

Biblical Anthropology: Us with God

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As a created being, the struggle of defining who God is and why I am here is fundamental to a meaningful existence. Wise men have debated the nature of man for millenia and have come up with countless categorizations, theories, and doctrines surrounding the study of what it means to be human. A repeated phrase from A.W. Tozer used to emphasize the critical nature of one's thoughts on God, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God," (Tozer, 1961). C.S. Lewis said, "How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us" (Lewis, 1941). If God's view of us is what counts, there is, for this writer, an imperative to know something about God's thoughts. Biblical anthropology is man's attempt to understand himself and how the human purpose is bound up in their relation to God (Fuller leadership development program, 2010). As a counselor my place is not to define the nature of man and his relation to God didactically to clients. My job is to reflect God's care, first, to myself, then, to the client. My role is not as a substitute for God's communication to the client, but a channel of God's love. This role will never be accomplished perfectly, of course, since there is not an end to learning from and knowing God. The position of this counselor on Biblical anthropology which informs my practice follows: God's is love, God does not shame, and God wants relationship.

The most common discussions around Biblical anthropology usually fall into these categories: man's composition - body, soul, spirit, one, two, or three parts, God's

image, and how a soul is transmitted (Grudem, 2009). While all interesting and necessary, each of these topics is only as good as how they inform our outworking of God's love. It is less beneficial to think of a person as spirit damned to a second death outside of a neat and tidy confession of faith, than to consider them one of God's beloved children, born to love Him forever. Whether one is sure of how a soul is transmitted to and from the body is of little concern when a client is in desperate need of hope here and now. What can transmit hope is the unconditional positive regard fostering acceptance of the client's experience. This is not necessarily an endorsement of the client's behavior (Rosenthal, 2017). The question of where the clearest picture of God is found is important if this understanding then informs our image. The bible can and has been used as evidence for innumerable depictions of God. The clearest image of God to man stated, "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9b, HCSB). As Jesus Christ hung on the cross He communicated clearly what is more than an attribute of God, it is God's essence, "God is love" (1 John 10:8b, HCSB). As God sent Emanuel to be with us, He did not leave us guessing on who He is and what He is about. Jesus left us with the greatest gift, Spirit, to work out His love in us, toward Him, and toward others. As a counselor learning to practice this love, it is the overarching objective of sitting with another person; listening, learning, and loving while "respecting their dignity and promoting their welfare", as the ethics code states (American Counseling Association, 2014).

"Promotion of dignity and welfare" will not be served by operating from an assumption of God's righteous judgment as life's guiding principle (ACA, 2014). God is

love and lives from love, shame is not loving, and it does not engender change. When Christ judged, even when it was an emotional demonstration, as in clearing the temple (Matthew 21:12, HCSB), he judged like a doctor more than a criminal court judge. The purpose is restoration, not retribution. Harsh words and shaming behaviors do not belong to God. In his work, *The Soul of Shame*, Curt Thompson takes readers back through the creation account through the fall in the garden, demonstrating that God from the beginning, set out to offer humans the connection that ultimately crushed shame (2015). God declares everything he made as very good (Genesis 1:31, HCSB). Then, he points out something not good, man being alone (Gen. 2:18, HCSB). Chapter two ends with the declaration that they were “naked and felt no shame” (Gen. 2:31, HCSB). The shame appears once Adam and Eve partake of the fruit (Gen. 3:7, HCSB). What happened to Eve that she felt compelled to seek out more than what she had, Thompson says, she was brought to doubt God, dividing her from her belief that she was being cared for and protected (2015). Adam must have been made to doubt similarly, we know what happened next, by isolating them from connection with God, they were left feeling separate, vulnerable, and their decision making, left-side of their brain, was impaired. They subsequently made a decision that left God out of their thinking, they acted impulsively from their limbic, fear response. They moved away from vulnerability and covered up their mistakes. “Hiding is the natural response to shame” (Thompson, 2015). This review of the first couples’ fall into sin and shame makes clear that God, far from shaming Adam and Eve, moves toward connection seeking them out. We know that God ultimately triumphs through Christ’s completely humiliating, vulnerable act, reconnecting everyone to the Creator. This demonstrates

God's emphasis on making man for connection. In counseling, listening to clients with empathy as they vulnerably tell their stories of shame is part of the healing. Through retelling, connection with an empathetic counselor, self-compassion returns and a willingness to heal results.

The story recounted above, illuminates the next anthropological truth of connection. In the creation account, God made clear through the pronouncement of all being good that generative creativity was the model of real living. Yet goodness was incomplete without a human connection. Not entirely different from God's own relational embodiment in the trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, this human relational triad, Man, Woman, and God reflects His inherent intention of connection between humans (Butler, 1991). The healing of any client will include connection. First, within the counseling relationship. There must be connection for progress to take place in counseling, the vulnerability of the client meets the empathic response of the counselor. Next, there is the connection between members in group therapy. Whether a support or 12 step group, a cognitive behavioral group, or a psychoeducational group, there is an obvious need for and benefit from the connection that is quintessential to groups. Then, consider the science of attachment. The relationship between parent and child is the model for connection in the counseling room, in church, groups, really at every level. God demonstrates attachment toward his creation and within the trinity. Curt Thompson astutely describes God's ability to connect comes through attachment, as does every other relationship.

“[O]ur patterns of attachment deeply influence the way we experience our relationship with God. For he has to deal with the same brain that we do; he engages the same proclivities we have for avoiding or being anxious about the intimacy of relationships.” (Thompson, 2015)

So God’s desire for relationship is built into our design as humans. The power of connection runs so deep that without human connection we feel lonely and depressed. In the article on depression as a disease of disconnection, Lucy Osler says, “first-person reports of depression consistently name isolation from others as a key feature of depression” (Osler, 2022). The findings from this study were that healing from depression requires social connectedness. Throughout scripture God communicates this with his people, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 31:8). This reassurance from the beginning to the end of scripture supports attachment to God, knowing that we will never be alone.

The love of God, the absence of shame, and the imprint of connection are defining characteristics of God. These fundamental aspects of God are reflected in humans. To live a life that reflects these essential qualities will serve to inform my relationship with God, my relationship to my family, and my relationship to clients. A healthy, secure attachment to my loving God is what makes connection with Holy Spirit sound. Our connection by way of the Spirit is what makes an effective counselor.

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