

CHRISTIAN LEGAL SOCIETY
NATIONAL CONFERENCE WORKSHOP
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HOW FAITH LEADS TO LAWYER WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS

Workshop Outline

INTRODUCTION

This workshop considers faith as the foundation for the health, well-being, and success of lawyers. Given a long-time focus on legal ethics and professional identity, John Berry, a state bar regulator, and David Grenardo, a law professor and former practitioner, have joined together to highlight the importance of faith for lawyer well-being. Starr Tomczak, a corporate lawyer and the author of *Living Well: Inspired by the Story behind the Bible* (Cascade Books, 2024), explores how the biblical stories help lawyers understand their personal experiences in ways that overcome adversity. Drawing on their professional experience, David grounds the workshop on legal obligations of lawyers when representing clients; Starr shows how biblical stories about overcoming adversity may lead to psychological benefits; and John explains how Christian truths go beyond secular answers for lawyer well-being.

PART I. PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES STRENGTHENED BY FAITH

David Grenardo notes that faith is rarely employed as a tool for addressing and preventing health and well-being issues among lawyers. Yet health and well-being relate to the competency of lawyers under the ABA Model Rules of Professional Responsibility, and faith can address health and well-being issues interfering with competency.

Under the Model Rules, which many states have adopted either in whole or in part, Rule 1.1 states, in part, “A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client.” If a lawyer is not healthy or well enough to represent a client, then the lawyer is not competent to represent the client. In fact, under the Model Rules, a lawyer’s physical or mental condition can prevent the lawyer from taking on clients and mandate the lawyer to withdraw from representation. Model Rule 1.16 provides, in part, “a lawyer shall not represent a client or, where representation has commenced, shall withdraw from the representation of a client if . . . the lawyer's physical or mental condition materially impairs the lawyer's ability to represent the client.”

This workshop shows how faith can help lawyers overcome health and wellness issues that interfere with their competency, including zealous advocacy. To begin the discussion, David focuses on imposter syndrome, authenticity, and civility. While these issues are relevant to all lawyers, the faith of Christian lawyers provides distinctive ways to address them.

A. Christian Response to Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is a phenomenon experienced by high achievers who perceive themselves as not good enough and fear others will soon discover they are frauds. Lawyers are particularly

susceptible to imposter syndrome. Former First Lady Michelle Obama, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Maya Angelou, Tom Hanks, and Serena Williams are among those who have admitted to suffering from imposter syndrome. David A. Grenardo, [*The Phantom Menace to Professional Identity Formation and Law Success: Imposter Syndrome*](#), 47 U. Dayton L. Rev. 369 (2022).

Part of being a good lawyer includes being able to assess one's performance and abilities accurately so one knows how to improve one's ability to represent clients as well as one can. Imposter syndrome can distort one's view of one's own value, abilities, and performance.

Imposter syndrome can result in anxiety, insecurity, and stress. It may also cause depression, indecision, and lack of confidence, which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

Techniques exist to address imposter syndrome, but Christians can and should address imposter syndrome in a unique way. God has a unique plan for each person that takes into account our own strengths and weaknesses. God will provide help, power, and direction to each one of us to fulfill our calling. Thus, we never need to compare ourselves to others. Given that we are called by God to use our unique gifts and talents, we belong if God has called us to serve as lawyers. David A. Grenardo, [*How a Person of Faith Can Address Imposter Syndrome*](#), Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy, Considerations Blog (2023).

B. The Importance of Authenticity

The inspiring work of Larry Krieger and Kennon Sheldon provides empirical data about what makes lawyers happy. Lawrence S. Krieger and Kennon M. Sheldon, *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success*, 83 Geo. Wash. L. Rev. 554 (2015). In their work, they observe that when there is a dissonance between who a person is at home and who that person is at work, the person is less likely to be happy. In other words, we should avoid acting like an obstreperous jerk at work while being respectful and loving at home.

Bringing our best self to work by being authentic is critical for Christians. St. Francis said our charge is to “[p]reach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.” If we are not genuine and true, no one will listen or follow. If we masquerade as someone else or pretend to be something we are not, then we will not truly be happy or fulfill what God asks us to do with the gifts and abilities He bestowed upon us. Being our best self is sometimes difficult when the motivations, prizes, and traditional thinking of the legal profession diverge from our beliefs. We must seek, and not stray, from the path of righteousness.

C. Christian Embodiment of Civility

Civility in public discourse continues to decline, and incivility in the legal profession remains a problem despite repeated calls for civility or to return to civility. David A. Grenardo, [*A Lesson in Civility*](#), 32 Geo. J. Legal Ethics 135 (2019). Lawyers, who are officers of the court and representatives of the legal system, should be exemplars of civility in society. Indeed, the Model Rules demonstrate the importance of civility. The preamble to the Model Rules states that a lawyer has an “obligation zealously to protect and pursue a client's legitimate interests, within

the bounds of the law, while maintaining a professional, courteous and civil attitude toward all persons involved in the legal system.” In addition, Comment 1 to Model Rule 1.3 regarding the duty of diligence provides, in part, that a “lawyer must also act with . . . zeal in advocacy upon the client's behalf,” but the “lawyer's duty to act with reasonable diligence does not require the use of offensive tactics or preclude the treating of all persons involved in the legal process with courtesy and respect.”

There are tangible benefits to acting with civility as a lawyer and high costs of incivility by lawyers. David A. Grenardo, *Civility Rules: Debunking the Major Myths Surrounding Mandatory Civility for Lawyers and Five Mandatory Civility Rules That Will Work*, 37 Geo. J. Legal Ethics 167 (2024). Christian lawyers should embody civility. The golden rule requires us to treat others as we want to be treated. Moreover, Christians believe we are all children of God, which means everyone should be treated with dignity and respect, even those perceived to be the least among us. Are we truly treating everyone we encounter as if they are children of God? How do we actually do that?

PART II. BIBLICAL STORIES HELPING LAWYERS OVERCOME ADVERSITY

Starr Tomczak discusses how biblical stories help lawyers understand their personal experiences in ways that overcome adversity. Starr's childhood was split between loving grandparents on a lowly Minnesota farm and abusive parents in a working-class Minneapolis suburb. Although she had a religious upbringing, she never felt the church helped her cope with financial difficulties and physical abuse. After she became a lawyer, she reached a new understanding of God's presence by reading biblical stories about overcoming adversity. While both the New and Old Testaments show God's concern with spiritual and material aspects of life, some stories in the Old Testament may be especially uplifting for people struggling with physical, economic, and social disadvantages or finding their lives out of kilter despite professional success.

A. The Exodus: Recovery from Trauma

Throughout the ages, the exodus story has inspired people to overcome adversity. As told in the book of Exodus, God freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and brought them to Israel for a new life with the Lord. For Jews, the exodus is celebrated at Passover as key to Jewish identity. For Christians, the exodus is part of God's salvation culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story uplifts many people struggling with personal difficulties or striving for freedom and justice in social movements.

Starr saw a new dimension of the exodus story for her personal life when reading Judith Herman's classic *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Herman, a psychiatry professor emerita at Harvard Medical School, emphasizes that both battered spouses and adult children of abusive parents often remain entangled in destructive relationships with their abusers. Consequently, the key to a survivor's recovery is breaking away from the abuser, ending physical and sexual contact and financial and emotional entanglements. Then the survivor needs to mourn the loss caused by the abuse while avoiding fantasies of revenge or forgiveness that keep her emotionally tied to the abuser. Herman explains that forgiveness is usually out of reach for the survivor because the abuser is highly unlikely to

confess, repent, and make amends. After mourning the loss, the survivor needs to create a new life with more trustworthy relationships, healing through restorative love in her own life instead of extending this love to the abuser. In doing so, the survivor may be surprised to find that the abuser no longer interests her, and she may even have disengaged feelings of sorrow and compassion for the abuser.

Upon reading *Trauma and Recovery*, Starr realized how much Herman's insights combined with the exodus story's inspiration could have helped her through her difficulties with her parents. While Starr discovered through trial and error the steps suggested by Herman for recovery from trauma, Starr would have had an easier time if Herman had been her guide. As inspiration for taking these steps to recovery, Starr found new meaning in the exodus story. God never asked the Israelites to forgive and reconcile with their slave masters. Instead, God freed the Israelites from abuse for a better life with the Lord.

After reading Starr's book *Living Well: Inspired by the Story behind the Bible*, several people told her how much they appreciated her discussion of abuse. One was a pastor who had been sexually molested by clergy as a teenager; another was a therapist who had been abused by an alcoholic mother; and another was a professional, childless woman degraded for her choices by her reactionary father. Each of them found that undue emphasis on forgiveness in religious and therapeutic communities and the general public had been destructive to their welfare.

The 2021 Survey of Law Student Well-Being suggests that some lawyers and law students may be coping with similar effects of trauma. Over 80% of respondents experienced at least one traumatic event such as emotional or physical abuse, assault, sexual assault, serious illness or injury, or natural disaster, and among these people, more than 25% may have benefitted from a posttraumatic stress disorder evaluation. Like Starr, many of us may find inspiration in the exodus story for recovery from trauma.

B. Abraham's Family: Trust, Hope, and Renewal

Besides helping us recover from trauma, biblical stories encourage trust, hope, and renewal in our personal and professional lives. We often cope with insecurity about our competence and careers, difficulty balancing our personal lives with our jobs, and adverse effects of anxiety, depression, alcohol, and drugs. When facing these problems, stories about Abraham and his family are among the biblical passages that may resonate with our experiences and help us improve our well-being.

As told in the book of Genesis, the Abraham stories encourage trust in God and hope for the future. In response to God's call, Abraham left his country, kindred, and father's house to go to the promised land; and despite infertility problems, Abraham and his wife Sarah had a long-awaited child promised by the Lord. Even though Abraham and his family had shortcomings, they could count on God's providence and renewal. As a dramatic example, Abraham's grandson Jacob was an ambitious man who defrauded his brother, outwitted his father-in-law, and wrestled with God. In that wrestling match, Jacob was renamed Israel destined to be the father of its 12 tribes.

In the classic book *Childhood and Society* and the related book *Insight and Responsibility*, Erik Erikson, a psychoanalyst, shows how the trust, hope, and renewal conveyed in the Abraham stories are basic to our well-being. To Erikson, trust is the foundation of our personal development and the key to living with courage rather than fear. He associates trust with hope buttressed by faith. In his view, religion provides a social context that reinforces optimism by a childlike surrender to a provider of earthly fortune and spiritual health, the admission of misdeeds and evil intentions, and the restoration of faith in the goodness of our striving and the kindness of the powers of the universe.

For many of us, the Abraham stories may reinforce the trust we began to develop as an infant with a loving parent or a loving caregiver in the absence of a supportive parent. God's call to Abraham to leave behind his past may reflect our own struggles to leave behind the turmoil of our past; and God's call to the promised land may inspire us to overcome financial, educational, and social hurdles for a better life. If we are searching for a suitable marriage partner, struggling with infertility, or planning to adopt or foster a child, we may be encouraged by God's fulfillment of the promise of a child born to Abraham and Sarah.

In our legal careers, we may also know people with Jacob's traits or discover that we ourselves share his traits. If so, we may find in Jacob's wrestling match a subliminal force that helps us get back on track when our lives are out of kilter. If we are cutting corners, undermining other people, taking too many personal or professional risks, or using too much alcohol or too many drugs, we can look to a force stronger than ourselves to provide order in our lives.

C. Your Personal Story: Insights from Narrative Psychology

Besides providing inspiration for overcoming difficulties in our personal lives, biblical stories can shape the stories we tell to ourselves and others about our own lives. In *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Dan McAdams, a Northwestern psychology professor, found that many Americans tell their life stories with redemptive themes and that these people live with greater well-being and generosity.

As a narrative psychologist, McAdams studies personal stories we construct to give meaning, unity, and purpose to our lives. We talk about where we have been, where we are going, and what the turning points were. From time to time, we change our stories based on new experiences or personal goals. Although our construction of our stories is not objectively verifiable, the stories form our identity and help us understand and cope with reality.

When many Americans tell their life stories, McAdams finds a common theme of redemption, which he defines as deliverance from suffering to a better place, influenced by Judeo-Christian views as well as other religions and cultural traditions. The people he studies describe many kinds of redemption: freedom from oppression and abuse; forgiveness of sins; struggling out of poverty for better educational and socio-economic outcomes; overcoming disabilities and mental and physical illness; recovery from alcoholism and addictions; development of psychological maturity and moral character; and insight into the person they feel they were meant to be.

In McAdams's studies, the people who tell life stories with redemptive themes are more likely to have better psychological well-being. They tend to have greater self-esteem and find their lives more meaningful and satisfying. Besides improving personal well-being, people telling redemptive life stories tend to help others have better lives. Their stories include parenting, teaching, mentoring, volunteering, participating in religious, political, and civic organizations, and a variety of other activities for the good of the community. They were often raised in religious homes and early on, typically as teenagers, they developed beliefs and values rooted in religious tradition and throughout the rest of their personal stories, these beliefs sustained their commitment to improving the world.

As lawyers, we have many resources to overcome our personal and professional difficulties and help others overcome their difficulties. We can use our legal skills to benefit our communities and give time and money to organizations that stand for our values. If we have lucrative careers, we are in an especially advantageous position to give a large portion of our wealth to worthwhile causes. The way we tell our life stories can become stories of redemption.

PART III. CHRISTIAN TRUTHS BEYOND SECULAR ANSWERS FOR WELL-BEING

John Berry highlights the way Christian truths help lawyers through failure and success. He begins with central concerns of Christian faith, reviews barriers to applying these concerns to lawyer well-being, and shows how Christian truths go beyond secular answers to problems faced by lawyers.

A. Central Golden Thread of an Overriding Theme

Del Tackett in his popular Christian lesson "Truth Project" states, "Do we as Christians believe what we believe is really real?" He explained that what he meant was do we truly believe God's word is totally true and that it should be foundational for all that we do.

The panelists for this workshop do believe God's word is true as it relates to lawyers' health and well-being. If true, then an approach to improving lawyers' health and well-being must start with those applicable truths. Our shared experiences demonstrate that the legal profession, law schools, and professional organizations too often avoid looking at the real causes and potential answers to their incredible health and well-being challenges. Avoiding faith discussions results in serious adverse consequences to the lives and careers of lawyers. Some of the barriers preventing those discussions are identified below.

B. Some of the Most Prominent Barriers

The first barriers are those we impose upon ourselves. A while back, a saying that became very popular was "You are OK and I am OK." The meaning of that statement quickly morphed into your ideas are OK. And so are mine. They in essence carry equal value. That sounded friendly enough, but it caused many not to confront some really bad ideas or to avoid sharing good ones out of fear somebody would be upset. Truth was considered unattainable since every opinion was OK.

Then came the establishment of unified bar associations where lawyers were required to be members. Those organizations of lawyers decided not to have a free marketplace of ideas about the application of faith in a certain God to the health and well-being of lawyers. For fear of possible lawsuits or upsetting some lawyers, it was decided that all such discussions would be avoided.

As more and more health presentations were given in organized bar settings, many did not have any reference at all to the application of faith to the health and well-being of lawyers. For those who hoped that the very prestigious Task Force on Health and Well-Being of Lawyers would buck the trend, it took extensive politicking to get a passing reference to “spirituality.”

John experienced these barriers when he gave a commencement address to the students at a large private law school. In his outline was a reference to Christ’s influence to help him deal with his greatest challenges. As he was coming out to meet a few students before putting on his robe, he met several students who were not Christians. Suddenly the question popped into his mind whether he should change his outline. Maybe speak of a generic God? Maybe no mention of a God at all. But he did not change it! After commencement a father and brother of a graduating student came up to him. The father was dying and had hoped something at graduation would be honoring to God.

C. Beyond Secular Answers to Christian Truths Affecting Lawyer Well-Being

Secular answers to lawyers’ health and well-being are at times very good, but not good enough as our efforts have not met with great success.

What about overeating? It seems people of faith and other people would agree on not pigging out to our detriment. Yes and no. Secular answers have stressed the physical impact of too many calories. Reference to God’s word on the subject and a bit of study will show that the problem of gluttony to God is following our own fleshly desires and not listening to the word from the God who made us and has directions for our best interests. It is called sin and goodness we cannot go down that path even as Christians but maybe this illustrates that there might be another approach to our problems than just a secular answer.

It just might be possible that the research showing a faith component brings in a new approach and a new result. Alcoholics Anonymous over decades found that seeking a “higher power” might lead to better results and though this was not going the full way for a Christian response it was starting to lay a pathway of crumbs to follow to potentially a better approach.

To illustrate this, as a regulator, John had conversations with three lawyers about the reason they became a lawyer. Each emphasized helping others, whether helping minorities, or the underprivileged, or society in general. At first glance, we may surmise that the common thread holding their stories together was their aspiration to make their careers about more than themselves by helping others. Well, that was their goal, but the common thread is John disbarred them all. Each of them lacked faith in God to help them through weaknesses that moved them away from their common desire to help others. They had a seed of greed that grew, a reliance on drugs and not God, and finally personal insecurities that they faced alone leading to a well-being

collapse. So well-being is more than just the right goals or right healthy choices but a foundational reliance on one who made us to help us through our temptations and challenges.

For several years, John conducted fireside chats with brilliant young lawyers in prestigious law firms. After several hours, when the smiling masks were taken off, the conversation turned to something that was missing. As Larry Krieger found in *What Makes Lawyers Happy*, it was not partnerships or money that brought happiness or better yet joy. It was intrinsic values and faith that mattered.

In a course John taught at Christian Handong International Law in South Korea, he mentioned numerous verses of God's word which as a regulator he had seen violated to the detriment of the health and well-being of lawyers. These verses were not the usually expected violations of theft and fraud and even neglect but rather verses about trusting in God for our understanding, not rejoicing improperly in our enemy's defeat, and the big one on forgiving and not having bitterness in our hearts.

Such discussions are rare in dealing with lawyer discontent, depression, and even suicide. We have ignored such verses to our detriment.

D. Conclusion

The workshop will display a huge picture of a laughing and joyful Jesus. Why? To illustrate many points but importantly to illustrate we need to go to the source for the full set of answers to our health and well-being. As stated in the biblical verse 1 Timothy 4:8, while physical training and health is beneficial in a limited way, godliness is valuable in every way.

So do we really believe what we believe is really real. If so, time will show it. Best of health and well-being to all!

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