

Trauma and Pastoral Care

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Introduction

For this research, I drew on my personal experience of being a trauma survivor to help understand and present ways in which individuals can be more trauma-sensitive in their theology, thinking, and care. Trauma occurs on a daily basis in the life of every individual. Some of these traumas are so severe they impact the development of one's life and faith. Some traumas are small and barely leave a mark. According to the American Psychiatric Association, 1 in 11 people will be diagnosed with PTSD in their lifetimes. This statistic does not provide insight to those who have endured traumatic events without the diagnosis of PTSD or those who do not endure the lasting symptoms of PTSD. Those who experience trauma often feel like they are trapped in their own little worlds. The walls are tight around them, no one understands what is going on with them because there is no words to express it, and they feel completely forgotten in the fold of life. Even the central event of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is an extremely traumatizing event. This is why the church should care about the traumatized. Their congregants are enduring these traumas, they are longing for a place that can be safe and supported in their journey. The people are longing for someone to break into their brokenness and help them escape. But how do we do this in a way that doesn't harm? Christians are called to help and love their brothers and sisters, no matter the situation they are in. Trauma is inevitable; therefore, we must be prepared in our churches to help and engage with those traumatized. By having the knowledge of trauma and trauma care, churches can help survivors move past their trauma into the life Christ has for them. This research dove into the way theology and Christology one holds can impact the traumatized, how power and trauma-care go hand in hand, and some of the ways this information is important to providing good pastoral, and non-pastoral, care to the traumatized.

Power and Pastoral Care

Power: The capability to exert influence

Baldwin explains, "Sin as abuses of relational power rather than given inheritance of humanity is important for survivors of traumatic wounding and those who offer care... Shifting to a theology of sin as abuse of relational power re-centers attention and care to the one wounded and opens space for the need, opportunity, and capacity of restoration." Relationality and connection are foundation beliefs of the Christian faith. After all, the Bible calls Christians many times to "bear each other's burdens", "each member belongs to the others", "iron sharpens iron", and "live in harmony with one another" among hundreds of other references to community. If the balance of power is thrown off from sin or traumatic events, these calls can become challenging to live out. Humans are called to be relational beings, and power is always going to be apart of that. Thus, saying that sin is a disruption and breaking of this sacred call from God can impact how individuals view their place in the world and in their relationships.

Power, more specifically how an individual views power, is vitally important when caring for those impacted by trauma. Baldwin explains, "The choices human beings make in how we choose to use our relational power are often influenced by our personal theology of divine power and agency." This is where power and Christology connect to one another strongly. For a trauma survivor, it is hard to imagine that traumatic events are caused by a loving God that is called "Father". This is where power of God can become harmful to survivors and why we must be cautious with our way we view and exert power.

For trauma survivors, power can become a distorted reality. They feel helpless or trapped when under too much power or they can feel weak and fragile if not directed enough or vice versa. It is important for leaders in the Christian community, and elsewhere, to understand how the misuse of power can be detrimental to survivors. This might mean being willing to come down from the pulpit and walking among those who you are serving. This is not the easiest place to come down and be apart of, especially since there is a lot of brokenness and trauma in everyone's lives. However, breaking down the walls and pedestals of power may be exactly what is needed to begin to break through to those caught in the never-ending loop of traumatization.

Theology, Christology, and the Traumatized

Christology – the branch of theology dealing with the nature, person, and deeds of Jesus Christ

Trauma in the Gospel:

- Enslaved
- Tortured
- Imprisoned
- Beaten
- Crucified

These are just a few of the traumatic events found throughout the pages of the Bible. Even the most central aspect of Christianity, the death of Jesus

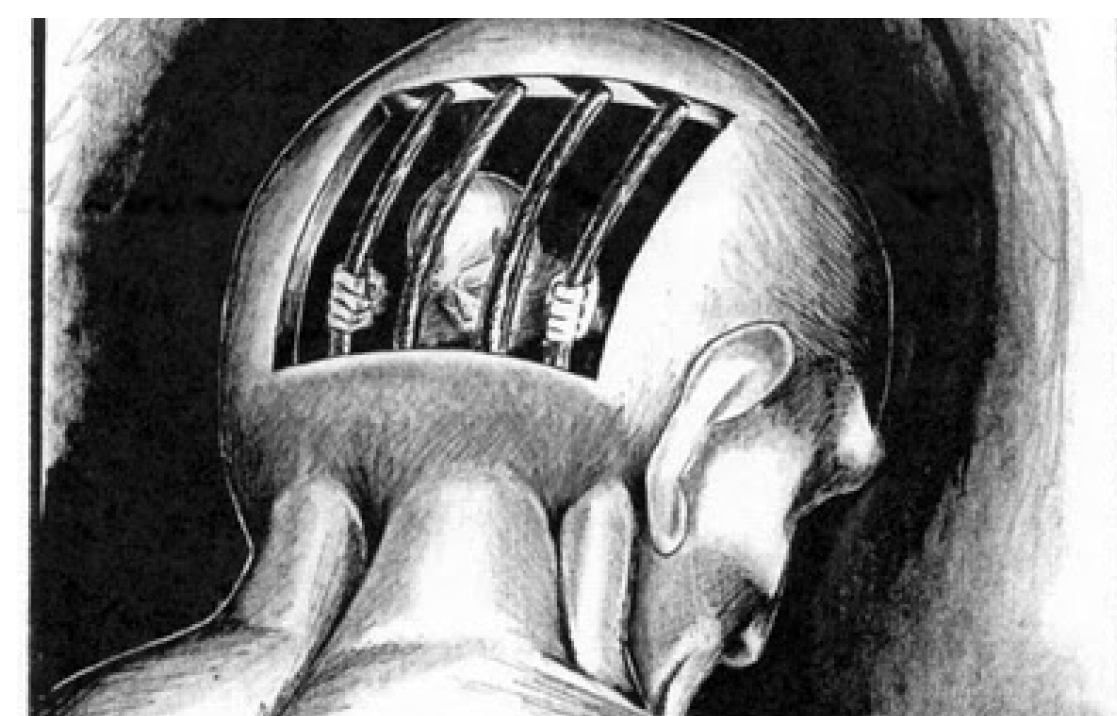
Christ upon the cross, is an immensely traumatizing. However, it teaches a lesson about our trauma in relationship to Christ. God is in the midst, directly attached, to our trauma and violence. Christ takes on all the traumatizing actions of the crucifixion to show His people that He is in the midst of their situations and cares so much about them. Those witnessing this event endured the trauma of seeing it unfold. However, the true gospel message lies in the truth that God, through Jesus Christ, showed His beloved people that He is in the midst of the trauma they endure, and He will, and they will, not be overcome by it! Why? Because on the third day brought a resurrected Savior as another symbol of how no circumstance, to carnage or trauma or pain or torture can separate us from God or end His love for us.

For trauma sensitive contexts, Baldwin explains that it is important to express the Christology that Jesus is the fully self-led human that enters the world of suffering to endure what humans are enduring. A God who is incarnate and loving in such a way that He would humble himself, taking sin and punishment from human lives, and be broken beyond human imagination despite never sinning himself. That is the God, the Trinitarian God, that the traumatized can come to love and worship. For it opens up those doors for empathy from the Father for the suffering, justification to the pains being endured, and hope that they will one day be reunited with a God who is so loving that He would also endure their suffering.

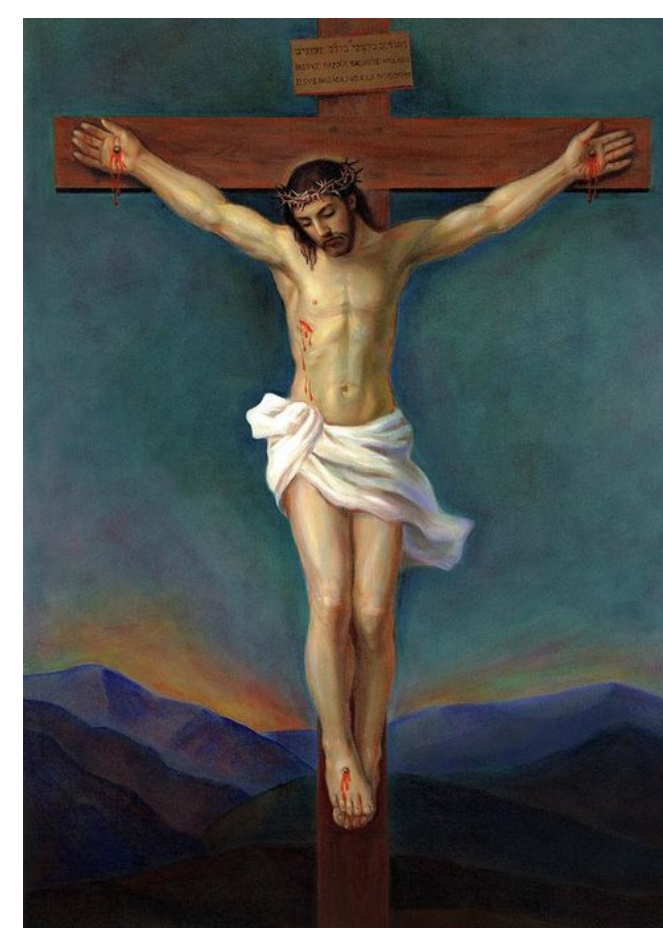
"The process offering of divine power and agency does not render God impotent; rather, it creates space for a degree of mutuality, consent, and a human agency in the unfolding of life in the world" (Baldwin). It separates God from being the sole reason for the horrible and evil events that occur in people's lives. This viewpoint is important for trauma ministry for two primary reasons.

1. Takes God out of being the sole inflictor of pain and trauma
 2. The power switches from a "power-over" to a "power-with"
- Christology. Christ becomes one that walks with us in our suffering, enduring the pain we endure so that we can be connected to the loving Father

Baldwin explains it as, "If God chooses, for God's own pleasure or agenda, massive suffering, as evidence in grand scale in the Holocaust and in small scale in the sudden violent death of loved ones, then God is unloving and unworthy of worship. This is not the God that Christians believe in. Therefore, there must be a way to reconcile the belief in a God that is loving toward His creation but also the traumatic events endured by individuals.



Picture 2



Picture 1

The Why and How

Why should individuals, especially those in a church, be cautious and informed about how to properly minister to traumatized individuals? This question has plagued churches for years. No one wants to hear that they are harming others when they are trying to help them in their most vulnerable time. However, this is sadly what is occurring in church's when they are not trauma sensitive to their congregations needs. If we decide not to focus our attention to a majority of our population or chose to be "blind" to the situation, we are part of the problem. Therefore, trauma ministry is so important. It enfolds all of God's beloved community into the fold of the church and body of Christ. It allows those who have experienced trauma to find themselves again, and eventually empower others in the same way.

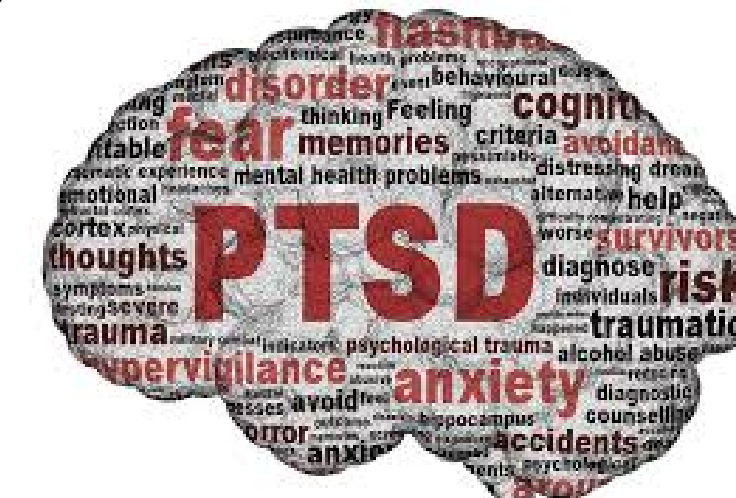
The how of this pursuit has more fluidity. Each person is going to endure and work through their trauma differently. However, that does not mean that our leaders and congregations should neglect to understand trauma to provide the support needed. According to Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger in *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care*, self-empathy is one of the first steps that needs to be taken. Compassionate ministry is rooted in the practice of being willing to endure the suffering of others without causing someone to endure compassion fatigue. People cannot serve well if they are overbearing themselves with the burdens of others and not caring for their own needs.



Picture 3

When being a support system for someone, it is important to know your limits and understand that there are times you cannot help with everything. Therefore, having additional resources and knowledge is important. Knowing trauma counselors, resource materials, shelters, or other ministries that focus on the need of the individuals are some of the ways the how can be played out. **Pastoral care leaders must remember, unless they are trained and licensed, they are not counselors.** Individuals enduring trauma need to have more than just someone to vent too but someone who is licensed to help them through their situations. It is also important for the church or ministry to create an action plan and provide information on ways to execute these plans within the community of the church. By having a plan in place, a church and its members can quickly jump into action to help the traumatized and not cause any more trauma to come to that individual.

If someone walks through the doors of the church beaten and bruised due to abuse, the leaders will jump into action to help them. Most trauma victims are dealing with these bruises on their minds and souls. The rhetoric used when in conversations with others, the ways topics are presented in sermons, and the way people are included in groups are all ways that people can be more mindful of traumatized individuals. This does not mean we cannot preach about something that may potentially trigger someone, because that would eliminate a majority of our topics. Instead, it is a good practice to be mindful of the traumas that the congregation may be wrestling with and provide safe spaces during services for those who feel they are in danger. Safe spaces could look like specific care-team members that people can come to during a service, special rooms in the building for people to go if they need too, or simply a warning for those who have endured trauma about the words about to be spoken. It does not need to completely flit the entire minister on its head, just simply providing these options can help a survivor feel safer and secure in the church.



Picture 4

Conclusion

In conclusion, trauma ministry is not something that should be simply ignored or forgotten in the church today. Many are suffering silently due to the lack of resources and training, causing them to potentially never leave the trauma cycle. We, as a church and Christian community, must be willing to walk alongside our brothers and sisters who have been traumatized and open our hearts to them. Christ came into this world to reject the evils within it thus healing the traumatic experiences. In order to understand how to work with a trauma-informed ministry the most, Christology must be fully unpacked. Viewing God, and Jesus, as loving and rejecting of evil is a healthier outlook for the traumatized than the view of God dictating every move. The view of power can become distorted by a survivor, making the view of the church and God also distorted. Understanding that these are dangerous waters to tread in and taking the time to understand the influence of power upon an individual's mindset can be beneficial in unlocking a successful trauma-sensitive program. How a trauma ministry will look is different for each church and each individual being care for. However, there are practices such as having a plan, providing safe spaces, and offering additional care that can be universally used among any trauma care program. These are a few of the ways that trauma-sensitive care can become a normal in the church, thus encapsulating what it means the burdens of each other and walk alongside each other. By diving into the Christology and power narratives in the context of traumatize individuals and how they can influence and seeing a few "how's and why's" to trauma-sensitive and trauma focused ministry, the foundations can begin to come together to helping untraumatized the populations in our churches and grow into the kingdom God intended for us.



Picture 5

References

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Questions and Continuing Conversation

How do we walk alongside someone when they have experienced a traumatic event that is unimaginable or unbearable?

What view of God allows the church to affirm God as all powerful and omnipotent but does not turn away the traumatized?

Is there a better way for everyone to advocate for the traumatized and help them redeem their brokenness, in order to live out more full lives with Christ?

How can we, as a church body in and outside of the church, be more in tune with the traumatized and provide the support they need?