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Musings on Being a Gospel-Centered Therapist

LILI D. ANDERSON

Musings on Robert Gleave's Article by One who Works at Being a Gospel-Centered Therapist and at Doing Gospel-Centered Therapy: In Defense of Generalizations

I found myself agreeing with much of what Dr. Robert Gleave (2012) wrote in his "Gospel-Centered Therapist" article. I liked the cautions about priestcraft: therapists who claim to have a "special relationship and status with the Spirit" or to have a "one size fits all" summation of gospel principles that denies or, at least, ignores the idiosyncratic needs of their clients.

As I read Gleave's article, however, I also found myself wanting to clarify a couple of points that I believe are critical in the discussion around this topic.

First, I suggest another term be used for what Gleave is warning against. Perhaps something like "rigid gospel therapy" or simply "gospel therapy." For LDS counselors to market or present themselves as a gospel therapists is a dangerous thing for the many good reasons that Gleave has articulated; however, as an LDS therapist, I can't imagine doing anything but gospel-centered therapy. The gospel of Jesus Christ contains all truth, all the answers to life's problems, and, in my opinion, any therapeutic approach by an LDS counselor that does not utilize the basic principles of the restored gospel must result in an unfortunate waste of available and healing truths. Why would I center my therapeutic approach on anything else? And while we hopefully learn in our gradu-

ate programs and through continuing education the best theories and practices available in our professional fields, why wouldn't we use the gospel as a kind of "Urim and Thummim" to sift through and identify those materials that harmonize with gospel truths and discard the rest? By "discard," I don't mean we fail to acquaint ourselves with what's out there, only that we recognize that certain therapeutic approaches are not in harmony with the gospel and protect ourselves and our clients from them, for why would we choose to substitute the philosophies of men for healing truths?

Now back to Gleave's warnings—it is crucial that we, as LDS therapists, avoid marketing ourselves as gospel savants who are able to receive revelation for clients or as super-religious counselors who attempt to usurp the stewardship of ecclesiastical leaders or dabble in any number of other "free-lance faith healing or spiritual therapy cult"-type activities (Allen Bergin as cited in

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Gleave, 2012). But let's not go so far as to throw the baby out with the bathwater and fail to center our professional work on the truths of the restored gospel.

My second concern is that post-modern philosophies may overly influence LDS practitioners to the point that, in our efforts to avoid overgeneralization, we fail to generalize at all, thereby forfeiting the most effective use of the principles that could most inform our practice and most benefit our clients. I am not suggesting Dr. Gleave, in his approach to counseling as a gospel-centered therapist, fails to incorporate gospel principles in his work with clients. Nor am I suggesting that he would disagree with much of what I am saying. I don't have enough information to make even a guess about either of those things. I am suggesting that in a world like ours, where post-modernist trends have made moral relativism the new religion, we need to be careful and clear about declaring and utilizing the truth inherent in the restored gospel, always recognizing, as Gleave emphasizes, the need for the guidance of the Spirit in applying those truths to individual circumstance. Again, this point is not an argument against anything in Gleave's article but rather a clarification that I feel is important whenever this topic is discussed.

I believe post-modernism, as a backlash against too strict a reliance upon the scientific approach, went too far in the opposite direction. Either extreme, I would argue, creates problems. While too strict a scientific approach may sometimes include the rather arrogant assumption that all truth can be found through its methodology, the post-modernism response holds all truth, all realities, to be plural and relative and dependent on context. For those of us who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, moral relativism is obviously problematic. No, let's not euphemize—moral relativism is a disaster. Elder Dallin Oaks (1999) warned BYU students:

Moral relativism, which is said to be the dominant force in American universities, has no legitimate place at Brigham Young University. Our faculty teach values—the right and wrong taught in the gospel of Jesus Christ—and students come to BYU for that teaching.

I think we could say that if moral relativism has no legitimate place at BYU, neither does it have a legitimate place anywhere individuals are trying to live by gospel principles.

Over 35 years ago, Elder Neal Maxwell (1974) gave this warning addressed specifically toward those of us in the behavioral sciences:

Relativism involves the denial of the existence of absolute truths and, therefore, of an absolute truth giver, God. Relativism has sometimes been a small, satanic sea breeze, but now the winds of relativism have reached gale proportions. Over a period of several decades relativism has eroded ethics, public and personal, has worn down the will of many, has contributed to a slackening sense of duty, civic and personal. The old mountains of individual morality have been worn down. This erosion has left mankind in a sand-dune society, in a desert of disbelief where there are no landmarks, and no north, no east, no west, and no south! There is only the dust of despair!

And while I believe many, if not most, LDS therapists are aware of the problem with moral relativism, I also believe it can sometimes sneak up on us in subtle ways. One area that warrants extra caution, I believe, is in not going to the other extreme in our effort to avoid over-generalizing.

It was about 20 years ago that I was in my master of social work program at UNLV. In one of my classes, a young man in my cohort made a rather impassioned comment about the importance of seeing every new client as an individual with his or her own unique circumstances and of needing, as therapists, to never bring preconceived notions or templates to the therapeutic table but to be willing to begin with a blank slate, so to speak, in each new therapeutic relationship. Such passionate—and politically correct—statements often generate a little buzz of support and approval, which this one did. I raised my own hand, however, to suggest that if we come to every new client with no preconceived ideas, we have very little to offer but a sympathetic ear, or what my husband, Chris (an LCSW for over 30 years) calls "rent-a-friend." (In fact, I suspect that too often that is all some clients get from their counseling sessions.) I went on to suggest that what we have to offer as therapists, are, in fact, generalizations, or our ability to share identified patterns to life: things that work for most people; things that work for most relationships.

Not incidentally, recognizing patterns—being able to generalize—is one of the key elements of IQ tests. One company that prepares and administers IQ tests explains:

Pattern recognition is the ability to see order in a chaotic environment; the primary condition for life. . . . Pattern recognition is . . . essential for reasoning because your capacity to think logically is based on your perception of the logic around you. (Pattern Recognition)

Leo Tolstoy recognized that there are some patterns that make life more successful than others. I read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (very depressing book; don't read it) for the first and last time at age 16 for an AP English class; however, shortly after I began doing therapy some 25 years later, the first line of the book crept out of a dark corner of my mind where it had been lurking with some of my less useful memories, to suddenly assume relevance. The book begins, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

I found it to be true. Notwithstanding the wide variety of styles and personalities, I saw that successful (in terms of emotional adjustment and relationships) individuals, couples, and families all did the same things and avoided the same things. It really came as no surprise because the gospel teaches us that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5; King James Version) and that "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to life" (3 Nephi 27:33).

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that there is absolute truth—the ultimate generalization. So how do we reconcile the idea of absolute truth with the need for individually customized spiritual guidance, as well discussed by Gleave? Gleave states:

Any attempt to create a gospel-based therapy—by the very nature of the attempt—is an attempt to articulate a set of principles that apply to all people in all circumstances. The gospel must be dynamic and cannot be reduced to all-encompassing rules; rather, it must be a present tense-lived experience with the complexity of every day oppositions in "real time."

Well, yes and no. Yes, each individual circumstance has unique aspects, which deserves a certain measure of customization. But many gospel principles are, in fact, if not all-encompassing, certainly broadly-encompassing rules and though they may not fit "all people in all circumstances," they will fit most people in most circumstances.

Further, I believe one of our well-known gospel paradigms lends insight into this question of reconciling absolute truth, including general principles that apply to most people with the clearly taught need for individually customized spiritual guidance.¹ Our doctrine of three realms: the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial, which the 88th section of the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, are not only future kingdoms of glory but are also realms of law, light, and life. I believe that the process of changing from the natural man—a person who allows himself to

be governed by desires, appetites, and passions—to one of the "honorable men of the earth" (D&C 76:75) can be seen as the process of leaving the telestial realm behind and living in a more terrestrial realm. This process, I suggest, is largely accomplished by consistent obedience to the general guidelines provided by our standard works and the words of our prophetic leaders. The process of changing from a terrestrial, honorable man or woman of the earth, to a more celestial child of God, I posit, is accomplished through the individually customized guidance of the Spirit, which alone can help us magnify our particular talents and fulfill our individual foreordained tasks in building the kingdom.

Nephi explained it this way:

And now, behold, my beloved brethren, I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye have entered in by the way [speaking to those who are baptized]. But, behold, why do ye ponder these things in your hearts?

. . . Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do. [Read the scriptures and obey the commandments which help us harness the natural man and become more terrestrial and therefore more able to receive the Spirit—who otherwise would be offended by our telestial behaviors and cease to strive with us (see Mormon 5:16).]

. . . For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do. [Once we are more consistently terrestrial, the Holy Ghost can give us the individual, personalized instruction that is necessary for us to fulfill the measure of our unique creation.]

Behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and there will be no more doctrine given [because no more is necessary] until after he [Christ] shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh [which constitutes one's calling and election made sure, or being sealed up for the Celestial Kingdom]. And when he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh, the things which he shall say unto you shall ye observe to do [sort of goes without saying, but makes for a nice completion of ideas]. (2 Nephi 32:1–6)

This explanation of post-baptism progression seems clear. One size does fit us all when it comes to leaving Babylon—the telestial world—behind and becoming more consistently terrestrial and, therefore, more consistently

able to receive the Spirit. In almost 20 years of experience as a social worker doing individual, marriage, and family counseling, I have found—at ever increasing levels—that my clients generally need help in finding freedom and safety from the telestial elements in their lives by breaking free of telestial patterns in their own lives or better coping with and setting boundaries for telestial behaviors of those around them. In those cases, the application of general principles is relevant and useful.

Then, to go further, to strive for exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom, we must follow the individually customized guidance of the Spirit. But again, to be eligible for the Spirit we must first follow a clearly laid out set of commandments that do, in fact, apply to all of us. Frankly, I would venture to say that the majority of those who seek counseling are likely to be struggling with telestial issues, either as perpetrators or victims.

Counseling is a strange profession, and I imagine that there are almost as many kinds of counseling as there are counselors. My style includes a lot of education. I believe—and regularly remark to my clients—that the truth sets us free (see John 8:32). I don't claim to be a source of truth, but a facilitator to teach or remind of some of the things that work better in individual lives and relationships and to caution about some of the things that don't work. In fact, I find myself presenting certain ideas, principles, interpersonal skill sets, etc. again and again, not because I don't have anything else to say and certainly not because I don't appreciate each client as a unique individual, but because human beings end up having similar ailments and needing similar remedies. And all these patterns of success and failure, of course, are truths contained in the gospel.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1974), directly addressing LDS behavioral scientists, put it this way:

Man has been taught, therefore, concerning the “thou shalt nots,” and we have also been taught the “thou shalt” by the Sermon on the Mount and other eloquent expressions. In so teaching us, God has portrayed the proximate and ultimate consequences of various behavior in terms of the misery that follows sinning, or the happiness that follows righteousness. Thus, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not “data rich and theory poor.”

Sometimes, then, as clinicians, we may need to share information about the gospel “theory” to which Elder Maxwell referred. Other times, our challenge may be to discover how a particular client has become stuck in

some way that prevents him from being able to utilize the truths and solutions found in gospel principles. Elder Boyd K. Packer (1992) once made mention of the generalities contained in the scriptures while still recognizing the need for some individualized application:

The scriptures speak in *general* [emphasis added] terms, leaving us free to apply the principles of the gospel to meet the infinite variety of life. But when they say “thou shalt not,” we had better pay attention.

Let me repeat an earlier point with emphasis. If Dr. Gleave reads these words, it may be that he would agree with what I've written and perhaps accurately point out that his article did not in any way preclude or directly contradict what I have said here; however, it is my belief that we, as LDS counselors, must constantly affirm the value of and utilize in our client work and scholarship the *general* truths of the restored gospel. Especially when we work with LDS clients who desire to address their presenting problems within the framework of the gospel, we should be ready to do so. I have had many clients over the years who have told me of their disappointment in past counseling experiences with LDS clinicians who would not include gospel principles in their clinical work. Those clients often expressed feelings of confusion and betrayal. When an LDS client² comes to an LDS therapist seeking for professional help within a gospel framework, why *shouldn't* they be able to expect that *all* truth would be available and drawn upon by the clinician? Why should we only offer what the rest of the professional world has?

I do agree with Gleave's point about the need for the guidance of the Spirit in our work with individual clients and in the client's life as they move forward. Let us be careful that our awareness of the individual nature of our work not be taken for post-modernist rejection of the absolute gospel truths that are available to us as a foundation in our clinical work. Let us always act with humility and caution lest we set ourselves up as “free-lance faith heal[ers]” or practitioners of priestcraft (Allen Bergin as cited in Gleave, 2012).

Again, from Elder Maxwell's 1974 address to LDS behavioral scientists—a speech worth reading in its entirety—comes this clarification: “The LDS scholar has his citizenship in the kingdom, but carries his passport into the professional world—not the other way around.”

If we became just like the world, the world would hold us in double contempt; and the Lord would be as displeased as he was when, through his prophet Ezekiel, he said his “priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have *put no difference between the holy and profane*, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean.” (Ezek. 22:26; italics added.)

Thus it must be in the behavioral sciences, as well. Otherwise, we will be victimized by relativism, as most of the world has been already. Paul made a plea for us to see the importance of simplicity and certainty: “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1 Corinthians 14: 8–9)

Finally, I share a charge given by President Boyd K. Packer to the J. Reuben Clark Law Society in 2004. President Packer spent a few minutes talking about how troubled the world now is. As he neared the end of his address, he reviewed the evils prophesied by Paul, with which we now contend:

You face a much different world than did President [J. Reuben] Clark. The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were localized. They are now spread across the world, wherever the Church is. The first line of defense—the home—is crumbling. Surely you can see what the adversary is about.

We are now exactly where the prophets warned we would be.

Paul prophesied word by word and phrase by phrase, describing things exactly as they are now. I will quote from Paul’s prophecy and check the words that fit our society:

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

For men shall be lovers of their own selves—Check!

covetous—Check!

boasters—Check!,

proud—Check!

blasphemers—Check!

disobedient to parents—Check! Check!

unthankful—Check!

unholy—Check!

Without natural affection—Check! Check!

trucebreakers—Check!

false accusers—Check!

incontinent—Check!

fierce—Check!

despisers of those that are good—Check!

Traitors—Check!

heady—Check!

highminded—Check!

lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God—Check! Check!

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts,

Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:1–7).

Then came President Packer’s (2004) charge to the members of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society:

I wonder if you who are now lawyers or you who are students of the law know how much you are needed as defenders of the faith. Be willing to give of your time and of your means and your expertise to the building up of the Church and the kingdom of God and the establishment of Zion, which we are under covenant to do—not just to the Church as an institution, but to members and ordinary people who need your professional protection.

Personally, I think that charge applies to AMCAP members and all LDS clinicians in our stewardship as LDS professionals, as well.

“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.” (Matthew 5:13)

We must never sell our birthright for a mess of pottage.

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ENDNOTES

1. This idea of applying the gospel paradigm of three realms of light, law, and life to human behavior and relationships is explored at length in the author’s book, *Choosing Glory*, 2009, These Are Great Days Publishing Company.
2. Frankly, I utilize gospel principles with my non-member clients, as well. I just use different vocabulary. I want to offer the very best I have to give to every client.