

Considering Atonement

FROM WHAT ARE WE BEING SAVED?



MARIA FOUND HERSELF in a season of disorientation when I (Megan Anna) met her. On the roller coaster of an “in-and-out” marriage with a man who was abusive, like many survivors of intimate violence she experienced symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Underlying this, she experienced a rigid narrative about self and world, with a number of “stuck points” (cognitive beliefs that make it hard to move into a new narrative) that left her immobilized and spiraling in shame and depression.

It is common for survivors to get stuck with self-blaming beliefs (*I could have stopped it, If only I'd been better*, and so on). This is a particularly sticky stuck point, one that requires much care. On one hand, the belief that she could have done things differently provides a sense of agency and empowerment, providing a contrast to a chaotic relationship in which she lacked agency and control. In other words, these beliefs provide her a sense of being able to make choices that protect her in the future. On the other hand, when these beliefs are taken to an extreme they can lead to self-deprecation, self-blame, and shame that can be difficult to escape. For Maria, her self-blaming beliefs isolated her from her community of faith, family, and relationships that might have been healing for her. Fraught with conflict, she frequently brought in examples of how she must have caused her partner's abuse, while holding onto the hope that if *she* changed, she could return and things would be better.

Intertwined with these dynamics was a theological narrative. A devout Christian, Maria struggled with the moral implications of initiating divorce.

She spoke of her call to forgive, the importance of obedience, and the call to follow Jesus in his example of taking on suffering. Amidst tears and confusion, she looked at me searchingly and said, “But Megan Anna, aren’t I supposed to forgive?” Her narrative had little space to move, and it was taking a profound physical, psychological, social, and emotional toll.

The Power of Story

“If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story” (McAdams, 1993, p. 11). This opening line of a foundational book in narrative psychology reminds us that the stories we tell ourselves underlie our concept of who we are.

For reasons I (Megan Anna) will likely never fully unearth, when I was young I was fused to a painful narrative about who I am in the world. The narrative I told myself was that I didn’t really matter, the fact that I breathed and had life wasn’t enough to reserve my “mattering.” I needed to earn it. Through my accomplishments, being good and accommodating, and attuning to others I might somehow be able to earn my “mattering.”

When I (Mark) read these words from Megan Anna, I have two reactions. First, I feel a profound sadness for her narrative and what it must have been like through her childhood years. Even as her father, I did not fully glimpse the inner angst she carried—and likely her two sisters as well. Second, I resonate and identify with this narrative myself. I suppose it is reasonable that narratives cascade down from one generation to the next, and so my way of explaining myself in the world must have been contagious in various ways to Megan Anna throughout her childhood years. Plus, she faced some unique cultural challenges that she is about to mention.

Those who have researched the unconscious motivations of therapists would suggest that some of (perhaps many of) those reading this book may resonate with this narrative (Miller, 2008; Sussman, 2007). Of course, narrative doesn’t form in a vacuum (personal or theological). It is formed within a complex interface of interpersonal relationships, cultural and social location, community influence, and so forth. For me (Megan Anna), this narrative was compounded by my context—coming of age in the affluent and high achieving, evangelical pocket of Wheaton, Illinois, during the

purity culture movement. This narrative I told about myself intersected with a particular way of understanding God in such a way that it reinforced fears about never being enough. Throughout this chapter, I'll draw on my experience to reflect on how personal and theological stories intersect. It feels important to note I am not suggesting one causes the other, nor am I particularly interested in looking at causal links. Instead, I'm curious about how our narratives show up in a complex and intricate web, and how we respond as counselors and psychotherapists.

If our stories are integral to our views of ourselves, then understanding our clients becomes an intricate task of understanding the stories they tell about themselves alongside life circumstances. For Christians, our narratives are interwoven stories of self and the Christian gospel. And though the word *gospel* means "good news," it is curious to see how the implications can sometimes turn out to be less than fully good. The story of the Christian self is always more than an individual story—it is the story of an individual embedded in a larger story of tradition that stretches back thousands of years. How these stories intersect for good and for harm is of utter importance for the Christian psychotherapist.

A growing body of research demonstrates that religion is connected to health and well-being. It can protect against depression through difficult times by helping people make meaning of life, and can encourage altruistic and prosocial behavior, which have a positive impact on mental and physical health (Koenig, 2018; Post, 2005; Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, & Reed, 2003). But not all forms of religion are helpful. For example, those studying the psychology of religion note an important distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religion—a distinction that goes back as far as Gordon Allport in the 1960s. Those with intrinsic religious beliefs see their faith as the primary organizing principle of life, whereas those with extrinsic beliefs see religion more as a means to an end. Extrinsic religiousness in the United States has been linked with rigid thinking, prejudice, and narrow-mindedness (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018). Also, negative religious coping (also called "spiritual struggle") is associated with various risk factors for poorer mental health (Koenig, 2018). Spiritual and religious distress often includes struggles with religious and moral guilt, as well as anger toward God (Exline et al., 2014).

It is encouraging to look at how the Christian faith anchors us as therapists, provides our clients with strength, and can be profoundly experienced *within* the therapeutic relationship. It's less comfortable to think about how Christianity can be a source of distress and fuel unhelpful patterns. In the same way that religion can both contribute to well-being and to harm, Christian narratives that overlay and interweave with our stories can both be beneficial and harmful.

In this chapter we're zooming in on atonement theology. How God saves us often becomes interwoven with how we imagine God to be (God's character and attributes) and how we imagine God to perceive us.

A Word About Approaching This Chapter

This has been our most difficult chapter to write, as made painfully evident by the number of revisions it has endured. The primary challenge we encounter is getting lost in the complex and heated theological conversations about atonement that stretch over two thousand years. Continually, we have worked to pull ourselves back to the therapy room rather than get lost taking an evaluative stance toward atonement theology. Atonement theology matters; it has profound implications for how psychotherapists and Christian counselors sit with themselves and their patients. Our aim is to look at atonement narratives, how they interplay with our personal narratives, the narratives our patients bring, and how this influences the work we do. Given the heat, depth, and history of the atonement conversation, it can be hard to resist the pull of diving into an evaluative conversation about the theological content.

Salvation can be a challenging topic to discuss while holding a humble and generous space. We've worked hard to hold this space, but have done so imperfectly even after multiple revisions. Surely you'll notice our leanings, informed by our personal stories and how they've intersected with theological narratives. To try to pretend that we do not have biases would be disingenuous and potentially harmful. While we find strengths in all the views, we lean toward a nonviolent view of the atonement. Still, we try to treat other views with generosity, and ask for grace where we have failed to do so.

Given our challenge in writing this chapter, we have thought carefully about its title. "Considering Atonement" contains two words—one a verb, and one a noun. We suspect that however you're engaging this chapter, as

an individual or in the context of a small group, you may notice a pull—as we have—toward entering into an evaluative conversation of atonement theories. This is approaching atonement as noun (a theory to be analyzed, evaluated, and understood). In contrast, what we attempt here is to focus more on the verb. *Considering* atonement moves us toward the stories our patients tell themselves and an opportunity to enter into meaningful places of conversation and transformation. We are not aiming to articulate the ultimate atonement theory that solves the two-thousand-year mystery, but are more interested in how atonement moves in our cultures and our lives. How has it moved across the two-thousand-year history of Christianity? How does it move in the life of the therapist, and the life of the patient? To accomplish this goal, we attempt two things. First, we provide a general theological map, because discerning movement requires understanding the larger contextual landscape. Second, we highlight six implications of how atonement theory and psychotherapy interplay.

God as Disapproving Father

When I was three, I (Megan Anna) shared a room with my five-year-old sister Sarah. One night as we lay awake, she explained personal salvation and told me about the prayer that could invite Jesus into my heart, resulting in my sins being forgiven. In the darkness of our bedroom I prayed this prayer with Sarah. I went on to pray that prayer another thousand times throughout my childhood. Whenever I sinned I would quickly follow up with the salvation prayer, wanting to make sure I was *really* saved despite my continued badness. I felt immense guilt when I sinned. Part of the story I inherited about salvation was that in that critical moment on the cross Jesus took on all of the world's sins (past, present, and future), and that it was the taking on of this sin that was the greatest pain for Jesus—even more than the physical pain of crucifixion. In my mind, every time I sinned, I increased Jesus' pain and suffering. This resulted in a sort of binary relationship with God. I felt incredibly grateful for and close to Jesus the Son, but God the Father frightened me. God the Father disapprovingly gazed at me as I struggled to be good enough. Jesus was the buffer, making it so God the Father could *tolerate* being in my presence.

I was reassured knowing that “through Jesus’ blood I was made pure,” but I experienced God the Father as wrathful, disgusted by my sin, and unable to look upon me without the blood of Christ. I wanted more than just being *okay* with God. I wanted God to *like me*. This theology, intersecting with my personal narrative, fueled a “not good enough” mentality. This led to years of engaging in what Brené Brown (2010) refers to as “hustling for worth,” which she describes as the tendency to prove our worth through “performing, perfecting, pleasing, and proving” (p. 23). In my narrative, I frantically tried to prove my worth to God the Father, frustrated that no matter what I did God still seemed disgusted by my sin. This made it difficult to experience divine grace, acceptance, and connection with God the Father.

My rigid narrative about God’s saving work interwove with my personal narrative around worthiness and identity. Thankfully, my narratives became kinder and more self-compassionate once I was introduced to additional understandings of atonement, such as nonviolent models. These views helped transform how I saw myself in relation to God, providing me with hopeful movement within both my personal and theological narratives.

But here I pause to reflect on the complexity of this conversation. What I am referring to as a violent view of atonement (known as the penal substitution view, to be discussed more later in the chapter) was not helpful to me as a child or as a Christian, but an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this chapter gave us a beautiful gift by unpacking their own Christian narrative and explaining how life-giving this penal substitution view had been, especially during the reviewer’s early years of faith.

Perhaps the penal substitution view settled poorly with me because of my near obsession with sin and salvation. Though I may be a bit unique in this, it turns out I am in good company. Throughout his life, Martin Luther struggled with questions of sinfulness and salvation. Luther’s early life included struggle and pain. He was treated harshly by his parents and struggled with depression and anxiety throughout his life (notice the context that gave rise to a self-deprecating personal narrative). Stuck in the middle of a ferocious thunderstorm, Luther—terrified by death and the possibility of damnation—vowed to become a monk. This existential angst around salvation and damnation continued. Luther’s overarching narrative, informed by the monastic life, was that the only way one could hope to stand before God was

through striving for perfection (Gillespie, 2008). From within this narrative, Luther constantly doubted his worthiness despite his strenuous efforts for perfection. Painfully aware of his sin, he constantly fretted about his salvation in the face of a wrathful God (Gillespie, 2008). Years later, through studying and teaching Scripture, Luther's narrative began to expand. As he lectured on Romans, he began to see the meaning of the text "the just shall live by faith" anew (Rom 1:17 NKJV). Luther began to understand justification as resulting from God's faithful actions. The just live by the faithfulness and righteousness of God. Righteousness is not something actively achieved, rather, it originates in God and is freely given to those who live by faith (Gonzalez, 1985). With this profound shift in narrative he could finally put away his frantic toiling to be among the "just," which was likely Luther's own version of hustling for worth.

Moving from Rigidity to Flexibility

One can hear the freedom, expansiveness, and joy that emanates from Luther as he shifted narratives: "I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning" (Gonzalez, 1985, pp. 19-20). Luther grasped that in Jesus' life and death healing took place and we no longer live estranged from God. This truth revolutionized Luther's life, which contributed to a revolution within the church as new narratives around grace and salvation were offered by Luther and other Reformers.

Though separated by five hundred years of history, it's comforting to know that Luther and I encountered similar struggles, tied in frozen and rigid narratives. The opening lines of John Calvin's *Institutes* start with the bold claim that any wisdom we possess, "consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (Calvin, trans. 2008, p. 4). Given the intertwining nature of self-knowledge and divine knowledge, it is no surprise that particular narratives of God correspond with certain views of self. Stuck points in this blended narrative can complicate and exacerbate suffering while also interfering with our knowledge and experience of God.

Like Luther, I experienced God and self with more abundance as my narratives shifted. You'll notice we didn't land at the same destination. Luther found hope in focusing on Jesus' substitutionary act, and others later built

on this to develop the penal substitution theory (discussed below). I find hope in nonviolent models that emphasize Jesus suffering *with*.

While theological content matters, for purposes of conversation the point is not so much about correct destination as the ability for us to move within story. We realize this may sound dangerously close to a free-for-all spiral into relativism, but we are not suggesting that a shifting narrative around atonement means we discard the idea of universal religious or theological truth. As will be discussed below, a rich and varied array of atonement metaphors can be found in the New Testament. The idea of fluid narrative lives in the dialectic of anchoring into the theology of the New Testament while recognizing how the context of people's lives will make certain metaphors more accessible and meaningful than others. This is not a rebuttal of truth but rather an acknowledgment of the diversity of theology represented in the Christian tradition and an appreciation of the complexity that emerges when our social context intersects with our attempts to understand the mysterious truth of the atonement.

The context from which we seek God means that we may be drawn to different metaphors. One metaphor may speak to us in a way that allows for deep encounter with God, while others may cause encounter to be stifled.¹ One of the reasons we have confidence in highlighting the fluid narrative process for individuals is because it finds resonance in Christian history, which has involved a shifting, multidimensional, and contextually informed narrative of atonement.

The Complex and Shifting Story of Atonement

The atonement, or the process of coming to wholeness and reconciliation with God, is one of the most central concepts to the Christian tradition (Maimela, 1986).² The truth of the atonement is mysterious and poetic, inviting us into deeper relationship with God. We started this chapter by

¹For a personal example of this, see Brock and Parker's book *Proverbs of Ashes* (2001). Two female theologians draw on their personal stories of sexual and racial trauma to show how trauma intersected with a view of atonement in a way that interfered with their ability to experience God.

²We're focusing the conversation around atonement theology, but you'll notice that it's difficult to talk about atonement without also weaving in views of salvation, God image, and other topics. Therefore, what follows is a conversation that runs the risk of conflating atonement with other key theological ideas.

FINDING FLUIDITY IN SMALL STORIES AND BIG STORIES

In this chapter I've used my example of being locked in a frozen, intersecting personal and theological narrative, and how movement led me to experience freedom and deeper connection to self and God. What I haven't shared is that this experience made me vulnerable to be locked into a different form of rigidity.

Projecting my experience and trajectory onto others, I was frozen in a story about theology having good (empowering) and bad (disempowering) views. Stuck in a rigid and evaluative place, it was difficult to hold space for generosity, compassion, and genuine curiosity for others'

views. That is the thing about frozen narratives—when we are stuck it becomes difficult to engage in true conversation with the other.

It was in "taking my own medicine" that my larger story was able to thaw. As I listened to students and peers and the anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this book, I heard stories of how the penal substitution theory had provided them with profound moments of grace and encounter with God. I offer this not to be overly self-deprecating but to observe the essence and power of good conversation.

exploring the power of story, and indeed theology could be seen as an attempt to tell a story about ungraspable, infinite truth.

In telling the story of redemption, we have historically employed a multitude of metaphors. These metaphors arise at the intersection of culture and gospel, helping us to see with "wider scope and truer depth perception" (Sharp, 2010, p. 26; Gunton, 2003).³ One of the profound aspects of the Christian gospel is that it takes seriously its intersection with culture. God's desire to come close, to address new frontiers and cultures, is evident in Abraham's calling and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, culminating in the divine translation of *Logos* into human flesh (Jn 1:1). This means that truth, and our understanding of truth, is not limited to abstract and universal statements

³Gunton (2003) discusses how metaphor is much more than a technique for communicating understanding. Rather, it is a means of understanding. Metaphor and understanding exist in a dialectical process: "finding new language and discovery happen together, with metaphor serving as the vehicle of discovery. . . . We comprehend aspects of the world as we find the new words to use in our search for understanding" (p. 31). In this sense, metaphor is not simply a way of conveying truth; rather, it is a hermeneutic by which we come to understanding.

but rather comes clothed in cultural particularity, metaphors, and imagery (Sanneh, 2004). Since the beginning we've used metaphor anchored in culturally embedded imagery in our attempts to grasp the ungraspable.

Even with a wealth of metaphors for atonement theology, we will always remain limited, as British Reformed theologian Colin Gunton (2003) writes: "Metaphor claims only an indirect purchase on reality, bringing to expression some but not all aspects" of what it is attempting to grasp (p. 34). This suggests that all the atonement metaphors capture part—but only part—of the mystery of God's saving grace. Each of the metaphors grasps unique dimensions and speaks to unique contexts about the truth of atonement, and because they are all attempts to grasp infinite truth in human terms, they also all have strengths and shortcomings.

A wide array of images is used throughout the New Testament to understand God's saving work (Green, 2006). Parenthetically, we also note that God's saving work is evident in the Hebrew Scriptures, but here we will limit ourselves to the New Testament. John emphasizes the importance of the "saving work of Jesus" and gift of eternal life, the author of Hebrews focuses on access to God, Peter underscores the importance of "a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ," James highlights the "the law of liberty" (Smith, 1919, pp. 51-52). This vast collection of metaphors is not simply due to different writers, because even individual authors provide varying images. The apostle Paul, for example, uses a wide range of metaphors to talk about the saving work of Jesus, from substitution to triumph over powers to sacrifice and justification (Green, 2006).

New Testament metaphors of salvation speak to the particularity and contexts of people's lives, and can be roughly grouped into six general categories that draw from the audience's sociocultural context: forensic, commerce, personal relationship, worship, battle, and medical (Green, 2006; Reichenbach, 2006). When a metaphor looks like a court of law and deals with concepts such as guilt or innocence, a forensic metaphor is being used. The word *redemption* (literally, "buying back") suggests a commerce metaphor. Personal relationship metaphors emphasize reconciliation. At the time the New Testament was written, animal sacrifice was still part of the prevailing worship practices, so references to sacrifice draw on a worship metaphor. Battle metaphors emphasize the triumph of good over evil, and medical metaphors emphasize healing.

Theologians continued this tradition of using metaphor to understand Christ's saving work as they drew upon culturally relevant imagery to try to make sense of the atonement. This led to three dominant metaphors that have been employed throughout Christian history.⁴

Christus Victor/ransom theory. A dominant view for the first thousand years of Christianity, the Christus Victor view casts atonement through the lens of a cosmic battle where Christ conquers evil, sin, and Satan, thereby setting humans free. Sin is conceptualized as an overarching state representing our alienation from God. Christ's victory over the enslaving powers of sin, death, and the devil brings reconciliation and overcomes our state of alienation (Aulén, trans. 2003; Crisp, 2020; Maimela, 1986). In the age of the Roman Empire, early Jewish believers found solace in how this imagery draws on the familiar cosmic battle language of the Hebrew Scripture (Gunton, 2003). There were variations of this classic motif, such as the ransom theory, in which the death of Jesus served as a ransom price paid to Satan. In a time of fear of robbers who routinely interrupted trade by holding travelers ransom, this would have held meaning (Weaver, 2001; Smith, 1919). Proponents of this view included Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa (Aulén, trans. 2003; Beilby & Eddy, 2006; Green, 2006; Hardy, 1954; Smith, 1919).⁵

Moralistic theory. God's love is at the forefront of the moralistic model (Crisp, 2020). Jesus' life and obedience to death on the cross demonstrate God's sacrificial love which has the power to move people toward repentance and moral transformation. This theory is a subjective model of atonement (whereas the other two are objective) because it emphasizes the subjective experience of reflecting on God's love which leads to transformation of one's spiritual life. In contrast, objective views emphasize who and how people are in relation to God. This model is represented by Peter Abelard, Faustus Socinus, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schleiermacher (Crisp, 2020; Green, 2006; Maimela, 1986).

⁴These three motifs were outlined in Gustav Aulén's (trans. 2003) work, *Christus Victor*, and have remained a helpful typology in understanding the history of atonement theology. It is outside the scope of this chapter to cover all of the atonement theories presented throughout church history. We sketch out a few of the significant atonement metaphors that have been meaningful to the church historically. For deeper study, check out further reading at the end of the chapter.

⁵While many, such as Aulén, have put ransom theory and Christus Victor together, typologically there are some important differences. For a more nuanced conversation about how these theories overlap and or differ, see Oliver Crisp's (2020) book, *Approaching the Atonement*.

Satisfaction/penal substitution. In the twelfth century, chivalry became an important cultural concept, and atonement was cast in imagery of honor and “satisfaction.” When a person’s honor was broken, there were two options: satisfaction by offering something greater in kind to the insult, or punishment. God chose the path of satisfaction rather than punishment as demonstrated by Jesus’ obedience in his life and climaxing in his obedience to death on the cross (some proponents of this view include Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin) (Crisp, 2020; Green, 2006; Gunton, 2003; Maimela, 1986; Smith, 1919). Luther and Calvin emphasized Christ’s death within a legal and penal framework, which then evolved into the substitutionary or penal substitution theory of atonement in the following centuries (Weaver, 2001).

The penal substitution theory has remained the dominant model for the last five hundred years and remains so pervasive within American Christianity that: “many Christians may wonder whether the saving significance of Jesus’ death can be understood in any other way” (Green, 2006, p. 169). The irony is that while this model is the most popular, it also provokes the greatest amount of negative feedback. Complicating the conversation, this model is the most vulnerable to misrepresentations and misinterpretations (Schreiner, 2006).

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright (2018) suggests that penal substitution can mean vastly different things to different people, depending on the larger narrative in which it is couched:

The penal substitution theory can be expressed in very damaging ways, and even when preachers don’t intend to do this, it is quite clearly the case that this is how many people, particularly many young people, hear it. . . . So now, if that is what people have heard and are hearing then we have some serious work to do. Because we have taken John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son,” and what people have heard is that “God so hated the world that he killed his only son.” And then, when you say that in a world where there is child abuse and domestic violence, people think, I know that bully of a God and I hate him, and then the whole thing goes horribly, horribly wrong.

Wright goes on to talk about how this fails to consider the complexity of the New Testament and provides a distorted view of both this theory and God’s saving work. This nuance feels important to note, as narrative fluidity does

not simply mean moving from one metaphor to another—it can mean re-deeming and reclaiming a distorted narrative.

As the center of Christianity shifts south and east to the Majority World, and as voices from marginalized groups in the West are increasingly entering the theological conversation, concerns about the penal substitution view increase, and we're seeing a new shift in the atonement conversation. While it would be easy (and tempting) to get lost in this complex conversation, treating atonement like a noun, we attempt to keep an eye on atonement as a verb by highlighting how individuals have subjectively experienced the penal substitution theory. These experiences lead to some of the concerns as well as some of the strengths of this perspective.

Current critiques of the penal substitution model. Many of the concerns regarding the penal substitutionary model of atonement arise from feminist, womanist, black, liberation, and peace-oriented theologians. We outline five concerns here.

First, the most central criticism is that at the heart of this model is a God complicit in violence, which seems inconsistent with a loving God (Crisp, 2020). This view provides theological justification for taking a life, which sets a precedent for theological justification of violence. Critics point to the link between this model and systems of retributive justice, suggesting this theory runs the risk of perpetuating violence and alienating the poor (Brock & Parker, 2001; Cone, 1997; Maimela, 1986; Weaver, 2001; Williams, D. S., 2013; Williams, J. G., 2007).⁶ Second, with its emphasis on the individual, it risks decontextualizing and overemphasizing sin. When sin is decontextualized, it is taken out of the complex social-cultural context that contributes to human behavior. And by failing to focus on systemic and contextualized sin, the transformation of institutions is not addressed (Maimela, 1986; Stoltzfus, 2012). Third, this view emphasizes an abstract salvation, outside of history, and therefore fails to address the injustices that take place within history (Brock, 1988). An ahistorical, abstracted model of atonement runs the risk of divorcing salvation from ethics and therefore lacks resonance for the poor and oppressed as it fails to address the complexity of human suffering in the face of injustice (Maimela, 1986; Weaver,

⁶To see a review of this criticism as well as a response, see the chapter "The Problem of Atoning Violence" in Oliver Crisp's *Approaching the Atonement* (2020).

2001). Fourth, it emphasizes a punishing and remote God, characterized by wrath and judgment (Brock & Parker, 2001; Maimela, 1986; Stoltzfus, 2012). Fifth, it appears antitrinitarian in that God the Father appears to be functioning differently than God the Son: God is the Judge demanding justice, and Christ is the Savior satisfying God's legal demand (Johnson, 2005; Weaver, 2001).

We offer these concerns as they may be helpful considerations when working with clients who are struggling with a "stuck" theological narrative. Recall Maria introduced at the beginning of this chapter. In addition to her current relationship, Maria, a Latina, experienced social and cultural oppression and marginalization. Given the concerns raised above, we can see how her theological narrative intersected with her personal narrative in a way that was disempowering and placed her at greater risk (both actual risk and the harm that comes with internal shame).

Maria and I made little progress with cognitive processing therapy for trauma. Any attempts to crack, question, or shift her story by entertaining alternative thoughts led to a rebound effect where she would reinforce her core beliefs with Bible verses about her "bad" behavior or need to forgive and return to her partner. My job was not to correct her theology. But still, understanding her concept of God, salvation, sin, and violence were integral for having a full conceptualization of Maria. My awareness of concerns arising from liberation and womanist theology about the penal substitution view, as well as my own journey of making sense of atonement, helped me more deeply understand the complexity of her personal and theological narratives. My treatment plan shifted from a cognitive processing model toward a relational and interpersonal approach. We could not adjust her narrative at the cognitive level, but perhaps we could touch these themes on an experiential level—and perhaps a new relational experience would provide her narrative with wiggle room.

Strengths of the penal substitution model. When we used the first draft of this chapter in an introductory integration class, the conversation felt a bit off. I (Megan Anna) was expecting students to experience some of the liberation I did when I learned there were multiple ways of looking at atonement. I (Mark) came prepared with some brilliant metaphors and illustrations for the penal substitution view of atonement, and for how limiting these views can seem. Well, at least I thought they were brilliant. The students didn't seem quite as compelled as I expected.

It occurred to us as we were debriefing from the classroom conversation that we were not connecting with students, and the quality of the conversations felt off. We think this is because we offered a polarized view and our students were either not connecting to our perspectives or feeling somewhat defensive of a view they had come to hold as central to Christian thought. Some students spoke of how this metaphor had given them a glimpse of God's grace carrying them in difficult times. Just as this metaphor has potential to cause problems, it can also lead to deeper encounters with God, self, and others. Here are five ways this may happen.

First, Jesus' atoning death leads to an awareness of the radical forgiveness of God as represented in Jesus' obedience and willingness to take our place in suffering and death. Stepping out in vulnerability, God takes on the risk, suffering the breach for us (Sanders, 2007). Second, reflection on God's risky and radical forgiveness can lead to greater self-acceptance and help one be more forgiving to others (Brock, 1988). Third, the penal substitution metaphor takes the problem of human sin seriously (Schreiner, 2006). It causes us to recognize the harm we've done, a necessary condition for healing broken relationships (Sanders, 2007). Relatedly, emphasizing our need for salvation can foster relational humility. Fourth, the justice of God is emphasized, protecting us from the risk of overemphasizing love at the cost of underemphasizing righteousness and justice. Both are integral to a covenantal relationship with God. Fifth, both God's holiness and love meet at the cross (Schreiner, 2006).

Our point is not to determine the rightness or wrongness of this view, but rather to look at how it shows up in our lives and the lives of our patients. As is true of narratives, our understandings and explanations sometimes move over time. When we are stuck in one metaphor, we risk limiting our access to and understanding of the infinite truth and our ability to experience God fully and truthfully. Conversely, we experience vitality and flexibility when we embrace the level of movement modeled for us in the New Testament.

Reflections on the Atonement Conversation

Hot topic conversations in Christianity are places where it's easy to miss one another. In reflecting on atonement narratives, we've noticed how the conversations are framed quite differently, fueling the tendency to talk past one another. For example, those critical of the penal substitution theory of

atonement tend to rest their eyes on God the Father and use language of “wrath,” “transaction,” “appease,” and “child abuse” (Brock & Parker, 2001; Weaver, 2001). Those more favorable to this model tend to focus their eyes on the Jesus who sacrificially and lovingly steps in to take a punishment deserved for us (Crisp, 2020). One way of framing the conversation leads to God doing something *to* Jesus; another way of framing the conversation emphasizes Jesus’ agency and choice to do something *for* us in forgiveness and sacrificial love (Crisp, 2020; Green, 2006; Sanders, 2007).

It’s difficult to have searching conversations across differences when we frame the conversation narrowly and rigidly. A difficult but important task is to also frame the narrative from “the other side” with generosity. When we engage a conversational approach, the language we employ to frame our narrative and the other’s narrative becomes critically important.

A classroom or small-group activity that is helpful for increasing capacity in perspective taking and fostering hospitality is known as the “five-minute rule.” For five minutes you are invited to take on an unpopular or differing perspective than what you would naturally hold while entertaining it with hospitality and generosity. As a classroom or individual, do the following: If you are a critic of the penal substitution theory, spend five minutes considering some of the benefits and merits of this view. If you find yourself a proponent of this view, take five minutes and consider some of the critical reflections we have offered. As you take on a new perspective for five minutes, ponder these questions.

1. In what sense and in which contexts may this view be helpful?
2. How does this view expand your understanding of God?
3. How might this view help you see your patients with more complexity or more compassion?

Having outlined the classic atonement metaphors, we briefly offer two newer views of the atonement that have arisen from the rubble of many historical debates.

Kaleidoscopic view. A kaleidoscopic approach acknowledges the limitation of any one metaphor for engaging the important task of proclaiming

the meaning of Jesus' life and death, and encourages us to "drink deeply from the wells of our own tradition" (Green, 2006, p. 169).⁷ Drawing from early church examples, Green (2006) recommends an expansive way of looking at the atonement:

The church has worked faithfully to embrace the message of the atonement without presuming that one image subsumed or trumped the others. In other words, the biblical narrative, which we seek to inhabit and to put into play in our lives . . . authorizes an expansive range of images and models for comprehending and articulating the atonement. (p. 170)

This approach considers how metaphors emerged from the context and situation of people's lives. These metaphors were not developed abstractly but arose as a theological response to concrete situations. Green (2006) writes:

We find in the New Testament an abundance of terms and phrases for conceiving the condition that characterizes human existence apart from God: slavery, hard-heartedness, lostness, friendship with the world, blindness, ungodliness, living according to the sinful nature, the reprobate mind, the darkened heart, enemies of God, dead in trespasses and more. How we articulate the saving significance of Jesus' death is tied to our conception of the human situation. People who are blind need illumination. Slaves need liberation. The lost need to be found. (p.167)

A kaleidoscopic approach is fluid, active, and contextual. An expansive range of metaphors allows for movement, providing an expansive narrative with room to breathe.

A nonviolent view of atonement. A nonviolent view of atonement emphasizes the Jesus who bears suffering and embraces weakness. God allowed Jesus to be drawn into a world of sin "and thus made sin" (Marshall, 2000, p. 591).⁸ Jesus' ministry laid bare the evil and oppressive political forces, and now these evil forces are confronting him with death; his commitment to be with and for the poor by speaking out against an oppressive political system ultimately leads him to the cross (Padilla, 1983; Schwager, 1999). Responding

⁷For a comprehensive review of this model see Joel Green and Mark Baker's (2011) *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* or Joel Green's chapter "Kaleidoscopic View" in Beilby and Eddy's *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (2006).

⁸A nonviolent view of atonement emerges from several streams of thought, including peace-oriented traditions, and contextual theologies such as feminist, womanist, black, and liberation theologies. This model draws themes from Christus Victor while also expanding it.

to violence with active nonviolence, Jesus chooses to die “rather than compromise with violence,” and the cross stands as the “ultimate paradigm of nonviolence” (Wink, 1992, p. 141).⁹ The cross is a subversive act, inverting the old model of power and oppression, revealing that nonviolence is integral to God’s being (Wink, 1992).

As Jesus is drawn into the darkness he embraces and transforms it, taking up the violence of the whole system (1 Pet 2:23), sacrificially entering into the oppression (Wink, 1992). Jesus exposes and endures the horrific violence, speaks forgiveness (Lk 23:34), and triumphs over death and violence with love and forgiveness, transforming it: “God takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history and then reveals himself as the God of love who opens up a hope for the future through the most negative side of history” (Padilla, 1983, p. 17). Jesus shows a profound love through this complete taking on of weakness and darkness, and in this act of love Jesus identifies with all the victims of torture, violence, and oppression (Wink, 1992).

The resurrection plays an important role in this view also, as it demonstrates that violence does not have the final word. Jesus rises again, demonstrating the inability of social evils to destroy him. He has broken the power of death and violence, and now we are invited to participate in this saving work. Salvation is understood as dynamic and comprehensive, rooted in a contextualized, comprehensive understanding of sin (Maimela, 1986). It is personal and communal, involving concrete social-political dimensions—such as challenging oppressive cultural systems—and making persons more human and the world more humane (Bediako, 1994; Cone, 1997; Nasimiyu-Wasike, 1991). Salvation occurs within history and therefore has *here-and-now* implications.

Why Atonement Matters for Christian Counselors and Psychotherapists

This is not just academic quibbling. Atonement theology has profound implications for psychotherapists and Christian counselors. Volumes could be written on this, but for the purpose of promoting integration conversations we limit ourselves to six implications: the availability heuristic, how therapists

⁹The employment or nonemployment of violence and God is another complex conversation. To see a comprehensive approach to Scripture that makes an argument for God as nonviolent, see James Williams’s *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (2007).

view patients, how patients view themselves, how therapists view themselves, how we view suffering and darkness, and finding hope in the face of suffering.

Availability heuristic. Cognitive psychologists study, among other things, the thinking shortcuts we take in order to make sense of our complicated world. One of these shortcuts is called the availability heuristic: we pay attention to the ideas most readily in our mind rather than attempting to understand a matter in all its complexity. A silly example of this is how fast food companies try to plant an image or a jingle in your head so that when you are deciding where to go to lunch you don't have to sort through all the complexities of your various options. You just head to the place that is most available in your mind.

Hold this thought and prepare for a brief tangent. One of the key characteristics of integration—as opposed to other ways of relating psychology and theology—is mutual transformation. If we are integrating two things, then each of them is capable of influencing the other. It's not just that theology informs our understanding of psychology; true integration requires the possibility that psychology may also influence our understanding of theology.

The church has had many different views of atonement over the centuries, all of them developed and argued by intelligent people, passionate about following Jesus. Given the complexity and nuance involved in these atonement theories, how do we go about choosing one, or should we even try to choose one? Psychology can influence our understanding of theology in this case because the answer seems to be that we will choose the view of atonement most available in our minds. The views prominent in a particular historical period, or a certain denomination, are the ones that will be most available to us, so we naturally assume these are true and correct views. But what if that's just our mind doing what minds do—choosing the most available idea to shape our thoughts and behaviors, like going to a fast food restaurant that happens to have a catchy advertising campaign? After going to that restaurant long enough and frequently enough, we may even forget the alternative choices.

We live in a time where the penal substitution (i.e., forensic) view of atonement has gained greatest availability to most Protestants (Green, 2006). As such, we read the Bible through this assumption, teaching our children—as Lisa and I (Mark) taught Megan Anna—that Jesus saves us by taking the

punishment we deserve, and often failing to consider other perspectives offered by godly men and women over the centuries. We may not even realize there are other ways of understanding orthodoxy and Scripture. I was at a Christian counseling conference recently where thousands of us sang beautiful praise songs to God before hearing from leading Christian counselors. It was a positive experience, but at the same time it was striking to see how almost every one of the songs assumed a penal substitution view of the atonement. "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe." "Until on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." "Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood." "How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns his face away." "Now my debt is paid; it is paid in full by the precious blood that my Jesus spilled." These lovely songs help us understand the weight of our sin, and the magnitude of God's grace—and these are powerful and essential concepts to grasp—but having a singular view of the atonement also creates some problems for contemporary Christian counselors and psychotherapists.

Here are two of the problems. First, simple certainties that cover complex realities are barriers to curiosity and searching conversation. Today's Christian wants to understand the nuances, the messiness, and the historical alternatives. Holding generous space for multiple views expands our understanding of God and salvation. Second, our views of atonement have profound implications for how we understand the nature of God, and that, in turn, affects how we sit with troubled souls during their most difficult seasons of life. If we can only see the atonement through one metaphor, then we may remain limited in our understanding of the work of Christian counseling and psychotherapy.

Integration Challenge: Starting

1. To what extent do you find it necessary to settle on a single "correct" view of the atonement? In other words, might it be possible that different views speak to the various ways that God works in the world?
2. How might your views of the atonement affect the ways you view and interact with the patients you see in your counseling or psychotherapy office? Does it make a difference? Why or why not?

How therapists view patients. If integration is lived out in conversation, as we are suggesting in this book, then it's helpful to explore alternative views of the atonement and their clinical implications, because they hold profound implications for how God looks at us in our weakness and vulnerability, which in turn, carries implications for how we look at one another.

One option is that God loves the essence of us while despising our sin, and that we should be the same in our interactions with one another. When I (Mark) first became a Christian psychologist, I recall a phrase we often used in the church: "Hate the sin, love the sinner." This worked fairly well in a binary modern framework, but it turns out not to work as well in today's context. Making a clean conceptual slice between a person and how the person behaves isn't as easy as it may seem. Being a person is a complex mix of choices, emotions, thoughts, social connections, biological predispositions, and much more. To somehow imply we can neatly parse and love the essence of a person without considering the complicated amalgam of that person's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions is quite unrealistic. Also, "hate the sin, love the sinner" often carried an invisible postscript which was to be sure the sinner knew about the sin. The message seemed to be that I can love you as long as I make it clear to you how you are sinning, and that I cannot accept that part of you.

I recall working with a client, Richard, early in my career who started having an affair with a coworker midway through therapy. In my zeal to hate sin and love the sinner, I tried to be as kind as possible in referring him to another therapist. At the time I justified the referral because one of our therapeutic goals was to help his marriage and I believed I couldn't help with that while Richard was choosing another relationship. A referral seemed like the best option, as I hoped another therapist could help him with his other treatment goals (depression, life adjustment issues). Plus, I felt a strong need to communicate something about his wrongness, even as I treated him kindly. Hate the sin, love the sinner. I shudder now to wonder what this must have communicated to him. Knowing I was a Christian psychologist, what did my rejection of him communicate about how Christians view people, and about how God views us when we make disloyal and selfish choices?

An alternative narrative, and one that holds complexity: "Love the person even as we recognize how muddled our world can be." This may appear to

be just a matter of semantics, but consider how much better this might play out in the counseling office. I could have entered into my patient's angst and uncertainty rather than shunning him because of his sin. Perhaps I could have reflected (privately and silently) on my own muddling in life, and how easy it is for all of us to lose our way. Richard's choice to have an affair could have been a tragic opportunity for empathy and compassion, a way to demonstrate the gracious presence of God in our broken world, to love both God and neighbor.

A more flexible understanding of atonement might have helped me experience my patient's sin differently. Perhaps if my atonement narrative had been attuned to the cross as ultimate evidence of God's enduring love, I could have better held my values of righteousness alongside the muddled spaces where we all live.

How might I have responded differently by considering how Jesus entered willingly into the darkness?

Jesus at his crucifixion neither fights the darkness nor flees under cover of it, but goes with it, goes into it. He enters the darkness, freely, voluntarily. The darkness is not dispelled or illuminated. It remains vast, untamed, void. But he somehow encompasses it. It becomes the darkness of God. It is now possible to enter any darkness and trust God to wrest from it meaning, coherence, resurrection. (Wink, 1992, p. 141)

Holding a view that places faith that God understands the darkness with us, once having entered it, creates the possibility that darkness is redeemable. I wouldn't be walking into the muddle alone; God would be there waiting for us.

This ability to enter into spaces of sin while holding the hope of redemption was beautifully modeled for me by one of our colleagues who works in the field of substance abuse, where she regularly encounters patients stuck in cycles of sin.¹⁰ Prior to Doug beginning his sixth round of treatment for substance abuse, he experienced a shattering trauma as he witnessed his partner severely beating their son. In addition to witnessing his son's abuse at the hand of his partner, he also had a lifetime of traumatic events. Doug's

¹⁰When we talk about sin in this context, we're talking about a contextualized, intersecting understanding of sin. Particularly with substance use, which is often linked with trauma, we are looking at something more complex than an individual's sinful choices. These are choices often made in the context of family and systemic injustice.

therapist was the first to address his shame and trauma as it connected to his addiction, and he began to make progress in healing.

He left treatment for a week in order to testify at his partner's trial. But Doug never made it to the trial; instead he relapsed, remembering little of that week. His family and friends cut him off, telling him, "this was the last time." In disgust, Doug's family turned away from his "sin" and darkness. Doug's therapist took a different approach: rather than discussing his failure, she made efforts to enter into and connect amidst his darkness. She observed, "It makes sense that you relapsed. Alcohol is your oldest and most trusted defense in this world." With this, Doug's therapist communicated a deep commitment to being with him inside the muddled mess of sin, pain, and darkness. Similar to how Jesus entered into the world's darkness and suffering, taking it all in, the therapist entered into Doug's suffering.

Today, with a more flexible, conversational, and dialogical understanding of integration, I could have provided better treatment than when I was trying to hate the sin and love the sinner. I wish I could rewind time and help Richard cast a vision for how a loving and complete way of living might look.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. Consider your own experience of entering into (rather than moving away from) the "muddled" parts of life (your own, others', your patients'). When you've entered into these spaces, what has it been like for you? What theological and personal resistance do you notice when going into the muddle?
2. Does the idea of a God who is already there in the muddle waiting for you change how you might experience or think of these moments?

How patients view themselves. I (Megan Anna) recently had an exchange with Amanda, who lives in complexity and pain, as well as in deep faith in God.

Megan Anna: I'm curious, where do you feel God is amidst this pain, this suffering?

Amanda: Well, I know he has a plan. Sometimes I just have a hard time seeing it. I should pray more.

Amanda has a newborn, born seven weeks premature, and a four-year-old struggling with behavioral and emotional dysregulation, and a husband who

experiences crippling depression. She experiences acute anxiety and depression exacerbated by her struggle to manage her diabetes. It took us months of working together before she became comfortable talking about how painful and hard life was, in part because Amanda felt she was being ungrateful whenever she discussed hardship. With that background in mind, let's look again at what was happening at this moment in therapy:

Megan Anna: I'm curious, where do you feel God is amidst this pain, this suffering? (Notice that my desire was to help her find God in her suffering, an idea which emerges from my belief that on the cross God entered into the darkness of her suffering.)

Amanda: Well, I know he has a plan. Sometimes I just have a hard time seeing it. I should pray more. (Notice that Amanda responded with shame.)

Amanda's response told me a great deal about her theology: suffering and pain are here for a reason, because God has an endgame or purpose. She sees it as selfish to be angry or to lament and grieve her hardships. As Amanda paces the wooden floors of her bedroom, wringing her hands, trying to avoid another panic attack, is God a distant critic who sees her as weak in faith, or does God fully enter in and pace alongside her?

Listening to Amanda talk about her experience of God also gave me insight into her perception of herself. I heard "shame talk" and noticed how her experience of God (God image) brought both protective and risk factors. It soothes Amanda to know someone bigger than her is in control, and it simultaneously makes her vulnerable to think that this bigger someone is quite disappointed in her, and perhaps capricious in how the pain of the world is distributed.

This reminds me of several exciting research frontiers in integration looking at how our view of God impacts our perception of self and psychological well-being.¹¹ These conversations include research on God image (experience of God) and God concept (ideas about God), looking at authoritarian versus benevolent concepts of God, and how these concepts relate to shame and vulnerability, attachment, and so forth. In this chapter we're

¹¹For a comprehensive conversation that looks at the interplay between God image, God concept, and psychological well-being, see Moriarty and Hoffman's (2007) book, *God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy*.

Considering Atonement

interested in how one's God image, God concept, and subsequent relationship to self may be deeply influenced by one's narrative about Jesus' work on the cross. In other words, views of the atonement are not isolated chapters in theology textbooks. These views weave into our understanding of God, self, and other, and really do matter in our daily lives and in our vocation as counselors and psychotherapists.

The point of counseling is not to correct wrong belief or to help patients more closely align to orthodoxy, but it is still essential to understand that our patients' views of God have a direct bearing on how they experience psychological and spiritual pain. We echo the intent of Moriarty and Hoffman (2007):

[We] do not intend to suggest that there is a correct way that all people see God; rather, we are concerned that many people distort their experience of God in a manner that causes unnecessary psychological and spiritual suffering. (p. 6)

It is clear that our God image and self-perception are intimately mingled together. A multitude of studies have evaluated the link between people's God concept (intellectual definition of God), God image (subjective emotional or relational experience of God), and psychological and spiritual wellness. For example, Alavi, Amin, and Savoji (2013) evaluated the link between depression, pathological guilt, and God image among cancer patients, finding a significant correlation between people's God image and depression, and that pathological guilt played a significant role in predicting depression. Similarly, self-esteem is positively correlated with positive God images and negatively related with punitive views of God (Francis, Gibson, & Robbins, 2001).

Our patients' God image has a significant impact on how they view themselves, specifically their sin and how they relate to their sinfulness (pathological guilt). Understanding how our patients view God and particularly how God relates to their sin provides helpful information about how they may relate to their own sin and potential vulnerabilities to guilt and shame.

We have made the point that theology, such as views of the atonement, shapes God image, and yet there is much more than theology at play. Theological and personal narratives are always intersecting, forming one another. For example, early attachments and relationships have a significant influence

on one's internal representation of God. As such, the task of the counselor is rarely the cognitive task of correcting theology, but instead the interpersonal task of living out a godly relationship with the patient in the context of counseling. Noffke and Hall (2007) note that the work of shifting a God image has less to do with changing theological content and more to do with "the power of emotion, metaphor and therapeutic bond" (p. 69). Being in an attuned, empathetic, securely attached relationship helps rewire one's God image.

My instinct when I heard Amanda describe her God image was to have a theological "righting reflex." While, thankfully, I know getting into a theological dialog would not be helpful or ethical, I did notice this instinct. My fix-it response oriented me to the cognitive realm. I silently ruminated on whether there were other ways to bring an alternative view of God into the room. Ironically, me detaching from Amanda's affect, going into cognitive fix-it mode was moving me farther away rather than closer to helping Amanda have a more relational, attuned view of God. Rather than talking about the atonement (noun), I drew from my own narrative of the atonement to shape how I could be with her (showing up in her suffering and being attuned to her pain, while not allowing her pain, shame, or sin to compromise the security of my presence). It turns out living the atonement (verb) was more helpful in creating the neural pathways necessary for the rewiring of her God image than any theological concepts I could have brought into the session.

Six months later, Amanda was in session, standing, rocking, and soothing her infant son as we talked. I wondered out loud if she ever wished someone would hold her like that. Amanda teared up and described a moment that week where she experienced a powerful image. She described seeing God hold her as an infant, staring down compassionately into her eyes. She described how it continued to be rare to experience God this way, but these occasional glimpses of grace provided her with an anchoring image of God's love to return to during times of pain.

Amanda's history of having unattuned and disconnected parents makes it difficult to experience Jesus pacing alongside her on those bare, creaky wood floors, but perhaps as she experiences enduring connection and empathy from her Christian therapist her internal representation of God will slowly shift.

QUERIES FOR PATIENTS

To access your patients' self-perceptions, consider asking questions such as:

1. When do you feel connected to God?
Listen for qualifiers. Is the person's connection to God based on doing enough or being good enough? Do they feel connected amid their messiness?
2. When you notice brokenness in your life, how do you imagine God responding to this? Viewing you?
Listen for their God concept.
3. When the shame-storm hits (i.e., struggling with feeling worthy or good enough), what would I see you doing?
Are they disconnecting and isolating? Are they connecting with others? With God?

How therapists view themselves. I (Megan Anna) found it a bit intimidating to learn that the most important tool I bring into therapy is *me*. Utilizing the self of the therapist requires exploring the significance of therapists as "wounded healers." How we integrate and use our wounds makes a difference, more so than technique (Aponte & Kissil, 2014; Lum, 2002; Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991; Sussman, 2007). Early in my training I recall thinking I would be more confident if I could simply master therapeutic techniques to address my patients' troubles. It felt overwhelming to see *myself* as the primary agent of change. Over time, I am finding comfort with this reality.

Counseling is relational; who I am in relation to myself and others matters a great deal. Some of my best work and some of my most timid work comes from my own wounds and areas of healing (Aponte & Kissil, 2014, refer to these core issues as therapists' "signature themes"). When I work with patients struggling with shame dynamics, I notice an increased sense of weightiness. At times this causes me to be avoidant and at other times to enter into the heaviness and terror with them. When my woundedness and the woundedness of my patient overlap, this brings up a mix of vulnerability, risk, and opportunity.

How I navigate my woundedness influences how I will work with my patients in their woundedness, particularly when our areas of woundedness overlap. Similarly, how I navigate and think about my own muddle (sinfulness

and relationship to God as a broken human) influences how I relate to my patients' experiences of these spaces. When locked into my "hustle for worth" narrative, I may recoil in shame at my own sinfulness and skirt away from the muddled spaces, likely struggling to be present to the pain and shame my patients are expressing about their experience of brokenness. My hustle for worth could also show up as frantic attempts to "fix" my patients. But when I am able to experience God's gracious presence with me in my sin, it enables me to be a gracious presence with my patients' pain, modeling an ability to tolerate their distress.

As I was able to draw from my profound experiences of Jesus with me in pain, darkness, and brokenness, I felt empowered to enter into Amanda's and Maria's confused and muddled spaces. And so, if it's true that the self of

FALLING APART WHILE HOLDING IT ALL TOGETHER

Graduate work is demanding and invokes personal change. While all education brings an element of challenge and change, this is heightened for those entering mental health professions because of the personal exploration it requires. Most graduate students in counseling and psychotherapy programs probably wonder at some point why they didn't just go get a degree in business or theology or thermo-nuclear physics.

As students enter training, they will likely hear some version of the following informed consent: "It will be hard. You will come out of this a different person." While we all hear it, I suspect few of us actually understand what it means at the time. If I

were to attempt to describe this experience to students coming into this field, I'd describe it this way: *Clinical training exists in the precarious tension between falling apart and holding it all together.* And while this intersection may be most intense during training, this is not a dialectic that is ever fully resolved. Seasoned therapists—at least the best ones—continue to live in a dialectic between brokenness and healer.^a

Trainees aren't simply undergoing the usual deconstruction-reconstruction that occurs in the education process. They are deconstructing their very selves. If we take seriously the notion that we ourselves are a therapeutic tool in the room, then training

^a Psychotherapist and bestselling author Lori Gottlieb (2019) provides an intimate look into this complex intersection as she chronicles her experience as both therapist and patient in *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*.

the therapist is the greatest tool we bring into the therapy room, then as Christian psychotherapists and counselors we need to reflect on our own experience of darkness and how we relate to ourselves and God in our personal experience of sin and shame.

Like Megan Anna, I (Mark) have grown to see the importance of my own presence in the room, and how I view myself, to be more important than the techniques I have mastered. Despite having written a couple of books and many articles on Christian approaches to CBT, and teaching classes on the topic for decades now, I am more convinced than ever that the theory and techniques of a particular approach are less important than the genuine person who shows up in the counseling room.

It wasn't always this way. Like Megan Anna, I can be quite vulnerable to the "hustle for worth" paradigm. I remember early in my career I assumed

for this work involves sitting in and reflecting on our brokenness and woundedness. This requires self-reflection, vulnerability, transparency, and a process that can at times feel akin to "falling apart."

At the same time, trainees need to hold it all together. They hold the trauma, complexity, and pain of their patients. Professionally, they hold it together as they work to impress professors and peers with keen insights, publications, and achievements. This pressure can make it difficult for trainees to talk about the fact that while they are busy holding it all together, they are also falling apart. This season of life calls for complex and fluid narratives (i.e., I can both be a professional who is able to hold complex and painful things and I can be a vulnerable and confused patient myself strug-

gling as I work through deep-seated emotional pain).

An expansive and fluid Christian narrative around brokenness, sin, and redemption can be a helpful frame for the trainee's experience. Theology that draws our attention to the universality and seriousness of our brokenness while also drawing our attention to the hope of redemption and reconciliation can hold together the tension of the both/and: brokenness and healing, sin and salvation, death and resurrection, falling apart and holding it together. As trainees (and seasoned therapists) embody the dialectic of falling apart and holding it together, perhaps they can find hope in the Christ who encounters and embodies the dialectics of sin and redemption, darkness and light, death and life.

my patients wanted to be in and out of my office as quickly and efficiently as possible, so I would make a diagnosis, propose a crisp treatment plan, and implement the plan as efficiently as possible. Curiously, I recall not needing to replace the box of facial tissue in my office over the first few years of my clinical work because patients never needed it! A few years later when I got into personal therapy I recognized that I was not looking for efficiency as much as connection. Thankfully, I found a psychotherapist who connected with me in compassion and care, and sometimes in confrontation, and who valued relationship above efficiency. This transformed my understanding of psychotherapy more than all the books I had read and workshops I had attended. What I discovered is that my patients yearn for the same thing I wanted—to be connected in a real relationship where empathy and human compassion are the centerpiece.

The best outcome researchers estimate is that about 15% of the variance in counseling outcome is related to the techniques we use, and much of the rest has to do with the personal, lived experiences of the patient as well as the so-called “common factors” of psychotherapy (Lambert, 1992). These basic dimensions of human civility and relational warmth play out in any effective counseling, whether psychodynamic, CBT, or almost any other theory one may be inclined to follow.

Perhaps the greatest relevance for the atonement theology we have discussed in this chapter is how we as therapists view ourselves. Are we locked into rigid narratives that fuel shame, or do our atonement narratives allow for movement to hold the complexity of being human: muddled and deeply loved, imperfect and agents of transformative work? The story we hold about how God sees us will shape our lives, both personally and professionally. This, in turn, will affect how we sit with patients in the messiest moments of their lives.

Intergenerational Conversation Starters

1. When I notice the presence of sin in my life, what is my first response (physical sensations, emotions, thoughts)? What does my self-talk/mind chatter look like? Similarly, when I ponder God's love, what are my first responses?
2. For most of us it is more common to think that God loves us than to think that God likes us. If you imagine God liking you, what responses do you have?

Views of suffering, darkness, and violence. Even as we argue that God's love abounds, and is all around us, we also acknowledge that suffering persists in our world. We recognize that as therapists we come into close contact with the brokenness and sin of the world (sin done to our patients, sin of our patients, sin in the social structures that we and our patients exist in). We believe that love abounds in the biblical story, and persists through all history, but this does not discount the reality and consequences of living in a broken and fallen world.

With speedy access to information, nearly any moment can be invaded by news of horrific suffering resulting from the world's brokenness. I (Megan Anna) have had horrific traumas invade both mundane and sensitive moments: learning of the Sandy Hook school shooting while playing a game with my three-year-old daughter, the news of the murder of a mother and her children in my community as I get my kids ready for school, learning of children severely neglected in migrant detention centers right before diving into a full day of being with patients. We live in an age where we are bombarded with human suffering on a massive level.

On top of this, we take on and listen to the suffering of our patients as we sit with them in their stories of pain: past and present. Being bombarded with suffering on a global and a personal level prompts the question: How are we to respond to human suffering? A view of atonement that considers Jesus' role in taking on human suffering, pain, and violence has implications for how we understand our response to the suffering of others.

Many people who go into the field of counseling are already attuned to the suffering of others and committed to the call of being with those who suffer. And so, we fear that writing about the significance of the Christian call to "suffer with" may be akin to preaching to the choir. At the same time, we also wonder how many of us in the helping professions struggle, like Amanda, with being present to, responding to, and taking seriously our own suffering. After sitting with some of the deepest traumas this world has to offer, it is tempting to minimize and discredit our own experiences of pain and suffering. Might not responding to our own suffering—not recognizing the presence of God in our pain—limit our ability to sit with others in their suffering?

1. How do I respond to suffering in the world? Do I shut it out, drown in it, experience numbness?
2. Do I respond to my own suffering? How?
3. How do I experience God in the world's suffering, my patients' suffering, and my personal suffering?

Finding hope amidst suffering. While there are many differences among the atonement metaphors, we believe they can all agree on these: Jesus death saves, and hope arises from the ashes of suffering. All views of the atonement give us hope that suffering is not without meaning.

I (Megan Anna) have had more conversations than I would like with patients discussing posttraumatic stress disorder secondary to sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and loss. When discussing trauma, I am extremely cautious about how and when to bring in the idea of posttraumatic growth (also discussed in chapter three). I've noticed a trend. Patients tend to feel empowered when they learn about the research and concept of posttraumatic growth. I've been witness to incredible transformations as patients begin to name and live into the growth and resilience gained through their suffering. An atonement narrative that holds the suffering God, who embraced our suffering, is a narrative that can hold hope, providing the clinician and patient with a renewed confidence in hopeful suffering.

Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the patristic theologians, was committed to articulating the importance of taking seriously the full humanity of Jesus (in addition to Jesus' divinity). He famously wrote "for that which he has not assumed he has not healed" (Ford & Higton, 2002, p.92). It was through the process of assuming the totality of our humanness that God brought redemption. Similarly, in the process of assuming suffering it becomes possible for it to become a hope-filled suffering. Human suffering is no longer a suffering without hope; it is no longer a suffering without God (Johnson, 2005).

I met Beth two weeks after her pregnancy loss. She and her husband had been trying for over two years to conceive, and she was ecstatic about her pregnancy. With news that a little girl, "June," would be joining them, she and her partner got busy putting together a nursery. At twenty-six weeks Beth lost

June. She and I spent weeks together sitting in her pain and confusion, pondering the significance of this loss. After a few months of sitting in the muck together, Beth began to bring in new insights: "I struggle to be present. My whole life I'm jumping from one thing to the next." Grief had forced Beth to slow down, and she was beginning to reflect on the quality of her existence. A successful lawyer well on her way to partnership at her big city firm, she worked grueling weeks. She was so used to pleasing others, always saying yes to people's requests without pausing to consider her own feelings. When hosting a dinner party with friends, Beth described feeling disconnected, so consumed by the details of managing all of the things (food, chairs, drinks) that she was unable to slow down and *eat, drink, and be merry*. This way of life had never bothered Beth before. But grief forced her to slow down. As Beth looked at her life, she reflected on the values guiding her and how disconnected these were from the things that gave her life, vigor, and purpose. As Beth was moving through her grief she began to pace out her appointments more.

At a follow-up appointment Beth began with a life update: she had quit her job at the prestigious law firm and was working for a small practice in her rural town. The cost in pay and prestige felt worth it to her for what she got back in quality of life. Beth also noticed that when people made requests of her she was pausing to check in with herself and listen to her voice. She described feeling more present and engaged in life—she highlighted noticing the sunset, birds, and the sensations that paired with gardening, swimming, or reading a good book in the sunshine. Midway through the session Beth returned to the topic of June, her mind continuing its attempt to make sense of this.

After a heavy pause I interrupted the silence with an observation that felt risky: "You have discovered a vibrancy, engagement, and connectedness that wasn't there before. You have utterly changed your way of being in the world. It feels like this may be a gift June has given to you. By living this way, you are continuing to integrate her into your life. What a powerful gift June gave you."

Beth's eyes welled up with tears as she fumbled, "I hadn't thought about it this way before. But yes . . . she gave me this gift." Beth continued to return to the significance of this meaning in future visits. At our next visit she talked about "June's gift" with ease. Reflecting on how she continued her attachment with June through living a good life continues to be an anchoring point of hope throughout her suffering.

Beth's story is an example of how God shows up during suffering. God doesn't promise that suffering won't happen. God showing up in this case didn't save June from dying. God showing up doesn't make things neat and tidy; it's God showing up to be with us. And this means that we counselors don't have to go home with headaches because we have failed to make our patients' lives neat and tidy.

God showing up doesn't even mean making sense of the suffering. Some suffering can never be fully understood. But God helps us find the hope amidst the suffering, and that informs our clinical work. God, whose redemptive presence is evident through all history, continues to show up in the messiest times of life. And the presence of One who loves us brings hope during suffering.

1. Suffering can be senseless. When exposed to some of the most senseless suffering, what thoughts, sensations, and emotions show up for you (e.g., powerless, angry, anxious, retreat)?
2. Reflect on a time that you have experienced God or another person showing up amidst your suffering. What was your experience of this? What was this like for you? What about it felt helpful or unhelpful?

AUTHOR DIALOG: WHAT ABOUT THE WEIGHT OF SIN?

Mark: We've been pretty tough on the penal substitution view of atonement in this chapter, Megan Anna. Like you, I've been compelled in recent years by some earlier views of atonement, but one aspect I have always appreciated about the penal substitution view is that it demonstrates how much God grieves sin. All around us we see a world suffering under the weight of greed, selfishness, exploita-

tion, and unfettered hedonism. We don't use the word *sin* much these days, but it's hard to deny that something is terribly broken and wrong with the world. In moving away from a penal substitution view, are we vulnerable to minimizing the significance of human sinfulness?

Megan Anna: I appreciate this image of God grieving sin. While I think it takes on a

different form and is perhaps emphasized less in some other atonement theories, is still present in other predicament these other theories move away from an individual focus of sin and more toward a collectivistic view of sin. While I think it is important to look at collective views of sin, you are right that we could lose an emphasis on individual responsibility. I'll highlight this tension through story:

I grew up going to an evangelical youth group, and our winter retreats often involved speakers who addressed issues related to personal piety. We would often leave with a renewed vitality and passion for the sanctified and holy life. It was incredibly moving and powerful, though it lacked connection to collective sin. Fast-forward ten years to when I was in seminary and leading a youth retreat for a mainline church where the winter retreat topic was about water and resources. They highlighted the importance of being ecologically responsible. While it helped the teens connect to an idea that salvation was also about the earth and the poor, it didn't seem to ignite their passion or interest. The message about water was a bit . . . dry.

These accounts reflect a tendency within the church to either focus on personal piety or public piety, evangelism or the social gospel. With today's polarization we run the risk of separating individual and public ethics. I long to see the

Western church embody the gospel in its fullness, which will include a comprehensive view of atonement and salvation. I wonder if there is a way to keep an eye on the seriousness of sin and the responsibility of the individual, but without God needing to be punishing Jesus on our behalf?

Mark: I love your answer and how you use story to explain it. And yes, I agree that we need to think about sin both collectively and personally. Still, given what social psychologists teach us about the fundamental attribution error—that we tend to have generous thoughts about ourselves and blaming thoughts toward others—what's to keep us from seeing sin as someone else's problem? In other words, a collective view of sin, coupled with our self-justifying tendencies, might make it easy to assume the sin problem in our world is someone else's doing. It's the political system or the corporations or the criminals who cause the problems in the world. But what about our personal responsibility? I remember reading Donald Miller's (2003) *Blue Like Jazz* and being so drawn to his idea that he would like to show up at a protest someday with a sign that reads, "I am the problem." If we lean too far toward a collective view of sin I wonder if we may miss the opportunity to see our own contributions to the problems of the world.

FINAL CONVERSATION

Pondering God

If you are reading this book as part of a group, here is a final conversation to have before moving on to part three.

Sometimes we may think the theological task of our time is to find some hidden truth, like we're scrambling through a maze looking for the treasure of correct belief at the end. This view has some merit, because what we believe is important insofar as it shapes our relationship with and actions toward God, others, nature, and ourselves. But in this part of the book, we have attempted to provide a different way of looking at theology.

Rather than questing for a particular correct belief, we have tried to open up conversations about the relationship between psychology and theology, because doing this allows for insight, personal awareness, and meaningful conversation. So yes, there are doctrines of what it means to be made in the image of God and about how atonement happens, and these doctrines matter. But for counselors and psychotherapists, it is also important to remember that our patients don't come for private lessons in theology. They come in pain, and many come with big questions, and with the hope that we might be hospitable and generous enough that they might eventually voice these questions of ultimate meaning. Within a few sessions people typically figure out whether we are able to host these big, difficult questions or whether it's best just to talk about symptoms and solutions.

When big questions emerge in counseling, it is typically after trust has been established and patients are confident that we can engage in true conversation without trying to educate or fix them. When deep questions come, they are not academic questions about theology but profoundly personal questions about the nature of who God is, and how God perceives them, and how they feel about God, and how to make sense of pain.



PART THREE

God in the World

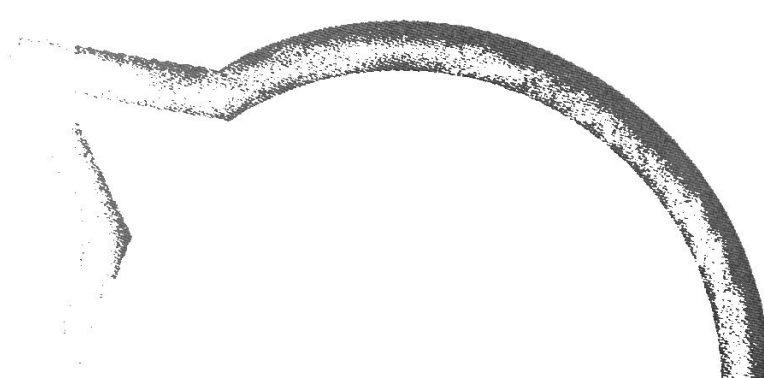
One of the questions we hear in our work as counselors and psychotherapists is "Where is God?" Pediatric and child psychologists likely hear this in the cutest of ways, as young children try to make sense of whether God lives in their neighborhood or maybe in the sky or maybe in Australia. But this is a question that persists far beyond childhood curiosity.

When an adolescent faces profound questions of sexual or gender identity, where is God in this confusion and uncertainty and social alienation? When young adults struggle with addictions or eating disorders, where is God in the longing for control and stability? When families are ripped apart by premature death or enmity or infidelity, where is God in the chaos? When bigotry triumphs in our communities and people are marginalized and wounded as a result, where is God in the injustice?

Where is God?

If you're hoping for a precise answer, you'll probably not find it here. But we think the question is terribly important anyway, even if answers are hard to find. These are questions that show up in the counseling room, so we should become familiar with the conversations. These are integration conversations—not ones with clear answers, but conversations that bring value to the question and the one who quests.

Even in the absence of a precise answer to the question Where is God? we do offer a more general answer. While our answer may seem vague, we try to unpack it in these final two chapters. Our answer to where is God? Here. Active. Present, even when difficult to discern.



Mission of God

WHAT IS GOD UP TO IN THE WORLD?



HERE'S A QUESTION I (Mark) have been asked many times over the course of my career: "How often do you share your faith in the context of counseling?" Of the many integration questions I have received over the years this is perhaps the most difficult, and my answers have always felt clumsy and inadequate. Indeed, this question is so common and intimidating that I have come to think of it in uppercase terms as "the Question."

Even as I sputter out some words in reply, my mind spins with the complexity of it, and the only thing I feel certain about is that my answer isn't very helpful. Recently, with Megan Anna's help, I have been able to place the Question in the context of a much bigger question: What is God up to in the world? At first glance speaking of religious beliefs in counseling may not seem very connected to this bigger question of God's activity in the world, but we attempt to make this connection clear in this chapter. And, as is true of every chapter in this book, we hope our ideas will promote further conversation among those who read this book such that our collective wisdom will evolve into something much greater than the two of us can offer here.

Early in my career, my answer to the Question tended to be guilt based. I included a general statement about my Christian faith in my informed consent form, and occasionally I would venture into conversation about how Jesus can save us from our self-focused ways and offer a more abundant life, but most often I did not. With almost every patient who did not identify as a Christian I had this nagging feeling that I might be doing something pallid and shallow in my therapeutic work. I pondered whether I was colluding

with them to look at the little stories of human life without considering the bigger story that could ultimately lead to abundant and eternal life.

Midcareer, during my years as a psychology professor at Wheaton College, I taught professional ethics in our doctoral program. Ethics standards look closely at issues of power and persuasion, so in those days I would often stumble through some answer about balancing ethical practice with our calling as Christians to spread the good news of Jesus. This already-tricky balancing act is further complicated because our professional licenses make us accountable to state regulatory bodies and national professional organizations. Being a licensed psychologist or marriage and family therapist or professional counselor means we are expected to act in ways that are congruent with what our jurisdiction mandates and our patients expect. If you were to ask the Question in those days, I would probably say something about attending to the deep spiritual questions of our patients, offering what we can while staying congruent in our roles as licensed professionals, and then referring people to clergy to further address these questions. Still, even as I offered these words I would feel internally guilty for not sharing enough about Jesus with my patients who seemed to be searching for some greater meaning in their lives.

Now in my late-career years, and in conversation with Megan Anna, I have come to a place of personal peace with this. In all those prior years I tended to nuance and parse the answer to the Question without spending much time pondering its connection to the larger topic of God's character and activity in the world. What I've discovered is that making this connection allows for simplicity, peace, and wisdom.

Locating Mission

We know from psychology that the human brain likes categories. We interact with thousands of sensory inputs every day and need categories to make sense of it all. And yet the categories we use change how we experience a thing. Take anxiety for instance. If you study anxiety under the category of biology you may focus on physical symptoms, the sympathetic nervous system, and biological interventions. If you study anxiety under the category of relationship you may focus on attachment, current social stressors, and protective factors. If you study anxiety under mental health interventions,

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you may focus on cognitive restructuring and psychological techniques to reduce anxious thoughts. Clearly, the categories we use influence our experience and interpretation of a construct. Theologians are not immune to this, as they too tend to study concepts under umbrella categories. This is helpful, except for when it isn't. Some things fit into categories more easily than others. Mission is a nomadic topic that has been studied under many different umbrella themes. Given that categories shape how we understand a thing, this has influenced our Christian approach to mission.

Mission and soteriology. In the twentieth century it was common to study mission under the umbrella category of soteriology—the doctrine of salvation. From this vantage point, one of the most important things we Christians can do is go out into the world to save lost souls.

In middle school, having just learned Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws, I (Mark) recall sitting down with a peer after we played a baseball game and explaining to him how all of us are sinners, that Jesus has built a bridge through the sacrificial death of Jesus, and that he could have the gift of eternal life by saying a prayer and inviting Jesus into his heart. It took incredible courage for me to approach this friend and share with him, but it was all worth it when it worked! He said the prayer and became a Christian. I spoke of it freely in my youth group and probably would have gotten lots of high-fives except that we did low-fives back then.

Though I'm about to criticize myself for this individualistic view of mission, I should first say two good things about this story. First, I take Jesus to be quite serious when he offered words of Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20). Jesus revealed God's heart for mission with these words and invited us to be participants in that mission. My clumsy, awkward conversation with my middle school friend came at least partly from a desire to obey Jesus, and I take that to be a good desire. Second, God really does save us. My understanding of God and humanity today doesn't fit as well with the Four Spiritual Laws as it did back in middle school, but I still hold firmly to the conclusion that Jesus invites us into the salvation we long for. Back then I thought only in terms of eternal life, which should not be minimized, but now I've come to think that we make the word

saved too small when we only think of something that happens after we die. God knows I have needed a lot of saving in my life, and I am grateful for his inclinations and from the ways I have been blind to the astonishing magnitude of God's love for all creation. Even as I write this story, I find myself pausing and praying for my middle school friend, that he has also known the saving presence of Jesus throughout these many years.

Now for the more critical look at mission coming from a desire to save my friend. Have you noticed that I haven't mentioned the name of my middle school friend? I don't remember it. In fact, I hardly remember any middle school friend after that day he invited Jesus into his heart. I had done my job by bringing another soul to heaven someday, and so I revelled in a sense of satisfaction about being a good Christian. My witnessing may have been at least as much about me as about him, and I feel sad and embarrassed about that today.

A decade or two later I started hearing about "friendship evangelism." This seems to be a huge improvement over the view that mission emanates from an individual trying to obey Jesus' command to "go make disciples." Friendship evangelism sees mission as rooted in human relationship. If I care about you, and we are in a relationship, then it is only natural to tell you about the things that are important to me, including my beliefs about God. Friendship evangelism has been robustly criticized in recent years because it can seem that the whole point of forming relationships is to win people to Jesus. In this case, it really is little more than the individualistic approach to evangelism that I learned in middle school.

These views of mission emanate from soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). We are trying to live out the Great Commission, to save lost souls and to help them follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. I find the soteriological urge of mission tugs at me often in the context of counseling and psychotherapy.

I met Elena after she experienced a difficult breakup, when she came to psychotherapy to address symptoms of depression and anxiety. As we explored this in the first session, it became evident that she had ample experience with breakups, in part because of repeatedly choosing abusive and addicted men. Though she did not meet criteria for dependent personality disorder

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she certainly had some traits of this. It was hard for Elena to be alone, so she often found the first man who would leave her and then ended up in damaging relationships. Eventually the man would leave her for someone else, or she would decide she needed to escape the abuse, and she would add one more breakup to her relational resume.

I noticed two other things in the first few sessions with Elena. First, she wasn't quite sure what to do with me as a male therapist. She drew attention to her attire and appearance, compared the ease of speaking with me to the difficulty she had speaking with her previous boyfriend, and apologized for being a few pounds overweight. It was clear that she didn't know how to relate to me as a person who would never have any sort of romantic or sexual relationship with her. Second, I noticed a deep relational yearning in her for something more than she could find in her series of relationships with men. She longed for security, a relational home, a place of safety where she was known and loved. It occurred to me how much knowing Jesus could help her in her quest for love and meaning.

Within three sessions I understood the dilemma facing Elena and me, and it was essentially the Question. Her whole life was crying out for something deeper than what she had experienced—for faith, for meaning, for fellowship and connection, for abundant life in Jesus. But at the same time, she had dependent traits and was having difficulty knowing how to relate to me without resorting to old relational patterns. If I would have shared my Christian beliefs with her as I had with my middle school friend, she would have likely been receptive to my words, but what would that do for the dependency patterns and the psychological issues that I was agreeing to help her address? If I turned into just another persuasive male in her life, even for a good cause, then it might work counter to our treatment goals. We'll return to Elena's story later in the chapter.

Mission and ecclesiology. A second category that has been used to study mission is ecclesiology (the study of the church). Perhaps the clearest biblical example of this is seen in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit filled a gathering of people, Peter gave a fabulous sermon, and three thousand people were added to the church in a single day. Ever since we have hoped for the same in places of worship—that we would gather, experience the presence of God, hear good preaching, and grow in number.

For the past twenty-five years I have worked with clergy, both in my research and my clinical practice. The fabulous-sermon fantasy, coupled with imagining adding thousands of new members as a result, is never far from a pastor's consciousness. It would be impossible to communicate how deeply most Christian ministers feel the pressure of this ecclesiological view of mission. If their churches are not growing they feel personal shame and often face criticism from their denominational leaders. Coupled with the demographic reality that church attendance is declining throughout the country, this leaves many pastors feeling the weight of presumed incompetence, failure, and shame.

There are good reasons to locate mission within ecclesiology. First, we have just hinted at church sustainability and growth. One could look skeptically at this, as if we are just talking about a business model where growth is revered as the epitome of success, but that trivializes the point regarding the church. Church growth is not simply about meeting the budget, but is—or should be—more about making the words and heart of Jesus available to a hurting world. Whether locating mission in soteriology or ecclesiology, the Great Commission is the central organizing and motivating factor.

Second, mission could be deemed to be the primary work of the church. From this perspective, this commissioning of the church in Matthew 28 is also establishing the blueprint for how the church should operate. It is interesting to consider who was present when Jesus gave the words we now call the Great Commission. It was the eleven disciples who remained after Judas's suicide. Jesus was not simply talking to individual followers, but to those who would eventually establish the church that would become the largest religion in the world.

Third, just like a beautiful symphony is an event to behold, with different instruments making various sounds at just the right moments, so also locating mission with the church demonstrates how the various gifts of individuals fit together into beautiful community that can be attractive to the world. In saying this, we recognize that the church hasn't always been attractive to the world, but when it works well it can be exquisite in its beauty. Some with the gifts of hospitality and mercy organize shelters and food pantries and community gardens. Others with gifts of teaching offer words of instruction and insight. Those with prophetic inclinations offer warnings at critical moments. Taken in concert, the church can demonstrate beautiful mission to the world.

God as the Source of Mission

Like all human efforts, these approaches to mission are a mixed bag of altruism and egocentrism. Connecting mission to soteriology comes from good motives to help save lost souls. Those who form relationships with their neighbors in order to share the gospel are also trying to follow the ways of Jesus in reaching out to those who are missing the fullness life has to offer. Seeing mission as part of the church is also reasonable. Growing churches can be beautiful, as it was on the day of Pentecost, and reaching out to a hurting world in an organized way reflects the heart of Jesus.

Without wanting to discredit these views, we introduce another possible view of mission—one that was prominent in the early church, then mostly disappeared for many centuries, but has regained attention in the past seventy years. In this view the source of mission is located within the very being of a trinitarian God.

In the early church the word *mission* was used to talk about the Trinity: the sending of the Son by the Father and the mutual sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. Within this frame the first mission does not follow the Great Commission; it precedes it. Mission is located within the activity of God. The sending of Jesus (by the Father) to a particular culture in order to embody and translate the divine message of creation, reconciliation, and redemption was the consummate mission. Jesus came and infused a particular culture with this gospel of hope and redemption. In this view the source of mission is not culture or ecclesiology or even soteriology but is rooted in the very being of God (Sanneh, 2004; Walls, 2002).

Rooting mission in God's trinitarian nature began with the early church and then reemerged following World War I as more missiologists began noticing theologians such as Karl Barth. Barth believed that mission originated from the character of God: first manifested in God's covenantal relationship with Israel; then through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and finally in the sending of the Holy Spirit. Barth's theology was quite radical in nature by placing mission under the umbrella of trinitarian theology (as opposed to soteriology or ecclesiology) because if mission is core to the being of God, it tells us something about how God is oriented toward the world (Bosch, 1991). This is often referred to as the *missio Dei* (the mission of God/the sending of God).

At first glance this may seem like a trivial distinction, but we suggest that it is critically important in understanding who we are as Christians and how we see and conduct ourselves in relation to God and God's world. And if this is so, then it also affects who and how we are in the counseling or psychotherapy office.

When I learned Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws and tested them out on my middle school friend, I viewed mission in ways that resembled a recruiting or rescue operation—going out into the world, finding lost souls, and bringing them safely back into the security place of the church where God is most fully experienced. Similarly, friendship evangelism, church-growth strategies, and much of the missionary movement in recent centuries have been focused on bringing people in. At first glance this seems to be the obvious conclusion in response to the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." But notice the quiet assumption in these views is that God primarily resides in the church. We go out and bring people home to where God lives.

The alternative view—and the prominent one among early Christians—is more outward facing. Mission emanates from God and points outward to the world. With this view of mission we are not recruiting for God, but God is moving forward into a world that God loves deeply. *The very character of God is missional.* With this perspective in mind, consider again the words and context of the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt 28:18-20)

Here we see Jesus sent with authority into the world to live out God's mission and inviting his followers to be part of this outward-facing mission. We so often read this assuming the key phrase is "go and make disciples," but what if the key phrase is actually this: "remember I am with you always, to the end of the age." With the first reading we presume that mission involves going out into the world and bringing people back to the heart of God. With the second we see a triune God whose mission is to be present with us. This God invites us to participate in the mission of creation, reconciliation, and redemption.

Where we locate the study of mission may seem like arbitrary debate for theologians, but it actually holds significant implications. When studied under ecclesiology, mission is largely seen as a *thing* the church does in efforts of expanding the church. When studied under soteriology it is done largely for the purpose of salvation, typically to prevent people from experiencing the wrath of God in their afterlife. But when mission is located in the nature of God it shows us something of how God is oriented toward the world (Bosch, 1991).

With my patient Elena, I struggled knowing how much to introduce my views of God into our work together, knowing that her patterns of dependency would make her receptive to my words but might also keep her from seeing how much she relied on the opinions of men to guide her paths through life. I desperately wanted to say the words that might bring her into the fold, but this rescuing view of mission might actually compromise our psychological work together. As a licensed psychologist I had some important contractual and moral obligations to consider the psychological outcomes of our work. It was the reason she came to see me. Even so, it nagged at my conscience to think I might have something more important than psychology to offer Elena. My resolve was further tested about two months into treatment when a former boyfriend contacted Elena and asked her to move back in with him. She had broken off the relationship several years earlier because he was a drug dealer who abused her. Of course, I knew it would be a terrible idea for Elena to get back together with him, but again the psychological treatment required me not to be another male telling her what to do. She needed to make this decision. We worked for several weeks in therapy to consider the pros and cons of getting back into this relationship, and she ultimately decided not to. She made this good decision on her own, without any direct advice from me.

Still, I felt like I was torn between my responsibility as a Christian and my responsibility as a psychologist. Would God agree with my priorities to stay congruent in my role as a mental health professional while this dear soul longed for some deeper meaning in life? But what if mission is about God's heart and God's actions in the world, and is larger than I imagine, and much, much bigger than me? What if God has a purpose and a view of all the moving pieces, so that I can remain consistent in my role as a psychologist without God packing up in heaven saying, "Oh no, McMinn missed another opportunity?"

A couple months later Elena came to a session and announced that her neighbor had invited her to church. After discussing her relationship with her neighbor and her feelings about church I simply said, "That sounds like a nice invitation." It was the only time in our treatment that I gave direct advice to Elena, and it was very muted at that. She likely didn't even recognize it as advice. Elena came the following week with a story of incredible spiritual transformation. She continued growing in faith over the coming weeks and developed a spiritual vitality and psychological strength that delighted us both. Our treatment ended well, with Elena experiencing a sort of hope she had never known.

Not every story ends this way, but it serves as a powerful reminder that mission is embedded in God's nature rather than our efforts, flowing from the presence of God through our neighbors and therapists and nature itself. We could not shut off the mission of God even if we wanted—it flows through life as a fierce river of love, a relentless torrent of grace. God was already there with Elena before I showed up as her therapist. We don't initiate God's work in the world, we simply pay attention, hold our patients prayerfully in the light of Christ, and respond to God's heart, to God's abiding presence with us. The self-revealing God, made known most clearly in Jesus, is with us always, "to the end of the age."

The *missio Dei* (or the missional nature of God) tells us that God is relationally oriented *toward us* and *for us*. The incarnation is the most profound and mind-boggling illustration of God's missional and relational nature: God is not distant or removed from us as Greek dualism might suggest but chooses to come be with us. Rather than mission being a second-thought action—something Jesus thought up and commissioned after his resurrection—or program the church engages in for the purpose of salvation or church growth, mission is essential to God's being and is therefore part of our identity as the church. Mission is not so much a task as it is a way of being oriented to the world. As Bosch writes:

Missio Dei has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the church nor any other human agent can ever be considered the author or bearer of mission. Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission has its origin in the heart of God.

God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. (Bosch, 1991, p. 392)

Bosch's words highlight two essential features of the *missio Dei*: that God is by nature missional—that is, God is at work mending and tending the universe—and that we the church are invited to participate in God's missional nature. And so, we return to the Question: do we share our faith in counseling or psychotherapy? If the question is about using the Four Spiritual Laws or seeking to do the missionary work common in sociological or ecclesiological views of mission, then no, we do not often see counseling as the place to share our beliefs about God. But if we see God as missional, turned toward humanity and all creation in love, facing outward to offer us glimpses of God's self-offering, gracious heart, then yes, all counseling is participating in God's missional nature. God the Father sends the Son, the Son and the Father send the Spirit, and we are invited to participate in this grand mystery that emanates from God and results in the work of the Spirit made visible

GOD'S MISSIONAL BEING

Remember those categories theologians used? These categories have often been used to divide God's function and being. For example, theologians will talk about the economic Trinity (God's activity in the world) and the immanent Trinity (God's being) as two separate things. When mission is talked about from this dualistic lens it's often been historically understood as a *function* of God. When our study of God starts with this dichotomy, it naturally follows to think similarly about the church (being vs. acts of the church) and our very selves (who we are vs. what we do). However, missional theology is careful to not make God's activities secondary to God's being; it takes seriously the sending forth of Godself in love as essential to *who God is*, not a mere function of God. We learn who God is through God's actions—and coming to be with us reveals something essential about who God is. The incarnation was much more than a functional trip for God; this was the giving and revealing of God's very self! In this sense Christ is both *what is* proclaimed as well as *how* it is proclaimed. Being and function are married in one single event, and the church is invited to participate.^a

^aFor further reading on the immanent and economic Trinity, see Karl Rahner's (1970) book *The Trinity*.

in human form. This is the missional invitation of God, that we participate in bearing witness to the very character of God that turns toward us and reaches out to wherever we may be. In this sense, all counseling attuned to the missional character of God, marked by the guidance and fruit of the Spirit, is sharing our faith. One might even argue that counseling that is not specifically attuned to God still reflects God's missional nature in the world through conveying common grace.

Implications for Counseling and Psychotherapy

If mission begins in God's nature and then flows outward to the church, to humanity, and to all creation, this has important implications for how we think of our work as counselors and psychotherapists. We offer a few implications here, again hoping that our ideas will help generate more new thoughts and implications through conversations in classrooms and conference rooms as readers discuss what it means for God to be missional.

God is already at work. God is always and already engaged in mission to the world. This is core to God's being—our work is to notice where God is already working and come alongside.

Earlier in the chapter we observed that we may have made the word *same* too small in our Christian circles. Jesus saves us in all sorts of ways—not just by offering eternal life. Similarly, we may have made the word *faith* too small by equating it with belief. Recently, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr has appreciatively described how the psychologist and author David Benner draws a distinction between faith and belief, noting that they are actually quite different (Rohr, 2017). Beliefs are constructs we accept to be true, but faith is trust. To have faith in God, then, is not so much about what doctrines we hold to be true, but to rest in mystery without trying to have answers to every question.

In this sense, Carl Rogers had faith in humanity. Rogers (1957) believed humans would naturally grow when given a nurturing environment. Similarly, as counselors and psychotherapists with faith in God, we can trust that God is already at work in our patients' lives, moving them toward wholeness. This is not an assumption that can be fully proven through Scripture or doctrine or any other rational means, but rather an ability to rest in the mystery, awe, and beauty of a loving God. Faith in a missional God takes some of the

pressure off of us to “fix” our patients. Rather, we are invited to come alongside the redemptive, holy work that is already occurring.

This may seem a subtle distinction, but we argue otherwise. If we see it as our job to save our patients from their suffering, pain, questions, and uncertainties—either in this life or in an afterlife—we are taking God's mission on as ours. In contrast, we can, in faith, release this mission to God where it rightfully belongs because God is always turned toward the world where when we read of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), we often focus on the fruit. But what if we turn this around and take the main point of this passage to be the Spirit rather than the fruit. Here we see a missional God, turned toward the world. The fruit of the Spirit point toward a missional God and show us what it looks like to live in service to God's mission, representing God to the world around us.

Jonathan came to me (Mark) for help because a judge told him to. His anger problem landed him in court, and the judge decided counseling would be a better option than jail on this first offense. At first it seemed he was attending because of the legal consequences if he failed to show up, but eventually Jonathan began settling into the process of counseling and looking honestly for the source of his anger. Along with his distress about a dysfunctional and abusive family of origin, he eventually surfaced some deep and important questions about God. As I ponder this, I am reminded that God is at work—in Jonathan's conviction, in the judge who sent him for help, in the movement from defensiveness during his first sessions to a more open exploration of himself in later sessions, and in his desire to probe questions of ultimate meaning and significance.

Reflection Questions

1. If beliefs are constructs we hold to be true, and faith is trusting in the character of God despite the deep questions and uncertainties of life, how do you find yourself drawn to each? How might this affect your work with patients?
2. If God is missional, and always turned toward the world, what implications does this have for how you sit with your patients?

I-Thou versus I-it. It is not uncommon in the town where I (Megan Anna) live to see members of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) on their mission. When I see missionaries approaching I notice my body clench up as I brace for impact. My past experience tells me that while their intentions are good, the mission-aries would like to *do something* to me: they would like to show me the truth and as a result have my beliefs and practices change. Over the course of several conversations, I have become better at attempting to engage them as people (rather than *things* or *its* to be avoided) before politely declining their message.

This model of mission is not unique to the LDS Church. As a teenager I went on evangelism trips in order to introduce people to Christian belief and practices. In this model of evangelism, we see ourselves as holding the truth, as if we are carrying a precious container to pass on to others so that they might also hold this container of truth. I might use tools like apologetics to convince you this is a container worth holding. My goal is for you to hold the same beliefs that I hold.

But if we locate mission under the umbrella of trinitarian theology (God's essential being), it becomes less about passing out containers of belief and more about how and who we are in the world. Our being bears witness to God's being. How we are oriented in relationship with ourselves and others is reflective of and bears witness to the relational character of God. Evangelism is about extending an invitation to others into this way of being in the world. Rather than calling for apologetics and argumentative practices, this places emphasis on internal processes such as sanctification and moral development as we grow in our ability to bear witness to God through how we are in the world (Guder, 2000). To be missionally oriented toward our patients holds similar parallels. With the move toward *missio Dei* we move beyond thinking about psychotherapy as a program or method (something we do to our patients) to more about our way of being oriented toward the other in a way that bears witness to the nature of God.

Every experienced therapist knows there is some tension between learning therapeutic techniques to use in the office and actually being relationally present with our patients. Techniques have their place, of course, but whenever they compete with or detract from the relationship itself they seem ineffective or even destructive.

Jessica Benjamin (2004) explores the “doer/done-to” dynamic that unfolds in relationships where one person becomes subject and the other object. In a

doer/done-to dynamic, one person (the subject) feels pulled to act upon or *do something* to the other (the object). Both people in this dynamic are struggling to see the other and both experience being pulled into the other person's power. This concept is juxtaposed with what Benjamin calls the “symbolic or interpersonal third” where mutual recognition can occur (Benjamin, 2004, p. 11). Here two subjects encounter one another, creating a shared space of mutual recognition (seeing the other, allowing space to be impacted by the other). Benjamin's concept draws from and is similar to Martin Buber's (1958) philosophical work on I-Thou and I-it relationships. Buber's I-Thou speaks to the ability to honor another person's humanity as we recognize and see the sacredness in self and in the other, rather than relating to the other as an *it* or an object. When we fall into a *doer/done-to* dynamic we have fallen into an I-it dynamic where we relate to the other as an object. An I-Thou connection allows us to see the sacredness of the other. According to Buber, I-Thou encounters between humans can exist because of God's I-Thou encounter with humanity; perhaps what I find most captivating about these concepts is the fact that

doer/done-to dominates so many of the social and cultural systems that influence our daily lives. And this sits in radical juxtaposition to the Christian gospel where we create space to be seen by and to see the other (mutual recognition). Christ came to meet us in the incarnation—to have contact with us, through flesh, through words, to be present with us. When we recast an understanding of mission from a thing we *do* toward a way of *being* oriented to the other, it shifts from an I-it relationship to an I-Thou relationship.

QUERIES FOR PATIENTS

Consider asking your patients questions such as:

1. It takes courage to reach out for help in times of depression. How is it feeling to be sitting here talking about this?

Rather than offering a solution or treatment plan, the counselor is first trying to understand the relationship that is emerging in the office.

2. I see a sort of desperation on your face, like someone needs to take you seriously and that's just not happening. Am I getting this right?

This calls for a relational connection even when the patient might not be thinking beyond the experience of misery. Consider this as you read the following case example.

Even after we understand this distinction between doer/done-to and mutual recognition, some patients may evoke in us a strong desire to revert back to the doer/done-to patterns. Early in my clinical work I (Megan Anna) experienced this pull with Jack, a patient whose history involved trauma and addiction. Much of his life had been shaped by doer/done-to dynamics. In the first session I noticed feeling disconnected from myself, inept, and clumsy. My normal questions ran flat. He seemed to be saying, "It's awful; just make it stop" and "I've tried everything: nothing works." Perhaps the low point of the session was when he asked: "I mean seriously, do you have a magic pill you can just give me?" He was in pain and wanted me to fix him. In response, I felt as if a tidal wave had overtaken me and I had been swept up into something larger than myself. After reflecting on this experience of being pulled into a doer/done-to dynamic, I thought about how he must be feeling as a new father: hopeless, powerless, cast into an inescapable role. He felt utterly done-to in the process of becoming a father, and together we colluded so that he could pass this experience to me. Pulled into this tidal wave I frantically began *doing to* him: providing psychoeducation and suggesting interventions that fell on ears not ready to hear them. Sadly (and understandably) Jack didn't return for a second session.

In this work we will get pulled into moments of doer/done-to dynamics. These dynamics can show up like an undertow—surprising us in a current that feels stronger than we can resist. What is most helpful here is not berating ourselves when this happens (or demeaning the patient by simply dismissing them as a "difficult patient") but being curious about why this has occurred and how it may relate to the patient's experience of life outside the therapy office.

Intentional Conversations

Starters

1. Reflect on a time when you've experienced this doer/done-to dynamic. This might involve being treated as an object by someone attempting to exert their will on you, or it could be a time when you were pulled into a doer dynamic, as in the clinical example I have just offered. What was that experience like for you?
2. Reflect on different clinical experiences you have had. Are there certain types of patients that pull a more "doing" mode from you? Which types of patients do you feel most comfortable "being" with?

AUTHOR DIALOG: WHAT ABOUT EVANGELISM?

Mark: Is there ever space for evangelism?

Megan Anna: The church has often split over categories of "social gospel" and "evangelism." Part of what draws me to "missional theology is that it takes seriously both the need for evangelism and the need for social transformation. In fact, these are unified: the missional nature of the church includes bearing witness to the mission of God. Proclamation is certainly a piece of this.

Still, evangelism considered within the context of God's mission feels different from many evangelistic experiences. It is an embodied and relational evangelism that avoids any hint of a doer/done-to dynamic and is more akin to Buber's I-Thou (1958). For example, Gunder notes, "Evan-gelizing churches are churches that are being evangelized" (2000, p. 26). In other words, the church is forever converting. The church that is being evangelized—ever named into the character of God—is the evangelizing church as it invites others into the community while proclaiming salvation. In this sense the church that participates in God's mission overflows to the world.

Mark: This is a lovely notion for the church. How would you apply these notions in the context of counseling or psychotherapy?

Megan Anna: I am drawn to the psychoanalytic idea of "co-created" space as

being helpful here—the idea that our personhood is always a part of the process of therapy and we are co-creating relational

experience with our patients. These co-created spaces have the power not to simply change our patients but also to influence and change us. Co-created relational moments are periods of profound connection characterized by authenticity, "feeling felt"—moments of being seen and present with one another. There is an element of immanence in these deep moments of connectedness (Vogel & Mitchum, 2017). These sacred moments have the ability to transform us as psychotherapists too. There is humility to the idea that we are an "ever-converting church," and there is humility to the idea that we are ever-transforming or converting therapists. I think these moments in therapy embody what it is to be missionally oriented toward the other and to understand ourselves as participating in God's mission—which is always bigger than us and is interested in our transformation and growth. To be missionally for the other means we are willing to be impacted by God's activity and mission in our life. In addition to being transformed in these moments we are also offering the other a profound experience of Christian presence, and we are often using selective words in these moments.

Perhaps as we bring word and deed (i.e., Christian presence) together through therapeutic spaces, this is embodied mission. As Bosch (1991) notes: "The deed

without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty. Words interpret deeds and deeds validate words" (p. 420).

Questions of ultimate meaning. I (Mark) was part of a radio interview once with a man who had just published a book about the dangers of psychology. He raised a question that I have heard often as a critique of those who integrate psychology and Christianity: Might it be possible that by alleviating emotional pain, we are short-circuiting God's intended work in our patients' lives? Perhaps the turmoil they experience might be an impetus to seek Jesus, but instead they come to a psychologist where they learn how to feel better and then have no reason to seek a higher and more transcendent hope. When I frame this conversation in the classroom, I often just ask if we run the risk of making happier sinners and thereby rob our patients of the possibility of abundant and eternal life? It turns out these questions make for good conversations, whether on radio or in the classroom!

It is important to realize that any view of what it means to be saved is embedded in a particular historical context. Early church writers focused on the importance of the beginning of Jesus' life on earth, the incarnation—that God would become human in fulfillment of a grand and mysterious plan to demonstrate God's immense love. This was carried forward by the Eastern Orthodox Church, who see being saved as a process ultimately marked by experiencing union with God, becoming more like Jesus and thus more fully the humans we were created to be. By becoming human and taking on human flesh, Jesus became the second Adam, thus restoring human nature and inviting us to a higher way of being (Daley, 2006; see Rom 5:12-21, 1 Cor 15:22, 45).

The Western church, both Catholic and Protestant, took the doctrine of salvation in a different direction by focusing on the end of Jesus' earthly life. Substitutionary models of atonement (see chapter four) brought hope that Christ would save us so that our eternal lives might be lived in harmony with God. And three days later we see the power of resurrection, and thus the hope of our own resurrection and life eternal.

In the wake of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, liberal Protestant theologians—and later contextual theologians—began to focus on the middle of Jesus' life, focusing on Jesus as an exemplar of moral character and advocate for social change. Here the focus was on the ministry of Jesus' life on earth, and salvation called us to challenge and change unjust social structures and live more virtuous lives (Bosch, 1991). This view is a present-oriented view of salvation (restoration to shalom, wholeness in the here and now).

Notice that these different views of salvation focus on various times in Jesus' life. The early church looked at the birth of Jesus. The Western church focused more on the death of Jesus. The exemplarist view of Jesus after Enlightenment focused mostly on his life—between his birth and his death. Is it possible that all three of these traditions belong in our conversations when it comes to how Jesus saves us—including all elements of Jesus' life: birth and incarnation, earthly life, death and resurrection?

Most of us face a temptation to overemphasize one aspect of Jesus while discounting other parts. I (Megan Anna) personally run the risk of underemphasizing the end of Jesus' life—the death and resurrection. But whenever I lose a part of the whole, I lose an important aspect of the saving power of Christ. If I focus exclusively on the beauty of the incarnation—God coming to live with us—I lose sight of the enormous sacrifice God made. I need to be in conversation with people who value this part of Jesus' story to help nudge me to remember God's gracious and sacrificial love.

How we view salvation, and specifically which parts of Jesus' life we focus on most naturally, can have implications for the counseling and psychotherapy work we do. Those who most naturally focus on the beginning of Jesus' life may tend to hold a good deal of hope for human progress through progressive maturity as we see in ourselves and our patients an ability to grow toward unity with God. They may also be naturally attuned to empathy; just as Jesus came to be with us in our broken world, so we are also called to be with our patients in their times of suffering (Heb 4:15). Their faith in the human condition may at times make them shy away from utilizing interventions and confrontation, which can be therapeutically helpful. At other times it may be challenging for these counselors and psychotherapists to distinguish their work from the work of spiritual direction.

Those who focus most naturally on the middle of Jesus' life and his earthly ministry may do a beautiful job of helping patients identify their values and the internal drives that motivate them. They may also be quite attuned to the social structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression. These counselors value virtue development, social change, and deconstructing cultural narratives, with Jesus serving as the exemplar of moral character. The challenge these counselors may face may be the possibility of avoiding conversations that look directly at personal agency and responsibility contributing to the problems at hand.

Those who focus on the end of Jesus' life will likely be most concerned about matters of sin, grace, forgiveness, and individual responsibility. Rather than just providing temporary relief for the struggles facing their patients, they look at a longer view of eternal wellness and hold that view to be of utmost importance. They may run the risk of engaging in sin-based or problem-saturated conversations with patients.

When we consider what it means for our patients to be saved, we ought to also consider our natural inclinations for how we view the life and work of Jesus. And when we see our inclinations, then we do well to look for conversation partners who are naturally drawn to other views of salvation. For example, when my patients talk about shame and "being bad," I notice a reflex to move them away from shameful talk by normalizing their behavior or reassuring them. This reflects my discomfort with addressing the end of Jesus' life. But then I am reminded that there is often therapeutic value in walking with my patients into their guilt, shame, and discomfort. If I am too quick to save them from their guilt, then I may also prevent them from experiencing the grace, forgiveness, and transformation they long for.

Starting

1. What part of Jesus' story are you tempted to discount? Which parts are you most comfortable with? How do you see this playing out in your clinical work?
2. Take on an alternative or contrary thought to what you may be naturally inclined toward. For five minutes ponder the view of salvation that is most uncomfortable for you. What is meaningful about this view of Jesus? How does it help you see people and be with them more fully?

Implications for Christian Community

Though our primary focus in this book relates to counseling and psychotherapy, it also seems important to reflect on how a missional understanding of God's nature might impact Christian communities. We are thinking of Christian community broadly, as what might occur in places of worship but also in Christ-centered training programs.

Ephesians moments. Jesus didn't exactly leave a rule book when he left. Beyond "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), he didn't give much explicit instruction on how to be Christian. In fact, Jesus was Jewish through and through. He followed Torah, honored most Jewish rituals, and attended temple, even referring to the temple as his Father's house (Walls, 2002). What we learn about being Christian tends to come after Jesus as the biblical authors interpreted Jesus' words and life. Much of what we see in Acts and the epistles is the working out of Christian beliefs in an increasingly diverse world. There was a monumental moment in the apostle Peter's life that reminds us of today's context and provides a model as we consider Christian community.

Despite the call to make disciples of all nations, the Christian movement initially stayed within Jewish culture (Walls, 2002). This all changed when Peter experienced a radical call to witness to the Gentiles (see Acts 10), which he first resisted but later embraced. Eventually Peter became a passionate spokesperson for Gentiles (Acts 15:7-21). Some Jewish Christians wanted to function as the guardians of Christianity, allowing Gentiles in as long as they followed the rules: observing Jewish culture, rituals, and ways of thinking. But Peter's call was even more radical than simply tolerating and inviting the Gentiles in; this was a call to let the gospel get messy with Gentile hands, facing the gospel to be translated into a new cultural context.

Jesus did not come to earth within a vacuum; he took on a particular culture and ways of thinking when he came and translated the divine message to humanity. Peter's call was to continue the translation process to new frontiers. This is somewhat unique to Christianity among monotheistic religions. For example, in Islam, the Arabic language is integral for understanding Kuran, law, and religion—the message must stay in the original linguistic-cultural form (Sanneh, 2004).¹ In Christianity, the gospel is most fully evident

¹Sanneh (2004) refers to this as "mission by diffusion," where religion moves out from the original cultural base and is implanted into new societies through a process of cultural assimilation. This

in interaction with culture. It is alive, moving, being translated and made new, always relevant in new frontiers and cultures. At its core, Christianity embraces cultural diversity. This was built into the fabric of the church in the monumental decision not to require Gentiles to conform to Jewish rituals such as diet and circumcision (Walls, 2002).

If Peter's call to release the gospel to a culture considered heathen wasn't radical enough, it becomes even more radical in what missiologist Andrew Walls (2002, p. 72) has deemed the "Ephesian moment." Traditionally, the meal table divided the Jews and Gentiles due to the dramatically different cultural values and laws around food. In the same way, a natural progression would have been to have two distinct Christian cultures: one for Gentiles and one for Jews. And yet we see a call to a different way of being in the world in the letter to the church at Ephesus:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph 2:14-22)

Here the call is toward one Christian community, rather than creating parallel Christian communities. The one Christian community is made more whole when lived in relation to one another. Diversity and unity walk together. Diversity itself is essential to the fabric of the church's unity. We are not unified despite our diversity, we are made whole because of our diversity (Forman, 1957).

is juxtaposed with "mission as translation" which places a high value on the receiving culture and assumes that all cultures can host and be transformed by the truth of the gospel (p. 29).

The division being addressed here, in addition to being about ethnicity and culture, was also about lifestyle. These lifestyle differences were celebrated at the very place that historically marked their differences: the meal table. These followers of Jesus ate together often, because the meal table demonstrated their unity in Christ. As Walls (2002) reflects: "The shared table demonstrates the acid test. It stood for diverse humanity redeemed by Christ and sharing in him" (p. 78).

Ephesians teaches us that no one culture is guardian of the gospel. We release the gospel to be translated to new contexts, in faith that God is ultimately interested in the transformation of all cultures—each bringing something different to the table, and each open to learning from the other as we eat together. In Christianity, we don't simply tolerate or coexist with diversity, we need it. It makes us better, giving us a fuller picture of God. Diversity helps make us whole as it refines and increases our collective wisdom. Embracing diversity is essential to God's missional character and is woven into the fabric of the kingdom of God (Rev 7:9).

Unfortunately, this Ephesians moment was only briefly a lived reality. The destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE, the disbanding of the Jewish church, and the success of Gentile Christianity made the church monocultural once again, albeit a Hellenistic (Gentile) version (Walls, 2002). While this monocultural expression of Christianity has persisted, with the significant expansion of Christianity through Latin America, Asia, and Africa, we find ourselves in another Ephesians moment.

Within the United States, Christianity is becoming increasingly divisive on lifestyle, political, and racial lines. In a 1960 interview Martin Luther King Jr. famously commented that "11:00 on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America" (Spivak, 1960). Dr. King wisely reflected that the integration of the church would not occur through legal means but would need to be initiated by the church itself. Since the time King was writing we have seen increased levels of integration in society thanks to legal measures, but the church has not done as well at initiating increased integration and community across ethnic lines. Whether viewing this Ephesians moment through the lens of cultural diversity in the United States or international diversity, it shapes our understanding of Christian community. Walls (2002) warns us of two potential

pitfalls. One temptation is to guard "standard" Christianity as it is experienced in one particular culture. This was the error of colonialism. The second is to see everyone's individual faith as valid for that individual, as if it doesn't impact others. This may well be the error of postmodernism. The first pitfall fails to celebrate diversity; the second fails to seek unity. Both of these pitfalls cause us to miss the Ephesians moment, which celebrates both unity and diversity. Christianity's unity is strengthened by diversity; it can be dangerous to translate and interpret Christ on our own. We are all better when we interpret and translate Christ in relationship to one another (Forman, 1957).

This belief that we are all made more unified and whole through embracing and making space for our diverse understanding and expressions of Christianity is an unapologetic belief that forms the bedrock of this project. At the same time, diversity will only be helpful if we are around the table together, conversing with one another. While we cannot all break bread with one another, it is our dream that the conversations sparked by this book will help all of us encounter more Ephesians moments.

Integrating Conversion

1. Walls describes two pitfalls: to either insist on uniformity for the sake of unity or to "tolerate" diversity through disengagement. The challenge is to have a diverse and unified community. Why might this be important? How can you see such a community being helpful? What gets in the way of holding unity and diversity together?
2. How do we embrace diversity of thought in the classroom? In therapy? With our colleagues? What strategies can be used in the classroom to avoid the second pitfall Walls describes? In other words, how can we remain in conversation despite our diversity?

Psychotherapists contributing to theology? This notion makes us somewhat uncomfortable, and we suspect it makes some readers uncomfortable too. Psychotherapists contributing to theology? Don't we need to know three languages and endure seven years of graduate school to do such a thing? Largely influenced by Greek thought, Christian theology since Constantine has tended to be conducted "from above." A theology from above prioritizes

principles and ideas, with application being secondary (Bosch, 1991). It tends to be interested in finding and starting with the abstract truths through the use of philosophy and reason. This view from above is often considered the transcend culture and history, and as such the task of modern theology has often been to decipher the objective, timeless truths of the Bible so that we can then apply them to our daily lives.

An alternative to theology from above is theology that uses concrete experience as the starting point for understanding God, this is often deemed "theology from below." In recent years, with postmodernity and the growth of Christianity in the Global South, there is a rise of contextual theologians. While theology from above partners primarily with philosophy to accomplish its tasks, theology from below and contextual theology draw a great deal from social sciences (Billman & Migliore, 1999). This theology is a *doing* sort of theology, focusing as much on orthopraxy (right living) as orthodoxy (right belief).

Of course, both orthodoxy and orthopraxy are important, but we appreciate Barth's warning that theologians often function like "a lonely bird on a roof" (a reference to Psalm 102:7). In contrast, a theology from below is done from the trenches, with the suffering. Those of us who do psychotherapy recognize this posture because we sit with the suffering every week.

A view from above and a view from below can work together in a "hermeneutical circle" where there is a dialectical relationship between theory and praxis. Rather than thought and reason being placed on one side and action on the other, they are understood as more integrated and interdependent (this would be another example where being/essence and function are married rather than separated as has often been done in modernity). As liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (1990) argued, both orthopraxis and orthodoxy get lost if they don't have the other. The best theologies hold both together.

I (Mark) have noted with dismay how difficult it is for doctoral students in Christian psychology programs to maintain and grow in faith during their training years (see Fisk et al., 2013, for research on this topic). As I have discussed this with scores of students, my tentative conclusion is that our Christian theologies do not give students adequate room to make sense of the suffering they encounter as they do their clinical work. A sense of tragedy

settles over me whenever I realize that we are sending some of our brightest young Christians out into the world where they encounter deep suffering and struggle, while not equipping them with a theology that will hold them, allowing them to make meaning of what they experience.

We need theology that can speak to pain—theology that is contextual, birthed in the trenches. In writing this book, Megan Anna has given me hope by reminding me that cultures outside of the West (cultures less influenced by Enlightenment ideals) have been better at recognizing contextual theologies that address pain and suffering as part of their lived reality. In the Western world we tend to have difficulty with this (see chapter one on lament), though there certainly are exceptions, such as black, womanist, and Latinx, among other theologies. We are reminded of the powerful words of Ellen Charry (2001), a renowned theologian and former mentor of Megan Anna's, who wrote: "We theologians have abandoned the practitioners, and we should be ashamed. Perhaps it is not too late to begin repairing the damage" (p. 133). Psychotherapists in conversation with religious leaders can help articulate a theology of hope and meaning in a world afire. We are in the trenches, and we have something important to bring to the conversation.

Integrating Competitions

1. How can you imagine psychotherapist partnering with and shaping theology?
2. What pitfalls and dangers do you see in a tradition that focuses too much on a theology from above? What pitfalls and dangers do you see if the pendulum were to swing too far toward a theology from below?

Toward a Missional Psychology

The first Bible verse that many of us memorize is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." God loves this world, and so our theologies must actively engage it.

Missio Dei, the mission of God, reminds us that missiology is not some subset of a larger theology, but it is at the heart of all theology because God's heart is missional. God is always sending out, turned toward the world, loving and saving rather than condemning (see the next verse after the one we memorize first, John 3:17).

For those of us interested in psychology and theology, it seems reasonable to consider a question that the two of us have been pondering throughout this book project: What might a missional psychology look like? We suggest four core elements to a missional psychology while realizing that much more needs to be worked out in conversation with theologians and psychologists. First, because God loves the world and is always turned toward the world, a missional psychology should be actively engaged in understanding and serving the world. This could never be a psychology that is limited to the ivory tower of academics but must be engaged in the lived reality of everyday life. Jennifer Ripley (2012) reflects on the history of the integration movement with its focus on cognition and calls for integrationists to "move beyond academic and cognitively addressing differences between psychology and Christianity and do something practical for the world" (p. 150). She casts a vision of what applied Christian psychology may entail: increased involvement in global mental health crises through increased international partnership and training, involvement in the health-care crises (such as what is being done with primary care psychology), and increased utilization of and presence at the intersection of technology, research, and education.

Second, a missional psychology is local insofar as it is lived out in a particular context and community. Just as the word of God is interpreted and lived out in particular faith communities, so also a missional psychology must be adaptable for particular needs and populations. One psychologist serves those who face severe and persistent mental illness. Another works with couples in crisis. A third sees those experiencing racial trauma and discrimination. A fourth works in a recovery and rehabilitation setting. A fifth works in a student counseling center. A sixth works in a physician's office doing primary integrated care. We could go on and on. In each case, the way they understand and live out a missional psychology will be distinct and nuanced.

Third, a missional psychology feels more like hope than despair. We might look at the world and see incredible political divide, natural disasters, and human suffering everywhere we look. Psychotherapists might be especially prone to this view because we sit with pain day after day. Without denying or dismissing any of the world's suffering, a missional psychology sees hope in the midst of it all. God is present with us, leaning toward us, working in

our midst. Our task then isn't so much just tolerating the suffering life brings us as it is learning to rest, with relentless faith, in the presence of a loving and mysterious God at all moments in life, including the ones that are most painful and difficult.

Fourth, a missional psychology should include human thriving as well as human suffering. The field of positive psychology (see McMinn, 2017, for more) reminds us that God attends to the world in order to offer us gifts of life abundant. Yes, our world suffers under the weight of oppression and sin of all sorts, but God's missional character is turned toward us in hope. God is turned toward us in grace. The fruit of the Spirit, which is about God's character more than ours, is to be enjoyed around tables all over this world God loves so deeply.

Further Reading

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God with Us

WHERE IS GOD AMID THE DEEP
UNCERTAINTIES OF LIFE?



THE VERY WORD *integration* implies wholeness. With integration, we seek integrity, completeness, fulfillment. And so, it seems fitting in this final chapter to offer a big-picture glimpse of what we have attempted to accomplish throughout these various chapters on lament, Ecclesiastes, *imago Dei*, abandonment, and *missio Dei*. The essence of this book and of how we understand faith in a complex and pluralistic age is to affirm the great mystery of Christianity: that God chooses to be with us. This happened most prominently in a dirty Bethlehem barn a couple millennia ago when Immanuel, "God with us," became the inflection point of our modern calendar systems. Christmas reveals the heart of a relational God who showed up in a dark and uncertain world, but God's presence is not fully defined by or contained in the incarnation. It's more that the incarnation reveals the abiding character of God, who has always been with us, and who still shows up. Every chapter of this book explores this remarkable theological proclamation—that we are not alone in our questions and suffering and uncertainties. God is with us. In the *labyrinth* of our fragile existence, in our confused and sometimes chaotic understanding of who God is, in our questions about how we are saved and what we are being saved from, in our deepest sorrows and struggles, in every corner of this beautiful damaged world, God is with us. And if this is true, or even if it approximates what is true, then our primary work as counselors and psychotherapists is to relax into the peaceful posture first known only to those who are deeply loved. From this place of security,

we sit with others and offer them glimpses of hope. This, it seems to us, is the fullness of integration—that God's presence in our world ultimately informs and transforms our presence with one another. Put simply, integration is love. As God loves and accepts us, we are to love and accept one another (see Rom 15:7). We may hesitate to use the word *love* in counseling or psychotherapy because love is so easily conflated with sex in our highly sexualized world, and sex never has a place in psychotherapy, but if we could distill our view of love down to its purest form then we would be back to the simplest truth of integration in the psychotherapy office—that we are deeply loved people, called to love one another.

Brooke, a thoughtful, intelligent, and passionate young woman, came to me (Megan Anna) during her senior year of college. She had a heart for the hurting world, with a marked tendency to overextend herself, and she struggled to offer the same compassion to herself that she so naturally extended to others. It soon became clear that driving much of her anxiety and depression was an inner dialog which she nicknamed her "master." Her master had a longstanding history, being forged in her early years in the throes of trauma and abandonment. In fact, it was hard for Brooke to see the master as simply a part of herself; it felt like *all of her*.

My work with Brooke was humbling and awe provoking in that I quickly realized I was just one piece of the work God was already up to in her life. Early in treatment, when we began to explore an issue or idea, Brooke would often leave sessions with uncertainty. Then she would return the next week to discuss how throughout the week she had gained insight through conversations with professors, listening to sermons, or private times of prayer. She described rich and beautiful connections that helped her make meaning of herself and the world. We'd get the ball rolling in therapy, but God would do so much more with it throughout the week.

During one session we were discussing the shameful voice that told her she needed to *be more*. Using a third-wave cognitive behavior therapy strategy, we talked about noticing and distancing from these thoughts. Initially she struggled with this, as the master would get stronger and work harder to get her caught up in an argument about her badness. Given this push and pull I wasn't sure about the intervention, but the next week Brooke returned beaming. As she was able to create distance from the thoughts, space opened up for her to hear the quiet voice of God, reminding her that she is loved.

The healing Brooke experienced delighted me. In addition to joining with the work God was already doing in her life, I also had the pleasure of bearing witness as this woman transformed from a place of shame and doubt toward one of self-acceptance. And here I pause to note that even the term *self-acceptance* seems more pallid and therapeutically sterile than what I intend to communicate. Brooke was able to touch what many of us long for—an acceptance of self where personal identity is anchored in God. This sort of

DOING INTEGRATION AND BEING INTEGRATED

for years. I (Mark) have had students in my classes or under my supervision

between, depending on the situation and circumstances.

yearning to know how to do this thing we call "integration." Shall we pray with our patients? Is it okay to refer to Scripture? Should we bring up church involvement? Have ever a place for talking about the-ology in psychotherapy? Honestly, I think I have consistently frustrated these stu-dents with my lack of answers. Some-ones they look at me as if I know the answers to these questions but am simply going out to answer.

I don't blame my students for wanting to know how to do integration. I want to know how to do integration, but the truth is, I don't. At least I know in any generalized way that I can't give them a specific counseling strategy or methods. Counseling is as much an art as science and requires incred-ible attentiveness to the patient and cir-cumstances. Choosing to use an explicit intervention can be incredibly beneficial, or anywhere in

These days I am much more inclined to think of integration as a way of *being* in the office (and out of the office) than as something we do. To what extent am I aware of God's presence in the complex and challenging work we are doing? How am I being personally formed so that I can communicate God's love in relation to the other? Am I able to host conversations in the office that honor the dignity of the other, demonstrating sincere curiosity and humility? Am I attuned to the present moment, and willing to stay in the mo-ment even when my mind is racing a mil-lion miles a minute toward the latest evidence-based intervention? Ultimately, these are all questions about being a lov-ing presence with the hurting soul that is sitting with me. They are questions about recognizing and reflecting—however dimly—the loving presence of God in our broken world.

deep self-acceptance freed Brooke to freely gift her passion, creativity, and love outward to the world. There is no sophisticated model for integration at play here: what I needed to do with Brooke was simply to create a space of acceptance that allowed for God's presence while having ears to hear when she talked about her spiritual life. God was with us in the therapy room each week, and God continued to be with Brooke in the intervening times through her relationships, in church, in nature, and through prayer.

God was also with me through Brooke's presence. Seeing the transformation in her reminded me anew of the power of divine presence. Yes, it can be frustratingly ambiguous when we talk about what it means for God to be with us in the psychotherapy room, and I suspect there are no good ways to quantify this, but still it seems both powerful and evident in this work we are blessed to do.

God has persisted in being with and for us throughout time. We draw on the imagery of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer to provide a frame for taking a deeper diver into this conversation.

God the Creator

From the beginning we see a God who is for and with us. In chapter three (on *imago Dei*) we explored how the Hebrew creation account differs from the gods represented in other ancient Near Eastern accounts. God blessed the creation from the beginning. Built into the fabric of the creation narrative is a God who desires to be with us. At times our Christian tradition has struggled to hold onto and retain this basic foundation and premise of God's blessing.

Brueggemann (1982) reflects how this original blessing (God who is for and with us) can at times be obscured behind a theology of sin. A theology of blessing is sometimes buried in traditions that tend to overemphasize the "deep gulf between the goodness of God and the unhealthiness of the world" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 36). The starting point of creation is goodness as God blesses, creates, and calls creation "good." A theology of blessing speaks to the expansive, generative, life-giving power God infuses into ordinary life.

As one who has written a fair amount about sin (e.g., McMinn, 2008), I (Mark) have been challenging myself recently to ponder ways I might focus

overly much on sin. My interest in sin emerged from a deep, abiding interest in grace, and I have argued that we cannot understand one without the other. But the deep gulf Brueggemann describes between a good God and a broken world has been evident in my writing and thinking about sin and grace over the years. One of the ways I am challenging myself is to pay more attention to the goodness of creation, noticing the splendor of cedars and oaks, watching seedlings grow into mature plants, and standing amazed at the process, listening to the birds sing, paying attention to the vistas in this gorgeous valley where I am blessed to live. Nature reminds me how much I belong to something bigger than myself. I recently read two books with the title "Original Blessing" (Fox, 1983; Shroyer, 2016). I liked one book quite a lot more than the other, but both challenged me to recall that the first truth of creation—the most original thing—is God's love and blessing rather than sin.

Genesis 1-11 plays out like a cosmic love tragedy, serving as a prophetic backdrop for which the rest of the biblical narrative unfolds. God, in immense love and abundance, creates and invites creation into relationship, and yet again and again humanity turns away from God. Brueggemann (1982) observes:

The main theme of the text is this: God and God's creation are bound together in a distinctive and delicate way. This is the presupposition for everything that follows in the Bible. It is the deepest premise from which good news is possible. God and his creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God toward that creation. (pp. 23-24)

Simply, if we read the New Testament assuming that sin is the most original part of the story, then God's grace seems to be offered as a corrective for our sin problem. But instead, we could read the New Testament through the lens of original blessing. Yes, we have a sin problem, but the foundational truth of creation is first the truth of blessing and the deep, abiding love of God. And in this light, grace is an enormous gift flowing out of God's abundance (Snyder, 2015), revealing the very character of God. Viewed in this way, grace is extended to the New Testament where a particular dispensation allows for a different humanity differently than before, but it is always evident through the entire narrative of human history. God's movement toward creation is always there. It is filled with self-offering grace and generosity.

In creation, throughout the prehistoric narratives of Genesis 1-11, throughout the years of slavery in Egypt, during forty years of wandering in the desert, God remained present. During Israel's sojourn in the wilderness the desert, God came as a pillar of fire leading the people at night; during the day God was a pillar of cloud. God's presence was relentless: "Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people" (Ex 13:22). God persisted in being present, functioning as Israel's servant by carrying the torch ahead of Israel in the wilderness, providing for their needs (Moltmann, 1992). A God this passionately and enduringly bound to humanity suggests that God also suffers alongside us as we journey through deserts. As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1992) reflects: "He binds himself so closely to Israel that he becomes one heart and one soul with her, as if he were her 'twin brother.' So Israel's shame is God's shame too, Israel's exile is God's exile, Israel's sufferings are God's sufferings" (p. 49). This is a God in the trenches with Israel, suffering alongside, taking on their shame. And this sort of "being with" brings consolation and hope in the midst of deep anguish (Moltmann, 1992).

Persistence in the face of attachment injury: We crave connection and attunement amidst deep anguish; as relational beings, attachment buoys us in the face of suffering. Sue Johnson (2008), one of the founders of emotionally focused therapy, has contributed helpful language for understanding how human vulnerability and relational needs and patterns get played out through the lens of attachment. Johnson explores how we put out "attachment cues" when we need connection with a significant other. When these cues are missed or neglected this may move us into "attachment protest." For infants this looks like crying. For adults it may also look like crying; however, we tend to get more creative in our attachment protests the more life experiences we gather. When we protest and continue not to be heard this may result in an "attachment injury." Many other events can also result in attachment injuries: betrayal, perceived abandonment, relational misses, and disconnections. When our attachment cues and protests are continually met with misses and rejection this leaves a lasting impact. When someone's attachment cues are denied deep enough or often enough this will influence how they go about signaling for attachment. Johnson works with partners to identify when they have become stuck in a perpetual loop of attachment injury, helping

patients to name their attachment vulnerabilities and needs and move toward connection. This is risky business, as it requires a partner to be vulnerable and honest about their desires and attachment needs—something that is hard to do when we are feeling injured and protective of ourselves. It takes vulnerability and risk to get out of the misconnection loop and into authenticity, intimacy, and connection.

One of the first couples I (Mark) saw in my early career was an unhappily married couple who couldn't figure out how to see and respond to one another's bids for attachment. Brent was inclined toward a domineering style, seeing himself as the spiritual and relational leader in the home and attempting to accomplish this with military precision. His bids for connection tended to be sexual, and often without the relational warmth that Jill longed for. Rather than seeing his desire for sex as a relational bid, she viewed it as an effort to be controlling and demanding, and so resisted. Over time, both felt isolated, misunderstood, and rejected. Things spun out of control when Jill found an attuned and caring male friend. They had a short-lived affair, which upped Brent's demands for relational closeness through sexual encounter. This, in turn, frustrated and alienated Jill. Though she felt repentant and ashamed of the affair, she could not find her way back to relational warmth toward Brent even as she complied with his frequent requests for sex. Because she lacked enthusiasm, Brent perceived even more relational rejection. After a year with all three of us working as hard as we could to improve their marriage, I recall a session where we all sat in tears and concluded the damage could not be repaired. I ran into Brent a year later and he told me that he and Jill were divorced, and recovering.

Perhaps this is part of why we are so drawn to and horrified by the love legend of the biblical narrative: God continually experiences attachment injury and yet God does not respond in the predictable way. God remains steady despite the attachment injuries endured. God takes these on and continues to call and invite humans into relationship. God is singularly unique in his ability to persist despite attachment injuries. We as humans tend to sidestep as well when our attachment cues are persistently neglected. Often when we've lost a sense of safety and trust our calls for attachment become more strained or pricklier, or they simply stop coming.

Attachment Conversation

1. When you experience attachment injury or attachment misses, what do your attachment protests look like? How might this be activated when working with clients?
2. Though the theme of this chapter is God with us, we hold this as a theological truth that may not always be self-evident. After times of loss or trauma, sometimes we and our clients may experience attachment injuries with God, as if God is not with us at all. We may ask, "God, where were you? Why did you let this happen?" When people are experiencing an attachment injury with God, how do you sit with them in this?

Against all odds: Reflections on faith and cognitive dissonance. We live in a world where young girls and boys are sold like cattle into the sex industry (Panko & George, 2012), where 3.1 million children die of undernourishment every year (UNICEF, 2018), where suicide rates among teens have increased by 20 to 30% in the United States since 2007 (Center for Disease Control, 2017). With all the natural disasters, human disasters, and systemic sin, it's hard to navigate this world and avoid the question, "God, where are you?" It's beautiful to read words about original blessing and God's commitment to the earth's well-being, but so often we sit with people in some of their darkest moments. What does this theology really do for us? Is it Pollyannaish of us to persist in belief in the goodness of God and the goodness of creation? Are we engaging in cosmic denial when we hold onto belief of a good God despite all of the contemporary data?

These are not new questions. Likely, these are similar to the questions the Israelites asked during the exile. Estranged from family members, facing early death and inhumane conditions, Israelites may have wondered where Yahweh was amidst their suffering and cries of protest. One way of learning how Israelites made sense of these questions is by looking to the first creation narrative, likely written during the Babylonian exile (Brueggemann, 1982). It's striking that this beautiful story of God's presence and commitment to creation was cultivated and written during a time of suffering, a time where people likely struggled and felt abandoned. Exacerbating their abandonment was the fact that they lived in a swirl of Babylonian theology asserting that

their gods had defeated Israel's God. Amidst Israel's suffering they had the audacity to proclaim that God is still the "Lord of all of life" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 25). This Judeo-Christian creation story is a bold theological assertion: despite the present circumstances, God is the creator of all life and chooses

AUTHOR DIALOG: HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Mark: Megan Anna, as we have worked on this book together, I notice how often you refer to the Hebrew Scriptures, or what we might commonly call the Old Testament. This has both surprised and delighted me, because it is so different than what most Christians talk about these days. I hear many more sermons about the New Testament than the Old. What inspires you to look so frequently to the Hebrew Scriptures as you ponder the integration of psychology and Christianity?

Megan Anna: Well, how many words do we have left until we exceed our word count? I could write many words on this, but I'll refrain and keep it to these two thoughts: it speaks into our mess, and it can be a voice inviting us back into our full humanness.

I fall in love with the gritty, messy, contextual nature of Hebrew Scripture while at seminary. In many ways it reminds me of our current context. As we live through a massive shift from a modern frame of reference toward a postmodern frame, our context is a bit messy and gritty. Additionally, our relationship to knowledge is shifting. Rather than starting from a top-down

approach (starting with systematic theory or "objective reality"), we are increasingly engaging a bottom-up approach—starting with the messy, relational contexts from which we live. From these spaces emerge embodied and contextualized truths, meanings, questions, and life lessons. In many ways the Hebrew people were doing something similar. In this sense it is a "contextual theology." Personally, this resonates with me deeply.

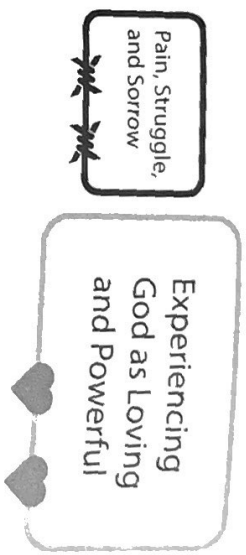
Another reason I am drawn to Hebrew Scripture is the embodied nature of it—the mind and soul intermingle in a humanizing and refreshing way. I suspect that one of the reasons we're experiencing such a whiplash to modernity is because we're reacting to what it has done to us (for example, the modern concept of "buffered" self as explored in chapter three). We live in a disembodied culture, alienated from the rest of creation, each other, and ourselves, making it incredibly difficult to be a whole, integrated self. I think the Hebrew Scriptures offer wisdom that may be helpful as we find our way back to humanness.

to be bound to creation in grace. God watches over creation and is committed to its growth and well-being. From the pangs and despair of imprisonment, this narrative proclaims that God is still with us and has not abandoned us. Leon Festinger (1962) developed cognitive dissonance theory to describe the common experience of being misaligned. When our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are in conflict we experience cognitive dissonance. As humans we innately strive for balance and consistency, and one way we do this is to reshape our beliefs and attitudes in order to fit our actions. This can be a rude awakening to those of us who wish to believe it works the other way around—that we shape our actions based on our values and beliefs (Hilberg, 2017). We work to bring our beliefs into alignment with our behavior in order to reduce the anxiety and tension caused by cognitive dissonance.

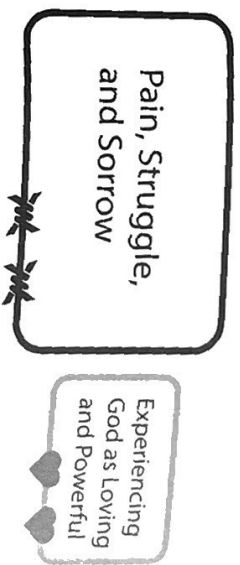
Recently my (Megan Annas) five-year-old took up chess, so we frequently spend summer afternoons playing. He has a warm and wonderful attitude and is a good sport about losing, except that he really doesn't like losing his queen, the most powerful piece on the chessboard. When I capture his queen it is common for him to create a rule so that we can undo the last move and he can reclaim her. My son is practicing impressive skills at resolving the cognitive dissonance that comes up for him: he values following the rules and he also values keeping his queen in the game. When he creates a rule that justifies saving his queen, he is aligning his beliefs, attitudes, and desires in a way that allows him to continue to play with ease.

While cognitive dissonance theory has been around for some time, research looking at how this influences belief formation remains limited (Hilberg, 2017). Our minds don't like cognitive dissonance, so we will chew on a problem until we have landed on a conclusion to resolve the tension, even if it's a painful conclusion. Holding the goodness of God, God's commitment to be with us in suffering, in a world afire with pain is often a significant source of cognitive dissonance for people of faith. How can God be both loving and powerful while still allowing such pain and struggle in the world (see sidebar "Theodicies" in chapter one)? While surely there are many alluring ways to solve this dissonance, there are two that seem most common (see figure 2). One possibility is that we can solve the dissonance by keeping faith in a good God and dismissing or ignoring suffering. This can be as simple as denying and avoiding interacting with suffering or it can also take the shape

Solution 1: Minimize or trivialize the pain



Solution 2: Move away from God



Solution 3: Embrace mystery, hold tension, be open to lament

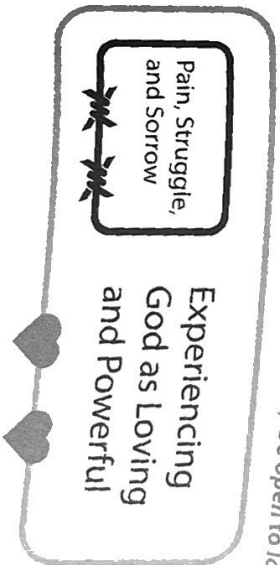


Figure 2. An implicit tension

of supposing a cause for the suffering (i.e., “she must have done something to deserve it;” “the earthquake was God’s punishment for their Muslim beliefs,” and so on). Social psychologists call this the “just-world assumption”—that we resolve our tension with the suffering of the world by assuming others somehow get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980).

A second possibility is that we can deny that God is both loving and powerful perhaps moving toward deconversion and abandoning faith. Most of us have probably seen the national polling data showing how prominent this has become.

But there is also a third alternative, which is to hold on to the dissonance. What if faith is more a mystery to behold than a logic problem to be solved? What if we can hold faith in God while still honestly lamenting the pain of the world? Over the last several years I have been intrigued by why some persist in faith despite the odds, despite the dissonance, and what makes the difference.

I find the writers and thinkers I am nourished by are those who have journeyed through complexity—those who sit in the tension of cognitive dissonance. Supreme Court Justice Wendell Holmes once remarked: “The only simplicity for which I would give a straw is that which is on the other side of the complex” (Howe, 1961, p. 109). I suspect a faith that can hold onto God’s goodness amidst the muck is a faith that has journeyed through the complexity.

I met Jake, a political science major, during his junior year of college. He had a passionate and aching heart for the world and struggled to make sense of a good God amidst the “contemporary data” of a world afire with suffering and pain. Why was God not acting? Why was God silent? These are questions I often sit in with people on the cusp of deconversion; they are the tipping point for many. As I sat with Jake I wondered which direction this question would take him. Would he journey to the other side of complexity? Jake and I explored much in our work together: Where is God amid the suffering? What is the role of the church in being God’s response to the suffering? Is there space for belief in a God who is boldly present amidst suffering and yet does not change it? How do we understand the God who did not allow the cup to pass from Jesus but who was with him until the bitter end on the cross? Jake cycled between hope and disbelief on an emotional roller coaster as he navigated his faith crises and identity under the weight of these questions. While it was tempting to bring in my own personal perspectives of how I have come to understand God amidst suffering, I knew that telling Jake the answers I had come to on my own journey through complexity would not magically transport him to the other side of complexity. I became his companion, helping to identify the questions and tensions he was asking, being a safe place to explore his questions, and (when appropriate) pointing him

toward the voices and witnesses of the others who had walked the path of complexity to sojourn with him.

The creation narrative, written in the crux of suffering, claims the simplicity on the other side of complexity. This is not a rose-colored-glasses, simplistic proclamation of faith, but a declaration and praise of God’s goodness amidst the bewildering confusion and despair that come with pain and isolation. It provides us with a model of how to avoid the two pitfalls of the quandary: denying suffering or abandoning faith. But it does require us to hold some dissonance as we move toward believing that God is with us, holding us, in the midst of suffering. This is a simplicity of presence. Maybe God being with us is more important than cinching down an answer to the deep existential questions that are fueled with “contemporary data.”

1. If applicable, what allows you to persist in faith despite “contemporary data”?
2. When faced with suffering, do you notice yourself leaning toward one of the poles we have described: denying suffering or disbelief? If so, how might this impact your clinical work?

Jesus the Redeemer

Arguably the most dramatic embodiment of God with us is through the incarnation—the *logos* taking on human flesh (Jn 1:1). And yet the drama starts with the meekness of an infant’s cry.

It’s one thing to imagine God in the throne room of heaven and quite another to ponder the stench of a stable, the arduous work of a carpenter, the thirst that must have accompanied treks through the sun-scorched Palestinian landscape, the fatigue of dealing with crowds day after day, the anguish of Gethsemane, the blood-stained cross. God chose to come near through taking on the myriad of experiences that come with having a human body. I (Megan Anna) was slow in coming around to recognizing the importance of the embodied life Jesus lived on this earth for thirty-three years prior to his crucifixion. It was through the writings of Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō that my appreciation for the significance of this embodied God took new life. Endō (1978) wrote about the power and beauty of a God

who chose to come, experience embodiment, and suffer with us. In Endō's stories he often depicts the weakness, emancipation, and "ugliness" that Jesus took on as he chose to enter the pain of the world. In his novel *The Samurai* (1983), the samurai, the central character, who at first couldn't fathom why the priests worshiped a weak God dying on a cross, later came to write this about Jesus:

I can believe in Him now because the life He lived in this world was more wretched than any other man's. Because he was ugly and emaciated. He knew all there was to know about the sorrows of the world. He could not close His eyes to the grief and agony of mankind. That is what made Him emaciated and ugly. (p. 220)

At first the samurai, with his cultural value of strength and honor, could not fathom bowing down to a weak and miserly God. It was in touching this God amidst his suffering and realizing the purpose of God choosing weakness that he came to belief.

Worshipping a God who chooses weakness is countercultural. Endō does a beautiful job depicting Jesus, who took on the human experience of suffering out of his commitment to be humanity's "eternal companion" (Endō, 1978, p. 80). Jesus suffered so that when we experience the throes and pangs of life, we need not be in it alone. In moments of darkest pain, we have an eternal companion.

Just as the embodied life of Jesus is a profound way God persists in being with us, so also the death and resurrection of Christ marks a significant moment. When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple is ripped. Prior to this, God met people at the temple. The ripping of this curtain represented the expansive presence of God now moving beyond the temple. Through Jesus' death the presence of God has now expanded and moves beyond: "No longer does God sit in his holy temple (Ps 11:4), whose destruction the ripped curtain epitomizes. God remains with us, crucified with us and for us" (Black, 2005, p. 52). This was the great democratization of God's presence—now opened up to the whole world.

I met Jessie just after she ended a tumultuous and traumatic marriage. She was experiencing guilt, shame, confusion, and anger—along with depression and a heightened sense of isolation. Though in the past she received significant comfort from God, now she felt blocked whenever she tried to connect with

God. Painful thoughts and memories would intrude and "get in the way." I wondered aloud if it was possible that God would be interested in these thoughts too—that perhaps these thoughts were not simply intrusions but actually some intuitive recognition that God is big enough to hold all of her. Jessie, having consistently spent a great deal of energy attempting to get rid of weakness so *that* she could go to God, looked at me with baffled but intrigued eyes. She returned to the next session in a much better mood. Once again, she experienced connection with God, describing how she invited God into the terror and pain. Rather than trying to get rid of her suffering and weakness so that she could get back to God, she started inviting God into the pain and vulnerability. Not only did this mean that once again she felt connected to God, it also meant that more of her was connected to God, even her confused and shameful parts. If God were only interested in connecting with "spiritualized" parts of us, I suspect God would not have chosen to take on humanness, experiencing it all. Precisely because God took on these human experiences, we can hold hope that God desires to connect with us in all our complexity and messiness.

Though I (Mark) resist metaphors that cast the therapist as Jesus, it seems important to notice the posture we take in the therapy office in relation to the way Jesus chose to enter the world. If we enter into counseling relationships with the goal of being all-powerful and all-knowing—the expert who comes to save the suffering—we will likely fail our patients and ourselves. But if we enter in humbly, as fellow pilgrims who understand complexity and suffering and pain, then we are more likely to make genuine, healing connections with those who seek our help. Some place deep in the human heart seems to yearn for another to listen, to care, to understand, to be with us. This is the transformative essence of the Christian story, that God loves us so immensely that Jesus would come to be with us.

In one of the most beautiful passages of the New Testament—and one of the very first christological arguments about the divine nature of Jesus—the apostle Paul describes the humility incarnate so poignantly:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as

better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross. (Phil 2:1-8)

Jesus is with us in our confusion and struggle and squalor. This is the great self-emptying, seen in Jesus who has every right to assert authority and superiority over the rest of us. But instead, Jesus humbles himself, even as we who have no right to assert superiority over one another squabble about who is greatest. This is the humble Jesus who comes to be with us and then invites us to accept one another even as he has accepted us (Rom 15:7).

Integration Conversation Starter

1. We rightly see God as powerful and mighty, but with the incarnation we see a God who comes in vulnerability and weakness. Theologians refer to the kenosis (self-emptying) revealed in Jesus. How does this view of God change the way you think about yourself in the world? Might it change the way you sit with patients?
2. Have you seen patients who feel a need to shield God from their true feelings and thoughts, as with the example of Jessie? How have you tended to respond? What sort of therapeutic responses might help your patients be more wholly themselves in God's presence?

The Sustaining Spirit

Jesus provides us with helpful imagery in describing the Spirit: advocate, guide, helper, counselor (e.g., Jn 14:26, 16:7). Even with this helpful imagery, describing the precise characteristics and personhood of the Spirit can

be challenging. Candles are so often used in Christian worship, and sometimes it seems that the flickering flame—moving and warming and brightening—does a better job explaining the Spirit than words (see sidebar “The Spirit as Flickering Flame”). Still, in the pages of a book we are limited to words and the pictures they create, so we explore three images here: the Spirit as sustainer, companion, and intercessor in suffering; the Spirit as midwife to new life, and the creative, expansive energy of God's Spirit.

THE SPIRIT AS FLICKERING FLAME

Over many years of being involved in the integration of psychology and Christianity, I (Mark) have been surprised how little we discuss the work of the Holy Spirit. There are exceptions, such as Siang-Yang Tan's fine work on this topic (e.g., Tan & Gregg, 1997), but for the most part we have written and discussed two persons of the Holy Trinity.

As I've pondered this lack, I have begun to feel some compassion and understanding toward all of us doing this work. The language of integration has been the written and spoken word. We write books and articles, talk together at conferences, teach our classes with our required textbooks and written paper assignments. This has been a cognitive, intellectual endeavor for the most part, and pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit) is not as easily contained in words and intellectual concepts as other theologies may be.

And so we offer the picture of a flickering flame, knowing that candles are used in worship through many traditions and times. The mesmerizing movement of a candle flame—moving with the wind, never being quite predictable enough for mathematic description—provides a subtle reminder that the Spirit is alive and active in every part of our lives, including our professional work.

I once had a colleague who would bring a candle into the classroom each time he taught, perhaps without consulting our institution's fire safety protocols. It seemed an unusual practice to me years ago even apart from the fire risk, but now I am drawn to this as a practical way of remembering that God's presence can never be reduced to our ideas, words, theologies, and theories. This is an active presence, an experiential, moment-by-moment presence. God's Spirit is moving with us, lighting our way.

The Spirit as sustainer, companion, and intercessor in suffering. The Spirit of God is present amidst suffering. This sounds like a sterile theological assertion, but it is also a deep personal comfort. Whatever our struggle, our loss or quandary, whatever challenges we face that resist solutions, God's Spirit is present with us, sustaining us and bringing us comfort. This has not only been true since the time of Jesus on earth, but throughout all human history.

Beginning in the Hebrew Scripture we see this in the portable tabernacle constructed during Israel's long sojourn in the wilderness. The tabernacle demonstrated God remaining present in the middle of difficult circumstances while speaking to the "descent and indwelling of God in space and time" (Moltmann, 1992, p. 47). This dwelling of God, referred to in Hebrew as *Shekinah*, holds Israel's joy and pain, and comes to take on particular meaning in the presence of suffering. The *Shekinah* traveled with the Israelites into exile and remained present during their deepest anguish. Back then, as is still true now, God's indwelling Spirit is present in suffering.

The Holy Spirit being present in suffering continues into the New Testament, accompanying Jesus into the terror of suffering and death: "Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God" (Heb 9:14). Here we see the mystery of the Trinity: three in one. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one, and yet distinct. In their distinction the Spirit ministers to Jesus: "The Spirit does not suffer in the same way, for he is Jesus' strength in suffering. . . . On Golgotha, the Spirit suffers the suffering death of the Son, without dying with him" (Moltmann as quoted by Rennebohm & Thoburn, 2017, p. 133).

Beyond being present with and providing strength during suffering, the Spirit also provides communication when words fail us: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). The Spirit is present with us, sustaining us and communicating on our behalf because—as every experienced psychotherapist understands—words are often not enough.

Within the Hebrew tradition, the idea of *Shekinah* has continued to mean that whenever people gather to study Torah they invoke the presence of God. The *Shekinah* is made manifest as we create sacred relational spaces, characterized by Buber's I-Thou encounter (Rennebohm & Thoburn, 2017). Though

the psychotherapy relationship isn't typically for purposes of studying Torah or the Bible, it is certainly a place where I-Thou encounters occur, where two souls commune and work both with words and with realities that are too big for words. It seems a reasonable assertion to say that as we step into relationship with our patients the Spirit who sustains, strengthens, and communicates amidst suffering is there with us.

So often throughout my career I (Mark) have been asked about praying aloud with patients as part of psychotherapy. This is a complicated question that I have attempted to address elsewhere (McMinn, 2011), though imperfectly. But one thing that remains crystal clear in my mind is that silent prayer is a beautiful part of the work we do in our counseling offices. I sometimes tell my students that my favorite prayer is a brief, one-word utterance: "Help!" And the thing is, God does help. Time after time I have sensed the sustaining, encouraging presence of God's Spirit as I recognize the limits of my own abilities and call out to God for sustenance and direction. God with us is not at all a sterile theological concept to me, but a lived reality experienced year after year, session after session, while sitting with people in anguish and suffering.

It's sometimes surprising for new counselors and psychotherapists to realize how lonely the work can be. We sit with people in conversation all day long, so how could this possibly be socially isolating? But soon we realize how lopsided these conversations are as we settle into the reality that we are ones who listen and know the other while professional boundaries prevent us from being known by our patients. Yes, we may have colleagues in the office, but each of us closes our door hour after hour to engage in sacred and healing and yes, lopsided, conversations with those who need our help. So while we may be in the vicinity of colleagues, we are rarely interacting with them. And sometimes when we head home in the evenings to the ones we love, we are so relationally exhausted from the day that we choose to read a book or watch television rather than engaging in the mutually satisfying relationships that we most long for. Thankfully, over time we come to recognize the reality of this loneliness and find ways to counteract it. We learn to put the book down in the evening and engage with our friends and partners over meaningful conversation. We prioritize staff meetings or lunches with colleagues in the office. And we come to recognize God's spirit as a steady, compassionate companion, not only for our patients but for ourselves as we

sit hour after hour holding our patients' heavy and wounded stories, sometimes feeling as if the weight of the world were on our shoulders.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. When and how have you noticed the sustaining presence of God's Spirit when doing counseling or psychotherapy?
2. In what ways, if any, does it resonate to think of psychotherapy as lonely work? How do you find God's Spirit to bring hope and comfort when you encounter this loneliness?

The Spirit as midwife to new life. The Holy Spirit does more than be present amidst suffering and provide us strength. The Spirit also acts as midwife to redemption, ushering in new life. In the great trinitarian mystery, we even see the Spirit in a midwife role in relation to Jesus: "The Spirit's companionate presence accompanies Jesus onto the cross and into death, and then is there to usher in new life through the resurrection" (Rennebohm & Thoburn, 2017, p. 133). The Spirit ushers us to the other side of suffering, inviting us into abundant life, while clothing us with "power from on high" (Lk 24:49). The Spirit moves creation toward new life, inviting us into an "ongoing process of becoming" (Rennebohm & Thoburn, 2017, p. 132).

Those of us who are licensed clinical professionals typically work out a deal with our patients and their health insurance carriers to identify and treat a set of symptoms, to get our patients back to "normal" so they can carry on with the social and occupational requirements of life. We consider this healing, but fairly often we encounter some greater, more astonishing reality that counseling is not just about removing unwanted symptoms or restoring a person to normal. Sometimes, many times perhaps, it is about offering our patients a glimpse into a better life, a connected and relational life where they dare to dream and hope and imagine new possibilities. We witness this over and over in our careers, and with any luck it never stops taking our breath away. The power of relational transformation is simply stunning. And for those of us who consider our work integrative, each of these opportunities allows us to bear witness to the redemptive work of God's Spirit, who is bringing forth new life from the pangs of suffering.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. How have you experienced the power of new life as you sit with suffering souls?
2. When experiencing this sort of transformation, some counselors are inclined to take personal credit ("I'm a good therapist"), others are inclined to give God's Spirit credit for the change ("This was so much bigger than me; God deserves the credit"). Can you imagine an integrative way to explain these good outcomes—one that both validates the counselor's work and skill while also acknowledging the active midwifery role of God's Spirit?

The creative, expansive energy of God's Spirit. Moltmann (1992) brings depth to the conversation of the character of the Holy Spirit by connecting the Holy Spirit described in the New Testament to the Spirit of God described in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Ruach* is a word used 380 times in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the Spirit of God. *Ruach* means "something living and moving over something that is rigid or dead" (typically translated "breath," "wind," or "spirit"). Twenty-seven times *ruach* is applied to Yahweh, roughly translating to something like "the moving, alive, expansive presence of Yahweh is here" (Moltmann, 1992). This is a creative, expansive energy. God's presence does not close places; rather, it opens up spaces.

As I (Megan Anna) read Moltmann's (1992) reflections on Yahweh's *ruach*, I experienced expansion taking place within. I found myself pouring over the following passage, aware it spoke a deep truth that I did not yet fully comprehend. I felt a deep connection to a rich, potentially painful, and transformative truth. I found myself returning to these words over and over, allowing them to wash over me with pain and pleasure:

In the elemental experiences of life, love and death we are touched by perceptions of a sensory kind. . . . They mold us, and become our companions. They are events in the past, which never become "past," but are continually present to us. We repress them, we work on them, we puzzle over them and interpret them, for we have to live with them. Our biographies are molded by experiences like this. . . . Even today I can still feel shaken by the terror of early experiences of death, even if I am no longer consciously aware of them, and even though "the activity of my reason" tells me that these experiences are forty-seven years old, and go back to the fire-storm that raged through Hamburg

in 1943. But for all that, these experiences are present with me still. I can feel myself back into them, and they still plunge me into the same terror as they did then. . . . We can never say about an experience of this kind "I had it" as if it were finished and done with, something past and gone. We are continually still involved in experiencing confronting events like these. . . . For primary experience is something that "happens to us," something that overpowers us without our intending it, unexpectedly and suddenly. . . . The person whose experience is changed in the process of experiencing. So although in German one talks about "making" an experience, it is not I who "make" the experience. It is the experience that "makes" something of me. (Moltmann, 1992, pp. 20-23)

In modern philosophy and theology (and perhaps in modern psychology) experiences are often squeezed into the realm of reason. We use words to remember and describe an experience, and in so doing we cheapen it. This is reflective of the Western tendency to place the center of human identity within the realm of consciousness, reason, and will, and to diminish the importance of bodily perceptions and sensations (Moltmann, 1992).

Counselors should know better. We work every day with people whose struggles are not just in the mind but are deeply embodied. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Van der Kolk (2014) demonstrates how the body remembers trauma on a neurological level. Our life experiences are not just cognitive memories that we have and move past; they mold and shape us, and we continue to carry them with us in our bodies. These events from the past become organically integrated into our entire bodies, impacting our brains, hearts, immune systems, and body composition even as they inform the existential questions that shape how we navigate life.

Still, even those of us who are counselors and psychotherapists sometimes struggle with our lived, experiential, embodied ways of knowing. When sharing the above Moltmann text with my therapist and exploring my tendency to keep experiences at arm's length by relegating them to my intellect, I mentioned how I found myself deeply drawn to this passage due to my desire to open myself more fully, allowing experiences to mold me. My therapist reflected, "There is part of you that wants to go under the knife of experience." I suspect that on one level we are all always "under the knife of experience," but how fully we surrender ourselves to such a thing is another matter. Are we welcoming the molding and formation that comes

through lived, embodied experiences or pushing away and closing ourselves from this possibility?

Maybe one reason it is so difficult to willingly "go under the knife" is related to the idea of *hebel*, explored in chapter two. Experiential living requires an ability to live in the moment, releasing illusions of control and embracing all its wildness and uncontrollability. It means we hold the one- and five-year plans loosely; we loosen our tight grip on control and predictability. This mission would be utterly terrifying if it weren't for the hope of Yahweh's *ruach*.

The Spirit's Gifts: Starting

1. How willing are you to "go under the knife of experience" (i.e., to be impacted by the people you meet, the interactions you have, the moments of terror, the moments of hope)?
2. How do you assess your patients' relationship to experience? When they talk about experience, are they keeping it locked in the realm of rationalism and will? Are they inviting the work of the Spirit to be with and transform them?
3. How open are you to inviting God's Spirit into the therapy room to be with you and your patients as you mutually go "under the knife of experience"? How is this related to the task of spiritual formation?

God's Spirit is present with us in our experiences—the joyous ones and the terrifying ones—and then invites us to be spiritually formed in response. This is not a haphazard, willy-nilly forming, but one that calls us forward toward life abundant, toward vitality and redemption. "*Ruach* creates space. It sets in motion. It leads out of narrow places into wide vistas, thus conferring life" (Moltmann, 1992, p. 43). *Ruach* invites us to experience the expansive space of God's freedom, and within this space we are invited to become more fully alive.

God meets us in our little experiences and creates wide vistas that are life giving and transformational. Furthermore, within the kabbalistic Jewish tradition, *Makom*—a secret name for God—means "wide space" (Moltmann, 1992, p. 43). God not only creates wide, expansive places, God is wide space. God widens the narrow. If I did not believe that God's Spirit meets me in the narrow passages of personal experience, I would struggle to willfully choose

to “go under the knife of experience” and open myself to be changed and molded by life events. It is confidence in the ever-present *ruach* of God, who is committed to suffering with, being with, and opening up wide vistas, that provides me with confidence to take the leap and meet myself and my patients in our narrow edges of experience. Yahweh’s persistent presence with us is ever opening up spaces and creating new life. God’s Spirit provides Christian therapists an anchoring comfort and confidence as we enter the enclosed and sometimes terrifying spaces of human experience.

Further Reading

- Fujinura, M. (2016). *Silence and beauty: Hidden faith born of suffering*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Moltmann, J. (1992). *The Spirit of life: A universal affirmation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Further Listening

- Mackie, T., & Collins, J. (2017, February 23). “The Holy Spirit part 1: The Spirit of the OT vs. the Spirit of Christianity” [Audio podcast]. *The Bible Project*. Retrieved from <http://thebibleproject.com/podcast/holy-spirit-part-1/>
- Mackie, T., & Collins, J. (2017, March 3). “The Holy Spirit part 2: God’s Ruakh” [Audio podcast]. *The Bible Project*. Retrieved from <http://thebibleproject.com/podcast/episodes/7a491f36-7a491f36>
- Mackie, T., & Collins, J. (2017, March 10). “The Holy Spirit part 3: Holy Spirit in the New Testament” [Audio podcast]. *The Bible Project*. Retrieved from <http://thebibleproject.com/podcast/episodes/220a40c1-220a40c1>

FINAL CONVERSATION

God in the World

We have offered a number of conversation suggestions for those reading this book as part of a class or other study group.

Final conversation: Describe a time when you have been keenly aware of God’s presence in the midst of your work as a counselor or a psychotherapist. What was that experience like for you? How did it impact the counseling work you were doing at the time?

Epilogue

*When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly,
God is the electricity that surges between them.*

MARTIN BUBER

THIS BOOK IS UNAPOLOGETICALLY DIALOGICAL. It emerged from our own dialog—a father and daughter curious about life's big questions—and soon the vision grew as we recognized the relevance of these conversations in the classroom and the counseling room. It seems fitting at the end of this project to pause and reflect on some things we are learning about dialog.

Dialog is not just about talking. There's plenty of talking going on in our increasingly polarized world, and not nearly so much listening. I suppose any parent and child go through seasons where we talk more than we listen, but one of the sweet discoveries of this project is that we are at a point in life where we listen well to one another, and cherish the words we hear and the person behind the words. It's fairly easy for a daughter and father—both grown and sharing similar professional interests—to value one another as we dialog, and more difficult when sitting with a patient with a personality disorder or in a group of people angry about ideological or political differences. Still, we hope the example of dialog we share in these pages may help us all aspire to true listening and real conversation in the places where this is difficult.

We also are learning to imagine dialog in its historical and conceptual diversity. The two of us are separated by twenty-six years, which is a substantial gap and one we hope contributes to the book, but some of the ideas we discuss here are separated by thousands of years. Dialog is enriched if we can go back and ponder old ideas even as we consider the newest things we are learning and thinking. One of the great joys of writing this book has been

to engage the dialogical method through bringing together theological and psychological concepts that span centuries, methodologies, and cultures.

It has been exhilarating to invite others into our dialog, which reflects how much we are learning to value hospitality in scholarly conversation. This book was refined in the context of dialog with students, colleagues, and an expert publishing team. John Ruskin, a nineteenth-century artist and social critic, suggested that people are shaped by *how* they create more than *what* they create. It's not so much about the product as about the toil that goes into the product. We are grateful for the opportunity to write this book, as the dialogs going into its creation have shaped us.

Perhaps the theme that strikes us most is the relational nature of the work we do and the conversations we host. Whether teaching, doing clinical work, relating to God, or writing a book, our profession calls us to relationship. Thus, to say that the content and process of this book are dialogical is ultimately to say it is about relationship. Martin Buber understood dialog as much more than a technique. Dialog is a posture toward the other, a turning toward and opening of oneself to the other (Friedman, 2002). As such, writing this book has involved continually bringing ourselves back into a posture of being oriented to the other—back into a posture of willingness to learn from the other. It has been humbling to recognize how easy it is to step outside of this posture.

In this work we are called to do as counselors and psychotherapists, we continually and imperfectly attempt to bring ourselves back to a posture of *being* with one another more than *doing* for or to the other. As we learn to do this we open ourselves to the possibility of transformative dialog, leading to greater encounter with the *ruach* of God (the expansive, creative God who opens up space).

One of the very best things about writing this book is anticipating the dialog yet to come as we share these words with students and colleagues in the years to come. We are grateful to you, our reader, for engaging with us in this process.