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ACT, Values, and Christian Psychology: A Response to Sisemore

Mark R. McMinn

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"Amen, brother" is probably too brief a response for an academic journal, but it would be a fitting summary for my observations of Sisemore's (2015) article, "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: A Christian Translation." Sisemore demonstrates both a good understanding of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Christian wisdom. Rather than repeating all our points of agreement, I limit my observations to two anecdotes about ACT and Christianity, a few positive reflections regarding Sisemore's article, and two suggestions for further translation work.

The Enlivening Effect of ACT

My first anecdote relates to the 2014 National Conference of the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) where Dr. Linda Mintle and I taught an intensive course on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and related counseling methods. For several sessions we taught various aspects of CBT, including a theoretical overview, methods for treating anxiety, depression, and relational problems, and a Christian critique. Dr. Mintle and I alternated sessions, and on my final session I intended to mention ACT as an example of third-wave CBT before moving on to a discussion of technology and CBT. We never made it to technology. Though the entire course seemed to generate a good deal of interest, the audience was simply exuberant when it came to ACT. Even the pastor in the back row who had offered critical observations of almost every dimension of CBT quickly became a fan of ACT.

What happened? I think it related to two facets of ACT that this Christian counseling audience found most intriguing. First, as Sisemore (2015) observes, ACT faces into suffering rather than promoting avoidance. Earlier forms of CBT sometimes seem shallow insofar as they resemble a toolbox of techniques to help people reinterpret life experiences

in order to feel happier. Happiness is not a goal of ACT. Acceptance is.

Second, ACT promotes awareness of one's values and living in ways that demonstrate commitment to those values. To be clear, ACT does not promote Christian values, or any particular set of religious values. Rather, ACT emphasizes the importance of freely chosen values in how one lives. Still, this seemed to promote a collective sigh of relief among the audience, as if people were saying, "It's about time someone talks about values."

I have observed a similar enlivening effect among doctoral students at the Christian university where I teach. Every year several students travel to Nevada for the ACT "boot camp." They come back excited about the possibilities, and sometimes enlivened in their faith. This relates to my second anecdote, which I will save to the end.

Some Positive Reflections and Further Translation Needs

I have too many points of agreement with Sisemore (2015) to list in this brief response, so I'll restrain my list to the essentials. First, my initial point of commendation is the task itself. We have needed a Christian translation of ACT, and Sisemore provides an excellent one. Perhaps it is best perceived as a strong start to a conversation that requires ongoing dialog. As the name implies, ACT involves both Acceptance and Commitment. The Acceptance part is what the AACC audience first got excited about – that we do better to accept the realities of life, even the harsh ones, than to engineer ways of avoiding pain. Sisemore's translation excels in this regard as he explores the contextual nature of a self. The Commitment part is the second thing that enthralled the AACC group: values matter, and it is important to live into our values. Sisemore addresses values in his translation, but space did not permit him to explore it as thoroughly as he explores acceptance. I agree with this choice because acceptance has more complexity when it comes to Christian translation, but I would like to see additional translation work done that emphasizes commitment to values. For example, ACT emphasizes freely chosen values. To what extent are Christian values prescribed for us as compared to being freely chosen?

Another dimension of Sisemore's article that I appreciate is his thoughtful enthusiasm for ACT. He writes: "In all my years of practicing, teaching, and writing, no secularly rooted model of therapy has seemed to offer such a readily apparent 'fit' for Christians as ACT, both in terms of its ends and its means" (p. 6). I heartily agree. Sisemore goes on to explain and illustrate this admirably. Sisemore and I agree that ACT has a rich theoretical depth in addition to practical clinical applications. Very often a therapy emerges because it works, and then the theoretical substrate

is developed later. In the case of ACT, the theoretical work (Relational Frame Theory) is impressive in its own right, and the clinical science is built atop this theoretical frame. When I attended a recent workshop by Stephen Hayes, he referred several times to "the engineers in the basement" in reference to the theoretical foundation for ACT interventions. In this case, both the engineers and the clinicians are impressive! Sisemore correctly refers to ACT as a third generation approach to CBT, and it seems important to note that it is far more than an extension of second wave CBT, which has relatively shallow theoretical roots (McMinn & Campbell, 2007). ACT shares more in common with first wave CBT (behavioral therapy) than second wave, but has more theoretical sophistication than either.

Along with the enthusiasm that Sisemore and I share for ACT, there is work to do. Sisemore has provided an excellent start. This work will involve both theoretical and empirical work. My colleagues and I are currently engaged in an integrative look at ACT which will appear as a chapter in a book co-edited by Stephen Hayes, one of the co-founders of ACT (McMinn, Goff, & Smith, in press). Though no published empirical work yet provides clear evidence for a Christian accommodation of ACT, it is fascinating to see ACT applied effectively to pornography viewing (Twohig & Crosby, 2010), both because it is a topic of interest for Christians and because it is an area of research rarely considered in mainstream mental health treatment research.

Because of its theoretical complexity, ACT is not quickly comprehended. I appreciated Sisemore's use of metaphor, something quite common in the world of ACT. His basketball metaphor exploring functional contextualism in light of Christian thought is brilliant. I also appreciated his metaphor involving currency, and it reminded me of a related metaphor I use in the classroom. Consider a nickel, which is money, of course. If the United States government decided today that a nickel is no longer worth the price of minting it and abolished it as money, do you suppose that you could ever pick up a nickel for the rest of your life and not still remember it as money? Would it ever just be a round chunk of metal? Probably not. This is an example of the contextual nature of knowledge. All words, and all ideas, exist in a relational frame with other words and ideas. We can't simply change that frame by exerting willpower or repeating new words. Better to accept and observe that we are selves in context than to spend our lives trying to escape, change, or transcend our contexts. In this, Sisemore makes a nice connection between self-as-context and the observing ego that is described in psychodynamic traditions. Clark Campbell and I describe a similar construct in *Integrative Psychotherapy*, which we call Recursive Schema Activation (McMinn & Campbell, 2007).

I both admire and appreciate how Sisemore handles the ideological connections between Buddhism and ACT. This should neither be trivialized nor exaggerated, and Sisemore strikes the ideal balance in this regard. Kelly Wilson, one of the co-founders of ACT, addresses Buddhism and ACT in a provocative blog post (Wilson, 2006), acknowledging that the founders of ACT may have read a book or two about Zen Buddhism in the 1960s while making it clear that the roots of ACT can also be traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Also, I appreciate how Sisemore considers suffering. ACT theoreticians and clinicians are quick to point out how pervasively we engage in experiential avoidance. When something is unpleasant, we go to great lengths to avoid it. Sometimes this is adaptive, but sometimes it puts us on a treadmill of misery and psychological inflexibility. Facing the inevitability of suffering is an alternative, which means the point of therapy is not obtaining happiness or even finding relief from suffering, but is more about psychological flexibility as well as defining and refining oneself in the midst of life's challenges. There is something deeply consistent with Christian thought here, and Sisemore does a stellar job illuminating this while also distinguishing between a Christian and Buddhist understanding of suffering.

As a final reflection, I appreciate Sisemore's treatment of mindfulness. While certainly it is part of ACT, mindfulness is common parlance in a variety of treatment approaches today. This is another area where additional translation work needs to be done. Ryan O'Farrell at George Fox University is currently working on a Christian translation of mindfulness for his doctoral dissertation. I look forward to seeing where this will lead.

ACT and Grace

My second anecdote about ACT occurred recently in my office as a doctoral student described how attending the ACT boot camp allowed her to understand grace. Clearly, I was taken aback because ACT has no pretense of being explicitly religious, and I have spent my career trying to understand grace (e.g., McMinn, 2008). She explained, and then I pondered her words almost nonstop for several hours until it started to sink in.

Oversimplified, second wave CBT looks like this: "Do something, and then you will be better." The "something" is likely to be revising thoughts or breathing differently or learning new social skills. ACT turns this around: "Stop trying to do something. Accept what is, and then live into your values." My student then applied this to Christian ways of looking at the world. Very often we approach it in ways analogous to second wave CBT: "Do something, then you will experience the presence of God." The "some-

thing" may be related to various spiritual practices, avoiding certain behaviors, acting charitably, and so on. Grace turns this around: "God loves you. Accept it. Now live into your values."

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