client is still ‘onboard.’ As a safeguard, the counselor might consider doing a self-evaluation with questions like:

Why do I want to have the client read this biblical text? What do I hope to accomplish through it (e.g., to be provoked, taught, comforted, connected to something greater than self, to change one’s focal point)? What barriers might hinder this goal? How might the client misinterpret my intervention? (Tan, 2007a, p. 108).

To proceed without the client actively giving consent is contrary to the therapeutic relationship. It is important to note that clients are often motivated to please their therapists and for that reason could assent to something they are not entirely in agreement or comfortable with. The perceptive counselor will make every effort to determine when the client ‘owns’ the approach and when he/she is compromising his/her own desires or objectives in deference to the counselor’s wishes.

It should not be assumed that because the client is an evangelical and evangelicals value the scriptures that in this particular case the client would appreciate a spiritual intervention involving the Bible. Each person, each case should be considered by criteria unique to that person, that case. Gary Collins (1972) explains:

The extent to which spiritual resources will be used in counseling depends on the counselor, the counselee, and the problem....For some counselees, prayer and Scripture reading during an interview will be a strengthening and reassuring experience. For others, this would be a source of considerable embarrassment and

discomfort. Therefore, the counselor must use careful judgment in deciding if, when, and how he introduces such practices (Capps, 1981, p. 31).

Using Scripture in counseling should be done only in a way that is “consistent with good counseling principles” (Capps, 1981, p. 19). Under no circumstances should the client be coerced, shamed, or manipulated into accepting a treatment option or using a spiritual resource like the Bible in his or her therapy.

Imposing Religious Values

The danger for some therapists is their perceived proximity to evangelicalism. It is helpful to remember the maxim that “every therapeutic relationship is a cross-cultural experience” (Bergin & Jensen, 1990, p. 3). Do not assume that a client’s biblical interpretations, beliefs or experiences can be easily labeled and classified. Even among individuals from the same denomination or ecclesiastical grouping there can be significant differences in belief and practice. Each client is unique and deserves individualized treatment (Richards & Potts, 1995). Therapeutic interventions that rest on a differing interpretation of scripture can cause the client offence and hinder the therapeutic endeavor. Debates about biblical interpretation are unproductive and can derail the joining process (Smith & Counsell, 1991). One evangelical believes one thing, but another evangelical sees it another way and places great emphasis on the difference. This is not to say that the counselor must believe what the client believes, but he or she must not discredit or disparage what the client holds to be true.

Research has shown that clients in distress are vulnerable to their therapists’ influence (Worthington, 1988). It is the therapist’s responsibility to see that he or she does not impose religious values on the client when using scripture in therapy. The

therapist must remain sensitive to any misuse of power in the therapeutic relationship. Imposing values or ideas reduces the client's right and freedom to choose (Tan, 1996). The therapist is in a place of power and should rely on self-examination and clinical supervision, if necessary, if the autonomy of the client is in any way threatened. Garzon (2005) describes three guiding principles to consider when applying scriptural interventions: "(a) respect for the client's autonomy/freedom, (b) sensitivity to and empathy for the client's religious and spiritual beliefs, and (c) flexibility and responsiveness to the client's religious and spiritual beliefs" (p. 114).

Not imposing values or convictions on the client may seem like a straightforward matter, but it takes good judgment and maturity on the part of the therapist to know when the line is crossed. As a rule, "[i]nterventions should be appropriate for the client's spiritual or religious tradition, diagnosis, level of spiritual development, treatment modality, and clinical setting without fostering defensiveness, inappropriate dependency, increased manipulation of the therapeutic setting, or increased pathology" (Eck, 2002, p. 271). The counselor should be constrained by the client's pace and the client's freedom to alter the pace. Even when the therapist has proceeded with sensitivity and respect, the client always retains the right to stop when he/she feels that his/her goals have been subverted. There is no substitute for careful explanation about how using scripture might look like and feel like before it is actually used (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Eck (2002) is correct in maintaining: "Explicit interventions that arise out of the therapeutic alliance are least likely to violate the client's values and most likely to facilitate client growth" (p. 270).

Counselors should be cognizant of where a discussion is going and how it contributes to the therapeutic goal. There is a difference between clarifying a position with scripture and arguing about some point of interpretation or theology without any therapeutic aim (Tan, 2003). Some clients may enjoy a ‘good fight’ over ideas, other clients may be offended or distressed by them, but arguments in general should be avoided. It is important for the counselor to treat issues nondogmatically and stress to the client that the therapist does not have official authority in these matters (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Simply using the Bible in certain circumstances can create an “authoritarian climate” when in fact this is not the counselor’s purpose at all. The client “may expect that the Bible, like the Church and office of minister, carry the weight of an authority which will advise or order, inform or instruct, judge or condemn, to which he must relate passively, submissively, and obediently” (Goodling, 1976, p. 185). This may create a power imbalance that leaves the client inappropriately dependent and vulnerable to manipulation (Eck, 2002).

Even when client and counselor are both evangelicals and have overlapping beliefs and practices, conflict can arise and the counselor may need to evaluate his or her role in the overall therapeutic endeavor. Johnson (1987) speaks to this conflict situation: “At this point the therapist needs to decide whether he will explicitly or implicitly subvert the client’s values, terminate the therapeutic contract, or drastically sublimate personal values and work within the personal values of the client” (p. 34). Even deciding which scriptures to use in therapy can cause offence; just reading a passage is fuel for hot topics like gender roles, divorce etc. Richards & Bergin (2005) provide examples of covert religious value imposition:

[An example] of this would be...a therapist who may agree to help a female business executive overcome her depression but while doing so implies that her career is the source of her depression and she should do 'God's will' by giving up her career, getting married, and becoming a full-time mother and homemaker....Similarly, therapists who are religiously and politically liberal may attempt to get clients to adopt their liberal views. This is also unethical. [An example] of this would be a therapist...who may try to influence a religiously conservative woman to give up her full-time homemaker role to pursue a career. Regardless of their personal views, therapists should not attempt to coerce clients into decisions or lifestyles that are contrary to the clients' values, wishes, and cultural context (p. 195).

If a conflict over what scripture has to say about values and lifestyle choices surfaces it is important for the therapist to sensitively address the issue and if necessary make a referral (Eck, 2002).

There are times when confrontation may have an appropriate place in the therapeutic endeavor. This seems somewhat contradictory in light of the above. The distinction between imposing religious values and confronting views that lead to dysfunction is difficult to demarcate at times. Tan & Johnson (2005) make a distinction between disputing "fundamental faith commitments" and challenging "idiosyncratic religious views or the incongruence of such beliefs with the doctrine or scripture of the client's own religious community" (p. 85). Under no circumstances is it ethical to use the Bible to dismiss or to trivialize a client's religious views or biblical interpretations. Nor

is it ethical to use the Bible as a club; Paul admonishes believers to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Grizzle (1992) suggests how to counter an extreme viewpoint:

While it is not generally appropriate to challenge the basic faith beliefs of clients, it can be extremely helpful to point out in their own faith language how they may have followed one extreme principle to the exclusion of another within their own faith framework. Knowing these principles can help the practitioner address these belief systems in a faith supportive manner....Often clients may have taken one aspect of belief to an extreme without recognizing the other balancing principle. By pointing this out within their faith framework, they may be able to modify their patterns without feeling their basic beliefs have been challenged (pp. 142-143).

There is a place for ‘moral confrontation’ especially with addicts, abusers and others—but without shaming or condemning them (Richards & Bergin, 2005). With a view to therapeutic wholeness, cognitive restructuring has a place:

It is not wrong, however, to examine the belief systems of patients, help them to identify those beliefs that make a favorable difference in their lives and those that are destructive, and to begin to help them to restructure their belief systems so as to end the pain that arises out of their acting on destructive beliefs (Nelson & Wilson, 1984, p. 19).

Ward maintains that the spirit in which confrontation is given is worthy of consideration: “the emphasis must be on a loving confrontation, not an insensitive blasting” (Ward, 1977, p. 17).

Logical disputation of irrational beliefs is a therapeutic approach used in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). Using this therapeutic strategy with evangelicals poses special ethical challenges for the practitioner. Johnson (2001) like Tan & Johnson (2005) distinguish between foundational religious beliefs and idiosyncratic or distorted understandings of scripture or doctrine. Some common beliefs that Christians hold that cause distress include: “If I sin, God does not love me” or “Because I am a Christian, I should be perfect” (Johnson, 2001, p. 45). You will notice that these have some biblical basis, for example, regarding perfection, Jesus admonishes: “Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Often the problem is an overemphasis or exclusion of other biblical texts that provide balance. DiGiuseppe, Robin, & Dryden (1990) explain,

[P]eople do not become disturbed because of their belief in religion; rather their disturbance is related to their tendency to selectively abstract certain elements of their religion to the exclusion of attending to others. They may become rigid adherents to one aspect of their religion without ever focusing on another (p. 358).

So with passages about perfection, we might add that the Bible also provides a solution when we do not achieve God’s perfection. In 1 John we read:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the

atonement sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1:9-2:2).

The message of salvation is that sin has a solution in Jesus Christ. For the self-condemning evangelical, there are the counterbalancing words of Rom. 8:1, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Johnson (2001) shares a case example to demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate logical disputation with the religious client. Renee is a college student from a strict religious background, who was admitted for treatment at a mental health clinic. In the course of treatment, Renee confessed to having sexual intercourse with her boyfriend of one year. The experience was consensual but it is causing her considerable emotional distress. She quotes passages of scripture about sin leading to death, and sexual immorality as a violation of the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). She feels she must disclose this sin to her pastor immediately, and she worries about the shame and embarrassment she will have caused her family. She laments: "God asked so little of me, and I failed at loving him more than myself. I have become a harlot. My sin is like a millstone around my neck" (Johnson, 2001, p. 40).

One approach would be a direct disputation of Renee's religious beliefs. Johnson (2001) gives an example of this:

Where is the evidence that any God exists? Prove to me that any supernatural being cares one bit what you choose to do! It seems to me that believing your body is a 'temple' to some other being is helping you feel miserable. I guess you'll have to choose between killing yourself or accepting the fact that sexual

relations between consenting adults are normal and healthy—regardless of what your religion teaches (p. 43).

One of the reasons why this is problematic is because religious belief is just that belief and not provable outside of its own presuppositional framework. Johnson (2001) explains:

Because it is impossible to rule out the truth or falseness of religious beliefs...and because the REBT disputational process relies primarily of empirical and logical criteria of rationality and irrationality, disputing belief content appears unproductive at best and grossly unethical at worst (p. 43).

Furthermore, Lovinger (1996) argues that the therapeutic relationship is in jeopardy when the therapist takes aim at a central pillar (i.e. existence of God) undergirding the client's belief system:

Arguing or directly confronting a client's belief is not likely to be therapeutically effective, and even if it is, the client's autonomy may be impaired. Furthermore, most religious clients approach the Bible with deadly seriousness. If the therapist appears to mock specific biblical precepts, this may damage the therapy relationship (p. 354).

Johnson (2001) suggests that disputation should not focus on the "actual content of religious beliefs," but rather focus "on the evaluative and demanding quality of the beliefs expressed by the client" (p. 44). The key issue is: "How does this client's style of thinking about God and his or her religion make him or her distressed?" (Johnson, 2001, p. 44).

Renee is demonstrating the cognitive distortion of “awfulizing.” She has catastrophized her situation and relationship with God. However, Johnson (2001) advocates that the ethical therapist honors Renee’s theistic beliefs about God, sin, salvation, and biblical constraints on behavior but focuses on how she has selectively abstracted certain scriptural ideas to the exclusion of others. Johnson (2001) addresses Renee’s self-damnation from within her own belief system:

You know, I understand after listening to you that God may not be pleased with your decision to sleep with your boyfriend, but I’m a little surprised that you think this mistake makes you ‘evil’ and ‘worthless’ in God’s eyes....I had always thought that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and that, in God’s eyes, most people sin now and then. Is that right? So wouldn’t it be more accurate to say that you’re a person who did a thing you’re not happy about, but who is still invited to be forgiven? (p. 44).

The story of the woman caught in adultery could be used in a powerful way to answer Renee’s self-condemnation: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). All of the woman’s accusers left, with only Jesus standing with her and he spoke these words to her: “‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin’” (John 8:11). Like Jesus, the counselor should not dismiss or trivialize the sin but point to God’s forgiveness and acceptance. The story of the prodigal son is another scripture passage that could be used to underscore God’s forgiveness and joy with a child who has ‘messed up’ but has returned home.

When confronted with grace and forgiveness, there is sometimes a tendency for people to feel that they must somehow earn God's forgiveness or favor or that their sin is especially damnable. The REBT therapist might answer Renee's continued self-condemnation with:

I wonder where it says in the Bible that to be forgiven, you must first earn forgiveness through some punishment, hard work, etc.? In fact, I know the Bible does talk about why and how we come to God's grace. Ephesians 2:8 says, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.' I don't know about you but it doesn't sound to me like God is asking for you to do anything but believe in him and be forgiven (Johnson, 2001, p. 46).

Salvation by God's grace and unconditional forgiveness are central doctrines of the evangelical faith, and as such the counselor is on solid ground when he/she steers the client back to the basics of the faith and away from extreme thoughts to the contrary.

Displacing Religious Authority

The ethical therapist actively examines his/her use of Scripture in counseling so as not to usurp the role of the client's religious leaders. There are a number of areas that the client might consider clergy prerogatives. These include hearing confession of sins, pronouncing forgiveness and giving blessings. There are a number of profoundly rich blessings and benedictions in the Bible including the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:23-26) in the Old Testament and a number of the benedictions in the New Testament epistles. For the therapist treating the evangelical client, it might seem therapeutic to "bless" the client with one of these passages. For some clients there would be no concern if the therapist

performed one of these functions, but for other clients this would create “role confusion and boundary violations and harm” (Haug, 1998, p. 190). For therapists who are also active members of a religious group, this requires special consideration because there may be significant overlap between counseling and ecclesiastical roles (Richards & Bergin, 2005). It is in the best interest of the client and the therapist if the therapist would seek clarification from the client about what rituals or tasks are reserved for people with the appropriate ecclesiastical sanction.

Furthermore, it is wise for the secular counselor to make it clear that he/she does not have official ecclesiastic authority, and that when there is a danger of role confusion that the therapist seeks collaboration with or a referral to a spiritual leader in the client’s religious tradition. Clergy can also be called on to clarify the beliefs and practices of the client’s spiritual tradition (Hodge, 2006; Johnson, 2001). In particular, if a course correction is needed it may be most appropriate for the religious leader or greater religious community to be involved. This also minimizes the danger of loyalty conflicts between therapist and clergy (Haug, 1998).

When using scripture in counseling evangelicals, it is important not to undermine the credibility of the client’s spiritual leaders. Richards & Bergin (2005) give ways in which this can happen and the results:

The most blatant way therapists undermine the credibility of religious leaders is to say or do things that denigrate or otherwise communicate a lack of respect for them (e.g., ridicule advice that clients receive from their religious leaders; suggest the clients’ religious leaders are superstitious, incompetent, or deluded; or make derogatory comments about religion or religious leaders in general). Such

behavior is not only unethical, but it is often harmful to the client and may even backfire and undermine the credibility of the therapist. Many devoutly religious clients hold their religious leaders in high regard, even if the leaders have done something to hurt or offend them (pp. 190-191).

In using a passage or theme from scripture, the therapist should show respect for interpretations that are a part of the client's religious tradition and seek continuity with the client's faith. If the counselor holds another interpretation of scripture, and this becomes problematic for the client or the therapist, it may be advisable to refer to another practitioner or clergy whose views are more in accord with that of the client (Hodge, 2006). If referral is necessary, the client should not be made to feel that this is somehow his/her problem or that he/she is at fault.

Practicing outside area of competence

In 1990, a study researching psychologists' preparation for dealing with the religious dimension of clients found that two-thirds of the clinicians (N=273) agreed with the statement: "Psychologists, in general, do not possess the knowledge or skills to assist individuals in their religious or spiritual development" (Shafranske & Malony, 1990, p. 75). Richards & Bergin (2005) maintain that the deficit in training has not been adequately addressed:

Unfortunately, most professional mental health training programs do not give adequate preparation for therapists to intervene in the spiritual dimensions of their clients' lives....Despite the fact that they give considerable attention to other types of diversity, few mainstream mental health programs provide course work

or supervision on religious and spiritual issues in mental health and psychotherapy (p. 205; cf. Tan 2003).

Specialized training is a prerequisite to using spiritual interventions in therapy: “Before utilizing spiritual interventions in treatment, one must obtain the necessary education, training, and supervised experience” (Eck, 2002, p. 269). Malony (1985) goes so far as to claim that scripture should be used in counseling “only where counselors know as much about the Bible as they do about counseling theory” (p. 123). “Spiritual literacy” is a necessary qualification before using explicit interventions with scripture (Haug, 1998). In the process the counselor should become conversant in a specialized spiritual vocabulary: “Therapists may also need to familiarize themselves with the spiritual, life affirming message expressed in traditional religious terminology such as ‘shalom,’ ‘sin,’ ‘salvation,’ or ‘grace’ in order to use clients’ language and beliefs resourcefully and without prejudice” (p. 189). If a therapist feels he/she is not adequately prepared for using scripture in therapy, and the evangelical client expects this kind of spiritual intervention, it may be necessary to refer this client to a therapist or practitioner with the requisite training and experience (Tan, 1996).

Indications and contraindications for using scripture in counseling

Using scripture in counseling evangelicals is indicated when there is a willingness on both the part of the counselor and the client to discuss spirituality generally and use the scriptures specifically when the client requests or consents to such treatment and when such spiritual interventions are relevant to the therapeutic goals. Counselors should be competent in their therapeutic discipline and have attained a certain level of personal maturity. Moon & Crews (2002) list eight traits of an effective counselor: “1)

psychological health 2) genuine interest in others 3) empathetic ability 4) personal warmth 5) personal power 6) self-awareness 7) tolerance of ambiguity 8) awareness of values” (pp. 185-186). Rogers (1957) centers on three qualities for successful therapy: “unconditional positive regard,” “empathy,” and “genuineness.” These have come to be designated as the “therapeutic triad.” In the Bible, the spiritually mature have certain qualities, these are referred to as “fruits of the Holy Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). These are evidences of what it is to live Christ-like and to mirror the character of Christ which is the goal of Christian formation (Moon & Crews, 2002). Some would refer to this as living “incarnationally”—that is, embodying the word of God in every day experience. Part of becoming more like Christ occurs when the words of God in scripture are becoming an integral part of living.

There are also situations in which interventions utilizing scripture are contraindicated. Scripture should not be used in therapy when the client makes it clear that he/she is not interested. Nor should scripture be used when it is not relevant to the therapeutic plan or goals. The counselor who uses scripture when not appropriate needs to seek clarification whether he/she has a hidden agenda that is overshadowing good therapeutic methods. Likewise the counselor who reduces everything to sin and the demonic is in danger of eliminating psychotherapeutic variables and solutions, resulting in a “monothematic approach” (Nelson & Wilson, 1984, p. 22).

There are cases when the client is incapable of “spiritual intelligence” or is psychologically disturbed to a degree that the use of scripture in counseling is unproductive or even harmful. Oates (1953) relates the story of an acutely disturbed

woman who, after hearing a sermon on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, attempted to take the life of her daughter with a pair of scissors. She felt called by God to sacrifice her child. She was prevented from carrying out her mission by her husband (Oates, 1953). Eck (2002) explains that spiritual interventions are not advisable in situations like these: "Spiritual interventions would be contra-indicated or used with caution with clients who present with a dysfunctional or poorly formed religion or spirituality...or for those for whom spiritual interventions would exacerbate existing pathology" (Eck, 2002, p. 270). With psychotic, delusional and obsessive clients, using scripture may be ineffective, confusing, or even detrimental: "These individuals are suffering true disturbances in their reality test, and ideas of a God or a supreme being are likely to be incorporated into their delusional, distorted thought processes" (Nelson & Wilson, 1984, p. 20). Treatment for severely disturbed patients will likely involve conventional psychotherapy, medication and even hospitalization. Theistic interventions in these situations should take a more minor role until the patient is in a less severe phase (Richards & Bergin, 2005). The temptation may be to confront religious distortions especially when these seem to contribute to the patient's condition, but Tan (1996) advises against this:

In a situation where supportive therapy may be needed in order to prevent or retard disintegration in a severely disturbed client, the therapist should refrain from confronting the client's religious convictions or beliefs, even if they may appear to be somewhat neurotic or unhealthy, until a later time when the client is more stabilized emotionally and able and willing to engage in such discussion or caring confrontation (p. 377).

This is not to say that scripture cannot be used in a therapeutic way with severely disturbed patients but special considerations and caution should be observed.

The religious background of the client is a factor in determining the suitability of using scripture in therapy. Scripture may be contraindicated for clients who have experienced religious abuse:

Has [the client] experienced a legalistic and judgmental church environment...and does he see the Bible as a book full of condemning passages? If so, guilt and shame might be his primary affects in reaction to an intervention utilizing Scripture. Such interventions may be contraindicated, at least early in treatment, until a supportive therapeutic alliance has been developed (Garzon, 2005, p. 114).

Some clients from a harsh and legalistic background may have experienced spiritual disciplines like Bible reading and memorization in a negative or authoritarian way. For them, spiritual interventions may have little benefit until they have experienced the love and grace of God through the counselor in a deeper way. These clients may be in active rebellion against God and in reaction to such heavy-handed practices—this kind of spiritual intervention only serves to worsen their condition. Early attention to this in history taking can prevent errors in diagnosis and treatment (Tan & Johnson, 2005).

When dealing with clients from an authoritarian Christian background, the therapist should be aware that using the Bible in therapy can be a catalyst which causes the client to act in certain unhealthy ways. For clients dealing with authority, the Bible, a symbol of authority, sometimes induces “unquestioned compliance or reflexive rebellion” (Johnson, 1987, p. 33). In the case of “unquestioned compliance,” the therapist may have inadvertently achieved a “transference cure—that is, symptom removal through which

the client seeks consciously or unconsciously to please the therapist” (p. 34). For others, the problem is that they are over-familiar with the scriptures to the point that there is no impact in their lives; in this case, the clients know all the right answers but the “Bible may have minimal penetration in the day-to-day reality of their lives” (p. 33). In these situations, the Bible is not a help but a hindrance to the client’s treatment. Where the issue is authority, it would be productive for the therapist and client to explore the underlying reactions to authority and how these are being evoked in counseling. If the motivation is legalistic conformity or earning favor with God or with the therapist, the client’s well-being may be subverted. Eck (2002) states: “Spiritual disciplines are not barometers of spirituality or a way to earn God’s merit, forgiveness, and goodwill. They are not to be used as soul killing legalistic practices performed from guilt and coercion” (p. 272).

On the other hand, it may be the therapist who is experiencing negative feelings when using scripture:

[T]he therapist might have had painful experiences in a church that utilized Scripture in a heavy-handed legalistic or judgmental fashion. The therapist’s own emotional reactions might be erroneously presumed to lie in the client as well, preventing the ability to see the Bible as a valuable coping resource for the client when it actually is. Thus, both positive and negative Scripture countertransference may lead to subtle or not-so-subtle impasses in treatment (Garzon, 2005, p. 114).

For therapist and client alike, the religious dimension may be just too personal for discussion in therapy. Internal conflicting thoughts and feelings may make religious psychotherapy difficult (Nelson & Wilson, 1984). If the therapist is experiencing

countertransference in regard to using scripture in therapy, and this is undermining the therapeutic alliance, a referral to a suitably qualified counselor may be warranted.

For some clients, their experience with Christianity may be conflicted. They may have experienced attention from people who have a shallow interest in them as persons. The therapist treating evangelical clients should be aware of this approach where interest is in the soul but very little interest remains for the person as a whole. Sometimes clients have experienced “soul winning” where they were valued for their salvation potential as a trophy for the evangelist. Christian therapists need to examine themselves to ensure that their love of the client is not limited to the spiritual dimension. Some have referred to this as being “so heavenly minded that one is of no earthly good.” Christians may not belong to the world as their ultimate spiritual allegiance, but they are still in the world, and this they share with their clients.

Proper use of the Bible

Hermeneutical principles for interpreting scripture

In using the scriptures in counseling the Christian therapist should straddle two worlds, the modern world of the present and the world of the ancient text. Sometimes this balance needs reflection and adjustment. The therapist needs to have familiarity with both horizons: “He must be acquainted with ‘living human documents’ as well as ancient manuscripts” (Oates, 1953, p. 27). To properly use scriptures Malony (1985) argues that the therapist should be competent in sound exegetical method:

Initially it should be said that counselors who use scripture in counseling should be as able at exegeting as they are at expositing. Using scriptures should never be an excuse for popularizing or for the buttressing of conventional wisdom with

pseudo divine sanction. Requiring informed exegesis to be the basis for sensitive exposition assures the counselee that the Bible will be utilized in therapy with as much expertise as will psychodynamics and personality theory. If the counselee cannot be guaranteed such expertise then the scripture should not be used (p. 121).

There is a logical sequence to exegesis and exposition; first the exegete must determine what the text *meant* before he/she can determine what it *means* for today. To reverse the process exposes the reader to the danger of reading the modern context back onto the ancient text. Sproul (1983) notes the danger in subjective interpretation: “The Bible has become a nose of wax, easily twisted, formed, and reshaped to fit the bias of the interpreter” (p. 37).

Just as there is a logical sequence from ancient text to contemporary context, there is also a sequence to be followed in moving from application in the reader’s life to application in other’s lives. Grappling with the message of the Bible should start in the counselor’s own backyard:

The message must go through you first. Notice how hard it is to share a story or concept with another when you have only a superficial or distant knowledge of the facts. The same is true with the Scriptures. When we try to use the Scriptures without wrestling personally with its meaning and message, it can only be communicated in a superficial manner. Imagine how comfort and hope oriented Scriptures would sound when delivered by one who does not know deeply of God’s rich comfort and hope. If we are to do justice to the Scriptures, we must

not only read them but be on our knees praying them so that we do not give counsel that we ourselves would not follow (Monroe, 2004, p. 12).

When the client experiences the word of God in a living and vibrant way vicariously through the therapist, it is likely to be contagious. This is also a safeguard against flippant applications of scripture as well. Anyone who has applied the passage “turn the other cheek” knows just how hard this really is to imitate. Perhaps the counselor who has grappled with such hard sayings of Jesus in the Bible will be sparing in applying these to other people’s lives.

It is crucial to keep in mind the ultimate purpose of the scriptures: it is not some random collection of ancient facts and stories, but rather it serves to draw the reader into relationship with the divine author: “The Scriptures exist primarily to connect us to God” (Monroe, 2004, p. 9). Johnson (1987) elaborates on this purpose of using scripture in therapy:

The assets of the use of the Bible in therapy must not be minimized by its dangers. Like prayer it can refer the therapeutic endeavor to the divine dimension and help people realize their God-given potential. The Bible also gives direction and content to personal growth, and can lead a person to a deeper relationship with the divine Author. Such a journey can be facilitated through bibliotherapy (p. 34).

In addition, evangelicalism as an heir of the protestant Reformation places emphasis on the central role of Christ in achieving a restored relationship with God. The scriptures, for the evangelical, point to Christ as its focal point:

Christ's life, death and resurrection provides the central, organizing recapitulation of the biblical metanarrative: his life fulfills the creation of image-bearers; his death was God's judgment for sin; and his resurrection was the beginning of human redemption and points ahead to the consummation. In Christ's story we discover the divine reframing of our story and the pattern for our life...He is the way, the truth and the life, terms that point to his centrality in soul-healing. Genuine Christian soul care is Christocentric and attempts to take all treatment captive to Christ (Johnson, 2007, pp. 214-215).

Evangelicalism interprets scripture in light of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. The Hebrew scriptures progressively reveal God's plan of salvation which is realized more fully in the pages of the New Testament. This Christocentrism is foundational to evangelical thought and doctrine.

While sound exegesis is essential to interventions utilizing scripture, it is also important to gauge the biblical literacy of an evangelical client. Not everyone is equally acquainted with the Bible and each will respond in a way that is unique to that person:

[T]he level of Biblical literacy or sophistication varies from counselee to counselee. For some the Bible has the familiarity of a home to which they return easily and comfortably and with shared understanding; for others the Bible is a foreign land, unknown, holding little or no interest as a place to visit. In like manner, the expectation of the counselees concerning the use of the Bible varies from those who consider a counseling conversation incomplete without a reference to the Bible to those who would consider such a reference an intrusion

at least, and even resented if it was viewed as taking advantage of a request for personal help to evangelize or proselyte (Goodling, 1976, p. 185).

It is necessary in this sense also to ‘exegete’ the lives of our clients, to meet the client where he or she is at without causing offence or intrusion. In fact, the client’s selective use of the scriptures or a special interest in certain passages to the exclusion of others can shed some light on the client’s way of being and relating in the world:

The person’s selective interest in scripture leaves clues concerning what is meaningful to him, where the important areas of his emotional life, including his pain, are to be found, that is, where his sources of anxiety lie and how he deals with them (Goodling, 1976, p. 184).

Just as dreams are considered by some as the ‘royal road’ to the unconscious, so Bible use can serve as the ‘royal road’ to “deeper levels of the personalities” of clients (Oates, 1953, p. 21). Bible use can become a diagnostic tool for the therapist exercising a depth of perception.

Improper uses of the Bible

Ignoring the context

When the Bible is used as a collection of loosely connected proof-texts we run the risk of applying scripture out of context and in so doing removing the limits of interpretation that are in the text (cf. Sori & McKinney, 2006). Tan & Gregg (1997) explain: “Getting the whole sense of what an author is saying through a book of the Bible decreases the risk of taking verses or portions of Scripture out of context and thus misunderstanding or misapplying God’s Word” (p. 84). One passage that has suffered some misuse and one which we will refer to in the therapeutic context is found in

Philippians 4:13: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” The KJV follows some manuscripts in identifying the “him” with Christ. This is a wonderful statement of Paul’s sufficiency in Christ, but the “everything” cannot be removed from the context. Some have used this text to mean that “Paul...could do anything and that nothing was beyond his powers” (Hawthorne, 1983, pp. 200-201). Even though “everything” or “all things” is an acceptable translation, the context does not move “without warning from the particular to the general” (p. 201). In the verses before, Paul discusses his approach to life’s vicissitudes:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Php. 4:11-13).

Carson (1984) correctly notes: “The ‘everything’ in this context is contented living in the midst of food or hunger, plenty or want (Php. 4:10-12). Whatever his circumstances, Paul can cope with contentment, through Christ who gives him strength” (p. 117).

Hawthorne (1983) renders the verse: “I have the power to face all such situations in union with the One who continuously infuses me with strength” (p. 193).

Recently I heard the well-known affirmation in Jer.29:11 used with a woman who was recovering from a spinal cord injury. At this stage, it was unsure what use she would have of her body from the neck down. Jer. 29:11 reads: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” This is a wonderful promise of hope and God’s blessing to the

exiles. I became concerned, however, when this patient took this to mean that she would walk again. What if she did not recover the use of her legs, or only in a limited way, what then? Would she conclude that she was not a child of God? In the context of the passage, Jeremiah is speaking to the exiles who would remain in Babylon for the time being. We only have to read from the book of Lamentations to get a sense of what exile was like. The exiles were under foreign control, taken from their homes, their land, and away from the temple, the symbol of God's presence. A few verses later in the chapter the false prophets Ahab and Zedekiah would be put to death by the king of Babylon "before your very eyes" (Jer. 29:21). This is another testimony to the ugliness of captivity and forms the context to this bright light of hope. This is not to say that passages like this cannot be used at all, but rather they should be used "judiciously and sparingly" (Goodling, 1976, p. 192) and with a view to how the client might interpret the passage in the context of his or her life.

Scripture passages dealing with marriage and the relationship between husbands and wives have suffered misuse as well. For some, "Wives, submit to your husbands" (Eph. 5:22) is the end of the story about marital relations. Without the rest of the context the idea becomes one-sided and has served to justify a one-way selfishness, placing a heavy burden on women which men do not share (Green, 1984). In the surrounding biblical context, we see that the husband is to pattern himself after the example of Christ who sacrificially gave up his life for his bride, the church (Eph. 5:25). He is to love his wife as his own body (Eph. 5:28-29). It is interesting that this whole passage is prefaced with "Be filled with the Holy Spirit...submitting to one another" (Eph. 5:21). The wife submits to the husband's authority, but the husband "submits" to the needs of his wife.

This kind of mutual submission is called for in the context of the passage but is foreign to those who selfishly dominate their wives.

Part of the problem with quickly producing a verse from the Bible is that we have not spent enough time in the context of the client's life. Goodling (1976) advises pastors but an application can be made to counselors as well:

Like a physician prescribing specific drugs for specific illness, the pastor is tempted to offer specific scriptural verses for specific life questions: a verse for fear, anxiety, guilt, hate, inadequacy, despair. Such prescriptions, to be sure, are sincere efforts to draw upon the Bible for wisdom and understanding, for care and compassion, for comfort and support, for acceptance and forgiveness, for affection and love, for courage and strength, for that which would be Good News for this person at this moment. But answers to personal problems are not arrived at through prescriptions but through work—the identification, the experiencing, the expression, the working through feelings and emotions in a relationship with a person, not merely with words (pp. 189-190).

The problem with quick fixes according to Hulme (1981) is that “[i]n order to attain the genuinely positive, one needs to enter into the genuinely negative” (p. 120). The word of God can give us the necessary light at the end of the tunnel. Without that we might despair, but we should not run from the darkness or deflect what is uncomfortable with a scriptural cure-all (Hulme, 1981).

Sometimes we also need to circumscribe meaning from the context of the Bible as a whole or from the collective experience of believers. The following is a beautiful passage but there may be some limitations on its application: “Delight yourself in the

LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). This is not a blank cheque to be spent on whatever fancy a person desires. As our will and desire become aligned with God’s will and desire, then we can count on receiving what we ask for. Likewise, Jesus promised: “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:14). “In my name” suggests that requests should be those that further the mission of God through Christ. Our focus should be on the kingdom of God and its success: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33). This is not to say that God is all business and nothing else. I can testify that not all my desires have focused on the kingdom of God, but God in his generosity has lavished upon me grace upon grace.

Insensitive

Sensitivity to the client’s situation is a skill that counselors do well to develop. It is not uncommon that a person can recall being repelled by a quick-fix solution to a deep or complex problem. This occurs in Christianity as well; someone pours out his or her heart on a sensitive and painful matter only to receive an insensitive or heartless response. This situation is magnified when the Bible is used:

Now there is a wrong use of God’s word and a right one. The wrong use is this sort of thing—someone comes to you, and you cast about in your mind what sort of man he is, then hurl a text at him like a projectile, either in prayer or in talking as you deal with him. That is a use of the word of God that kills your own soul and the souls of the people you deal with (Monroe, 2004, p. 6).

Monroe (2004) goes on to answer the question: why do we use the scriptures with such insensitivity:

Why are we inclined to shoot Bible bullets at those who are suffering? The answer is simple: quick and tidy answers serve our purposes. A verse or passage may baptize a personal opinion so as to give it biblical credibility. It may provide comfort and protect a fragile faith that might otherwise crumble under the weight of having to struggle with no clear answer to the why of a particular suffering....

We, like Job's counselors, often desire a black and white God who is never mysterious and always follows our logic. Whatever the reason, when a counselor uses the Scriptures in an unthinking and/or self-serving manner, it produces a chasm between counselor and counselee and makes subsequent counsel ineffective (pp. 6-7).

The one thing that Job's friends did that was sensible is recorded in Job 2:13: "Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."

Life has many problems that defy simplistic solutions. Problems may have developed over years and have been experienced in countless ways. It is important to resist the temptation to answer quickly. It is essential to create a therapeutic space where the story can be told in detail and with as much emotion as needed. Sometimes a few words 'seasoned with grace' can open the floodgates of retelling and emotions (Clinebell, 1984).

One area that requires special understanding is the area of forgiveness. Some have suffered greatly at the hands of others. In all these cases it is important to start where the client is (Hulme, 1981). Forgiveness is a process not just a result. For people who have experienced abuse, it may be counterproductive to therapy to start with Jesus'

teaching about forgiveness in Matt. 18:21-22: where one is to forgive his brother not seven times but seventy-seven times. Some, rather, are at the stage where they would have the perpetrator drowned in the depth of the sea with a millstone around his/her neck (cf. Matt. 18:6). There is a time for everything even for forgiving and letting go, but counselors should not be in a rush to get there (Guyette, 2003).

Likewise when a client confesses to a sin that he or she committed, it is important not to rush toward a reassurance of forgiveness:

The painful sharing of the guilt opens the person to receive the gift of forgiveness. If this sharing is interrupted by a premature offering of the gift, the opening process is impeded....Since the confessee has not had the opportunity to share the whole story, the absolution he or she receives may remain too abstract to be healing. Since the full sharing of the negative is itself a part of the healing process, we need to hold back on our reassurance until we have dealt adequately with the confession (Hulme, 1981, pp. 121-122).

It may have taken courage and strength to get to the place of retelling, the counselor should not pre-empt this important stage because of the discomfort it brings.

Luke 17 discusses steps involved in forgiveness: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him" (vv. 3-4). The first step involves telling the perpetrator what he/she did wrong and how it affected you. Secondly, the perpetrator then must repent for his/her act. Repentance entails more than just an apology: "Repentance requires the person not only to renounce verbally their act but then to turn away from or change their mind about sin. Sorrow may precede

repentance, but it is of no effect if it does not bring about the change in the person's behavior....A change in their behavior leads to forgiveness" (Turell & Thomas, 2001, p. 139).

The example of Christ dying on the cross is instructive in finding a way to forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness. Jesus cried: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). There are times when the perpetrator has been removed from the victim's life, and the hope of person-to-person reconciliation no longer exists. What is significant is that Christ "turned it over to a higher power" (Turell & Thomas, 2001, p. 139). If forgiveness is out of reach volitionally or because of other reasons, the victim can turn the forgiveness of the perpetrator over to God. We will explore this further when we look at the use of the psalms in the chapter on grief counseling below.

Magical use

There are times when people have been told to read the Bible and pray and everything will be fine. For some, reading the Bible and praying then becomes a sort of magical cure or panacea to all of life's problems. For those clients who looked to scripture with this kind of expectation and did not receive what they hoped for, a therapist can help with such 'failures' (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Oates (1953) tells the story of a man with homosexual thoughts and behaviors who went to his pastor for guidance. The pastor supplied the man a copy of the Bible with this advice: "When you go to bed at night place this Bible under your pillow, and it will drive away your evil thoughts and dreams and help you rest" (p. 17). This man's already fragile emotional and mental state was further deteriorated after adhering to a few days of this pastor's advice. The man

was hospitalized and Wayne Oates served as the man's chaplain in a state hospital. In an interview, the man expressed that he "felt...that God had given him up to 'a reprobate mind,' and that he should die" (p. 17). The Bible was used here as a fetish intended to heal but serving in the end to hasten self-destructive processes already at work in his life. Just like the cross, the Bible has been used as a talisman or good luck charm to ward off evil and bring blessing (Oates, 1953). Even daily Bible reading can further dysfunction in particular clients' lives: it can serve as "ritualistic warding off of anxiety through obsessional-type behavior" (Goodling, 1976, p. 186). For some, "the Bible has the power of fetish to neutralize demonic forces and serves as armor to ward off and protect against dangers—physical, psychological and spiritual—from without as well as from within" (p. 182). Goodling (1976) is correct to maintain that the problem is not with the Bible itself but the power invested in it by those who are captive to its symbolic worth: "The answer is not to discard this resource, but to work with those factors which interfere with, block, and distort being in touch with and drawing upon personal and interpersonal resources" (pp. 186-187).

Just as the benefits of using scripture are real so are the risks of misuse. Whether that is the mishandling of the passage in its context or in the greater context of the Bible's teaching as a whole or in the context of the client's life, scripture remains a tool that when misused can bring harm at the hands of those who would wield its power. This is not to dissuade from its proper use but to respect that many have invested trust in its authority over their lives and as such are in a position of dependency and vulnerability. Just as the surgeon has the power of life and death, healing and disability from his/her instruments, so the counselor should pay close attention to how he/she handles tools like

scripture which when used correctly can bring emotional and spiritual health but dysfunction when used incorrectly. One area that deserves special attention is the therapeutic use of scripture in grief counseling.

2. SCRIPTURE AND GRIEF AND LOSS COUNSELING

Many reasons to grieve

There are many reasons for grief: sickness and death; marriage problems and dissolution of relationships; loss of job, possessions, or financial stability; injustice or violence by another. These can bring about the need to express anger, frustration, sadness, and despair (Duff, 2005). Grief has many dimensions and these are reflected in scripture. One area in particular where we find concentrated descriptions of grief is in the psalms. The psalms include the following aspects of grief:

1. Physical (22:14-15, 17; 38:3,7,8,10,17; 69:3; 77:4-10; 88:4; 137:1)
2. Social (22:6, 11; 38:9,11; 41:9; 66:10; 77:4-10; 88:8, 18)
3. Emotional (13:2; 22:1-2,6; 38:4,8,9; 42:3,5; 55:4,5; 56:8; 69:1-2,20,29; 73:21; 77:2,4; 80:4-5; 88:4; 137:9; 143:4)
4. Cognitive/spiritual (13:2; 22:1; 42:11; 43:5; 55:2; 60:1,3; 69:21-22; 77:3,7-9; 88:5,14)
5. Behavioral (39:12; 55:7-8; 77:4; 88:13; 126:5-6 (Smith, 2007, p. 3).

In particular, the laments contained in the psalms and in other biblical poetry are appropriate vehicles for the expression and resolution of grief: "Lament is an appropriate way to cope with calamity. Tragedy, failure, and calamity require a response equal to their harsh reality, making a season for lament necessary" (McLeod, 2002, p. 19). It is precisely in this area that clients have difficulty putting their grief into words. The

Talmud states: “The deeper the sorrow the less tongue it has.” For evangelical clients, the Bible is a rich repository of the experiences of saints who have gone before us and who struggled as we do with the issues of grief and loss.

Psalms as a mirror of life

The psalms are a mirror of life both ancient and modern. What is striking is how applicable the psalms are to our experience of the world and of God. Winter (1999) sees something therapeutic in their poetry: “The Psalms are a wonderful window to the soul. The reader seems to have the privilege of listening in to the profound therapy sessions where the psalmist was pouring out his soul on the divine analyst’s couch” (p. 371). Athanasius in his *Letter to Marcellinus* notes the commonality of human experience: the Psalter contains “this marvel of its own—namely, that it contains even the emotions of each soul” (Gregg, 1980, p.108). Similarly John Calvin in his commentary on the psalms notes the range of emotional expression represented here:

[T]here is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated (Anderson, 1845, pp. xxxvi).

The analogy of human experience is part of the reason why after millennia the psalms continue to resonate with our lives (Endres, 2002; Jones, 2007).

The psalms lend themselves to various situations and the broadest application also because there is very little historical context in and about them. Certainly meaning is constrained by the meaning of words, syntax and literary device. Capps (1981),

however, suggests that when the counselee asks “Is this what the psalmist means, or am I reading my feelings into it?” the answer can be as follows: “You may be reading your own feeling into it, but this is precisely what the psalm invites and encourages” (pp. 65-66). The psalms can speak to situations that were not anticipated by the psalmist. Whether the worshipper was a son of Korah or a seventeenth century puritan or an urban Christian of the computer age, there is something timeless about the message of the psalms (Capps, 1981; Smith, 2007).

Poetry is a distinctive use of language which reaches deep within the reader to images and emotions that may be untapped. Johnson (2007) helps us understand the significance and power of this linguistic experience:

Poetry taps into the human capacity to symbolize, form and activate semantic associations, and produce mental imagery, offering a rich, fuller and deeper encounter with meaning-content than might otherwise occur (and making use of more brain regions, in the process). Symbols, metaphors and mental images often add connotations to bare facts or propositions that can produce past memories, valuable emotions and unique insights and foster a deeper appropriation of truth.

Research has found that such experiences can be a profitable means of soul-healing...and the Bible is filled with such literary devices (p. 205).

Just as there are times when silence is appropriate there are other times when it is not. Jones (2007) asserts: “Silence in the face of hurt does no good. The anguish of life calls for speech, for words, for prayer. The anguish of life calls for poetry” (p. 49). The figurative language of the Bible also helps us to read our own experiences figuratively: “Being rejected by others is made more meaningful by ‘seeing it’ as something else, for

example, an identification with Christ and his purposes, rather than simply a tragic, painful tale, ‘signifying nothing’” (Johnson, 2007, pp. 205-206).

Venting feelings

There is something missing in a person’s life if the deepest and darkest feelings remain unexpressed. Kübler-Ross (1969) is one of many who see therapeutic value in a catharsis of deep emotion for the individual that grieves: “[W]e have found that patients do best who have been encouraged to express their rage, to cry in preparatory grief, and to express their fears and fantasies to someone who can quietly sit and listen” (p. 119).

Mayner (2002) also describes the benefits of lamenting:

Had I not allowed myself the freedom of lament I would have delayed moving beyond an intellectual to a personal understanding of the Holy Spirit’s ability to comfort. Had I not allowed myself to lament, I would have delayed fully realizing God’s capacity to be a father, a mother, and a friend. Had I not allowed myself the freedom to lament, I would seriously have delayed moving to the next level of spiritual maturity (pp. 28-29).

In view of God’s omniscience, it seems hardly necessary that people pour their hearts out to him, but he expects this of us (Ps. 62:8). This is an incredible thought that the creator of the universe should care when I am in pain and can be expected to act. This is unmatched in the ancient world: “In no other culture did people pray to the high god in language that was so strong, so forthright, even so rude: ‘Wake up God! Why are you sleeping? We haven’t forgotten you, why have you forgotten us?’ (Ps. 44:23-24)” (Mayner, 2002, p. 29).

This can be contrasted with our “death-denying culture” where grief and mourning are expected to be restrained and brief (Smith, 2007). It is not without reason that the popular phrase says: “Laugh and the world laughs with you. Weep and you weep alone.” Duff (2005) demonstrates how our modern impatience with grief is reflected in the church as well:

Society and the church discourage us from expressing intense feelings of sorrow or anger when we experience a significant loss in our lives. When there is a death in the family, for instance, people are allowed very little time off from work, and when they return they are not expected to talk too much about their loss. No one wears visible signs of mourning as was once the custom, and the expectation is that one will move quickly back into everyday routines of life. For Christians, continued expressions of grief after a death are considered a sign of weak faith: ‘Isn’t the person in a better place?’ The notion that one cannot bear the grief is rejected: ‘God doesn’t give us more than we can bear’ (pp. 5-6).

This is even more tragic when the one who grieves is the victim of violence or injustice. The church is not always a safe place for a person suffering this kind of loss. Take the example of rape:

[O]ur initial feeling of sympathy can shift into impatience as times goes on. We may hear the question from coworkers or friends, or may even ask it ourselves, ‘Hasn’t she gotten over that yet?’ When the victim is a Christian the expectation of forgiveness is raised early on: ‘Have you been able to forgive him?’ For those who are the victim of sexual violence, silence has almost always been the norm.

The crime becomes a source of shame for the victim, as if she or he is the guilty one (pp. 6-7).

It is my contention that this silencing of emotion and rage will express itself somehow whether on the therapist's couch or feeding the veins of dysfunction and emotional breakdown.

It is interesting that there are more psalms of lament than psalms of praise in the Bible (Jones, 2007). From this, I think we should find some indication that God intended that grief should not be hushed and unexpressed. The Hebrew worshipper had greater liberty than his/her modern counterpart in this regard: "[T]he Hebrew worshipper was free to express complaints, anxiety, rage, and deep sorrow before God and other members of the community. What was quite natural for the Hebrew worshipper, however, seems foreign to most of us now" (Duff, 2005, p. 3).

Using the psalms of lament helps us see the grieving process as a normal part of the Christian life: "The Psalms of lament validate and normalize the sadness, hurt, alienation, questions, doubts, anger, confusion and bewilderment that accompany the grief process" (Smith, 2007, p. 5). The psalms provide us with words and images to express the experience of pain and suffering. The evocative language awakes in us feelings and recollections that resonate with our lives: "That's exactly how I feel!" or "That's what I hope!" (Miller, 1990). The biblical laments provide us with a "vocabulary of need, a rhetoric of affliction" (Mays, 1994, p. 22). Sometimes we are at a loss for words to describe the pain:

The psalms give voice where there may be only silence, where neither sheep nor shepherd may know how to pray....There in the psalms the mute voice of pain

receives speech and a mode of prayer, a way to ask for help when the ordinary modes and structures of human life can not provide that any more. Whether the feeling of the sufferer is that I do not know how to pray or I do not know what to pray, the psalms help one say what needs to be said (Miller, 1990, p. 131).

There are many images in the psalms used to describe grief and suffering. Longing for God's help is like the longing of a parched mouth for water (Ps. 42:1-2; 63:1); the psalmist is overwhelmed by his problem like a person who is drowning (Ps. 69:1-2); at other times, the one who is oppressed by persons or problems feels caught in a net or trap (Ps. 10:9; 18:4-5) or in a deep pit (Ps. 88:4-6) (Miller, 1990).

Dialogue with God

The psalms not only allow us to utter what is repressed and buried because of fear or piety, they also allow us to realize the hope that is available to the sufferer: "[T]his venting of inner feelings [is] a necessary step toward positive change, first through insight into one's feelings, then through the infusion of new spiritual energies to replace the negative feelings" (Capps, 1981, p. 57). Grief and loss for the psalmist is more than intrapsychic conflict, it is not just raw feeling echoed in a vacuum; it is addressed to someone. The covenant God is the "final reference for all of life" (Brueggemann, 2002, p. 27). God cares about the stuff of life and nothing is outside of the context of his care:

[T]he laments in all of the despairing complaints, the outraged accusations, the broken petitions, the persistent appeals, and the desire for vengeance are not outside the life of faith. On the contrary, all of life, all of human experience, is embraced within the covenantal relationship with God....On first glance, the lament in all of its anguish may seem to be in opposition to faith, at least a faith

that sees only light, goodness, and contentment. It is, instead, a way to move deeper into a faith which is transformative, a faith where God does indeed make a difference (Jones, 2007, p. 50).

The laments show us that life lived as it encounters life fully, life lived *coram deo*, is unashamedly dialogical:

[P]recisely in the presence of God himself is where the hurtful issues must be dealt with. Nowhere but with him does Israel vent her greatest doubt, her bitterest resentments, her deepest anger. Israel knows that one need not fake it or be polite and pretend in his presence, nor need one face the hurts alone (Brueggemann, 1974, p. 4).

Contrast this with the modern Christian's failure in this regard:

If we are dialogical at all, we think it must be polite and positive and filled only with gratitude. So little do our liturgies bring to expression our anger and hatred, our sense of betrayal and absurdity. But even more acutely, with our failure of nerve and our refusal to presume upon our partner in dialogue, we are seduced into nondialogic forms of faith, as though we were the only ones there; and so we settle for meditation and reflection or boot-strap operations of resolve or alter our situation (pp. 4-5).

In fact we find little avenue of expression in Christian liturgy for the brutal honesty of the biblical lament. Lament is typically unrepresented in our books of worship, outnumbered by liturgies of praise and penitence (Duff, 2005; Smith, 2007). This is the typical situation for the evangelical client as well; little room has been made in corporate or individual devotion for the “experiences of anger, confusion, protest, and grief”

(Smith, 2007, p. 4). Westermann (1981) objects to this imbalance in worship:

“[S]omething must be amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation” (p. 267). This kind of nervy and honest faith may be foreign to the evangelical but there are benefits emotionally and spiritually with a robust faith that is both painfully honest and uncompromisingly dialogical (Brueggemann, 1974).

One of the areas that the modern evangelical has difficulty with is in his or her anger towards God in the predicament of grief. The hard questions deserve their due: “Not least of those feelings and thoughts that overwhelm the sick and the dying and the grieving is the anger at God and doubt of God’s power and faithfulness, the questions of why and how long that are almost unavoidable to the sufferer” (Miller, 1990, p. 132). Passivity and helplessness in the face of suffering are not the message of the psalms of lament. Someone has said “God behaves in the psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology” (In Jones, 2007, p. 47). I think it is rather the worshipper who behaves differently when immersed in the brutal honesty of the psalms: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps. 13:1). “You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” (Ps. 43:2). “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent” (Ps. 22:1-2). Everything is the proper subject of discourse with God: “There is nothing about the reality of the world or of the self that cannot be brought before God” (Duff, 2005, p.

9). The biblical laments when utilized in therapy can help with this fuller expression of grief.

In addition to anger against God, modern Christians have a difficulty with the cry for vengeance against one's enemies. This silencing of our raw cries for justice and retribution can reap the reward of dysfunction in our emotional and spiritual lives:

Many of us in our more arid days of a religion without suffering and tragedy felt that the imprecatory psalms were low forms of religion, and that such blunt expressions of hatred and hostility as are found in these prayers should be 'soft-pedaled' in our teaching. Then we began to see the effects that this refusal to accept and face hostility works upon personality. These effects came up in all forms of neurotic symptoms, and every manner of disease. One day they exploded geyser-fashion, and we, observing the plight of our counselees and their families said, 'We knew there was water there; but where did all this force come from?' (Oates, 1953, p. 116).

We may be somewhat embarrassed by the psalmists' appeal for retribution: "Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked" (Ps. 3:7); "If only you would slay the wicked, O God!" (Ps. 139:19). I think the church has subverted the normal process of grieving and dealing with injustice by silencing that cry to God for vengeance:

The regular ventilation, catharsis, bringing to light, and resultant insight into one's negative or hostile feelings in one's prayers puts them into their rightful context with the Eternal. It lowers their importance along with the correction of our self-concept, and it makes for better health (p. 116).

Here again nothing is too “down and dirty” for God to hear; this should be the case for the pastoral counselor as well. This is not to say that “turn the cheek” and “loving one’s enemies” does not have its place but often this becomes a veneer over a well of deep-seated feelings if the issues of vengeance and justice are not allowed to surface and find their proper place in God’s hands. Reading the biblical laments and imprecatory psalms in therapy may elicit and normalize such feelings for the evangelical who has suffered injustice or pain at the hands of another.

Using the biblical laments and psalms in therapy can serve to unplug repressed emotions and feelings. These passages of scripture give us a vocabulary of pain so that the unexpressed can be expressed and with the negative catharsis of raw emotion, there can be room for the positive spiritual renewal. Furthermore, when we include God in our deepest and darkest thoughts we place our trust in the one who knows and cares, and we find hope for our situations.

The evangelical may be familiar with the different places in scripture where the people of God have made their feelings known to God. Not all complaints against God were condoned. The evangelical may very well ask the question: What is the difference between the rants of the psalmists and the grumbling of the Israelites in the desert? The evangelical may desire greater openness and honesty in his or her life but fears falling into disfavor with God. I think the difference between these two is that God expects us to approach him in faith. Woven through the psalms are the echoes of faith sometimes just faintly, sometimes bright and bold. God has endowed each of us with the seeds of faith and we are responsible for the endowment we have received. The Israelites were witnesses to the miraculous parting of the Red Sea and God’s visible leading with cloud

and fire in the desert, and his gifts of manna and quail. God expected the Israelites to act in light of these proofs of his provision. When we are given evidences of God's provision and grace, we are to appropriately respond with faith. When we suppress or deny our faith, we are not unlike the Israelites in the desert.

To be sure, there are times when the voice of faith is almost silent. There are times when we are so low and beaten down that the voice of faith is faint. Listen to words of Ps. 88:14-18:

Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

Many clients can relate to this level of despair. However, when using the scriptures we should not exclude those smallest rays of hope when they peak into the darkness. The imagery of the Bible and its rich figurative language give us hope that in the deepest pit we are not alone, we are held and supported by God. Biblical poetry in particular provides us with pictures that can bring reassurance and faith: God is a secure fortress (Ps. 62:2), a strong tower (Ps. 61:3), and a shield (Ps. 18:2). God is pictured as a bird that covers its young with its feathers (Ps. 91:4). Psalm 23 is full of beautiful imagery of safety and provision in the hands of the Shepherd. For the fearful and suffering, God is a rock or a place of solid ground supporting the ones who are in danger of collapsing or going down to the pit (Ps. 40:2; Miller, 1990).

Another place the psalmist brings the reader for hope is into memories of God's past interventions. When using the Bible in counseling evangelicals, hope can be cultivated, and depression lifted when we evoke memory of God's past assistance and when we "employ imagery to express the possibilities of new existence" (Guyette, 2003, p. 20): "In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed" (Ps. 22:4-5); "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done" (Ps. 143:5). Sharing stories from the Bible about God's involvement in the lives of his people can bring hope and expectation.

At the same time, there can be impatience and despair when the counselee's present does not mirror the past biblically or personally (Miller, 1990). The counselor also needs to be there when the counselee experiences those peaks and valleys in his or her faith life. Capps (1981) gives advice to pastors which is applicable to counselors as well about the ebb and flow of counseling:

Like many psalms, the grief counseling process is not rigid or forced...If the psalmist's experience of God is reflected in the abrupt shifts that occur in the lament, grief counseling should be no less open and adaptable to similar abrupt shifts and experiences of intervention. Thus, grief counseling is also nondirective in its pace and timing....To say that the basic method in grief counseling is nondirective does not mean that the pastor assumes no responsibility for seeing the process through. Rather it means that the pastor's role is not to direct the healing process, but to allow spiritual energies to work their will and purpose.

This means that the pastor's role is primarily to remove barriers that are impeding a spiritual process (p. 92).

A great deal can change in a counseling session; the counselor to evangelicals benefits much from a loose hold on the direction that biblical therapy takes. If the counselor is also a Christian, it is important for both counselor and counselee to remember that God's Spirit blows where he wills, and the work of God can defy understanding.

Another obstacle to using biblical laments with evangelicals comes from the apparent switch between the Old and New Testaments on the issue of personal innocence. In the Pauline tradition everyone is sinful, "There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22-23). Some would conclude that there can be no lament in the New Testament era without the confession of sin because everyone is guilty before God. Today's Christian may feel there is something wrong in protesting one's innocence before God, unlike the psalmist who considers it proper to remind God of his innocence and to declare: "I am innocent in this, yet I am made to suffer, Why?" (Capps, 1981). For Capps (1981), the question is one of perspective: "the psalmist can claim innocence because the issue is a specific offence, not the psalmist's general condition" (p. 68). The psalmist is not saying he is sinless according to Paul's definition, but rather in this specific act or episode he is innocent. This is an important distinction especially for the victims of violence: yes we all are sinful from birth but I am innocent as a victim in this particular crime.

In the New Testament, the protest of the lament does not seem to be represented. Paul seems almost Stoic in his encouragement of the Thessalonians on the issue of death: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve

like the rest of men, who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). Unlike the imprecatory psalms, Jesus advocates non-retaliation in the face of violence: “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39). At first glance there seems no way to reconcile Old and New Testaments on the issue of lament.

There are, however, some passages that do speak of overwhelming grief in the New Testament. In Acts 8:2, the death of Stephen was met with profound sorrow: “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.” Paul was thankful that his brother in the faith, Epaphroditus, recovered from illness and so spared him “sorrow upon sorrow” (Php. 2:27). I think the most significant New Testament validation of the Old Testament lament is found in the passion of Christ. Jesus was deeply troubled and sorrowful before his crucifixion (Mark 14:33); he asked that if it were possible that his cup of suffering be removed. Finally as he hung on the cross dying, Jesus cried out in a loud voice words from the lament in Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Miller (2005) underscores the importance of this for the tradition of the righteous sufferer:

To understand the incarnation and death of Jesus through the prism of the lament psalms is to know that both the incarnation and Jesus’ death are his identification with all those innocent/righteous/faithful sufferers who have experienced the pain of human existence, the terrible absence and silence of God, and human torment, oppression, mockery, and reproach. In Jesus’ death the crucified God takes up all that suffering and becomes one with it (p. 21).

Johnson (2005) argues that quoting the beginning of psalm 22 is like quoting “Our father, who is in heaven” in both cases the author is bringing to mind the greater passage. The parallels between the lament of psalm 22 and the crucifixion are many:

The psalmist is reviled by his tormentors (Ps. 22:6), and so is Jesus (Mark 15:29, 31-32; Matt. 27:39, 41-43; cf Luke 23:35-36). In both the psalm and the passion narrative, people pass by ‘wagging their heads’ at the afflicted one (Ps. 22:7; cf. Mark 15:29; Matt. 27:39). The psalmist trusts in God to deliver him (Ps. 22:8), just as those who are deriding Jesus say, ‘He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son’’ (Matt. 27:43; cf. Mark 15:31-32). . . . The psalmist laments that the perpetrators divide his clothes and cast lots for them (Ps. 22:18), a circumstance that is repeated at the crucifixion (Mark 15:24; Matt. 27:35; cf. Luke 23:34b). . . . Moreover, the psalmist shouts to God a second time, whereupon God hears him (Ps. 22:19-21, 24b). Similarly, Jesus cries out a second time before he dies (Mark 15:37). . . . Finally, in the psalm it is said that the Gentiles shall worship the Lord, who delivers the one who was afflicted (Ps. 22:27); and in all three Synoptic Gospels a Gentile centurion makes a statement concerning Jesus’ divine sonship immediately after Jesus invokes the psalm (Mark 15:39; Matt. 27:54; Luke 23:47) (Johnson, 2005, p. 82).

Jesus validates the lament tradition with his words, and the synoptic writers endorse this view. In the book of Hebrews, the author portrays Jesus in the lamentation tradition: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Heb. 5:7). Jesus is one with those who lament past and future.

For the evangelical client who in grief and sorrow joins with Jesus in his lament also joins with the suffering saints of all ages in their use of the biblical lament.

Stages of grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) in her book, *Death and dying*, identified five stages of grief and dying: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

- (1) *Denial*: Kübler-Ross claims that “denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize less radical defenses” (p. 39).
- (2) *Anger*: “When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment. The logical next question becomes: ‘Why me?’” (p. 50).
- (3) *Bargaining*: “The third stage, the stage of bargaining, is less well known but equally helpful to the patient, though only for brief periods of time....maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening: ‘If God has decided to take us from this earth and he did not respond to my angry pleas, he may be more favorable if I ask nicely” (p. 82).
- (4) *Depression*: “His numbness or stoicism, his anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss” (p. 85).
- (5) *Acceptance*: “If a patient has had enough time (i.e., not a sudden, unexpected death) and has been given some help in working through the previously described stages, he will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his ‘fate’....Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes

a time for 'the final rest before the long journey' as one patient phrased it" (pp. 112-113).

Lyon (2000) claims that each of these stages can be found in the book of Job:

- (1) *Denial*: Job may have underestimated his situation with the following: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." (1:21); "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (2:10).
I am least convinced about Lyon's evidence for denial in Job which could be classified as acceptance alternately.
- (2) *Anger*: Job's anger is seen in the following: "Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. Am I the sea, or the monster of the deep, that you put me under guard? When I think my bed will comfort me and my couch will ease my complaint, even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine" (7:11-15).
- (3) *Bargaining*: Job contemplates bargaining with God: "If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, someone to remove God's rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more" (9:33-34).
- (4) *Depression*: Job's depression is evident throughout the book and is characteristic in: "Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave!" (10:18-19).
- (5) *Acceptance*: Job states: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15).

Worden (2002) warns against the tendency of some in expecting each person's grief or dying to follow this pattern in some neat order. I think what we can take away is that these stages are often evident in grieving but not necessarily in the order laid out or in completeness. In counseling evangelicals, scripture can be used to show that others in the biblical tradition have gone before them, and such feelings and sentiments are normal and expected.

In addition to Job, the psalms of lament also have characteristic elements which can be helpful to note. Brueggemann (1974) identifies six typical components of the lament psalm: address, complaint, petition, motivation, vow of offering, and assurance of being heard. Capps (1981) sees it as: address to God, complaint, confession of trust, petition, words of assurance, and vow to praise. Others have a more simplified outline: Smith (2007) sees the structure as: complaint, petition, and praise. Similarly Jones (2007) divides the lament along the lines of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. What is common to all of these and that of Kübler-Ross is "movement in each from negation to affirmation" (Brueggemann, 1977, p. 272).

The *Address to God* (e.g. Ps. 4:1; 5:1) establishes the covenant context—the relationship that exists between God and his child(ren)—in which the lament is spoken. The *complaint* (e.g. Ps. 6:2; 13:3) describes the trouble or situation in which the person finds himself/herself. The counselor should not feel the need to defend God here; if these feelings are not expressed they may be repressed and replaced with guilt and deception. The *petition* entails how God's intervention will alleviate the problem. In response to sickness, may God bring health (e.g. Ps. 6:2; 41:4) in response to enemies, deliverance (e.g. Ps 22:20). The *confession of trust* (e.g. Ps. 142: 3, 5) is the "'but' or 'nevertheless'

that follows catharsis of negative feeling” (Capps, 1981, p. 88). The *motivation* is the reason why God should give assistance and can be an appeal to God’s reputation (e.g. Ps 13:4; 25:11), past assistance (e.g. Ps. 22:4-5; 143:5), guilt (e.g. Ps. 25:11; 38:18) or innocence of the psalmist (e.g. Ps. 26:3-7; 35:7), or the promise to praise (e.g. Ps. 6:5; 22:22). The *vow of offering or praise* (Ps. 26:12; 54:6-7) is the call to oneself or the congregation to fulfill obligations to God for his transformation of the situation. For some clients, it may not be even possible to praise. In that case, the client can be reassured that God continues to mourn with him/her. The *words of assurance* (Ps. 13:5-6; 17:15) are the affirmations that God has heard and has acted in behalf of the one who petitioned. Sometimes the client is so devastated by his/her problem that the counselor may exercise faith and hope on behalf of the client (Capps, 1981; Brueggemann, 1974; Westermann, 1981).

Capps (1981) summarizes the counseling tasks for the counselee and the counselor that can be tied to the components of the biblical lament:

<i>Address to God</i>	Counselee/Counselor: Implicit understanding that conversation is addressed to God
<i>Complaint</i>	Counselee: Gives vent to negative and self-justifying feelings Counselor: Helps counselee ‘name’ these feelings in the form of complaints
<i>Confession of Trust</i>	Counselee: Expresses sense of being upheld and able to cope Counselor: Helps counselee identify and cultivate grounds for trust
<i>Petition</i>	Counselee: Expresses specific needs and desires

Counselor: Helps counselee clarify and focus petitions

Words of Assurance Counselor: Expresses support for petitions and relief from sufferings

Counselor: Supports counselee's petitions and assures counselee that God hears the prayers of those who lament

Vow to Praise Counselor: Experiences response to petitions and begins to hope

Counselor: Helps counselee clarify grounds for praise; affirms

'God who mourns' when counselee cannot praise

(Capps, 1981, p. 91).

It must be stressed that these 'stages' of the biblical lament should not be stereotyped so that every client is expected to follow these stages in some definite or necessary order.

The psalms themselves have abrupt shifts and turns; sometimes certain elements are eclipsed and others expand to form most of the psalm. Likewise, when using the psalms in counseling, the greatest latitude and freedom should be exercised in application. The psalms are a help in counseling not a strict blueprint.

As Capps (1981) demonstrates, Psalm 71 can be divided into sections as an illustration of the components of the biblical lament:

Address to God

In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn your ear to me and save me. Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress (vv.1-3).

Complaint

For my enemies speak against me; those who wait to kill me conspire together (v. 10).

Confession of trust

For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you. I have become like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge. My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long (vv. 5-8).

Petition and motivation

Deliver me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of evil and cruel men (v. 4)...Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone. For my enemies speak against me; those who wait to kill me conspire together. They say, 'God has forsaken him; pursue him and seize him, for no one will rescue him.' Be not far from me, O God; come quickly, O my God, to help me. May my accusers perish in shame; may those who want to harm me be covered with scorn and disgrace (vv. 9-13).

Vow to praise

But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure. I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone (vv. 14-16).

Assurance of being heard

My tongue will tell of your righteous acts all day long, for those who wanted to harm me have been put to shame and confusion (v. 24).

Other psalms can be used as well, but this serves to exemplify the lament psalm.

One of the main differences between Kübler-Ross and the biblical lament according to Brueggemann (1977) is that with regard to the former, “what is lacking is the presence of a sovereign God who can authorize” (p. 272). We shall explore in greater detail the differences between the biblical lament and the work of stage theorists like Kübler-Ross. What becomes evident is that even though grief and loss has many similarities between the secular and religious sufferer there are some differences which suggest that biblically informed Christians grieve in some different ways. Paul may be suggesting this with his admonition: “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope” (1Thess. 4:13).

What is striking is that the first stage of denial in Kübler-Ross has no strict counterpart in the biblical lament. Brueggemann (1977) highlights the different orientations to grief:

In a modern technological hospital organized to deny reality, the form begins with a predictable denial, not only by persons but by definitional world of the medical community. Israel’s form has no precise counterpart because Israel’s speech begins with an insistent covenantal address, identifying one who is expected to be present....Israel’s speech presumes a history of interaction, of speaking and

hearing which gives life. In the urban consciousness, loss must be faced without history and so instead of covenantal address there is denial (pp. 268-269).

The biblical lament is situated within a dialogical, covenantal context. The psalmist expects something from God and bases the present on previous commitments which will now be summoned: “The speaker of the lament does not come *de novo* to God, but out of a context of faith and loyalty” (Brueggemann, 1974, p. 7). Utilizing the psalms of lament in counseling evangelicals brings into focus the covenantal relationship between the one who petitions and the one who is expected to intervene. This is not to say that the evangelical may not go through a period of denial as the gravity of the situation sinks in. However, what we have in the biblical lament is the “hope” in the person of God which Paul points to in 1 Thess. 4:13 and which the biblical lamenter addresses.

If God is missing from the picture, grief may look different. Another significant contrast is at the stage of depression. Without a doubt, there are expressions of this in the Bible and so the evangelical client should not be made to feel strange or unspiritual when he or she experiences depression as a part of the grieving process. After Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:16ff), he went through a period in which he felt insignificant and wished for death (1 Kgs. 19:1ff). We also see expressions of utter helplessness and insignificance in the psalms: “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads” (Ps. 22:6-7). However, for Brueggemann (1977), the covenant God in the biblical lament makes all the difference:

Israel knows about that sense of diminishment and self-deprecation, but it is differently textured. Kübler-Ross’s subject has no one to address and so will

finally be depressed. Israel, always by form, has a partner to whom to speak. For that reason, Israel's anger is much more healthy and buoyant. It is fundamentally hopeful because there is always a chance that the other one will act....In place of depression, Israel's form has petition, and here the forms are most to be contrasted. Depression is appropriate if the speech is finally monological. But Israel's form is boldly dialogical and the one who hears or is expected to hear is not addressed in hopeless despair but in passionate expectation (pp. 269-270).

When counseling evangelicals, one should certainly expect to see depression, but also hope as the one who grieves connects with the God of the covenants through the biblical text.

For those clients who have been taught intentionally or not to accept everything from God's hand without questioning, there may be only resignation as the final stage of grief. The truth cannot be said; there is only the veneer of joy in the face of suffering. The psalms of lament give the evangelical who grieves a radically new perspective. God is not only transcendent but also imminent. God does not expect only docility and submissiveness. This dialogical God of the covenant has given the one who grieves the voice and the examples of godly sufferers in the pages of scripture. If the worshipper is only permitted to utter praise and doxology, we are not true covenant partners. Moreover the questions of theodicy become mute; questions of justice become illegitimate because we are in the end only "yes-men" (Brueggemann, 1995, p. 102). Covenant without lament is "finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretence, which sanctions social control" (Brueggemann, 1995, p. 102). What we have in the end is unquestioning obedience and eventually despair. The biblical lament evens the

theological balance of power; it gives voice to the human side of the equation and reveals a God who is available and vulnerable and who is willing to take the place of respondent and not just sole initiator (Brueggemann, 1995).

The temptation for the New Testament Christian is to move too quickly to praise and thanksgiving—short stepping the negative, the place of disorientation. The temptation for the counselor is to ‘fix’ the problem, to prematurely bring in the solution. When the counselor does this, it can give the client a sense that the negative is a sign of immaturity rather than an act of faith. The net result is that the feelings of lament are repressed and replaced with shame and embarrassment (Jones, 2007). Consider psalm 88: the speaker begins: “O LORD, the God who saves me” but beyond this affirmation of faith the rest of the psalm details a life of pain and suffering—and much at the hands of God. If this is where the client is, then linger here. Psalm 88 is not base Christianity or pre-Christian but a legitimate cry for help well within the context of faith.

Grief and loss is a wide category and there are many psalms that can be used in counseling clients going through these issues. Capps (1981) lists a few psalms in addition to the ones discussed above that can be used in specific situations:

For one who fears that death is imminent: Psalm 6, 139;

For the terminally ill: Psalm 41;

For one who faces an uncertain future: Psalm 42;

For the bereaved: Psalm 90;

For those who face premature death: Psalm 102;

For one who feels threatened in old age: Psalm 71;

For one who grieves over a broken relationship: Psalm 55;

For one who grieves over past mistakes: Psalm 38;

For one who grieves over loss of personal prestige: Psalm 62;

For one who grieves over lack of personal success: Psalm 73

(pp. 93-95).

Other clients may relate to the righteous sufferer like Job, to the childless like Abraham, Sarah and Hannah, to those who have let someone close down or even denied their faith or lord like Peter, to someone running away from home and God like the prodigal son, to someone who suffers for his/her faith or feels abandoned by God like Jesus.

Psalm activities

Meyerstein (2006) describes a number of psalm activities that can be used in group therapy with clients. These would be suitable in therapy with evangelical clients as well. Reading psalms can be a useful way to draw out clients emotionally:

Their [psalms] evocative imagery often mirrors and validates the strong emotions felt by people struggling with illness, trauma, and loss. Focusing on a text, such as reading a psalm, is a non-threatening way to elicit emotions, and is often more effective than a direct elicitation of feelings. The question, 'What does this text say to you about your life situation?' invites a personalized 'finding oneself in the text.' A cathartic expression of negative emotion and/or the creative search for making meaning can be beneficial (p. 209).

When finding commonalities with the text, all answers should be considered correct because each interpretation is unique to the one offering it. Reading a psalm in a group setting helps people find connection with others and lessens the feelings of isolation.

One exercise that helps clients with their feelings is the use of “psalm clips.” In this exercise, brief excerpts from the psalms are printed on strips of colored paper and placed on a table. Some examples include:

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy (Ps. 126:5).

I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth (Ps. 121:1-2).

In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free (Ps. 118:5).

Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:12).

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me (Ps. 23:4).

With soft music in the background to create a relaxed atmosphere, clients can select a psalm clip that speaks to their life situation. Clients can jot down a few words about what this passage means to them. As each shares, the others listen respectfully and add supporting comments as appropriate (Meyerstein, 2006).

There are also artistic responses to the psalms which can “tap into one’s deeply held inner realities” (Meyerstein, 2006, p. 209). Drawing a psalm clip can be a useful extension to sharing a psalm clip. It is interesting that literally Ps. 118:5 reads: “From [my] distress I called upon the LORD; The LORD answered me [and set me] in a large place” (NASB). Grief and loss can be compared to being constricted in a narrow place; it is not unlike the Hebrews’ experience of slavery in Egypt. Participants can draw how they feel when in this narrow place and then draw how they feel in that broader space and

what they might do to expand their space. Participants can then share their findings with the larger group (Meyerstein, 2006).

Using these tools, Meyerstein (2006) relates how Keith and his daughter Janet used psalm clips to express their grief regarding Sandy, Keith's wife and Janet's mother, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Keith selected the passage: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). Keith related what it was like knowing that his wife's days were numbered and how important it was to make each day matter. Janet, on the other hand, chose Ps. 118:5: "From [my] distress I called upon the LORD; The LORD answered me [and set me] in a large place." Janet described what it felt like to be cornered with her various responsibilities: including visiting her mother, taking care of her children and husband, and resuming her career. With all of these tasks, Janet described the tight place she felt she was in, pulled in many directions. She related her expanded situation when she was able to enlist the help of a friend to visit with her mother, and how she was able to eat dinner at home with her own family.

Keith and Janet also made handmade crafts to express something they could take with them from the psalms. Keith made a representation of "house of the Lord" from psalm 23 with himself hiding inside. He explained how he desired to be under the God's protective care in this time of fearfulness. Janet used blue and green colors to describe "lying down in green pastures beside still waters to restore my soul" (Ps. 23:2,3). Using restful colors and shapes served as reminders of peacefulness in a time of great stress (Meyerstein, 2006).

In many ways, the psalms help give fuller expression to our grief, both before God and in solidarity with those who have wrestled with sorrow and loss before us. In using scripture in counseling evangelical clients who grieve, we value the patterns contained in the lament, and place great emphasis on the fuller expression of feelings in the movement to and from sorrow. The next chapter addresses how certain feelings can become debilitating and how our thought life can play a direct part in our emotional well-being.

3. SCRIPTURE AND COGNITIVE-BEHAVORIAL THERAPY

The ancient Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, wrote: “Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the view they take of them” (Enchiridion 5). Backus and Chapien (1980) explain it this way: “It is not...events past or present which make us feel the way we feel, but our interpretation of those events....Our feelings are caused by what we tell ourselves about our circumstances, whether in words or in attitudes” (p. 17). This powerful influence that thoughts have over our emotional and physical well-being is illustrated in the following story:

Some years ago a man was traveling across country by sneaking rides on freight trains. One particular night he climbed into what looked like a boxcar, and closed the door. Somehow the door locked shut and he was trapped inside. When his eyes became adjusted to the darkness, he found that he was inside a refrigerated boxcar. He was freezing cold. All the noise he could make inside the car failed to attract anyone’s attention. He hopelessly gave up and lay down on the floor of the railroad car. As he tried to fight against the freezing cold, he scratched part of a message on the floor of the car. He never finished. Sometime the next day,

repairmen from the railroad opened the door of the refrigerated boxcar and found the man dead on the floor of the car. The problem was the refrigerating units on the car were not working. The temperature inside the car probably did not go below fifty degrees during the night. The man died because his thoughts told him he was freezing to death (David Stoop in Chisholm, 2002, p. 2).

Cognitions play a major role in our emotional state and ability to function.

Albert Ellis who pioneered the cognitive therapy called Rational Emotive Therapy used the acronym of ABC to explain his theory. A refers to the **A**ctivating event or circumstances to which the person is exposed. B refers to the **B**eliefs or thoughts that this person has in response to A. Finally C refers to the emotions and resultant actions that are a **C**onsequence of B. For most people, it appears that A causes C. What we fail to recognize is that our feelings and emotions are mediated by B, our belief system. When we change B we can exert some control over C, our emotional consequences. For the man in the boxcar, if he believed something different about his circumstances, the outcome may have been totally different (Chisholm, 2002).

Cognitive therapy encompasses Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). These two approaches share three foundational propositions: “(a) cognitive activity affects behavior, (b) cognitive activity may be monitored and altered to produce relief from negative psychological symptoms, and (c) desired behavior change may be affected through shifting or modifying core dysfunctional schemas or assumptions” (Tan & Johnson, 2005, p. 78). REBT and CBT see core beliefs and assessments as the cause of emotional or behavioral upset. In REBT, the therapist targets these irrational beliefs and uses reason and logical disputation

to challenge them, whereas CBT encourages the use of empirical questioning to challenge the client's perceptions about events (Tan & Johnson, 2005; Garzon, 2005). Some have beliefs like: "I must be loved and approved of by everyone who is important to me. If people do not love me, it is terrible and just shows that I am worthless." The REBT therapist might strive for philosophical change appealing to reason with: "Let's assume she does hate your guts, why does that have to be so terrible?" Whereas, the CBT therapist might address misperception or misinterpretation with: "How do you know she hates your guts? I'm not sure that conclusion is warranted. How can you test that thought more carefully" (Tan & Johnson, 2005, p. 79).

There are a number of reasons why cognitive therapy is useful in treating religious clients:

First, CBT is highly belief oriented and focuses on clients' foundational or core beliefs and assumptions. Clients from most religious traditions are familiar and comfortable with belief-oriented language and share the assumption that what one believes is an essential component of feeling and behavior. Second, the CBT emphasis on teaching and education is familiar to many religious clients who often respond well to homework assignments involving scripture reading or religiously integrated activities (e.g. imagery, relaxation, prayer). Finally, the CBT emphasis on modifying and transforming cognitions and beliefs and the hard work required to achieve growth and change are often highly appealing to religious people (Tan & Johnson, 2005, p. 80).

There is a resemblance between cognitive restructuring and the biblical idea of repentance, which comes from the Greek and means "changing one's mind" (BAGD).

Propst (1996) sees cognitive restructuring as a “spiritual transformation of the mind—a spiritual exercise” (p. 394). The idea of self-examination and the stress placed on changing personal beliefs may make this an attractive therapy to evangelicals (Propst, 1996; Lasure & Mikulas, 1996).

The Bible itself has things to say about a person’s thought life and belief system. Many of the sayings from Jesus and other biblical passages are meant to be thought provoking and thought shaping: “They dart into the mind with the sharpness of a fishhook. They move into the memory like a fishhook, and can be removed only with great effort” (Oates, 1953, p. 82). Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Knowing the truth and acting upon this knowledge is liberating. Another important passage on changing distorted thoughts into biblically accurate and healthy ones comes from Paul in his letter to the Romans:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom. 12:1-2).

The verb that is rendered with “be transformed” is in the present tense suggesting that this transformation is a continuing process (Moo, 1996). When a person’s thinking is transformed, he/she can experience the perfect will of God (Chisholm, 2002). This “will” directs us into greater conformity to the image of Christ. In fact, we are to control our thinking as an act of obedience to Christ: “We demolish arguments and every pretension

that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). To control one’s thoughts and actively oppose evil and falsehood is an act of spiritual warfare. The passage makes it clear that God empowers the believer to face the world of beliefs and ideas with divine power (2 Cor. 10:4).

The Bible also gives advice on the content of transformed thinking. Paul explains what constitutes wholesome thinking:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Php. 4:8-9).

Right thinking aligned with the truths of scripture can produce dividends in righteousness and peace. The scriptures make it clear that the ‘inner’ produces the ‘outer’ (Chisholm, 2002); when a person’s thought-life and desires are corrupt the rest becomes corrupt as well: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:20-23). In this way, the scriptures suggest that the believer’s thought life has much to do with his/her spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

An important part of replacing irrational and unhealthy patterns of thinking involves the repetition and the infusion of biblically accurate thoughts. Sori & McKinney

(2006) highlights the benefit of thought repetition in the formation of new patterns of thinking:

[O]ther research demonstrates that when we practice certain responses to the exclusion of other possible responses, the nonpracticed response becomes actively inhibited....By repeatedly using the new information, it becomes the dominant response in our repertoire and the old information is inhibited. Therefore, to successfully transform one's thinking (Romans 12:2), one must be constantly rehearsing new thoughts (p. 224).

In counseling evangelicals, it can be helpful to pick out a passage that can be repeated when destructive or self-defeating thoughts surface. This can work towards creating a new perspective for the client. Elaborating on this benefit, Oates (1953) states:

The deliberate, suggestive, persuasive repetition of the passage or passages to the person in need is an important element in their effective use. The objective of this is to imbed the idea and thought of the passage just below the conscious level of the person's awareness in such a way that it will be unforgettable, and keep coming back like a song (p. 105).

The psalmist declares in Ps.119:11: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." The Holy Spirit is able to bring to mind biblical passages and ideas when needed. Take the case of Doug who struggles with fear. When fears came, Doug would meditate on the short passage: "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). With this passage as a cognitive and spiritual resource, Doug was able to gain a measure of control over his fear and attain some self-confidence (Tan & Gregg, 1997).

Sometimes it is necessary to augment scripture memorization and meditation with an active stance against the negative thought that comes to mind. This is what is referred to as ‘thought stopping.’ Tan & Ortberg (2004) advocate the use of thought stopping with depressed thoughts:

Sometimes you may have trouble controlling recurring thoughts associated with depressed feelings. When this happens, a thought-stopping procedure may be of some help. You should sit back comfortably, with eyes closed, and imagine the negative thoughts recurring. After allowing a few moments for this, you should then shout, ‘Stop!’ This may feel awkward the first few times you do it, but it is helpful to actually shout. The ‘stop’ should usually disrupt your recurrent negative thinking, if only momentarily....After some practice, you can say ‘stop’ quietly, whenever such thoughts occur (p. 94).

This idea of actively opposing false ideas is supported in scripture: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Tit. 2:11-12).

For some a less disruptive routine involving deep breathing and relaxation can create the ideal atmosphere for learning new ways responding to intrusive thoughts.

Benson (1996) outlines nine helpful steps:

Step 1: Pick a focus word or short phrase that’s firmly rooted in your belief system.

Step 2: Sit quietly in a comfortable position.

Step 3: Close your eyes.

Step 4: Relax your muscles.

Step 5: Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, repeat your focus word, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.

Step 6: Assume a passive attitude. Don't worry about how well you're doing.

When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, 'Oh well,' and gently return to the repetition.

Step 7: Continue for ten to twenty minutes.

Step 8: Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.

Step 9: Practice this technique once or twice daily (p. 136).

The evangelical client may choose a phrase from scripture for this exercise; some examples could include: "Our Father who art in heaven"; "The Lord is my shepherd"; "In God I trust."

Another exercise that has proven helpful in cognitive restructuring involves creating a sheet with two columns, the first column is for listing the negative self-evaluations that are producing dysfunctional feelings and behaviors, the second column is a place for the scriptural affirmations or ideas that counter the negative ones. For example, "I will probably fail again" is countered with the scripture: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Php. 4:13). The "him" in this passage is Christ. Liz an evangelical client used this exercise with success in dealing with feeling anxious, inadequate, and overwhelmed in her work situation. Liz prepared a list of negative self-

statements and a corresponding list of scriptures that she had found that spoke to her feelings. Some of her list included negative self-defeating thoughts like:

I am weak; I will be overtaken.

I am disorganized—I can never succeed

I am going to fail.

I am a failure in God's eyes.

I will screw up.

I can't manage things: my life, work, family, stress.

I am not worthy of love.

God will never hear me or help me (Sori & McKinney, 2006, p. 226).

The scriptures that Liz found that she felt spoke to her negative self-evaluation included:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners,
Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts
at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than
our hearts....if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and
receive from him anything we ask (1 John 3:19-22).

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Php. 4:13, NKJV).

This God who cared about her long before she knew him was greater than her negative thoughts, and she could have victory through him (Sori & McKinney, 2006). Evangelical clients often have significant biblical literacy, and with the help of a concordance, they can carefully search for passages and contexts that address their situation. Other clients

may need help to find meaningful passages from the Bible, and with these clients, the counselor can supply to the degree that he or she is able.

Among evangelical Christians there are some faulty beliefs that should be countered with the truth of scripture. Tan & Ortberg (2004) list three with scriptural counterarguments: (1) Because I'm a Christian, I will not have pain and suffering. Jesus spoke to his disciples: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). (2) It is my Christian responsibility to meet all the needs of those around me. In passages, like 1 Cor. 12:27-31 and Rom. 12:6-7, scripture makes it clear that in the body of Christ different people have different gifts and responsibilities. No one member has all the gifts and no one is responsible for meeting all needs. (3) A good Christian does not feel angry, anxious or depressed. Jesus was angry when he drove out the money changers from the temple area (Mark 11:15-17). Paul expects anger to be a part of the believer's experience with his statement: "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26). When Jesus learned that Lazarus, his friend, had died, it says that he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33-35). In Gethsemane, Jesus was "deeply distressed and troubled." Jesus expressed his mental and emotional torment with the words: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33-34).

Another area of distorted thinking for evangelicals involves 'worm theology.' Garzon (2005) describes this exaggeration in belief as, "a view that overemphasizes one's sinfulness, the fallen nature, and God's judgment while minimizing God's love, acceptance, and the reality of [one's] new position in Christ" (p. 116). Evangelical clients who present with this type of distorted thinking may benefit from an exploration

of the passages in scripture that emphasize God's grace, love and acceptance in Christ. There is freedom in the words of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery: "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11) and in the declaration: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12).

One of the ways that people have benefited from the cumulative message of the scriptures is by meditating on a list of biblical affirmations. Anderson (2000) has compiled a list of such affirmations which can be used in counseling evangelicals:

Since I am in Christ, by the grace of God:

I have been justified—completely forgiven and made righteous (Rom. 5:1).

I died with Christ and died to the power of sin's rule over my life (Rom. 6:1-6).

I am free forever from condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

I have been placed into Christ by God's doing (1 Cor. 1:30).

I have received the Spirit of God into my life that I might know the things freely
given to me by God (1 Cor. 2:12).

I have been given the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

I have been bought with a price; I am not my own; I belong to God (1 Cor.
6:19,20).

I have been established, anointed and sealed by God in Christ, and I have been
given the Holy Spirit as a pledge guaranteeing our inheritance to come (2
Cor. 1:21,22, Eph. 1:13,14).

Since I have died, I no longer live for myself, but for Christ (2 Cor. 5:14,15).

I have been made righteous (2 Cor. 5:21).

I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am now living is Christ's life (Gal. 2:20).

I have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3).

I was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and am without blame before Him (Eph. 1:4).

I was predestined—determined by God—to be adopted as God's son (Eph. 1:5).

I have been redeemed and forgiven, and I am a recipient of His lavish grace (Eph. 1:7,8).

I have been made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5).

I have been raised up and seated with Christ in heaven (Eph. 2:6).

I have direct access to God through the Spirit (Eph. 2:18) (p. 64).

Anderson (2000) continues with another page of biblical statements, the collective weight of which is impressive. This kind of evidence shows that in Christ there is a totally new reality and blessings. These kinds of lists can be compiled on various therapeutic topics like depression, anxiety, and guilt as well. For a simpler more personal style, I would recommend the Father's Love Letter available from Father Heart Communications. The Father's Love Letter is a powerful tool that can be used to encourage and confirm the spiritual beliefs of evangelical clients who are struggling with various psycho-spiritual issues. It should be stressed that in using these tools one should not see in them a quick fix to any problem. Just as patterns of thinking take time to embed themselves into our thinking so we need to resist thinking that simple mental assent is all that there is involved in reworking our cognitive distortions.

One of the areas that scripture speaks to is in the realm of supernatural healing. Many evangelicals have struggled with the apparent disparity between the abundance of healings in the apostolic church and the seeming absence of healings in the modern North American church context. There are many places where Jesus and the apostles healed those who suffered various afflictions. Today's evangelical may blame himself/herself when God does not heal supernaturally. Some internalize this as a lack of faith or as an indication of sin. It is noteworthy that when the apostle Paul suffered some physical and/or spiritual limitation referred to as a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7); he prayed repeatedly that God would remove it. God's response was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Instead it served the divine purpose of making Paul humble and dependent. Job was another person who suffered sickness not because of some sin or lack of faith but rather for a divine purpose that was never fully revealed.

Tan & Johnson (2005) discuss a relevant case where scripture and biblical arguments were used effectively in counseling a seminary student with a fear of speaking in public. Grace, a student, was treated at the seminary's psychological services center. During the assessment it was found that for Grace public speaking was preceded by acute episodes of anxiety. Tan & Johnson (2005) report that symptoms included "sweating, trembling, difficulty concentrating, racing heart, profound social embarrassment, and a strong drive to escape the situation" (p. 92). Together with her therapist, Grace acknowledged some distorted beliefs that she had in relation to public speaking e.g. "I must not get nervous," "it will be awful if they see me tremble or stutter," "I can't stand feeling anxious like this," "I must model God's peace for others," and "if I can't just 'let

go and let God,' it shows that I am spiritually cut off" (p. 92). As a secondary condition, Grace was experiencing depression because she was unable to control her primary difficulty with anxiety

Grace indicated that she desired to integrate her faith and the Bible into her therapy. The cognitive distortion that Grace presented with is known as "catastrophizing." In this way, Grace saw her situation as catastrophic and intolerable. Tan & Johnson (2005) record how Grace responded well to the following disputations about her evaluation of her situation:

[R]emind me how it is that rating your situation as catastrophic is helping you to keep your focus on God and serve Him more effectively? Job lost his wife, his children, and his property. He had painful boils covering his body. If his situation was 100% bad, where would your classroom anxiety fall on the scale?....God saw the good which would come from his son's death and Job's suffering. God sees things about our unpreferred circumstances that we cannot. Instead of stubbornly demanding that things be different than they are, what might God want to hear from you instead? (p. 95).

In relation to her low tolerance for frustration, the following disputations were helpful:

If God created you, understands your capacities, and has allowed you to end up in this situation, He must believe that you can stand it...The apostle Paul begged God to remove his 'thorn in the flesh' [2 Cor.]. He suffered and yet chose to tolerate his discomfort to keep serving God...Imagine that God appeared to you and explained that He needed you to tolerate feeling anxious for an important reason. Could you stand it then? (p. 95).

As another treatment method, Grace and her therapist role played, swapping sides: Grace taking the rational biblical perspective and the therapist taking her irrational side in order to demonstrate that some of Grace's dysfunctional beliefs ran counter to reason and her basic beliefs about God as revealed in the Bible. For example, in one instance the therapist played the God of Grace's irrational beliefs and Grace was to dispute the following argument: "Because Grace is feeling anxious at times, she is entirely worthless to me and a deep source of disappointment. In fact, I God, can't stand thinking of Grace getting anxious, it upsets me too much!" (p. 96). This was entirely contrary to the message of God's unconditional love as expressed in the Bible and opposing this distorted thought was the reasonable and scripturally correct thing to do. For the self-denigrating beliefs that she was worthless as a Christian in God's sight, the following request for evidence was effective:

What did Jesus say about the worth of sinners? The lost sheep? The lost coins? The prodigal son? What does these parables [all in Luke 15] say about your worth even when you get yourself so anxious you can't speak the way you'd prefer? (p. 96).

The therapist aimed at replacing Grace's dysfunctional beliefs with theologically and biblical supported ones: "It seems to me that when you get anxious and feel distressed, God is giving you an opportunity to experience His comfort and grace, Grace!" (p. 96). Others in the Bible experienced limitation but with God's help were able to persevere.

As a final intervention, the therapist employed rational emotive religious imagery as a part of the treatment aimed at coping with a stressful situation. Grace was asked to imagine the anxiety producing situation and then to change the image and emotions using

cognitive disputation. Grace found the mental picture of Jesus close by with his hand on her back prior to public speaking calming. Jesus rose with her when it was time to speak, smiling in a way to reassure her of his presence and approval. Grace also included praying to Jesus and expressing her thanks to him (Tan & Johnson, 2005).

Using religious imagery in counseling

Others have benefited from using imagery based on or taken from the Bible as well. Tan (2007a) presents the composite case of Jane who was suffering from mild depression, fatigue, and a distant relationship with God. Jane related a painful story of how her father ignored her preferring his newspaper over spending time with her. As a part of therapy, Jane shared this image and allowed herself to feel the pain again. In response, the therapist prayed with Jane that the Holy Spirit would come and minister to her in this painful episode. With tears in her eyes, Jane described the image that came to her mind and which she found deeply moving:

I actually sense the presence of Jesus with me, although I can't see His face clearly...he is having lunch with me, spreading out a blanket with a picnic basket filled with food like sandwiches and tea to drink, on green pastures beside the still waters as Psalm 23 describes, ...and He eats a leisurely lunch with me, giving me His full and loving attention....and He speaks to me and tells me that I am His beloved child and very precious to Him...(with some tears)...I really feel close to Him and my heart is experiencing some warmth and joy and...deep peace. This is very meaningful and healing for me....I feel that I can experience God more now as a loving and present Heavenly Father or Parent (pp. 106-107).

As a part of her treatment, Jane felt gently nudged by Jesus to forgive her father and let go of her resentment.

Religious imagery has also been used in therapeutic interventions involving abuse and in treating posttraumatic stress. Propst (1996) explains the benefit of using religious imagery in evoking “visual thoughts”:

These images are not stimuli that individuals respond to; rather, they are individual’s responses. Furthermore, images may have a greater capacity than thoughts in a more linguistic mode for intensifying traumatic memories and, thus, may allow patients to focus more fully on emotionally laden ideas, so that patients may more effectively restructure the thoughts and images surrounding a traumatic event (p. 401).

Some female victims of physical or sexual abuse have benefited by incorporating Jesus’ presence into an image they have of the abuse. In this way, the meaning of the image begins to change and its negative intensity begins to diminish. For those who found Jesus’ gender problematic, it was useful to focus on him as human and a fellow victim of emotional and physical abuse (Propst, 1996).

For others, ritual activities aid in the disputation of negative self-statements. Clients can visually picture or physically enact nailing distorted thoughts to the cross (cf. Col. 2:14). Other clients may prefer to write these negative thoughts on pieces of paper and burn them one by one symbolizing the rejection of condemning thoughts for ones that are biblical and theologically accurate. As each thought is nailed or burned, the client can repeat the words of Jesus: “It is finished” (John 19:30) as a way of embracing the completed work of Jesus on the cross (Sori & McKinney, 2006).

Biblical characters and cognitive distortions

Chisholm (2002) presents a number of biblical stories to illustrate various cognitive distortions. In the Gospel of Luke we have recorded the story of Martha and Mary, two sisters who opened their home to Jesus.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her' (Luke 10:38-42).

In this story, Martha can be used to illustrate the cognitive distortion of "perfectionism." Using the classification in Beck (1995), we could also view this as a distortion in which "should" and "must" are the operative words for self and other's behavior. A person suffering from this cognitive distortion has unrealistically high standards for self and/or others. For perfectionists the inner thought is: "It's got to be just right. I will accept nothing less" (Chisholm, 2002, p. 94). The net result of perfectionism is increased stress, frustration, anxiety and depression when things are not perfect. Martha was unable to find time in her ordered world for Jesus and his teaching.

In the report of the ten spies who scouted the Promised Land is an example of the cognitive distortion, "magnification." Beck (1995) describes this distorted way of thinking: "When you evaluate yourself, another person or a situation, you unreasonably

magnify the negative and/or minimize the positive” (p. 119). In this case, both happened: the ten spies incited the people of Israel to fear with a magnified report of the strengths of their opponents in the land and minimized their resources and strengths evidenced in the miracles that God displayed in the exodus and early desert experiences. Caleb urged the people with words of confidence: “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it” (Num. 13:30). However, the other ten spies gave an exaggerated report of their findings which fuelled a rebellion against Moses, Joshua, and Caleb:

But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’ And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, ‘The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them’ (Num. 13:31-33).

Note the exaggerations: “The land...devours those living in it”; “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” Even the connection to the Nephilim was used to engender fear:

At this point their words became exaggerations and distortions. The Anakites (who were of large size were now said to be Nephilim, the race of giants described briefly in the mysterious context of the cohabitation of the sons of God and the daughters of man (Gen. 6:4). The use of the term Nephilim seems to be deliberately provocative of fear, a term not unlike the concept of the bogeymen and hobgoblins (Allen, 1990, p. 812).

Fear reigned and faith faded for the people of the Israel:

No one talked about God's grace. None recited his miracles. Forgotten was the act of God where the most powerful nation of their world was stymied at the rushing waters back to their beds. The thunder of Sinai, the fire of God, that he had spoken and delivered and graced his people beyond imagination—all these things were forgotten in their paroxysm of fear. Fear unchecked becomes its own fuel, a self-propelling force that expands as it expends (p. 813).

The inner thought of those who magnify or minimize circumstances is “I can't handle it. This is too much for me” (Chisholm, 2002, p. 108). Tan & Ortberg (2004) give a contemporary example of magnification: “I yelled at my children. I'm a terrible parent; my kids will need to be in therapy throughout their adult lives” (p. 89). Magnification in this case could be treated using logical disputation like: “Every parent has yelled at his/her kids from time to time, most children turn out just fine” or “You don't yell all the time: there are many times when you are calm and collected. You're a good parent.” This, however, should not be seen as a justification of poor or abusive parenting, for there are parents who need to consider the role they are playing in their children's dysfunction.

Elijah experienced the supernatural power of God on Mount Carmel; the prophets of Baal were defeated and he was vindicated as a prophet of Yahweh. After this however, Elijah was likely exhausted and allowed his thinking to be distorted. Instead of resting in God's accomplishments, he discounted the positive in favor of the negative. Elijah laments before the Lord: “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kgs. 19:10). “Discounting the positive” is very much like the cognitive

distortion of “minimization” in that the positive is minimized, overlooked, or dismissed. The reality for Elijah was that he underestimated the number of the faithful remnant. God assures Elijah: “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all those whose mouths have not kissed him” (1 Kgs 19:18). For those who suffer from this distorted way of thinking, negative supplants the positive: “You discount compliments or positive experiences by manufacturing some reason why they’re not really credible. This allows negative thinking to continue, despite positive evidence to the contrary” (Tan & Ortberg, 2004, pp. 88-89). For example, someone might have done a great job and was complimented for it. Instead of taking the compliment, the person diminishes his/her performance as “not good enough” or “I could have done better.” Empirical questioning might focus on testing the hypothesis that it was not good enough or incomplete. By surveying the ideas of other fellow workers, the person may get a better idea of the extent of his/her contribution. It is very much like saying that the cup is almost empty when in fact it is half full. We need to accustom our eyes to seeing the positive and our role in its accomplishment.

Another distorted way of thinking involves “mind reading.” After the defeat of Goliath and the Philistines, the Israelite women sang a song of praise to the returning warriors: “As they danced, they sang: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’” (1 Sam. 18:7). The narrative continues with Saul’s negative assessment of the situation: “Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. ‘They have credited David with tens of thousands,’ he thought, ‘but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?’” (1 Sam. 18:8). When Saul heard the song that the Israel women were singing about David and his battle statistics, he assumed that he knew what David

was thinking and planning. In some ways, Saul discounted the positive as well; he should have celebrated David's accomplishments as his own. Saul's insecurity and paranoid thoughts kept him from enjoying the success of one of his military leaders. It is interesting that the spies were mind reading as well when they assumed that they looked like grasshoppers to the Canaanites. This happens today as well. Sometimes it is only a look or facial expression, and we go away thinking that the person was disposed in a way that may not accurately reflect his/her true intentions. Again examining the evidence may be the best way to counteract this distorted thinking.

All-or-nothing thinking can create grief for the person who engages in this cognitive distortion. Sometimes called "black-and-white, polarized, or dichotomous thinking"; the person views a situation in only two extremes instead of on a continuum (Beck, 1995). This kind of thinking is evident in the reaction of James and John to the cold reception they received in Samaria:

And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village (Luke 9:52-55).

For these disciples the decision was black and white; they judged the town and found it guilty and worthy of destruction. Sometimes we use this kind of thinking in our self-assessments. For example: "My sermons are not powerful or effective enough to draw huge crowds to my church. I'm a failure as a preacher and should probably look for some other line of ministry" (Tan & Ortberg, 2004, p. 88). Either the situation is perfect,

or it is seen as a failure. Not everything is black-and-white, and it is a sign of psychological health when we begin to recognize shades of gray.

Part of the motivation for using biblical examples of cognitive distortions is because evangelicals characteristically value the scriptures and for many these stories are known and appreciated. Another reason for using biblical material is rooted in the belief that there is spiritual benefit in reading and meditating on the scriptures. Evangelicals see Bible study and meditation as a source of God's blessing and a means of his grace.

Empirical research on Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

Support for biblically informed CBT comes from a number of different sources. Tan (2007a) reports firsthand how spiritually oriented CBT has been useful and effective in treating clients with a number of mental and emotional problems:

I have used a biblical Christian approach to CBT with mainly adult Christian clients...with the following types of problems: phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorders, stress, burnout, anger control problems, marital and family problems, adjustment disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, epilepsy, pain, hypertension, and religious conflicts and issues (p. 103).

Hawkins, Tan & Turk (1999) describe the main characteristics of Christian therapies that have been developed within the CBT framework:

(a) reliance on Scripture as the primary truth (and not on self-evident truths as in traditional CBT); (b) challenging some of the core assumptions and goals of CBT that emphasize the need for self-efficacy through self-fulfillment (not wholeness through God); (c) explicitly acknowledging the importance of other factors

(historical, social, theological, and familial) that are important in a Christian context (p. 311).

Hawkins et al. (1999) are also supported by a number of empirical studies that conclude that religiously oriented CBT is effective in treating depression among Christian clients. Some argue that biblically informed CBT or CBT using biblical imagery is more effective than standard CBT in treating depressed Christian clients. Propst (1980, 1985) and Propst, Ostrom, Watkins, Dean, & Mashburn (1992) found that Christian clients responded better to CBT adapted to their Christian belief system than did Christians who were treated with standard CBT:

Results of this investigation provide cautious support for the increased efficacy of CBT adapted to the beliefs of a religious subpopulation. Both traditional statistical analyses and an evaluation of the clinical significance of these results at posttreatment indicate that religious individuals receiving a religious cognitive therapy (RCT) reported more reduction in depression, as measured by the BDI and HRSD, and greater improvement in social adjustment and general symptomology, as measured by the SAS and GSI, than did patients in the standard CBT (Propst, Ostrom, Watkins, Dean, & Mashburn, 1992, p. 101).

Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage (1996) describe the study by Propst et al. (1992) as a “state-of-the-art outcome study” (p. 477).

However, studies by Johnson (1990), Pecher & Edwards (1984), and Johnson, Devries, Ridley, Pettorini & Peterson (1994) have found no statistically significant evidence to suggest that there is added therapeutic value in religiously based CBT in treating depressed Christians. This is not to say that biblically informed CBT was not

effective; on the contrary, both standard CBT and religious modified CBT were effective in treating depressed Christians. The subjects in these studies experienced significant decrease in their depressive symptomology as evidenced by self report and other clinical tests. Pechaur & Edwards (1984) underscore the significance of these findings for the intersection of faith and science in treating psychotherapeutic disorders like depression:

The findings of the present study also demonstrated that Beck's et al. (1979) cognitive therapy can be adapted to and integrated with the religious belief system of Christians without impairing the therapeutic value of the intervention. This finding has important implications for it attests to the compatibility between Cognitive Theory and Therapy and Christian Theology...and refutes the position of those clinicians (e.g., Ellis, 1970, 1980) who maintain that psychology is antithetical to Christianity—a position predicated on the general assumption that a sincere adherence to religious beliefs engenders emotional disturbance (p. 52).

Hodge (2006) argues that based on the APA guidelines for the selection of empirically supported interventions, CBT and biblically informed CBT are both “well-established” interventions for the treatment of depression among Christians. While it remains uncertain whether biblically informed CBT is superior to standard CBT in treating depressed Christians, there is little doubt that biblically informed CBT is a therapeutic treatment with solid empirical support.

These studies on spiritually oriented CBT and the treatment of depressed Christians are significant and worthy of consideration. As we have seen above, evangelical Christians form a sizable portion of the North American population and their presence in the counseling room should be anticipated. Furthermore, depression is

considered by many as one of the most common mental health conditions and its occurrence appears to be increasing (Hodge, 2006). For evangelicals, the interest in spirituality and integration of biblical principles and imagery should be seen as a sign that the discipline of psychotherapy is becoming more attuned to the distinct needs, values, and treatment of Christians.

The preceding chapters have focused on therapies that evangelical Christians have found agreeable and consistent with their belief system. The following chapter moves into an area where one might not expect to find agreement, but the inquiry presented shows that there are dividends for the evangelical client in the therapies that have arisen out of the post-modernist movement.

4. SCRIPTURE AND POST-MODERN THERAPIES

For many evangelicals the differences between classical theology and the post-modernist movement are insurmountable. The evangelical starts with God's special revelation in the Scriptures. The understanding is that God is revealed in the canon of scripture, and this revelation is not opaque or unintelligible. The basic message of salvation through the atonement of Jesus Christ is plainly laid out, and people are accountable for their acceptance or rejection of this message. With hard work and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to understand the author's intention in the text. This is not to say that all passages are equally transparent, but in general the evangelical holds that God superintended the inspiration of the Scriptures in a way that people would understand.

If truth is objective and universal for the evangelical, the same is not true for the post-modernist. We can never know what the author intended because we do not know

what meaning the author brought to the text. For the post-modernist, “[m]isreading is not a problem to be solved, just a fact to be lived with” (de Shazer, 1991, p. 51). It appears that at this juncture evangelicals and post-modernists are most divided. However, there are some places where evangelicals have been influenced by post-modernism. There is probably a greater tentativeness about what different passages mean thanks to post-modernism. We are not living in the first century; we are culturally and philosophically removed from the apostolic church. This should temper our dogmatism in interpretation. In some passages of scripture we simply do not have sufficient context to argue one way as opposed to another. This hesitation is a good thing because scripture makes it clear that our knowledge is partial: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Post-modern therapies are rooted in post-modern philosophy, and evangelicals may feel the tension here. There are, however, other emphases that post-modern therapies stress and techniques used which are congruent with the evangelical faith and can be helpful in treating the evangelical client. In particular, we will examine how scripture can be incorporated in a beneficial way with some aspects of post-modern therapies like narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy. In the end, the therapeutic endeavor may not look like post-modern therapy but we still acknowledge our debt to post-modern thinkers like Steve de Shazer, Michael White, and David Epston for their contribution to our pursuit.

Incorporating spirituality in the post-modern context

While some of early psychotherapy was indifferent to religion and at times hostile, post-modern thinking has opened the door to spiritual and religious concerns.

The client's worldview and beliefs about the problem are of central importance to the post-modernist therapist. This "informal content" referring to the client's "idiosyncratic assumptions about problem causation" is highly significant in solution-focused therapy:

Virtually any (informal) content...including any idea, philosophy, or theme, can be used or introduced within solution-focused counseling in an effort to frame a problem and its potential solution. So long as the informal content fits with the client's worldview, then it is assumed that such content can be used to work toward collaborative ends during the change process. It follows that the strategic approach to eclecticism in solution-focused counseling can be effectively applied to religious and spiritual clients (Guterman & Leite, 2006, p. 42).

It is a task of the first order for therapists to understand the personal beliefs and values of their clients because this sheds light on how the client frames and understands the problem. This is no less true with evangelical clients. Guterman & Leite (2006) relate how one particular client incorporated principles from the best-selling Christian book: *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Warren, 2002) into her therapy as something consistent with her beliefs. Therapy was organized around helping the client identify times when she was able to use the book's insights in her own life. The same is true of using the Bible with evangelicals. The scriptures can be fertile ground for working with evangelical clients in conceptualizing the problem and exceptions to it.

Social constructivism encourages hearing from a multiplicity of different voices. For religious clients, spirituality is one such voice. The spiritual experiences of many clients have been marginalized. Blanton (2003) is correct in asserting that "clients can be fully cared for only if the therapist attends to their complete stories" (p. 48). In holistic

therapy these marginalized stories need to be given legitimacy and space. Belief in God and fidelity to the scriptures are not pathological but are the threads which for the evangelical hold the garment together. For biblically fluent evangelicals, the text of scripture and the text of their lives become woven together.

In narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy, hearing from God through the pages of Scripture has benefits. To unite with the saints of old and new and to connect with the God of the Bible is to build an audience for change. These voices become an audience of support and encouragement in the continuing story of success. Listening to the word of God also helps to put the therapeutic relationship in perspective: "Including the voice of God allows the Spirit to be the true agent of change and permits the therapist to recede into the background" (Blanton, 2005, p. 76). When both parties are Christian, a focus on the scriptures allows both to be addressed by the same word of the Lord (Capps, 1981).

This emphasis on relationship, especially the client's relationship to God, is consistent with the social constructivist approach which views the "self as being inherently relational, non-autonomous, and non-individualistic" (Carlson & Erickson, 2000, p. 70). The construction of reality is at its core a relational enterprise where stories are co-authored in relationships with others. The "relational identity story" is bound up with those significant relationships including the client's relationship with God:

[I]t is our belief that the relationships that are the most significant in a person's life will carry the most meaning or have the most power in constructing a dominant identity story. When working with religious and/or spiritually

committed persons, it is important to consider the importance of their relationship with God (p. 73).

It is important to ask “Are there any relationships where the problem has less of a foothold?” (p. 69). Problems can isolate a person from his/her significant relationships with others. In the case of the evangelical, this alienation can result in impoverished stories about his/her relationship with God (Carlson & Erickson, 2000). In post-modern therapies, there is an emphasis on the transforming influence of conversations, especially those ‘other’ voices that the problem seems to be drowning out (Blanton, 2003).

Exceptions in the realm of spirituality

For post-modern psychotherapies, special attention is focused on developing unique outcomes or exceptions which contrast with the problem or complaint. For both the narrative therapist and solution-focused therapist, these exceptions have the potential of leading to a solution. Special attention is devoted to the generation of alternate stories which fall outside of the dominate problem saturated story. These can lead to the “re-authoring” of new stories of hope where the problem is not central (White & Epston, 1990).

For the Christian client, it is important for the therapist to understand that God is already at work in his/her life creating solutions. The client and therapist should look to see what God is already doing in the client’s life and promote those things that are working. The Bible contains many examples of solutions that God was and is working out according to his plan and purpose (Rom 8:28). In this way, the counselee, the therapist, and God are co-creating solutions as the client is being transformed into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) (Kollar, 1997).

God is in the process of making all things new (Rev. 21:5). In the end, God will create new heavens and a new earth (Is. 65:17). Already now God has given the Christian a new identity in Christ. God is doing a new thing in their lives (Is. 43:18-19), he has put a new song in their mouths (Ps. 40:3). Christians are members of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31). Christians have been given a new spirit and a new heart (Ezek. 11:19). It is through new birth (1 Pet. 1:3) that Christians have been given new hope (Kollar, 1997). As counselors we need to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit already in progress: “Each person has his own path, or track, by which the Spirit is leading him” (Kollar, 1997, p. 58). The Holy Spirit and the client are “co-creating a future in which the problem does not dominate” (p. 82).

In envisioning life without the problem, it is helpful to take notice of “grace-events” in our lives—places where God is at work. Kollar (1997) gives a partly fictional example of the “grace-events” in the life of the patriarch, David. When David faced wild animals in caring for his father’s sheep, he was being formed by God for God’s unique purpose. If David’s counselor had focused on David’s fear in facing Goliath without noting the exceptions that God put in his path, David might have been paralyzed by fear. Instead, the counselor may have focused on those times when fear did not have the last word. In this way, the counselor could help to transfer emphasis from the problem to the exception. God had already given evidences of his transforming work in David’s life. The solution-focused counselor might have asked how fighting Goliath is so different from the other problems that David faced. David was the expert in his own life; the counselor could have affirmed the exceptions to the problem that God was using in David’s spiritual formation.

For some, the problem saturated story seems to have no exceptions. In cases like this where the evangelical cannot see his/her way out of the tunnel, the counselor might look to the Bible for solutions that have worked for others. Many clients can identify with biblical characters: “Some feel perpetually homeless in the world, like Abraham. Others always seem to disappoint their Lord at the most inopportune times, like Peter. Still others are inwardly divided between the composed Mary and the responsible Martha” (Capps, 1981, p. 44). These stories can jog the client’s memory to consider past exceptions or introduce something new that he/she had not considered before (Bischof & Helmeke, 2006).

There are many narratives of hope that find their initial source in the scriptures. Guyette (2003) discusses a few of these. Ruth is an example of someone who had a strong commitment to family. Even after losing her husband, enduring famine, and migrating to another land, she remains resilient and dedicated to her new family: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). The Song of Songs expresses a lover’s heart with examples of love, tenderness, and passion. In the last chapter of Proverbs, there is a tribute to the tireless efforts of a wife and mother who cares for her household: “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all” (Prov. 31:29). For many, these kind words of affirmation, respect and gratitude can be the start of new stories where there is love and appreciation. Couples and families benefit from the guiding principle: “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) and “do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Eph. 4:26). For those who struggle with a venomous tongue, the Bible teaches instead: “A gentle answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1).

There are numerous other exception building passages in the scriptures. We will mention a few more. Jesus gives an example to men regarding grieving when he wept for his friend, Lazarus. Mary and Martha do not cope with their brother's death alone, they send for Jesus. Both sisters express their faith and perhaps also their disappointment: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 11:32). Jesus can also teach us the importance of spending time together and with God. In the midst of ministering to others, Jesus says to his disciples: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). Jesus himself spent time praying and communing with his father in heaven. Hebrews 10:25 can be a corrective to those who isolate themselves in their problems: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Association with other believers can be an important way in which the biblical message can be presented anew. We need exceptions to our routine ways of reading scripture. For the client struggling with a specific issue, he/she may tend to read the Bible in the same way, gravitating to those passages that seem to be adding confirmation to an existing mindset. Sometimes it takes listening to someone else who might have a different perspective from the same scriptures maybe even an understanding of a passage that the client might not have seen before. These can be epiphanies—radical moments of exception. Ideas that are in the text which did not stand out before may require someone else to bring them to light. The Holy Spirit can use the seeds that others sow in producing a harvest of peace and righteousness. It is a "grace event" when God interjects his story of love and acceptance into our self-stories of hurt and misery.

Often the problem overshadows the sub-plot of God “working all things together for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). The dominant story is so enmeshed with the problem that it does not allow the client to see the blessings that God has given along the way. This is not to trivialize the seriousness of the problem for those who suffer most acutely. There is very little comfort in the words: “Well, some people have it even worse than you.” Yet, we strive to fan into flame those sparks of hope and subversion when the problem does not have the final say. The scriptures can be a helpful resource in generating a preferred identity subplot (Blanton, 2005).

When the client is unable to give meaning to those stories of God’s blessing, the problem often recruits blame and self-hatred in its service. The client sees everything as confirmation that he/she is to blame for the problem or that God does not love him/her. The voice of scripture can be the corrective to the resounding noise of the problem. Carlson & Erickson (2000) encourage the use of “re-membering” questions about the exceptions that God and the client are co-creating:

Re-membering is about helping persons find membership, or experience a return to membership with the significant relationships of their lives. These significant members can be people past or present, alive or deceased, relatives or friends, real or imagined, personally known or not, human or non-human, etc (p. 78).

The scriptures can be instrumental in “re-membering” God in joining the relational identity story that God is authoring with his children. Often the writers of scripture remind us of the great accomplishments of God both in their lives and in the lives of others. In recollecting the acts of God in scripture, the client may find common elements with his/her own life, times when the problem was subverted where God was at work in

the unstoried parts of his/her life. The Bible joins the saints of old with the saints of the present and future together as the ones who will be receiving a kingdom where God in Christ has dealt decisively with the problem.

Experiential use of scripture

Not all hearing of scripture has to be cognitive; it is possible to experience the message of the scriptures in a fuller experiential way (Hart, 2001). This is the beauty of story-telling. We could have all of the scriptures as a systematic theology where truths are laid out in an orderly and logical way but “stories have a way of changing us in ways that bare conclusions rarely do”:

A good story evokes feelings and images, textures, and colors that connect us to the story’s subject and message. You may know that infidelity is destructive, but listen to the story of a victim of an affair and you not only know but feel the devastation (Monroe, 2004, p. 13).

Stover & Stover (1994) add to this by explaining that “stories...engage both the conscious and the unconscious, foster independence, bypass natural resistance to change, model flexibility, explain the behavior of others, teach with humor, and make ideas more memorable” (p. 29). Narrative therapy shares this love of story telling with the tradition of spiritual direction. The Bible has many stories that stay in our memories not solely because of the truth they convey but because of the affective experience that they conjure in us. Listen to the way the storyteller, Nathan the prophet, drives home David’s treachery in the Bathsheba affair:

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, ‘There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large

number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.’ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.’ Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’ (2 Sam. 12:1-7).

Nathan could have accused David of adultery and murder but the story told conveyed its message in a way that bald accusation could not. The narratives of scripture can also be used with evangelical clients to create alternate stories of success.

Lectio divina and the experience of scripture

The post-modern emphasis on the whole person is very much a part of the practice of *lectio divina*. Peace (1998) notes the common thread in post-modern thinking and contemplative Bible reading: “there is a growing desire to know the Bible in more than just a cognitive way” (p. 12). It is important not only to grow in our knowledge of God but also to have a living encounter with him. *Lectio divina* is “a style of prayer that flows directly from Scripture and opens up new ways of hearing God” (p. 7). For 1,500 years, *lectio divina* has been used by monks to creatively engage the God of the scriptures:

During the time set aside for personal reading, prayer, and reflection, a monk would go to a private place and begin to repeat aloud a passage from Scripture. Often this was taken from the Psalms or Gospels. The monk spoke the passage out loud until he was struck by a particular word or phrase. Then he would stop and ponder this word or phrase, understanding it to be a word from God for him. This meditation...led naturally into prayer as the monk offered back to God what he heard. As he moved deeper and deeper into prayer he would come to the place where he rested in the presence of God. Such a state of contemplation was actively sought (Peace, 1998, p. 11).

Some today refer to engaging the whole person in the experience of scripture as “soaking” in the word of God:

This process is...where we listen to Scripture deeply with the ears of our hearts. We are like Elijah, listening for the still, small voice of God, the faint murmuring sound that is God’s Word for us, the voice of the Holy Spirit touching our hearts. This gentle listening is an attunement to the presence of God in Scripture. Once a word or a passage in the Bible speaks to us in a personal way, we can take it and begin to ponder it in our hearts, soaking ourselves in the passage. We can ask, ‘What is happening here? What are the sounds, smells, feelings? Why is God focusing me on this verse or idea? What does he want me to understand? Why do I need this word from God? How do I respond? Is there an example for me to follow, a sin to avoid, a command to obey, a promise to claim? (Tan & Gregg, 1997, pp. 86-87).

Through the creative work of the Holy Spirit “we take time to meet Jesus in each passage, to have lunch with him to address him and to be addressed by him, to touch the hem of his garment” (p. 87). Perhaps this is in part what Paul means when he exhorts: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16).

Meditation is an important part of *lectio divina* and has been used therapeutically in helping clients: “meditation can empty the mind of ‘noise,’ ease suffering, and rid the body of tension and pain. Becoming mindful in still and focused concentration can lead to more deliberate action as Being infuses Doing” (Walsh, 1999, p. 43). Meditation on scripture is a way of *sowing* the mind: “Meditation or the reading of scripture is simply for the implanting of ideas as one might plant seeds to let them grow with reference to any particular problem” (Malony, 1985, p. 120). The psalmist says in Ps. 119:11: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” It is in times of need that these scriptural affirmations can find themselves back in our consciousness. Evangelical clients who are looking for greater peace and contentment might wish to commit to memory short phrases from scripture relevant to their situations. Some of these affirmations could include: “He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121:4); “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want” (Ps. 23:1); “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me” (John 14:1); “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). When committed to memory, these scriptural affirmations can bring hope and encouragement and serve as a “powerful antidote to the ravages of life experience over which one [does] not seem to have control” (Malony, 1985, p. 121).

In meditating on scripture, it can be helpful to concentrate on a word or phrase and how it contributes to the meaning of the whole thought. Sori & McKinney (2006) use this in therapy as a response to self-defeating thoughts. A client named Liz was struggling with self-defeating thoughts like: “I am weak; I am going to fail” and in response she meditated on Php. 4:13 each time emphasizing different words and phrases:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

I can do *all things* through Christ who strengthens me.

I can do all things *through Christ* who strengthens me.

I can do all things through Christ *who strengthens me* (emphasis added).

When Liz meditated on this short passage from Philippians she found different meanings and significance for her life according to the words that were emphasized. These kinds of exercises are useful in creating themes in our self-narratives, places where the problem no longer has the last word.

Some might argue that this is a subjective way to read scripture. Certainly in all of this there is no excuse for bad exegesis: we must first attempt to understand what the passage meant to its original readers before applying it in our context. But objective reading of scripture also has its dangers:

Too much Bible study these days has been reduced to a mere academic exercise in which hypotheses are weighed and tested, various interpretations are discussed, and in the end people know a lot more about a passage, but it makes little difference in how they live. The choice ought not to be between dry

scholasticism and irresponsible subjectivism. We need both approaches to Scripture. We need analysis and application (Peace, 1998, p. 18).

Meditation that varies emphasis actually does justice to the text in that it seeks to understand each and every grammatical component of meaning. This kind of meditation on scripture actually avoids the mistakes that a cursory reading of scripture can result in. Inevitably when we read scripture we privilege certain ideas and thoughts. A repetitious reading of scripture allows the passage to soak in and allows us to entertain readings we might overlook when reading in the same habitual way.

Tan & Gregg (1997) call the process of *lectio divina* “living into scripture.” They outline a useful pattern to follow in this method of meditation and contemplation on scripture:

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit to speak to you and guide you as you read a passage of Scripture.
2. Read through the passage you are meditating on several times, listening for the still, small voice of God and waiting upon the leading of the Spirit.
3. Ponder the verse or two that grabs your attention or touches you in some way. Picture what is happening as though you are behind the lens of a camera looking at the scene, for example, Jesus’ feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. See the little boy give his lunch to Jesus. Picture and hear Jesus’ conversation with the disciples.
4. Come out from behind the camera and put yourself in the picture—in Jesus’ shoes, or in the shoes of the disciples or the people gathered around. Ask questions. What is Jesus thinking? Why is he acting this way? Allow a

dialogue to unfold inside of you; let your imagination and senses be instruments for revelation from the Holy Spirit.

5. Be open to the ways God may want to speak to you directly through his Word: through a personal encounter, as you stand alongside one of the disciples; as you ask questions; perhaps as Jesus comes directly to you in the scene in which you have entered.
6. Write down what you have heard from God or what you have learned through your meditation on his Word.
7. Take time to share what God has said to you with an accountability partner or wise friend. This provides protection by checking what comes from your time of meditation, helps to reinforce God's Word to you, and encourages and blesses others in their journey of faith (p. 88).

At certain points, music might be included as a way of expressing thoughts and feelings that have emerged from the time of contemplation. *Lectio divina* invites the use of various methods and senses—we need to be open to how our mind, heart, and body connect to this living encounter with God. In being passive, we open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we meditate on his word. In *lectio divina* the greatest latitude should be extended to each as they uniquely experience the “living word.”

Lectio divina can be integrated with narrative therapy in a number of steps.

Blanton (2003) gives a few to follow: (1) *Explain the strategy*: The therapist describes and answers any questions about the use of *lectio divina* in therapy. The therapist also explains how *lectio divina* prepares the person to hear from God cognitively and experientially and to discover new possibilities and unique outcomes for the client's life.

(2) *Clients implement the lectio divina method*: Clients are encouraged to spend at least 20 minutes at a time in meditation 3 or more times a week. During this time, clients are asked to record their thoughts, prayers, and experiences as they meditate on a word, phrase, or passage of the Bible. These reflections are discussed in the next counseling session. (3) *Listen for unique outcomes*: Both the therapist and the client are watchful for experiences, thoughts, insights that fall outside of the dominant story. These observations can be storied into new stories. (4) *Plot the story*: At this stage the therapist asks for more details as the budding story begins to develop. Some questions might include: “What was happening inside as you prepared for meditation on scripture?” or “Is there a word, phrase, idea that stood out for you?” “What impressions did you have as you meditated on that word, phrase, or idea?” (5) *Expand the story into the future*: At this point the therapist widens the story asking how these thoughts might impact those around the client. “What might others notice that has changed in you?” or “Do you think this might have an impact on your significant relationships to your spouse, family, and friends?” or “What are you planning to meditate on next week?” or “What does this teach you about your relationship with God?” or “What does this tell you about yourself and your ability to deal with problems?” (6) *Reflection by others*: If it is couple or group therapy, the other(s) can describe what they felt as the client was sharing. The therapist should also express any ideas that he/she might have had during the sessions together. “As you were talking I was impressed by a thought which with your permission I’d like to share with you.” This is the point at which we are creating an audience for change.

5. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It would be helpful to engage in qualitative research of evangelicals who have experienced the integration of scripture in therapy. What was helpful, what was unhelpful? How can this be used to further our understanding of when using scripture is indicated or contraindicated? Is there an age or quantifiable indicators that a client is mature enough to benefit from the integration of the Bible with psychotherapy? The use of the Bible in cognitive behavioral therapy is empirically supported by various outcome studies. Some have noted that the sample sizes should be increased in size—this could be addressed in future studies. Empirical research is needed to determine the efficacy of using *lectio divina* with narrative therapy. Some study could be directed at determining if post-modern therapy is still post-modern when married to a structuralist view of the Bible, and whether this even matters.

CONCLUSION

Evangelicals form a significant portion of the population of North America with their own faith distinctives. As therapists provide a safe and sensitive environment for people of faith, we should not be surprised to find more evangelicals seeking counseling. Evangelicals place special confidence in the Bible as a source of comfort and authority; this resource should not be overlooked in psychotherapy. Those clients who desire the use of scriptures in their therapy should expect the highest standards of care. Thus the scriptures should never be used in a manipulative or threatening manner nor should they be used flippantly or with condescension. The counselor who uses scripture should give close attention to good exegetical method in his/her integrated therapy in a way that honors the context of the ancient writer and of the present day counselee.

Through the scriptures, the client can discover what is healthy both spiritually and emotionally. Clients can express and explore their feelings as they relate to a specific passage or person in the scriptures. For example, the psalms of lament draw the reader into their world and provide words for deep catharsis of grief and emotion and point the reader heavenward with words of comfort and peace. As such, the Bible can supply the client with a “vocabulary of need” and offers a formfulness to grief. Readers, both ancient and modern, have cried out in their pain and found refuge in the same God who saves. When the evangelical client has intrusive or destructive thoughts, the scriptures provide powerful images and responses for thought stopping and cognitive disputation. As clients open themselves to the possibilities that the Holy Spirit has for them they will find tributaries of his grace and love opening up new possibilities where the problem does not have the final say. For evangelicals, the scriptures are the word of God and when clients express a desire to integrate the scriptures with therapy there are possibilities for positive and effectual change.

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