

## MENTAL HEALTH IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Mental Health in Theological Perspective  
 Conveners: Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)  
 Elizabeth Antus, Georgetown University  
 Moderator: Marcus Mescher, Xavier University  
 Presenter: Todd Whitmore, University of Notre Dame  
 Respondents: M.T. Dávila, Merrimack College  
 Andrew Kim, Marquette University

The third and final year of the interest group focused on addiction, which Todd Whitmore brought to the fore in his paper, “Who is My Brother and Sister?: A Kinship Approach for Responding to Addiction.” Whitmore introduced kinship as an alternative lens to the two models of addiction that have dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the moral-carceral understanding of addiction, which judges those who struggle with addiction as criminal, and the medical-therapeutic model, which views addiction as a disease.

Ushering in his discussion of kinship were the tales of two Indiana families: the Sackler family—the billionaire owners of Purdue Pharma—and the Grants, whose two sons have moved in and out of the prison system as they live with addiction. Stories of these families illustrated how politics shape tight, loose, plausible, and implausible kinship relations in contemporary American society. Gospel portrayals of kinship trouble these contemporary social configurations, however, as they cast an alternative vision for relational intensity and plausibility. Jesus’ challenge to the family structures of his day as well as his elective kinship with the marginalized of his context exhort Christians to embrace as kin those otherwise deemed implausible kin by prevailing US social norms, including those who live with addiction. Whitmore pointed to the witness of Our Lady of the Road Catholic Worker and Motels4Now, a low-barrier housing program in South Bend, Indiana, as two concrete examples of what a Gospel kinship approach to addiction looks like.

Discussion of Whitmore’s paper commenced with two formal responses. With appreciation for Whitmore’s Gospel call to extend our chosen kinship networks beyond typical definitions of the American family, M.T. Dávila uplifted the experiences of blood-related kin who negotiate their own limits and self-care needs as they accompany loved ones through addiction and severe mental illness. Calling upon insights from Family Connections, a network of families and caregivers supporting those with borderline personality disorder, Dávila emphasized the importance of asking what kind of kin one *can* be to those who suffer. Dávila also recalled that accompanying Jesus’ instructions to embrace new configurations of kinship were calls to leave behind previous ways of relating; accordingly, many must grieve those kinship relations that they can no longer sustain with loved ones. Dávila concluded with an invitation to reflect on some of the perplexing kinship sayings of John’s gospel—where, for instance, Jesus says “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30)—which might help us reflect on the realities of kinship that remain beyond our understanding.

Carrying forth this invitation to think with the New Testament Scriptures, Andrew Kim asked how Jesus’ tendency to divide people into two sets of kin—those associated

with God's kingdom, on the one hand, and those positioned antagonistically, sometimes cast as Satan's kin, on the other—maps onto Whitmore's portrait of Gospel kinship. Affirming the importance of Whitmore's kinship lens for addiction, Kim also inquired about its superiority to the moral-carceral and medical-therapeutic models; this prompted Whitmore to clarify that while the kinship model importantly supplements some of the weaknesses of the prevailing models, these three are not necessarily exclusive to one another when it comes to effective responses to addiction.

The lively conversation among presenters and audience members that followed touched on the relationship between addiction and the "epidemic of loneliness" currently plaguing the US, the biblical figure of the "neighbor" and its place within theologies of kinship, the significance of different roles within the kinship network that supports individuals with addiction, and how the proposed kinship model implicitly frames the problem of addiction.

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