





DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEWS?

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"I can do all things through a verse taken out of context" 2 Opinions 3:15

I found the verse above in a meme on a Christian facebook group. As much as it is humorous, it led me to reflect on the different Christian interpretations that result in completely different understandings. As counsellors working with Christian clients, we may assume that everyone shares the same worldview – but this would be a mistake.

Let me start with some disclaimers: I am not an ordained Minister, neither do I represent any specific Church or denomination so references to specific denominations in this article are not necessarily endorsing any group. Also, the theological ideas presented in the article are raised solely for reflection and to highlight their importance in professional practice. In this essay I will also reflect on my own ongoing spiritual journey because, as a Christian, my spiritual search over many years has been accompanied with a search for understanding of the origin and true significance of my beliefs. I often questioned the assumptions with which I was raised and thankfully my search has brought me to a closer relationship with God. Having said that, I embrace the reality of being in a constant process of learning and growing, and I trust that "He who has started the good work in me will bring it to fulfilment" (Phil 1:6).

As Christian counsellors, we know that there is a significant overlap between our spiritual lives and mental health. Similarly, our own pre-conceptions and beliefs are determinant when working with our clients because it is difficult to separate our worldview from our practice. The assumptions that we make about our clients, their issues and potential recovery are interpreted and fitted within specific mental frameworks arising from our own concepts of the world, our relationships with others and ultimately our own walk with God.

Although there have been many different types of Christianity present in the history since the beginning of the Church, it seems that nowadays there is an abundance of different "Christianities" – something new, more "relevant" or somehow "refreshed". So, it would be naïve to assume that all Christians have the same worldview. While this statement may be totally obvious to some people it can also be controversial for others. Not all 'Christianities' are the same – a truism recognized within

mainstream/ traditional/ orthodox Christianity – even before reference to less accepted groups such as Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses. Differences have also become more obvious since the rise of liberal Christianity and the subsequent deconstruction of the Faith – a movement that has deeply impacted traditional Christianity and has transformed every denomination, creating splits and schisms that are still happening today. However, I want to explore even more subtle differences in Christian worldviews that permeate what could be considered as "traditional" Christian denominations and/or groups who share adherence to the basic historical faith statements and creeds.

In my work with Christian clients, I have noticed that some depend on their denominational affiliation in their definition of themselves before God, their relationship with God and God's role in their lives. Christian propositions of an anthropology and specific teleology are often misunderstood. Themes like salvation, sanctification, sin, suffering and grace impact people's behaviour before we even mention the spiritual perceptions of their daily lives and their perspective of the future. For example, the following questions:

What is the "job" of a Christian? How are Christians supposed to live their lives? If the Gospel is the proclamation of Christ crucified and resurrected for the forgiveness of sins, as St Paul says in 1 Cor 2:2 "I preach Christ and Him crucified", how does this work out practically? If the Gospel indeed brings a spiritual re-birth from death to life, what follows? Some time ago a Pastor I admired recommended "The Spirituality of the Cross" by Gene Edward Veith Jr. (2010) which is a Lutheran perspective of two common standpoints on the Gospel: The emphasis of the Gospel of Glory versus the Gospel of the Cross. I will use both of these concepts to illustrate their impact on counselling.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL OF GLORY AND THE GOSPEL OF THE CROSS

The Gospel of Glory focuses on preaching that: "we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us". As children of God, we should have access to all God's blessings. The Gospel of Glory has been interpreted as believers living in a supernatural realm – "walking" in the spirit in a visible display of spiritual gifts,

which in turn demonstrate individual piety and their level of anointing. In this worldview it is enough for us to "confess" victory to achieve it. Somehow our words are so determining that affirming anything else but prosperity, wellbeing and joy constitutes a risk for our spiritual lives at best; and at worst it can be a demonstration of our lack of faith and unresolved sin. Christians should therefore be living a glorious life, full of blessings.

The Gospel of Glory emphasizes that all believers should be able to "stand in authority", as much as this is true with regards to sin, This often gets interpreted as authority over material circumstances and manifested in one or two main modalities: "health and wealth" and "supernatural gifts" (and/or a mix of both). In time, this emphasis of the "Gospel of Glory" focuses in the believer while God takes a secondary place except to be a place-to-go to get more "power". A hierarchy of believers is formed, where the "real" Christian is the more "anointed" and "blessed" while others struggle. This interpretation leads to a view that if you are not displaying any gifts or if you are not healthy and prosperous, then you must be at fault.

The Gospel of Glory is often consistent with "positive confessions", "The Secret" of new age concepts, and Pop-psychology that are mimicked in sermon and book titles that are suspiciously similar to ten-points-advice lists and "to-do" recipes – "your best life now", "how to obtain victory", and "claiming your health". Good feelings are emphasised and church services strive to be "relevant" by including forms consistent with current cultural tendencies.

The western emphasis on individualism trumps the divine. One of my clients described a practice in her Church where the leader would often start the service by praying to let God know that "He had permission" to be present in the service, because as believers they were entitled to release, and therefore to also prevent God's action even in Church. This is a lot of authority to be put in human hands.

THE GOSPEL OF GLORY IN THE COUNSELLING CONTEXT

As Gene Veith puts it:

"The ideal of the "victorious Christian life" proves impossible to attain, so we have to suppress our failures, keep trying harder

(and buy more books), and present a more positive front to the world”.

My experience with Christian clients from this worldview includes their expression of their pain and shame because they have not “surrendered” fully to Christ and therefore do not have gifts or authority. On exploration, their feelings of condemnation, guilt, frustration and anger are often present. They fear that pleasing God is an impossibility and accepting forgiveness is difficult because there is no tangible proof in their lives. These ever-present negatives are overcome by a craving of a “new level” of revelation and its parallel spiritual experience. The new levels assure them that they are now on good terms with God.

In the Gospel of Glory worldview suffering is regarded as something bad, something to be avoided and of which to be ashamed. These Christians search for spiritual highs often gets reflected even in the language they use – or at least a reinterpretation of traditional terms such as “revival”, “anointing”, “spiritual manifestations”, “victory”, and getting to a new/higher level of “revelation”. To be a Christian you always have to be happy and experiencing spiritual ecstasy. If you do not feel this way then you cannot be pleasing God.

This is a crushing thought for people who sincerely believe in the Gospel and often results in the short-term as depression and anxiety and in the long term as complete shame, guilt, disenchantment and walking away. The Gospel of Glory worldview makes it easier to be ashamed of the human condition of personal shortcomings and suffering. As a result, they tend to hide their issues as they do not want to be confronted with failure and sin – issues that intensify instead of being addressed more easily in a timely manner.

THE GOSPEL OF THE CROSS

The Gospel of the Cross emphasizes Christ's victory over sin. The only way of accessing that victory is at the foot of the Cross. This happens through repentance and through recognising our utter need for forgiveness and renewal, without Him we can't do anything! (John 15:5). Our victory is the reconciliation with God. The cross opens for us the path towards heaven. This worldview reaches its climax in the new birth and a spiritual reality accessed through the waters of baptism and through the conviction of

our faith and repentance from sin (Col 2:12) - the old man is dead, the new man is born (Col 3:10). Even though the new man is now a spiritual baby, many of the after-effects of past sinful lives still need to be dealt with, and not only that, but the fact that we are still in living in this world, dealing with our flesh and exposed to temptation every day.

The Gospel of the Cross teaches that the Christian life is one of continuous repentance. The new birth is the starting point, our beings still need to be transformed to the image of Christ (2Cor 3:18) by killing the old man and experiencing conversion on a daily basis (Rom 8:12-13). The Eastern Orthodox Christianity refers this process as “deification” - the constant process of becoming more like God (Ware, 2015). All Christians are in the process of becoming spiritual adults by growing up as the Apostle Paul pointed out to the Hebrews (5:13).

I'm no longer alive, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2:20).

Starting with the Cross, our motivation resides in the hope of resurrection and the assurance that God has our lives in His hands. Our actions should be driven by gratefulness and as a reflection of God's nature - not as human efforts to be promoted in some sort of spiritual hierarchy. The Gospel of the Cross admits that we cannot really offer anything to God. We learn to receive God's Grace (Kleinig, 2008) and let our understanding be changed by God (Eph 4:23). The Gospel of the Cross places our faith in Christ rather than within ourselves.

THE GOSPEL OF THE CROSS IN THE COUNSELLING CONTEXT

Jesus said that his followers should expect strife, persecution and pain (John 16:33) and that He looks after our every need (Matt 6:26-34). In this journey of the Cross all these things help those who love Him (Rom 8:28). Instead of “I can do all things through a verse taken out of context” 2 Opinions 3:15, Paul's statement was “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). Paul's physical context was not outwardly victorious and anointed. Paul was suffering the shame and degradation of imprisonment.

He details his human suffering of persecution, deprivation, hunger and persecution he still maintains

that he endured all those things in Christ. Imagine all the emotions and psychological pressure Paul would have experienced during that time. The fight to kill our old nature and nurture our new man is hard, full of challenges and pain. At times our suffering comes as the effects of our own sin, at other times it is part of the reality of our lived contexts, and at other times God's sovereign will to allow us to struggle to in order to bring us closer to Him.

Sin poisons our souls. The Eastern Orthodox see it as a disease and correctly identify the Church as a Hospital (Ware, 2015). As Mental Health professionals we are called to support this function of “health care” that happens in the Church by helping our clients understand their issues as part of the human condition and our battle for sanctification. Sin has a clear impact in our human make-up, it manifests in our emotions, thoughts and behaviours. Emotional and psychological pain are realities we need to face. We should help our clients understand and accept God's renewing and everlasting grace.

The Gospel of the Cross removes pretenses of self-righteousness and self-dependence. It opens the way for people to come to terms with the reality of their suffering and the need to do something about it. It also helps people to open up to the means provided by God to heal and restore them – not just by spiritual means (word and sacraments) but also secular means such as professional help, including counseling people in their suffering.

CHRISTIAN COUNSELLING

The Gospel demystifies the need to access support, it puts everyone at the same level – a sinner in need of God's mercy, even after the new life has begun and “simul justus et peccator”. God provides help to us as human beings using the vocations such as counseling. However, it is important that we as counsellors do not take for granted our understanding of our Christian clients' worldview. Over-dependence on self that is central to some interpretations of the Gospel of Glory can hinder progress in therapy. My experience has led me to explore my clients' worldviews by using the conventional CBT triad. This allows me to explore how my clients see themselves, the world and the future.

Secondly, by understanding my clients' deep held assumptions regarding who

God is and who they are in relation to God, we are able to explore issues that impact on their daily live – “How does their relationship with God play out in their minds?”

“What is their understanding of Grace?”
“Is there anything, apart from believing, that they can do to please God?” “How do we access forgiveness?” By exploring the unconditional nature of God’s love and the irrelevance of their own efforts to please God, Grace can be experienced as an unmerited gift, given by love and not attained by merits.

Thirdly, there is a need to understand suffering and its role in Christian life with questions such as – “Is it reasonable to expect suffering in our lives even though we are Christians?” “Is all suffering bad?” Ultimately this discussion often leads to talking about repentance and forgiveness. Suffering can be a way to recognise our dependence on God by pointing to our incapacity to deal with stuff alone.

One of the most important aspects in this discussion is to help them understand that their feelings are not good indicators of the state of their spiritual lives. We need to realize that when we repent, God’s forgiveness of us is declared independently of how we feel. Understanding this is powerful, as it lifts condemnation from people’s lives and makes them more open to accept God’s love where and how they are.

There is no need to experience ecstasy of the Gospel of Glory to know that the Gospel of the Cross means that we are forgiven and our relationship God is restored.

References

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