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A Matter of Faith: A Qualitative Study With Evangelical Christians

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Every Sunday across the United States thousands of individuals gather at churches with others of similar faith and beliefs (Gallup & Jones, 2000). Why? What significance do these beliefs have for them? How do these shared experiences manifest in their daily life? Research conducted by Gallup and Jones (2000) reveal approximately 92% of Americans consider themselves religious, eight out of 10 Americans identify themselves as Christians, and 41% of Americans specifically describe themselves as *evangelical Christians*. The beliefs and doctrines embraced by evangelical Christians adhere to the Bible as the ultimate guide for personal and spiritual growth and view faith as a valued and necessary part of their relationship with God (Gallagher, 2003; Gallup & Jones, 2000). In addition, it has been suggested that faith can have a positive influence on one's physical and mental health (Koenig, 2005, 2008; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Perry, 1998; Walters & Byl, 2008). While literature exists in the areas of spirituality, religiosity, and faith (Foster, 1978; Gallup & Jones, 2000; Koenig, 2005; Meilaender, 1991; Pargament, 2007), few research studies have been conducted with the evangelical Christian community. Such studies may help counselors who work with clients identifying themselves as evangelical Christians.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how six adult participants in Southeast Texas describe and experience the essence of faith. For the purposes of this study, faith as described within the Bible (Hebrews 11:1), will be

generally defined as, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (New American Standard Bible, 1995).

Expanding on Perry's (1998) study of Christian faith, the central question of investigation was: What are evangelical Christians' perceptions of the phenomenon of faith? Our interview questions explored descriptions of personal experiences of faith, how faith manifests on a daily basis, and the role of church attendance in faith. Finally, the researchers were mindful to bracket their own experiences, faith, and beliefs to maintain the validity of the study.

Background and Literature

Understanding the perspectives of evangelical Christians and their commonly held values and ideas is necessary to begin to understand how faith impacts their lives. Current literature provides a foundation for gaining insight into the world view of evangelical Christians (Eriksen, Marston, & Korte, 2002; Gallagher, 2003). Additionally, a basic examination of spirituality, religiosity, and faith are presented as the basis for understanding how faith can influence the quality of life. For counselors, recognizing these factors and becoming familiar with the experiences and activities of the evangelical Christian client can demonstrate respect and acceptance of their religious values. Furthermore, it provides an open door for this population to discuss and integrate their personal beliefs and religious teachings in treatment without apprehension. Thus, examining a client's religion and faith can add significance to the therapeutic process.

Evangelical Christians

Evangelical Christians are a group of individuals who define themselves by a common faith and belief system. Specifically, they place great value on the authority of the Bible as literal truth (Beck, 1997; Eriksen, Marston, & Korte, 2002) and have historically viewed professional counseling and psychology with much skepticism (Esau, 1998). Evangelicals are typically conservative and espouse to the virgin birth of Christ, believe Christ's death on the cross provided the atonement for the sins of the world, that he was bodily resurrected, and that the miracles reported in the Bible are authentic (Eriksen, Marston, & Korte, 2002). Furthermore, a central tenet held by evangelical Christians is the importance of spreading the message of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Today, evangelicals' faith and practices can be found throughout the world and on a continuum from fundamental to more progressive beliefs (Gallagher, 2003). Major evangelical denominations in the United States include Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal (Richards & Bergin, 2000). For counselors, it is important to take into account when an individual describes himself or herself as an evangelical Christian. Thus, asking the individual to describe the meaning attributed to this term may provide for a better understanding of values, beliefs, and roles that have been adopted in the client's public and private life (Gallagher, 2003). Furthermore, the number of individual Christians who identify themselves as evangelical has steadily risen from 51 million to 77 million nationwide (Richards & Bergin, 2000); yet, despite growth, limited research has been conducted with this population.

Faith as a Component of Spirituality and Religiosity

Within the evangelical Christian context, spirituality includes communication with God through prayer, obedience, worship, love, and servanthood to God and humanity (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Religiosity includes trusting in God, believing that the Bible is the ultimate and authoritative source for beliefs and practices, and an affiliation to a religious denomination (Gallagher, 2003; Richards & Bergin, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Renewed interest in these constructs (Zinnbauer et al., 1997) makes the study of faith relevant because faith is a central component of spirituality and religion for the evangelical community. Additionally, evangelical Christians believe that as they grow in their faith, a positive difference will take place in their lives both inwardly and outwardly (Foster, 1978; Woodfin, 1988). To further understand the concept of faith, a phenomenological research design was selected to describe and understand the essence of faith.

Method

A phenomenological design was chosen for this research project in order to best understand the lived experiences of the participants and to explore the emerging themes and patterns that arise from these experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), "phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved" (p. 58). In this case, the phenomenon to be explored was faith.

Participants

Miles and Huberman (1994) described purposive sampling as a common method used within qualitative research in which selection of the participants is often based on the researcher's understanding, knowledge, or experience with a particular phenomenon. In this study, the selected group included members of the evangelical community. Participants included two men and four women who ranged in age from 20 to 71. Three evangelical denominations were represented: Southern Baptist, Non-denominational, and Assemblies of God. Each individual represented differing backgrounds to add breadth to the research project. Participants included: Sophia a 26-year-old occupational therapist who identified herself as a South Asian Indian who, though raised within a Hindu faith, became a Christian while in high school; Dee, a 71-year-old woman who is a widow and serves as a ministry volunteer at her church; Marie, a 49-year-old wife and mother of 14 children, 13 of which are children with special needs; Wayne, a 52-year-old Native American who is a minister and doctoral student; Lynn, a 40-year-old homemaker and mother of two; and Brian, a 20-year-old young man who holds two jobs as a retail store assistant. Each participant gave of his or her time graciously to share their personal experiences and journey in the area of faith.

Instrumentation

Two predesigned questionnaires were utilized by the researchers for data collection. The first was a demographics questionnaire. The second questionnaire was a semi-structured interview protocol that included four grand tour interview questions: (*a*) *Tell me about your personal faith and what faith means to you. (b) What have your*

experiences been in terms of faith? (c) How does faith manifest in your life on a daily basis? (d) How does church attendance affect your faith? Participants' responses to the final question were often addressed within the context of the first three questions and therefore were not addressed separately. Questions were developed based on the review of literature and were designed to explore the meaning of faith and how faith is practiced in the lives of the participants.

Ethical Issues

Qualitative methods include face-to-face interviewing to explore the subjective meaning of the participants. Because several of the participants attended the same church, increased precautions were taken to protect their anonymity and privacy, and to ensure confidentiality. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity and they all completed an informed consent process. Audio tapes were maintained in a secure location and then destroyed following verification of the transcripts.

Data Collection

This study employed qualitative methodology of data collection and analysis. Written consent from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects was secured, and a permission letter from the senior pastor of the site location was also obtained in order to conduct research on the church premise. After permission was granted, a demographics questionnaire was given to each participant, one-on-one interviews were conducted and audio taped, and transcriptions of the interviews were produced for analysis.

While the audio tapes and transcripts were the primary sources within the study, triangulation methods involving various sources and investigators were incorporated in order to minimize validity threats and increase trustworthiness. Maxwell (2005) proposed that triangulation, "allows you to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating" (p. 93). In addition to triangulation, the researchers incorporated bracketing and peer debriefing in order to set aside their own personal experiences, biases, and prejudgments so that everything was "perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p.34). One of the three researchers also conducted a validity check by returning to several of the participants to determine if the essence of the interview had been captured accurately.

Data Analysis

In order to understand the phenomenon of faith, the researchers employed Moustakas' (1994) adapted version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method in analyzing participants' transcripts. In this method, transcripts were read in search of significant statements and phrases that described the meaning and essence of the experience. Non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements, also referred to as invariant horizons, were then clustered into themes. A synthesis of the emerging themes was then created to formulate a textural description of the participants' experiences.

Results

From the six transcripts, four notable themes emerged. All six out of the six participants shared their personal experiences about how faith was ever present in the midst of challenges, trials, and disappointments. Four out of six discussed the importance of relationships and unity they experienced as being part of a body of Christian believers. Each described an action side of faith where faith is manifested and developed either privately or through service to others. Five out of six participants discussed the concept of evangelism which is the importance of sharing one's personal faith with non-Christians.

Theme 1: Trials and Tribulations

Common to each of the six participants was the threat to emotional and physical wellbeing that occurs during the trials, stressors, and challenges of life (Polonyi et al., 2010). Faith was discovered to be a foundation that sustained the participants and minimized feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear while coping and trying to make sense of difficult events. In her interview, Marie reflected on the "trials and crises" she has endured over the past 10 years. "My husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor… we lost my daughter four years ago which was like the ultimate trial." The death of a child and the physical illness of a loved one were explained by Marie as "a battering of my faith." Despite these circumstances, Marie stated, "I walked through it, it [faith] was there, it didn't move. My faith was my anchor." She also remarked,

> Faith is something that happens in the pit, in the dark times, in the loss, that's where faith happens, grows. I guess one of the correlations I've drawn for myself is that in those times [dark times] my faith grows. And when I am in my easy times, my happy times, I get really complacent…I don't want to be in the dark times and yet those are the most beneficial times for me spiritually.

Marie was able to find hope and meaning through her trials and tribulations.

Brian recounted a recent event that occurred involving a car accident and admitted that "I'm also still battling with it now" but courageously shared how the event intersected with his faith. "Why did you let this happen? Why did this happen? Things were going good" were questions Brian had after the accident. "The last couple of days I've just been fighting back and forth and I kind of got in a hole. Let's say, one of the holes you can fall into, pity." However, despite uncertainty and confusion Brian stated, "I'm trying to get back up," and that "I can trust solely, completely in him [God] through faith that he's going to get me through it." The sense of trust, hope, and reliance in their personal faith plays a considerable role in the lives of the participants in the midst of difficulties.

Theme 2: The Family of Faith

Five of the six participants spoke about the common relationship of being part of the same group, or same body, which is the body of Christ, which is consistent with the Christian Bible that states, "So we, being many, are one body in Christ and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:5, King James Bible). Wayne referred to this relationship as "the family of faith" and that members of this family "sometimes correct

me, sometimes encourage me, sometimes laugh with me, and sometimes cry with me." Dee supported this same sentiment calling the body of Christ a "camaraderie of believers" and explained that support and encouragement received from others not only comes through words, but can occur through "the smile…the hugging you." When reflecting about faith, Lynn stated that "faith brings people closer together" and that individuals "from totally different walks of life" can become "the best of friends." The participants appeared to be strengthened through their relationships knowing that they share the same faith in Jesus Christ.

Theme 3: Faith is a Process

Participants described how their faith grew as a result of personal study and reflection and through attendance at church services. For example, Brian stated, "[faith] ...is something that builds as you know God more, as you learn about him, your faith becomes stronger." Wayne noted,

> God says that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God…
> As I learn more about God, God learns more about me, I get more of God
> in my life, and he gets more of me in his life.

In addition, four of the six participants reflected that faith can grow through church attendance while two stated that there was not necessarily a relationship between faith, church attendance, and spiritual growth. Sophia stated, "He [God] still meets you whether you go to a physical building or not." While Marie described faith as "an ongoing process and it's a process based on a relationship that grows and evolves."

Theme 4: Evangelism

Evangelism is often defined as sharing the story of Jesus Christ with others (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Five of the six participants shared their individual beliefs concerning evangelism and how evangelism is a part of their personal faith lives (Polonyi et al., 2010). For example, Dee shared, "I want to express to other people to have faith… to believe and trust God and his son Jesus Christ." Sophia shared, "My parents are Hindu...they don't believe in my faith…I've claimed my parents' salvation… I just need to keep believing and having faith." Brian explained, "I have to put my faith on the line" and that can involve asking others, "Would you like to know about my faith? Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" Lynn becoming emotional expressed, "I just want everybody to get it … to accept him [Jesus Christ]." Finally Wayne reflected,

> So many people… are looking for peace, and looking for hope and
> looking for joy and looking for something to help them make it through
> just day to day… if it hadn't been through faith in Jesus Christ I have no
> idea where I'd be today. And I want everybody and I really mean
> everybody to have that same joy, and that same peace, and that same hope
> that comes through Jesus Christ.

Essence Statement

The outcome of phenomenological research is the definition of the phenomenon based upon the words of the study participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, *faith based on a relationship with God* was described by all six of the participants as the

essence of the phenomena. One commonality among the evangelical community is the notion that faith involves a relationship with God and that the relationship provides a foundation for everyday living experiences (Polonyi, Serres, & Henriksen, 2010). This notion was clearly supported in the statements made by each of these participants. For example, Maria stated, "It is at the core of who I am, it is my relationship with God. Faith is what shapes me as a person." Lynn affirmed, "It is my anchor, I always refer back to it. It infiltrates my whole life." Brian suggested "It comes from the inside, from especially knowing God." The words of each participant demonstrated their faith in God and their assurance that God is with them as they willingly shared intimate details of their lives.

Limitations of the Current Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations to the study should be noted and taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. One limitation was that only evangelical Christians were represented in the study; we suggest that additional religious denominations be included to gain a broader conceptualization of personal faith. A second limitation was an over representation of women and participants who identified themselves as Anglo; understanding faith through the lens of various cultures, races, and genders can increase transferability of the results and enhance understanding of religious diversity and multiculturalism among individuals.

Integrating Religious Beliefs in Counseling

As counselors, we gain an understanding of the totality of the clients' style of life when we seek to understand the clients' personal convictions about themselves, others, and the world (Watts & Shulman, 2003). As researchers, we discovered that the participants' faith beliefs provided a sense a purpose, significance, belongingness, and security that expanded beyond themselves and others to include a universal God. As noted by Nedumaruthumchalil (2009), "human service professionals need to attend to the spiritual dimension of human experience, to better understand the needs and sufferings of clients and to assist them in their healing and growth" (p. 14). Additionally, counselors who fail to notice and incorporate these system supports within the counseling process would have missed an opportunity to foster social interest that promotes growth opportunities apart from the counseling setting (e.g., church fellowship, church programming opportunities, and discipleship trainings). Watts and Shulman (2003) described discounting the client's religious beliefs in counseling as, "to close one's eyes to a vital therapeutic factor" (p. 30). Therefore, when the counselor attempts to operate from the client's faith perspective, while maintaining both the client's and counselor's individual beliefs, the client's fear that his or her faith will be trivialized or misunderstood is minimized and allows for the establishment of a trusting and collaborative therapeutic relationship from which to build upon. As noted in the results of this study, the participants consistently pointed out the importance of faith in their lives and the need for the recognition of their faith to be a part of any helping relationship. Establishing a genuine and emphatic relationship allows the client to safely explore mistaken beliefs, safeguarding mechanisms, and feelings of inferiority and helplessness (Watts & Shulman, 2003). Consequently, as insight and self-understanding are gained,

the counselor can encourage the client in his or her movement towards change, the development of coping skills, and towards his or her identified goals; all from an integrated religious framework that is meaningful to the client.

Conclusions and Implications

This study examined the meaning of faith through the eyes of evangelical Christians. While it supplements the current body of literature, it also has implications for professionals such as counselors, pastors, and educators who work with evangelical Christians or other faith denominations. For one, it is important to encourage all individuals to develop their sense of faith, as in doing so, their sense of well-being and mental health increases (Koenig, 2005; Perry, 1998; Walters & Byl, 2008). Counseling that focuses and incorporates the development of faith for all clients can strengthen the therapeutic process (Aten & Leach, 2009; Pargament, 2007; Plante, 2009; Richards & Bergin, 2000) and should be a priority. Furthermore, faith fosters identity and purpose in Christians' lives (Foster, 1978; Walters & Byl, 2008; Woodfin, 1988). Individuals who are struggling with finding meaning in life or who are experiencing trials can benefit from interventions that encourage the exploration of their Christian beliefs and convictions. Finally, higher education has typically shifted away from topics relating to faith and spiritual matters, despite the interest in spiritual issues (Young, 2003). Therefore, counselor educators who acknowledge the role of faith and its' importance to their students can affirm the student's well-being, faith, and Christian identity.

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