PASTORAL COUNSELING
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The list of problems facing people are endless: emotional conflict, mental disorders, depression, grief, anxiety, irrational fears, compulsive behaviors, general unhappiness, chronic pain or illness, substance abuse, sexual disorders, addictions of various kinds, the loss of a loved one, marriage and parent-teen conflict, juvenile delinquency, family violence, the loss of job, the care of an elderly parent, AIDS, suicidal feelings and attempts, etc. all threaten to exhaust the emotional and spiritual resources many people have.

It is no wonder why there are so many programs to address such problems as

- adults, adolescents, children, families and couples treatment centers
- wellness programs
- religious retreats
- spiritual direction
- clinical training
- consultation to corporations
- outreach preventive services in prisons
- hospital chaplaincy
- nursing home chaplaincy
- military chaplaincy
- community education

The serious emotional, mental and spiritual needs people have also accounts for the growing field of pastoral counseling.

Pastoral Counseling is unique in the field of psychotherapy because it uses spiritual resources as well as psychological understanding for healing and growth.

Pastors who counsel and pastoral counselors are different in that Pastoral Counselors are certified mental health professionals who have had in-depth religious and/or theological training.

According to The American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) they

“...represent and sets professional standards for over 3,000 Pastoral Counselors and 100 pastoral counseling centers in North America and around the world. AAPC was founded in 1963 as an organization which certifies Pastoral Counselors, accredits pastoral counseling centers, and approves training programs. It is non-sectarian and respects the spiritual commitments and religious traditions of those who seek assistance without imposing counselor beliefs onto the client.”
Persons become members of AAPC through a process of consultation and review of academic and clinical education which leads to competent professional ministry. For members, AAPC offers vital continuing education opportunities; encourages networks of members for professional support and enrichment; facilitates growth and innovation in the ministry of pastoral counseling; and provides both specialized in-service training and supervision in pastoral counseling.”¹ (Emphasis added)

Pastoral counseling, whether by a pastor or a certified professional, appeals to those who do not consider a secular approach used by psychologists, social workers or psychiatrists as being adequate. They see the need for a spiritual context in which to try to find answers to their problems or illnesses.

This need for a spiritual context in which to explore mental and emotional problems is preferred by most people according to a national survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Research, Inc. of Washington, D.C.:

“an overwhelming number of Americans [69 percent] recognize the close link between spiritual faith, religious values, and mental health, and would prefer to seek assistance from a mental health professional who recognizes and can integrate spiritual values into the course of treatment.”² (Emphasis added)

According to George G. Konrad, “Counseling as a distinct discipline of the social sciences has existed for only a few decades.”³ However, passages in both the Old and the New Testament describe counseling relationships. “The pastoral care movement . . . came into its own in the forties”⁴ and has experienced rapid expansion and utilized by the increasing number of people affected by the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, especially in the areas of marriage and family.

Much of the Christian community has become increasingly open to the insights of the social sciences. Having been a pastor for almost 40 years I have seen numerous pastors who became so overwhelmed with the time-demands of pastoral counseling that they left the pastoral ministry to focus on counseling as a professional or they have left exhausted and turned to other jobs, professions or ministries.

Sometimes pastors are simply over their heads in their counseling because of the serious nature of the problem they are dealing with. If a situation or crisis requires more than a few informal sessions, the pastor is wise to refer to a certified pastoral counselor whose training in psychotherapy qualifies him to do extensive, in-depth work.
MODELS OF COUNSELING

Those who counsel are faced with various models of counseling (psychological schools) proposed by secular psychologists such as Rogers, Freud, Perls, Glasser, Mowrer and Satir and other voices such as Howard Clinebell, Jay Adams, Lawrence Crabb, John Marten, etc., who use counseling methods based on a Christian worldview.

Whereas some Christian counselors have completely accepted current psychological insights into their counseling practice without critical assessment, others have rejected whatever the social sciences have to offer outright.

John D. Carter has outlined four ways to relate Scripture and psychology, particularly as they impinge on counseling philosophies.5

The first is **Scripture against psychology.**6 Here the underlying assumption is that **revelation is against reason.** This is the belief that everything we need to know—including mental health principles—is contained in the Bible. Typically salvation is so emphasized that God’s creation and providence are overlooked. Therefore the Bible is the text, and only text, needed to address any problem, whether psychological or spiritual.

The opposite extreme places **psychology above Scripture**7 in which human reason is considered the final arbiter of knowledge and wisdom. This position considers religious/spiritual views as irrational and illogical or naïve at best. Therefore the psychological approach is that the continued discovery of human knowledge in the field of psychology needs to be applied. Therapist who apply these psychological (usually with the help of medication) measures provide resolution to mental and emotional problems.

A third position is to consider **Scripture and psychology as parallels**8 where revelation and science are seen as two distinct and irreconcilable categories. This means that the person with mental and emotional problems should seek help from the psychologist whereas the person with spiritual problems should seek spiritual help from a pastor.

The fourth position attempts to **integrate psychology and Scripture.**9 Lawrence Crabb identifies his own struggle in coming to terms with psychological systems as a Christian counselor:

“I determined that my belief in Scripture was rational and firm . . . and that my psychological theory and practice would have to conform to biblical truth. . . . The more I read the more difficult it became to block out the impression that, with a few rewarding exceptions, humanistic psychology was not being replaced by Christianity but rather integrated with certain biblical ideas.”10

(Emphasis added)
The integrational approach is the melding of psychology and theology and acknowledges that the data of theology consist primarily of the self-revealing acts and words of God contained in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. Yet it is not enough simply to quote what Scripture itself contains. Theology must encounter and speak to each new generation and situation and the relevance of its biblical message needs to be made clear to every person's current need.

As a study of human behavior, psychology emphasizes the scientific approach, but it does not rule out the several other ways by which we have come to an understanding of human nature. Some of these impressions have come through self-reflective consciousness, creative and artistic expression, religious experience and philosophical thought.

The integral model then is based on the assumption that all truth is God’s truth whether it applies to special revelation or general revelation, truths revealed in Scripture or other aspects of God’s truth revealed in creation and history.

If all truth is God’s truth, truths from the social sciences, which derive their insights from a study of man (i.e. creation), should be used as long as they are used in conformity to Scripture.

COUNSELING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITY

According to Konrad, the Rogerian or client-centered therapy approach has dominated the pastoral counseling movement in the forties and fifties and is still much used today. Rogerian counseling is based on Freudian psychoanalytic psychology. Its emphasis is on achieving insight and casts the counselor in a rather passive role. The assumption is that new self-perceptions and changes in feeling will also lead to new behavior. The individual is viewed as having all the necessary power within himself for renewal and change. It assumes that emotional disorders most frequently stem from unconscious motivation and have their roots in childhood experiences. Although few Christian counselors would accept the underlying psychoanalytic philosophy of Rogerian counseling, there are emphases, such as listening and responding to feelings, which treat the counselee in a wholistic manner and merit our attention.11

Almost in direct contrast to the Rogerian role model is that of the directive counselor. Generally speaking, this style cannot easily be identified with a unified psychological system. Jay Adams and “O. Hobart Mowrer probably come closest to it in their method of identifying the sin of the client, confronting him with it, and insisting on repentance and restoration as the only approach to healing and growth.”12

The directive counseling role seems most compatible with the conservative evangelical counselor in which the common assumption is that since the client is sinful, therefore he is weak and helpless. The rationale is that because the counselor is armed with the Bible he has the truth on his side and thus becomes the voice of authority who identifies and solves the specific problem as he doles out his words of wisdom. Such an authoritarian approach fails to realize that the client knows himself better than anyone else and that he also has access to truth.
The non-directive approach commits the opposite mistake by giving an excessive role to the client in which the counselor merely mouths back what the client has been saying.

A wholistic Christian approach to counseling requires that both the counselor and the client receive due attention and respect.

In the person-centered emphasis of counseling, Howard Clinebell suggests that,

“The new model is “relationship-centered” in that the pastor views his relationship with the counselee as an important part of the counseling . . . the pastor is free to reveal his own humanity . . . Experiencing healthy relationships is important for the personal growth of the counselee. The pastor recognizes his rightful authority and, when necessary, uses it to guide, teach, encourage, or confront.”

If counseling is to be Christian, the counselor must give attention to the relationship which he establishes between himself and the counselee. Who the counselor is will communicate more than words of counsel. The warmth or coldness, the patience or impatience, etc. will come through in the counseling session.

The counselor is to communicate a view of people as having been created in the image of God, with an abiding concern for their relationship to Jesus Christ. And he conveys the conviction that resources exist which transcend his own.

Scripture is clear that Jesus assumed a variety of roles in his relationship to different people. These included the Prophetic, the Pastoral, and the Priestly roles, and He exercised them in a continuous, not in the dichotomous, fashion. Whereas the prophetic role includes preaching, teaching, confronting and calling for repentance, the pastoral role includes nurturing, protecting, supporting, encouraging and calling the lost. The priestly most closely resembles the counseling role since it involves listening, forgiving, sensitivity to feelings, mediating and calls for confession.

COUNSELING AND GRACE

Limiting counseling to any one role exclusively in our counseling and considering it the only biblical one, easily leads us to become less than helpful to the client since a more wholistic approach is needed. Although the directive approach, like other approaches, has its strengths, it also has its weaknesses such as not allowing enough time for serious listening, of prematurely jumping to conclusions and of sharing the possible solution before the person is ready to listen. Conversely, the non-directive counselor may be so passive that he fails to offer forgiveness and healing or to share the Gospel altogether.

Different counseling approaches are based on different views of man. The client-centered model assumes that all the potential for healing, change and growth reside within the person whereas the directive counseling method reflects the sinfulness of man and thus his total
helplessness. In the case of the directive approach, help comes only from the therapist (through his sharing of the truth) and from God. This heightens the client’s dependency and further weakens his sense of responsibility because the approach is one in which the client so looks to the counselor that he thinks that healing and wholeness comes by crossing the t’s and dotting the i’s recommended by the counselor.

The directive/authoritarian model fails to adequately acknowledge the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the client’s life and his need to take responsibility for his own spiritual growth. The mark of maturity is **taking responsibility** for our own attitudes, feelings, responses, decisions and actions. After all, we are all accountable to God.

Konrad strikes the right balance:

“Counseling must become an encounter between the client and the counselor and through the counselor, an encounter between the client and God. Our task is to enhance this encounter and help the client to understand that he must carry the responsibility of the response.”

Probably, the greatest difference in a counselor’s and client’s view has to do with the Holy Spirit. Whereas the secularist denies the reality of such a divine person a Christian affirms His reality and power. As Konrad put it:

“**Christians are aware that they can tap into a spiritual, supernatural, source of Divine power which is at work in both counselor and counselee.**

A responsible view of persons in the Christian counseling relationship must, therefore, recognize the sinful nature of man, encourage him to **assume responsibility for his feelings and behavior, and together with him rely on the power of the Holy Spirit for changes in his life.** This reliance is not an avoidance technique since God does not overwhelm us and force us into His mold; rather he works with us and heightens our powers as we decide to follow him. The fact that a person is guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit it does not mean that he is less intellectually sharp than those who are not divinely guided.”

COUNSELING AND GRACE

Much of religious counseling, especially among conservative Christians, is condemnatory rather than freeing. Moralistic and legalistic advice is often given rather than an offer of grace and forgiveness. In general, people already know they have failed to live up to God’s standards and are experiencing discouragement, frustration, failure, guilt, brokenness and even despair. Although law needs to be proclaimed, so does Gospel.
The opposite of this approach is the common secular approach which is not judgmental, does not impose values, but is supportive and accepting as it seeks to remove guilt and tries to resolve the problem by shifting the blame solely to conditions (environment) and experiences in general, and childhood experiences specifically, as well as to unconscious motivations.

Although our experiences do affect us, and may affect us in very positive or destructive ways, they do not determine our lives. And counseling is best accomplished in a climate of love and concern. Yet for a significant relationship to exist and develop is impossible apart from the sharing of values. Condoning sinful attitudes, words and deeds is not an act of love but one of indifference. Overlooking negative and destructive attitudes and words, even evil deeds, does not help anyone. We are exhorted by God to speak the truth in love (Eph 5:15). Sharing values and providing criticism and counsel are obligations as long as they are done in a spirit of humility and love (Gal 6:1-5).

COUNSELING AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure—the process of revealing information about one self to others that is not readily known by them—is crucial in counseling since interpersonal communication is the primary means by which we get to know others as unique individuals. There are degrees of self-disclosure, ranging from relatively safe disclosure (revealing our hobbies, etc.) to more personal topics (revealing fears, etc.). As relationships deepen and trust is established, self-disclosure increases in both breadth and depth.

There are limits to self-disclosure that must be honored. This is important because there is a natural desire to be open and honest with others while at the same time not wanting to reveal every thing about one self to someone else. One’s desire for privacy does not mean one is shutting out others; it is a normal human need. We tend to disclose the most personal information to those with whom we have the closest relationships. However, even these people do not know everything about us.

Self-disclosure on the part of the pastoral counselor is a sign of humility which opens the door for the other person to safely open up. By establishing a loving and caring relationship we make it easier for the client to experience the grace of God.

Counseling from a Christian perspective means that the Gospel is communicated by the counselor’s attitudes, responses, words and deeds. Because the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel is a message of forgiveness and hope, it must always be central to our thoughts.
NOTES

2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
12 Konrad, “Responsible Christian Counseling.”
13 Ibid.
15 Konrad, “Responsible Christian Counseling.”
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.