A Theology of Trauma: A Creation Paradigm

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In a previous essay, I proposed that a meaning/control/connection paradigm provides a helpful conceptual framework to account for the spiritual distress that results from exposure to trauma and informs the key tasks effective spiritual trauma care. When the core spiritual needs for meaning, purpose, direction, and value, self-efficacy and control, and connectedness are threatened by trauma, distress results. Caring for a spiritually distressed person is founded on three further principles: recognition, respect, and understanding. Spiritual trauma care requires, first, the recognition that spirituality is a universal part of the human condition, that spiritual issues are an inescapable component of the experience of trauma, and that individuals, knowingly or unknowingly, use spiritual forms of coping and problem solving in the face of adversity. Second, it requires that we demonstrate a genuine respect for each individual's deeply held spiritual beliefs and practices, irrespective of whether or not we agree with them. Third, it requires that we make a concerted effort to understand how these spiritual/religious beliefs and practices have found expression in the individual's pre-trauma, peri-trauma, and post-trauma experience.

It is my intention, in this essay, to demonstrate that the meaning/control/connection paradigm is actually a creation paradigm introduced in Genesis 1 and elaborated throughout Scripture.

1. Meaning, control, and connection: a creation paradigm

The human response to trauma is a contextually specific application of the God-given spiritual principles by which humanity relates to the world that God has made. The creation narratives are a starting point for understanding these principles.

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth…" Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:18 ESV).

Three spiritual principles can be discerned. First, the created purpose of humanity is to express the "image" and "likeness" of the invisible God in the visible world. Second, people are to exercise control or "dominion" over the created order under God's delegated authority. Third, they are not to be alone. In other words, "image" is to be expressed and "dominion" exercised in the context of co-operative, supportive relationships, first with the creator with whom the man and the woman "walked in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8), and second, with each other (Genesis 2:24). These three creation functions closely parallel the three mechanisms that establish and sustain spiritual trauma as they are described in the secular literature, the "ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1997, p. 33).

The effect of trauma is to disrupt the normal application of these principles. Definitions of trauma express the idea of disruption. An event is personally traumatic if it is extremely distressing, poses a significant challenge or threat (directly or indirectly) to well-being, at least temporarily overwhelms an individual's usual coping mechanisms, and results in some degree of functional impairment in one or more of the physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and spiritual domains (Everly & Mitchell, 1999, pp. 2-3; Brymer et al., 2006, p. 5; Wooding & Raphael, 2012, p. 10; Briere & Scott, 2015, p. 10). The effects are acute because, as a consequence of the widespread failure of humanity to fulfil its created purpose, many people already live in a state of heightened existential unease and it does not take much to tip them over the edge into spiritual distress.

How does Christian theology understand these three systems of "image" (meaning), "dominion" (control), and relationship (connection)?

2. Meaning – "the image of God"

> *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"* (Genesis 1:26 ESV).

a. Introduction

The secular literature describes the search for meaning as a universal, existential need. "Every human being… has a natural need to formulate a life-view, a conception of the meaning of life and its purpose" (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 231). Frankl described this as our primary life motivation (Frankl, 2004, p. 105). People are inherently "reflective and inquiring beings" (Kant, 2003, p. 587) who seek to understand the world through rational reflection on it (Kant, 2003, p. 457). We make sense of experiences, traumatic and otherwise, by integrating them into a "meaningful pattern" or "coherent narrative frame" that spans an individual's remembered past, their present experience, and their desired future (Baumeister, 1991, p. 33; Baumeister, 1996, p. 324; Bering, 2003, p. 117).

Some indicators of a loss of meaning or purpose are feelings of meaninglessness, inauthenticity, guilt (Sartre, 1992, pp. xxxviii-xxxix), an inner "uneasiness, unquiet, discordance" (Kierkegaard, 2002, pp. 133-134), a restlessness or existential anxiety (Tillich, 1973, pp. 200-201), anxiety-related behaviours in response to threats (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997, p. 24; Pyszczynski et al., 1997, p. 2), and the loss of a sense that one is "a valuable contributor to a meaningful universe" (Pyszczynski et al., 2004, pp. 436-437) or that one is "living up to the standards of value that are part of the cultural worldview" (Pyszczynski et al., 1997, p. 2).

Flowing from an awareness of one's purpose in life is the personal responsibility and choice to act in the world to fulfil it (Sartre, 1992, pp. 131, 380) through situation specific goals that are steps towards a desired future (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996, p. 322). Meaning or purpose establishes the criteria for evaluating decisions and actions in terms of their contribution to that future (Baumeister, 1991, p. 33) and motivates the individual "to move forward toward important goals in spite of fears" (Crocker & Nuer, 2004, p. 4). It provides a "protective shield" against the "awareness of the horrifying possibility that we humans are merely transient animals groping to survive in a meaningless universe" (Pyszczynski et al., 2004, p. 436) by allowing people to "believe that they have some control over events" as they make progress towards about their desired outcomes (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996, p. 322). Moreover, it grants value to unpleasant experiences in so far as they contribute towards the desired future (Baumeister, 1991, p. 33).

By calling life goals into question or rendering them unattainable, the experience of trauma undermines these benefits and results in a degree of spiritual distress.

The pursuit of meaning or purpose rests on two basic assumptions. The first is that the universe is architectonic, being ordered "from the smallest natural thing to the most comprehensive environment" and the second is that reason provides the conceptual apparatus with which to understand this order (White, 1993, p. 72). However, because not everything amenable to rational explanation, the insights of other approaches, in conjunction with reason, are necessary for drawing comprehensive conclusions about meaning.

Theology is one such alternative. It enables the individual to "entertain images of meaning and reality that are beyond the givens of observable experience" (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 16).

b. Meaning is a universal, existential need

From a theological perspective, "every human being… has a natural need to formulate a life-view, a conception of the meaning of life and its purpose"

(Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 231). Calvin, writing about a person's need to fulfil the purpose of their existence, warned that for the individual to not "direct the whole thoughts and actions of their lives to this end" is to "fail to fulfil the law of their being" (Calvin, 1960, p. 52). This need sets human beings apart from the rest of creation (Aquinas, 1947, p. 839; Luther, 1904, p. 107).

Humanity's need for meaning or purpose originates in God's creative purposes. God created an ordered world that is comprehensible through the application of natural reason (Aquinas, 1947, p. 25) and created people with the rational capacity to comprehend it (Wesley, 1771, p. 694). Reason naturally seeks to comprehend the world and an individual's place within it. Aquinas variously called this, "the last end" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 422), the "highest good" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 211), the "supreme good" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 849), the "perfect good" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 197), and "happiness" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 831).

> The will tends naturally to its last end; for every man naturally wills happiness: and all other desires are caused by this natural desire; since whatever a man wills he wills on account of the end (Aquinas, 1947, p. 422).

However, not everything is amenable to rational explanation (Aquinas, 1947, p. 25). Reason cannot "give either faith, hope, love, or virtue" or "happiness" (Wesley, 1771, p. 700). These must come "from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh" (Wesley, 1771, p. 700). Luther held that humankind was created for…

> …a life far more excellent than, and high above, anything which this corporeal life could ever have been… a spiritual life after this present life; an end of this life in paradise; thought for us and destined for us by God through the merits of Christ (Luther, 1904, p. 108).

Tillich noted that humans, as distinct from all other living creatures, are beings with "spiritual concerns" (Tillich, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, God also created people with the spiritual capacity to have "the knowledge of God" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 541), a "vision of God" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 198), to "see God as He is" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 432), to "conceive of the invisible God and angels," to "have ideas of rectitude, justice, and honesty" (Calvin, 1960, p. 160), to see "divine things clearly" (Wesley, 1765, p. 804), and to understand the essential truths of the Scriptures "concerning [God's] eternity and immensity; his power, wisdom, and holiness" (Wesley, 1771, p. 696). Our failure to comprehend the world and our place within it is inherently distressing.

c. Meaning is an artifact of rationality and spirituality

> Rectitude of the will consists in being duly ordered to the last end... And therefore none can obtain Happiness, without rectitude of the will... [Happiness] consists in the vision of the Divine Essence, Which is the very essence of goodness. So that the will of him who sees the Essence of God, of necessity, loves, whatever he loves, in subordination to God... (Aquinas, 1947, p. 862).

Reason can comprehend purpose when it is ordered and directed by the last end, that is, a vision of God and the knowledge of him. The consequence of separating the rational from the spiritual is not just a failure to comprehend meaning or purpose. It also results in an inner "uneasiness, unquiet, discordance" (Kierkegaard, 2002, pp. 133-134), restlessness, or existential anxiety (Tillich, 1973, pp. 200-201) arising from the fact that everyone is "a synthesis of spirit and body, the infinite and finite, freedom and necessity, destined for spirit" (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 134).

The pursuit of meaning or purpose is a person's response to the sovereign creativity of God using their God-given rational and spiritual capabilities. They can choose to accept their status as a dependent being, with "an absolute duty to God and to God alone" (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 28), acknowledging and obeying their Creator (Bultmann, 1988, p. 228), becoming "the servant of his providence" (Wesley, 1765, pp. 804-805), and surrendering the responsibility for their life to God who "conducts [their lives] to their goal irrespective of our success or failure" and who "justifies, sanctifies, saves and glorifies us" (Barth, 1961, III.4, p. 407). Alternatively, they can choose to assert their independence by denying or refusing to obey their creator and taking on themselves the overwhelming burden of having to "make something significant of ourselves, to justify, sanctify, save and glorify ourselves" (Barth, 1961, III.4, p. 407). The consequence of a person striving to be their own master and recognizing no power other than self, is that they end up ruling over nothing and the result is despair (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 136, 137, 139). However, every person is free to make this choice. Tillich wrote, "My destiny [purpose] is the basis of my freedom; my freedom participates in shaping my destiny" (Tillich, 1973, pp. 184-185).

d. God's threefold purpose for humankind

God's three creative purposes for human beings (Genesis 1:26-28) are that they be conformed to the "image of God," that they exercise a benevolent and representative dominion over the material and visible world, and that both occur in the context of a relationship with their creator.

First, the "image of God" refers to God "himself present and operative" in humankind (Brown, 1986, p. 287). The perfect example of this is found in Christ (Dunn, 1988, p. 483; Hoekema, 1994, p. 21), whose glory is the content of God's

image (Moo, 1991, pp. 571-572). Because the "image of God" in people was rendered imperfect and partial as a consequence of the fall, "God's creative purpose became a redemptive purpose" (Torrance, 2008, p. 115). His purpose is now to imprint the perfect image of the "second Adam" onto those who belong to Christ (Moo, 1991, p. 571). While progress toward this goal is made throughout life (Hoekema, 1994, p. 23) by the application of the rational, emotional, and spiritual faculties that a person shares with God (Dunn, 2006, p. 78; Bavinck, 2011, p. 326), this process will not reach completion until the glorious resurrection body of the Son is revealed on his return (Dunn, 2006, p. 488; Torrance, 2008, p. 115). Until then, *imago Dei* has become *imitatio Christi* (Middleton, 1994, p. 24).

Second, dominion or rule is a "function or task of royalty" (Wenham, 1987, pp. 30-31; Middleton, 1994, p. 12) and describes the intentional bringing of events into conformity with the will of the ruler. Human beings are "God's appointed governors (vassals) over creation." Their task is to bring events into conformity with the will of God, to "maintain order," to "shine God's light on creation," and to keep "a beneficent relationship with all that God has created" (Van Gemeren, 2008, p. 142). Humanity stands in the place of the spiritual and invisible God in the material and visible world (Berkouwer, 1962, p. 114; Von Rad, 1972, p. 60). Because people rule over the living creatures as God's representative, they must treat them "in the same way as God who created them" (Wenham, 1987, p. 33). Legitimate rule stems from "God's deliberate choice" (Broyles, 1999, p. 72), is "commissioned and empowered" by God, has an authority conferred by God's word (Bonhoeffer, 2004, p. 66), and genuinely represents God. Rule becomes illegitimate when a person fails in this task and gives their allegiance to anything other than God (Bonhoeffer, 2004, p. 67).

Third, life in the presence of God was once the norm of human existence (Genesis 3:8) and will be again in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:3). One aspect of the "image of God" is that people, as God's counterpart, have the capacity to enter into a relationship with him (Barth, 2010, III.1, pp. 184-5; Brunner, 2002a, p. 59; Brunner, 2002b, pp. 500-501; Bonhoeffer, 2004, pp. 62-63). A desire to dwell in God's presence (Psalm 27:4) is a defining characteristic of his people. Since the expulsion of the first people from the Garden (Genesis 3:24), God has been invisibly present with his people and at work to bring them back into his physical presence (Exodus 15:13, 17-18). He uses tangible means to symbolize his invisible presence. The "bread of presence" in the Tabernacle and the Temple (Exodus 25:30; 35:13; 39:36; Numbers 4:7; 1 Kings 7:48; 2 Chronicles 4:19) was a visible sign of the presence of the invisible God (Provan, 1995, p. 73; Kaiser, 2008, p. 515) and of his continuing relationship with them (Bruckner, 2008, p. 242). Jesus became the "bread of presence" and redefined the elements of the Passover meal (Mark 14:22; Matthew 26:26; Luke 22:19) as a

“pledge of the real presence of Jesus wherever and whenever his followers celebrate the Supper” (Wessel & Strauss, 2010, p. 946). The purpose was to maintain a relationship with his disciples in the period between his physical departure (Hurtado, 2011, p. 235) and the final and physical consummation of this relationship in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:3).

God’s threefold purpose for humanity remains unchanged. “What God intended humanity to be, God still intends humanity to be… Our vocation is to work for the completing of God’s creation project” (Goldingay, 2006, p. 226).

e. Summary

Supporting the assumption that the universe is architectonic, theology affirms that the universe is the perfect expression of the will and purpose of its creator (Aquinas, 1947, p. 25). “Everything that happens has its ultimate explanation in God’s intentions and actions” and, therefore, contrary to what many believe, the meaning of events “cannot be grasped without reference to what God is doing” (Kaufman, 1996, p. 45). Endorsing the assumption that reason provides the conceptual apparatus with which to understand the order of the universe, theology further affirms that people, having been created in the image of God to share his rational nature, have the conceptual apparatus with which to comprehend this order (Wesley, 1771, p. 694) and naturally seek to do so (Aquinas, 1947, pp. 302, 422). Moreover, in those areas not amenable to rational explanation (Aquinas, 1947, p. 25; Wesley, 1771, p. 700), God has provided, by his Spirit, the capacity to have “knowledge of God” and see “divine things clearly” (Wesley, 1765, p. 804; Wesley, 1771, pp. 696, 700; Luther, 1904, p. 108; Aquinas, 1947, pp. 198, 432, 541; Calvin, 1960, p. 160; Tillich, 2009, p. 1). Thus, meaning or purpose is an artifact of both rationality and spirituality, just as each person is a “a synthesis of spirit and body, the infinite and finite, freedom and necessity” (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 134).

Theology further affirms that each individual has a personal responsibility to act in the world to fulfil their purpose as an “absolute duty to God and to God alone” (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 28) and an act of obedience and submission to the Creator (Wesley, 1765, pp. 804-805; Bultmann, 1988, p. 228). In all things we must seek to "work with the grain of God’s creation purpose" (Goldingay, 2006, p. 226). The alternative is to assert our independence from God by denying or refusing to obey him but in doing so we take on ourselves the overwhelming burden of having to “make something significant of ourselves, to justify, sanctify, save and glorify ourselves” (Barth, 1961, III.4, p. 407).

3. Control – “Subdue the earth and have dominion over it”

> ...*And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth* (Genesis 1:26 ESV).

a. Introduction

The secular literature defines the need for control as the need to minimize uncertainty, to be able to predict positive outcomes, to have confidence that one's chosen course of action will achieve these desired outcomes, and to believe that one has the capacity to pursue this course of action (Baumeister, 1991, p. 41; Baumeister & Wilson, 1996, p. 322). Collectively, these create hope, and hope motivates action. Those with greater certainty and confidence generally act with assertiveness and decisiveness, demonstrate higher aspirations, strive for achievement, and persist at difficult tasks (Burger & Cooper, 1979, p. 383; Burger, 1987, p. 310). Without hope, trauma sufferers can find themselves paralyzed. Lower levels of certainty result in greater feelings of powerlessness, frustration, anxiety, depression, and a loss of confidence. An unmet need for control can also express itself in negative compensatory responses including the abuse of power, revenge seeking behaviour, observing superstitious rituals, and the embracing of conspiracy beliefs (Burger, 1984, pp. 76, 79; Whitson & Galinski, 2008, pp. 115, 117; McKay, 2010, pp. 216, 238-239).

The experience of trauma violates an individual's sense of control (Park & Folkman, 1997, pp. 126-127). It creates uncertainty and hopelessness by disconfirming deeply held beliefs and assumptions, often predicated on the anthropocentric view that self and the world are the ultimate reality and the source of the ethical concern, that the world and the individual are inherently good, and that individuals, by their actions, can overcome evil and make the world good again (Bonhoeffer, 2009, pp. 47-48). At the same time, trauma overwhelms the individual's normal internal coping mechanisms (Briere & Scott, 2015, p. 10).

> Trauma, by definition, is unbearable and intolerable... It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability (Van der Kolk, 2014, Prologue, para. 4).

The belief that events are under the control of a benevolent God or higher power points to a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric basis for the nature of the ultimate reality and the source of the ethical concern. It enables the individual to envisage a good outcome determined by God that is greater than their immediate circumstances and not limited by their personal inability to influence events, grants the certainty that this outcome will be realized, and thus provides the motivation needed to pursue and appropriate it. Understanding the benevolence

of God is, therefore, a necessary step in the pursuit of a good outcome.

b. The goodness of creation and the goodness of the Creator

God's good purposes are realized in traumatic events due to of the inherent goodness of creation flowing from the essential goodness of its creator, because God is present within his creation and takes responsibility for it, and when people fulfil their created function of standing as God's representatives in the world by conducting themselves in conformity with the character and intentions of their creator. The result is that the outcome of events, at least in general terms, becomes predictable. While this does not change the objective events of trauma, it does shape the way in which events are interpreted. God's desired outcomes can be appropriated by the individual, giving them a sense of control, albeit indirect, over them. Alternatively, the individual can choose to distance themselves from God and God's purposes.

c. God is the final standard of goodness

God is, in his essential nature, good (Psalm 34:8; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19; cf. Matthew 19:17; Hurtado, 2011, p. 168). He is "the highest good, than which there is no higher" (Augustine, 1887, *On the Nature of Good*, p. 172), "something than which nothing greater can be thought" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 24), and "the chief good" (Edwards, 1974a, p. 642). God's goodness is seen most clearly in his dealings with the world in creation, providence, and redemption (Westermann, 1994, p. 166). In each of these areas, God deals with the world through Christ, who is good because he is *of God* (Evans, 2011, p. 276). That which is good "stands in harmony with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer, 1974, p. 24). Therefore, God's goodness is revealed in Jesus and his character and actions are the standard against which all goodness is measured.

d. All that God makes or does is good

All that proceeds from God is good (Genesis 1:31; Psalm 106:1-3, 119:68; Matthew 7:11; James 1:17-18). The creation, including humanity, is good in three ways.

First, the creation is good because it is the handiwork of a God who is, in his essential nature, good and, therefore, incapable of giving "evil" gifts to his children. He cannot be inconsistent with himself (James 1:17-18; Davids, 2011, p. 37). Everything that is made bears the stamp of its creator. The Creator is "the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 28). Calvin likewise held that, prior to the Fall, the creation was "good and pure" (Calvin, 1845, p. 207). Edwards wrote, "all he [God] effects is good, and only good" (Edwards, 1974a, p. 738).

Second, the creation is good because God is present within it. Augustine wrote, "he who is good has created them good; behold how he encircles and fills them" (Augustine, 1955, pp. 100-101). McKnight argued for the "ontic presence of God" amongst his people by his Word that unleashes the power to trust God's goodness (McKnight, 2011, p. 132). Where God is present in Christ, so too is his essential goodness.

Third, the creation is good in so far as it conforms to the character and intent of God (Wenham, 1987, p. 34; Westermann, 1994, p. 166). Where it fails to express the character or intent of its creator, as revealed in Christ, it ceases to be good.

e. Creation has fallen short of its original goodness

Seeking to account for the apparent lack of goodness in creation, Augustine proposed that goodness has been darkened, weakened, and diminished by sin although the creation does retain "some good" (Augustine, 1887, *On the Nature of Good*, p. 600; 1887, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, pp. 403, 421). Edwards argued that God's benevolence towards his creation, while perfect, is restricted in extent and degree. He extends his goodness in some areas and withholds it or limits it in others (Edwards, 1974a, pp. 737-738). Calvin, however, denied that any of the original goodness of creation remains. Sin does not diminish or weaken a person's original goodness leaving some part of it intact, as claimed by Augustine. Instead, it has the effect of "perverting and corrupting all the parts of our nature," producing in us the "works of the flesh," and making us "deservedly condemned by God" (Calvin, 1845, p. 210). Goodness has not merely been injured and needs healing, or hidden and needs revealing (Augustine, 1887, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, pp. 403, 421). Goodness has been irretrievably lost and can only be restored by re-creation. Seeking to account for the fact that good is nonetheless present in the world, Calvin argued that fallen human beings are not incapable of good, however, their goodness is a work of the flesh rather than a diminished expression of their original created goodness.

It is not God's benevolence that has changed. What is impaired is the individual's capacity and desire to experience the goodness of God.

f. God's goodness is knowable

However, despite the effects of sin, God's goodness can still be experienced.

The relationship between the creator's essential goodness and the creation's derivative goodness finds expression, in Aquinas' thinking, in the human desire for goodness. Aquinas held that people are seekers after God. "All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 65). While the desire to experience goodness may be real, Lewis rightly countered that "the

human soul is not the seeker but the sought: it is God who seeks, who descends from the other world to find and heal Man" (Lewis cited in Baue, 2008, pp. 16-17). In a similar way, Bonhoeffer described grace as a movement from God towards humankind. "Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us" (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 45).

Given the movement from God towards humanity, the perfect goodness of God, while knowable, cannot be fully known through the application of human reason to the evidences of God's goodness in creation. "From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained" (Aquinas, 1947, p. 26). Rather, God's goodness becomes knowable as God, in seeking us, reveals himself. The incarnate Christ is God's self-revelation. He expresses the incorruptible goodness of God within the corrupted creation, allowing us to glimpse the perfect goodness of God. Bonhoeffer went so far as to claim that only by participating in Christ can we share in God's goodness and apart from him all we can know is suffering (Bonhoeffer, 2009, pp. 50-51; 1995, p. 92). There is, within the heart of each person, a desire to appropriate God's goodness. To do so we must "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).

There are two theological alternatives to this classical position. The first is to reduce the goodness of God to an abstract moral principle that can then serve as an evaluative standard or reference point against which to test human motives and actions (Kaufman, 1995, p. 24). The second is to replace the character of God as the absolute standard of goodness with a relative human standard. Schleiermacher held that God cannot be known as an external, objective reality through the application of human reason but is experienced subjectively through "intuition and feeling" (Schleiermacher, 1893, p. 36). The consequence of both alternatives is that human goodness cannot be regarded as an analogue of the external and absolute goodness of God. People determine their own actions in the present moment, independently of God, and with the overarching goal of realizing their true potential.

g. With the knowledge of God's goodness comes responsibility

Appropriating the goodness of God requires three things (Calvin, 1960, pp. 442, 446; Barth, 1981, p. 66). The first is the acknowledgement that the source of all goodness is God who is ontically present and working out his good purposes among his people as they trust him (James 1:18; Bonhoeffer, 1974, p. 24; McKnight, 2011, p. 132). The second is that we "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8) by: taking refuge in him, learning his statutes, keeping his commands, observing justice, doing righteousness, giving thanks to him for his goodness, praising him for the miracles he works for our benefit, confessing our

sins, unfaithfulness and unworthiness, petitioning God to fulfill his promises, and calling on him for help (Bonhoeffer, 1974, pp. 34-35; Craigie, 1983, p. 279). The third is that, having experienced or tasted God's goodness, we act with the same benevolence towards others (John 15:12-13).

h. Divine benevolence and control

The three aspects of divine benevolence are directly applicable to the experience of trauma. A belief in the benevolence of God does not change the objective events of trauma, however, it does shape the way we interpret the experience so that we cease to be controlled by it.

First, there is good to be found in traumatic events because of the inherent goodness of creation that flows from the essential goodness of its creator. God's good purposes can be known and the outcome, at least in general terms, is predictable. Individuals can fulfill their existential purpose by appropriating these purposes/outcomes for themselves. Finney wrote, "Benevolence is... the choice of the highest good of God and the universe, as an end" (Finney, 1944,p. 137).

Second, there is good to be found in traumatic events by virtue of the presence of God within his creation. As Creator, God has a responsibility for his creation.

> From the moment of creation the good God is in a relationship of care and concern for that which he has brought into being, and his care and concern are infinite and never vary or fail (Knox, 2012, p. 40).

God reveals his presence most clearly through Christ. People can distance themselves from God or fulfill their relational purpose by drawing close to him to experience his "care and concern."

Third, there is good to be found in traumatic events when people fulfil their created function of standing as God's representatives within that event by conducting themselves in conformity with the character and intentions of their creator. "To practise benevolence is to act in accordance with the very nature of God" (Hopkins cited in Elsbree, 1935, p. 540).

i. Summary

The benevolence of God means very different things to different people. In contemporary western society, the beliefs of traditional Christianity are perceived as having no greater claim to this knowledge than any other faith tradition or secular belief system (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 9; Kaufman, 1995, p. 50). Bonhoeffer nonetheless concluded, "All questions of our own goodness, as well as of the goodness of the world, are impossible unless we have first posed the question of the goodness of God" (Bonhoeffer, 2009, p. 49).

Biblical theology contends that God is, in his essential nature, good. His goodness, revealed in the character and actions Jesus, is the standard against which all goodness is measured. All that God makes and does is good. The creation is good because it is the handiwork of God, because God is present within it, and in so far as it conforms to the character and purposes of God. The creation has fallen short of its original goodness as a consequence of human sin although a diminished expression of its original goodness remains. God's goodness can be known, in a partial way, through the application of human reason to God's self-revelation in creation and the incarnate Christ. With the knowledge of God's goodness comes the responsibility to appropriate it.

In applying this formulation to the experience of trauma, two things should be noted. First, goodness is not a moral evaluation of an individual's motives or of the consequences of their actions for the state of the world (Bonhoeffer, 2009, p. 227). Rather, it challenges us to consider the nature of the ultimate reality and the source of the ethical concern. Second, a belief in the benevolence of God does not change the objective events of trauma. What it does do, flowing from the previous statement, is shape the way in which the individual interprets their experience. The interpretative principle is that good can be found in traumatic events because of the inherent goodness of creation that flows from the essential goodness of its creator; because God is personally present within his creation and taking responsibility for it; and when people act as God's representatives within creation and conduct themselves in conformity with the character and intentions of their creator.

The task of spiritual care is to be a personal expression of the benevolent God in the midst of trauma, assisting a trauma affected individual to reframe their perception of the experience "away from an absolutizing of the present" (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 28) and towards an appreciation of God's greater purposes for his creation - what he has done, what he is doing, and what he will do, or in Bonhoeffer's language, God's work as "creator, reconciler, and redeemer" (Bonhoeffer, 2009, p. 48). In this way, we instill the hope of a better future and the confidence that, with God's help, this future can be realized. The challenge is to do so in a way that "rings true in our context [and] applies authoritatively to our lived life" (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 9).

4. Connection – "It is not good to be alone"

> *Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him"* (Genesis 2:18 ESV).

a. Introduction

Positive supportive relationships with peers, friends, family, and God have been identified as an important resource for coping with the experience of trauma. The loss of these relationships is a third mechanism by which spiritual distress is established and maintained. “One of the ironies in trauma recovery is that the traumatic event can disrupt support networks at the very time they are most needed” (Lyons, 1991, p. 101).

Some indicators that these relationships have been disrupted are feelings of isolation and abandonment, feelings of disconnection from human and divine systems of care and protection, a lack of acceptance, relationship problems, and a reluctance or refusal to interact with family and friends (Herman, 1997, pp. 33, 51; Grant, 1999, p. 10; Murray et al., 2004, p. 41; Koenig, 2006, p 10; McClung et al., 2006, p. 148).

The continuity of positive supportive relationships in the midst of chaos has been identified as a significant source of strength (Hermann, 2001, p. 69; Murray et al., 2004, p. 41; Hermann, 2006, p. 742). Specifically, a sense of emotional connection with God or a higher power as a supportive partner is an “important correlate of positive outcomes” (Pargament et al., 1990, p. 814), “a primary determinant of health outcomes” (Johnstone & Yoon, 2009, p. 428), and “may serve as a significant protective factor” by providing a greater sense of personal hope and self-acceptance and “a secure base… from which to approach a difficult and/or stressful situation” (Gall et al., 2007, pp. 112-114). A sense of connection has the effect of integrating personal effort with a realistic “recognition of the limits of personal agency” balanced by “the knowledge that the deity will be there to make events endurable” (Pargament et al., 1990, pp. 814-815).

All this poses the question, “Is it possible to personally experience a benevolent God or higher power as a supportive partner in the midst of trauma?”

b. A “mysterious, paradoxical dialectic”

The essential nature of God is invisible and incomprehensible to humans due to the disproportion between an infinite, self-communicating God and a finite, contemplating subject (Augustine, 1892, *Letters*, CXLVIII. II. 7, 10; Aquinas, 1947, p. 119; Rahner, 1978, p. S108; Calvin, 1960, p. 57, 97; John 1:18; 6:46; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16; 1 John 4:12). However, human limitations notwithstanding, it is in the nature of God as a self-communicating being to reveal himself. He does this indirectly through his works (Augustine, 1888, *Sermons*, Homily I. 13. 2009; McGrath, 2011, p. 203), which can give “plain intimation of his incomprehensible Essence” (Calvin, 1960, p. 97), and through his activity in history (Pannenberg, 1969, p. 13; McGrath, 2011, p. 143). Inferences can be drawn about the nature of God from reflection on the natural world, however, these are limited to the

awareness of his existence (Calvin, 1960, p. 57; Hagner, 1971, pp. 89-91) and his "eternal power and divine nature" (Romans 1:19-20). God's greatest self-revelatory work is in Christ, the incarnate Word. While Christ's human form was visible to people, his divine nature was not (Augustine, 1892, *Letters*, CXLVIII. II. 10). Thus, a second and complementary means of divine self-communication through the Spirit is necessary (Augustine, 1892, *Letters*, CXLVIII. I. 1; II. 6; Rahner, 2003, pp. 84-85).

God's self-communicating nature in conjunction with his creation of humanity as the "personal recipient or addressee of his communication" with the "'obediential potency' for the reception of such a self-communication" (Rahner, 2003, pp. 89-90) argues for more than just the knowledge of God's existence. Together these suggest that God can be personally known as a relational being.

c. The paradox is resolved through Christ as a relational mediator

To overcome the disproportion between God and humans, Christ has entered the presence of God as a relational mediator to "connect us with the Father" until such time as, according to 1 Corinthians 8:6, we "partake of the heavenly glory" and can "see God as he is" (Calvin, 1960, pp. 394, 703). Aquinas held that any knowledge of God that is not knowledge of his essential nature is an inferior knowledge (Aquinas, 1947, p. 134). Augustine offered the corrective that the knowledge we do have, incomplete though it is, provides…

> …a depth of understanding sufficient for this life – sufficient, that is, for grounding a unified, coherent, and philosophically rich account of the divine nature, its place in reality, and it relation to his own soul (Stump & Kretzmann, 2001, p. 86).

A relational knowledge of God is therefore sufficient for coping with the spiritually destabilizing effects of exposure to trauma.

d. Knowing God as a relational being

A number of biblical passages affirm that God is relationally knowable. He is known to those who are in relationship with him by his actions towards them. God can be either an enemy or a friend. With regard to the first, God can never be physically absent from his creation, but he does choose to be relationally distant from people by "hiding his face" (Job 13:24; Psalm 13:1; Psalm 44:24). This does not mean that God cannot be seen, but rather that he has deliberately chosen not to be "friendly and well-disposed" towards us (Clines, 1989, p. 319) and to withdraw his covenant blessings from those who may previously have experienced them (Van Gemeren, 2008, p. 662). From a human perspective, it may appear that God is absent or that he is present but acting in opposition to us.

Conversely, “seeing God face to face” (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 6:25-26) implies a friendship or relational closeness with God and the experience of his support, protection, and blessing (Van Gemeren, 2008, p. 170). With the experience of his blessings comes the assurance of his presence. The experience of God is such that his presence is recognizable and reportable (Fretheim, 1984, p. 92; Grudem, 1994, p. 189). The experience of “seeing God face to face” belongs to the righteous (Job 33:26) who genuinely seek him (2 Chronicles 7:14; Psalm 24:6; Psalm 27:8) and who “desire to live in accordance with his standards” (Van Gemeren, 2008, p. 260).

e. God’s means of self-communication

The word and the Spirit are God’s two means of self-communication. In Genesis 1:1-3, the invisible God was present in his creation by his Spirit (Wenham, 1987, p. 17) and effective through his word (Hartley, 2012, p. 44). In Psalm 33:6, the concepts of “word” and “spirit” are used synonymously (Hartley, 2012, p. 44). Speaking of the promised messiah, Isaiah wrote, *“And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD”* (Isaiah 11:2 ESV). Those attributes of the Spirit listed here - wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge - are also the attributes of the word of God (Woodhouse, 2015, 2.3 para 2). In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus claimed to be the literal fulfilment of Isaiah’s messianic prophecies (Nolland, 1989, p. 197), linking word and Spirit within his own person. “The word of God” can refer to “the word about God” or “the word from God” (Woodhouse, 2015, 3.3.1 para 1). In either case these must be God’s own words. The alternative is that they are human words about God which, according to Calvin, are powerless (Calvin, 1960, p. 88). God, present as Spirit, empowers his words to bring into being the content of his proclamations. The Bible is “the word of God” in that it embodies the spiritual presence of the invisible God and effective words about God and from God. Thus, the apostle Paul could write,

> All Scripture is breathed out by God [originating from the Spirit] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work [effective] (2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV).

God’s self-revelation in word and Spirit is perceived by means of the human intellect (Aquinas, 1947, p. 119), however, the flawed human intellect is inadequate for the task. It must, in the language of Aquinas, be perfected and strengthened (Aquinas, 1947, p. 123; Rahner, 1978, p. S100) or, in the language of Augustine, be complemented by purity of heart (Augustine, 1887, *City of God*, XXII. 29) and faith (Augustine, 1894, *Psalms*, XLIV. 4). Certainly, failures of reason,

purity, and faith (Augustine, 1955, p. 85) expressed as ignorance, pride, and unbelief, act to prevent people from "discerning the divine presence and purpose" (McGrath, 2011, pp. 213-214). Only when these failures are addressed is the believer able to see...

> ...the invisible things of God hidden beneath their opposite: God's glory is indeed revealed in Jesus the Christ, but it is revealed as something completely antithetical to our preconceptions of divinity and of glory (Hall, 2004, p. 5).

f. Experiencing the presence of God

Participation in God's spiritual presence requires three things: proclamation, belief, and repentance. First, God's words about himself must be proclaimed. These are frequently words that reveal God's character through his past actions (Psalm 46:1). One mechanism of proclamation is the symbolic re-enactment of God's ancient redemptive acts. Examples of this are the Passover and the Lord's Supper. Second, the hearers of these words about God must allow him to be God (Broyles, 1999, p. 211) by trusting that his actions in the present will be consistent with his past character and promises (Psalm 46:10) thereby "actualizing" his past protection and rescue for a new generation (Durham, 1987, pp. 158, 166). Third, words from God calling on people to cease forms of action that are inconsistent with his revealed character and purposes and commence others that are consistent with them (Van Gemeren, 2008, p. 407) must be obeyed. Actions to be ceased include unbelief, disobedience, and fear. Actions to be commenced include seeking "refuge" and "strength" in the Lord's presence (Psalm 46:1). The results of proclamation, belief, and repentance are oneness (1 Corinthians 10:17), partnership, fellowship, and communion (Garland, 2003, p. 477) both with the risen Christ and with the community of believers.

In contrast to God's "partial and preparatory" revelation recorded in the Old Testament, his self-revelation in Jesus Christ is "supreme and permanent" (Bavinck, 2011, p. 148; John 1:14; 12:45; 14:7, 9). "God chose to make himself known, finally and ultimately, in a real, historical man" (Carson, 1991, p. 127). The Incarnation was necessary because the personal and relational nature of God "cannot be represented by an impersonal object" (Tenney, 1981, p. 145). That being said, human limitations still mean that God's self-revelation in Christ will only be seen perfectly in the heavenly city (1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 22:3-4). Even Jesus' disciples failed to see him as he truly was. They knew the man Jesus well enough to leave everything and follow him and at times displayed intense loyalty to him. However, they were also struggled with a profound spiritual blindness (Carson, 1991, p. 494) and failed to understand his true identity and significance (Morris, 1987, p. 642). Despite this, God graciously

granted them the experience of his presence, initially in the physical form of Jesus (Luke 8:22-33), but later through the indwelling of "Spirit of truth" (John 14:16-19) with whom Jesus had equated himself (John 14:6). Morris wrote, "It is worth noticing that, without exception, these functions assigned to the Spirit are elsewhere in this Gospel assigned to Christ" (Morris, 1987, p. 663). Despite the impossibility of seeing God's essential nature, he is knowable as either friend or enemy. Despite our human limitations and failings, God grants to his friends the experience of his spiritual presence, through proclamation and participation in his word.

g. Summary

The Scriptures affirm that God's purposes for his people are best fulfilled in connection with others. *"The LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'"* (Genesis 2:18 ESV). Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 lists a number of advantages flowing from connection with others: shared labour, support, protection against the elements, and protection against attack. Implicit in both passages is that idea that, while human connections are advantageous, God's purposes are ultimately achieved through a connection with God himself and that he created humans "in his image" for just this purpose.

Theology holds that all knowledge of God begins with God, who has chosen to reveal himself. Human language, despite its limitations, is capable of conveying meaningful knowledge of those aspects of God's nature and character that he has graciously made known. This is possible firstly because God chose to enter his creation through his Word, making himself part of the common human experience and therefore able to be represented by words and secondly because he created humans with the rational ability to communicate knowledge via language and the relational capacity to respond to that knowledge.

Meaningful knowledge of God equates to participation in God's spiritual presence. Such participation is transformational and requires three things: proclamation, belief, and repentance. First, God's words about himself must be proclaimed. These are frequently words that reveal God's character through his past actions (Psalm 46:1) and they may involve the symbolic re-enactment of God's ancient redemptive acts. Two examples are the Passover and the Lord's Supper. Second, the hearers of these words must allow God to be God (Broyles, 1999, p. 211) by trusting that his actions in the present will be consistent with his past character and promises (Psalm 46:10). In this way his past protection and rescue is "actualized" for a new generation (Durham, 1987, pp. 158, 166). Osmer wrote, "...these very descriptions of God's identity are reinterpreted to articulate the new thing God is doing and will do as the people of God continue on their journey" (Osmer, 2008, p. 9). Thirdly, God's call to cease acting in ways that are

inconsistent with his revealed character and purposes and begin acting in ways that are consistent with them (Van Gemeren, 2008, p. 407) must be obeyed. Actions to be ceased include unbelief, disobedience, and fear. Actions to be commenced include seeking "refuge" and "strength" in the Lord's presence (Psalm 46:1). The results of proclamation, belief, and repentance are oneness (1 Corinthians 10:17), partnership, fellowship, and communion (Garland, 2003, p. 477) both with the risen Christ and with the community of believers.

5. Conclusion

From a theological perspective, spiritual distress results when people fail to engage with the world in the way that God intended. God's intention is that humanity function in the world by expressing the "image" and "likeness" of the invisible God to the visible world, exercising control or "dominion" over the created order under God's delegated authority, and doing so in the context of co-operative, supportive relationships with the creator and with each other. These three creation functions closely parallel the three core spiritual needs described in the secular literature, the need for a sense of "control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1997, p. 33).

Meaning or purpose is lost when people refuse to accept their status as dependent, created beings and instead assert their independence, placing their own goals above those of God, and taking on themselves the overwhelming burden of "making something significant of themselves" (Barth, 1961, III.4, p. 407). In effect, they become their own god. Flowing from this, control is lost because people attempt to exercise dominion on their own authority and for their own purposes rather than as God's representatives seeking to conduct themselves in conformity with the character and intentions of their creator and subject to the authority and limits conferred by God's word. Illegitimate rule fails to recognize the limits of human agency and may oppose the purposes of God in a given situation. The outcome, from a human perspective, is unpredictable, hope is lost, and paralysis can result. Connection is lost when people, by reason of ignorance, pride, or unbelief, fail to exercise their inherent capacity to enter into a relationship with God and experience him as a supportive partner in the midst of trauma. Instead, they choose to distance themselves from God and his purposes.

The ultimate goal of spiritual trauma care is the restoration of the creation paradigm of image, dominion, and relationship resulting in the elimination of spiritual distress. However, given that most people do not subscribe to biblical truth, avoid the conscious consideration of questions of meaning unless forced to do so, and are content to move through life without a coherent or fully elaborated belief system, a more realistic outcome is a degree of mitigation of

distress as a spiritually distressed person steps back from the brink of acute distress to a state of generalised existential dissatisfaction or unease.

Because the personal and relational nature of God "cannot be represented by an impersonal object" (Tenney, 1981, p. 145), the role of the spiritual carer is to be the physical and tangible expression of the presence of God in a traumatized person's life and assist them to reframe their perception of the experience "away from an absolutizing of the present" (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 28) and towards an appreciation of God's greater purposes for his creation. They become one means by which God is present and operative and instill the hope that, with God's help, a better future can be realized. The challenge is to do so in a way that "rings true in our context [and] applies authoritatively to our lived life" (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 9). This is achieved in three ways.

First, a sense of meaning is rediscovered by recognising that meaning "cannot be grasped without reference to what God is doing" (Kaufman, 1996, p. 45). Humans are dependent beings whose existence only makes sense when we freely surrender the responsibility for our lives to the God who is present and operative in the world in Word and Spirit. To this end, we seek to identify God's purposes and priorities by measuring and evaluating our own purpose-oriented goals against the character and actions of Christ.

Second, a sense of control is regained as we appropriate God's purposes as our own. This has the effect, at least in general terms, of making the outcome of events predictable and giving the individual a sense of control, albeit indirectly, over those events. Appropriating God's purposes requires acknowledging that the source of all goodness is the God who is ontically present and working out his good purposes among his people as they trust him, "tasting and seeing that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8), and acting with the same benevolence towards others (John 15:12-13).

Third, reconnection with God as a supportive partner is possible because, despite our human limitations and failings, God wants to be known and graciously grants to us the experience of his presence in Jesus (Luke 8:22-33) and through the indwelling of the "Spirit of truth" (John 14:16-19). Participating in God's spiritual presence requires three things: proclamation, belief, and repentance. First, God's words revealing his character through his past actions (Psalm 46:1) are proclaimed. Second, the hearer trusts that God's actions in the present will be consistent with his past character and promises (Psalm 46:10) thereby "actualizing" God's past protection and guidance for the challenges of the present. Third, the hearer ceases acting in ways that are inconsistent with God's revealed character and purposes and begins to act in ways that are consistent with them. The results of this are oneness (1 Corinthians 10:17),

partnership, fellowship, and communion (Garland, 2003, p. 477) with the risen Christ and with the community of believers.

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