

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN COUNSELING?

Rapha Christian Counseling

Dallas, TX

The Prototype

During the past 30 years some of the finest minds in Christendom have articulated clear and careful counseling philosophies and techniques, to the significant benefit of Christian counseling. Concepts that have been set forth and embraced differ in many ways, but those which are genuinely Christian have in common a number of important elements, including:

- They permit and indeed invite legitimate expression of emotion.
- They acknowledge that many human problems result from attempts to meet God-given needs in ways that are incongruous with the will of God.
- They espouse the principle that truly Christian counseling can be offered only through a person whose faith in Christ provides wisdom, insight, love, and strength.
- They have come from observation of the human condition, the purpose of that observation being an increasingly profound application of Scripture to human perplexities and problems.

Providing comfort and direction have been integral aspects of Christian ministry throughout the history of the church. The apostle Paul wrote to believers in Thessalonica: "...warn those who are idle...help the weak, encourage the disheartened, be patient with everyone" (I Thess. 5:14, New International Version). To the young man Timothy, Paul wrote: "These are the things you are to teach and insist on" (I Tim. 6:2).

Teaching, helping the weak, encouraging those who have become disheartened – these are among the materials of which counseling is made. The terms psychotherapy and therapy share a very modern sound, but the roots of these words are ancient. The etymological history of the word therapy speaks to the animus of Christian counseling. The word is derived from the Greek *therapeia*, in its various forms (*therapon*, *therapeuo*, and *therapontos*). The noun means service

and appears frequently in the works of Aristotle, Hippocrates, Philo, and Josephus. Its closest Greek synonym is diakonos, meaning servant. In the ancient world therapeia commonly was translated into the Latin ministerium. The linguistic relationship of these words -- therapeia diakonos, and ministerium, each related to service -- is reflected in the contemporary concepts of therapist and minister.

In addition to therapeia and diakonos there are several Greek words that describe the role of a servant, including oiketes, pais, and doulos. The most intimate of these words is therapon, which always refers to personal, considerate, and confidential acts of service. In his book *Kerygma and Counseling* (1962) Oden wrote:

More particularly, [therapeia] means attentive, caring service, the kind of heedful, scrupulous, conscientious care that one would hope to receive in private and intimate matters, such as medical service. The therapon is the servant who renders careful, experienced, watchful, meticulous, skilled, obedient, painstaking service to the one to whom he is intimately responsible" (p. 147).

Kerygma, Oden pointed out (1962), means proclamation, and according to God's proclamation of Himself in Scripture, He is the therapon, the New Testament prototype being the God-man Jesus. The therapeia God renders is the demonstration and offer of His redemptive love in the person of Jesus, who is both the means and the message in and through whom God intimately communicates healing and restoration to all people (Matt. 9:1-8, Mark 1:32-34, Luke 4:18, etc.).

Many passages of Scripture depict Jesus' ministry as the interweaving of teaching, preaching, and healing. This three-fold therapeia validated Isaiah's prophetic pronouncements of the Messiah who would come as Servant to comfort the anxious; encourage the depressed; reconcile

the alienated; and heal the lame, the deaf, and the blind. The teaching, preaching, healing ministry of Jesus continues in His church and concisely summarizes the mission of the church.

During the earthly ministry of Jesus, His rendering therapeia on the Sabbath was a volatile issue (Matt. 12:1-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11, etc.). Holding to their rigid interpretation of the law, religious leaders of the time declared all such activity to be unlawful. In so doing they demonstrated callous disregard for the suffering of the sick and broken people for whom the leaders bore responsibility. In spite of that judgment, Jesus continued to offer therapeia on the Sabbath as a sign of the emerging reign of God, thus “intruding” on the holy day by His ministry to sick bodies and tormented souls.

The Relationship of Scripture and Psychology

For anyone with an interest in Christian counseling, it is of critical importance to foster an appropriate understanding of the authority of Scripture and the correspondent role of psychology in relationship to Scripture. Often the term integration is used to describe this relationship. However, use of the word integration may leave the misleading impression that the relationship between the Bible and psychology is a relationship between equals. It must be understood that the Bible and psychology are not equals and cannot be blended together as if they were.

The Word of God is the ultimate authority by which all theories and practices are measured. Psychology is man’s attempt to analyze the human condition and provide assistance. As such, its place is one among many theories and practices that must be measured by the Word of God.

While most psychological theories contain some valid observations of human behavior, the conclusions drawn from these observations can be based upon erroneous presuppositions about both man and God. Secular theories, even those with measurable validity, cannot provide the

ultimate source of healing power, which is the love and strength of Jesus Christ. He is our Creator and Savior. He is the one who can touch our deepest needs and bring light and life.

True Christian counseling is based upon the complexity of God's design as revealed in Scripture. We address the interrelationship of thought processes, emotions, behavior, and personal responsibility. The skills we employ combine medical and psychological expertise with basic relational techniques such as active listening, the offer of support, and the provision of affirmation and feedback to clients.

The history of the Christian counseling movement

In an excellent treatise on the Christian counseling movement, Powlison (1996, 2010) pointed to three distinct stages in its history. The first of these stages began in the 1950's and extended into the 1960's. During this period of time there was a significant expression of concern as to whether teaching and counseling methods employed by the church of that day were effectively addressing problems surfacing in the Christian experience. By his response to this concern Clyde Narramore became the first champion of Christian psychology. The movement he initiated was the backdrop for the founding of The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) and the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Seminary.

Adams (1970) challenged that growing movement in his book *Competent to Counsel*. Of that challenge Powlison (2003) wrote:

Adams perceived psychology and psychiatry as threats to conservative Christianity in three ways. First, psychology's influence neutered the "in the office" theology of pastors. Once a pastor left his pulpit he became a de facto "Rogerian." He no longer proclaimed the claims of Christ and called for repentance. Second, the mental health system offered a persuasive rationale for referring troubled parishioners to secular experts. The province of pastoral care

supposedly did not include psychologically, emotionally, or mentally sick people. Third, evangelicals in the mental health professions were functionally secular in their ideas and practices. They were intruders into and usurpers of the pastor's role. In Adams' eyes the phrase "Christian psychotherapy" was an oxymoron (p. 4, para. 3).

The response to Adams' attack marked the beginning of the second phase of the modern development of Christian counseling. A growing body of academic study and research gave credibility to the movement, and Christian psychologists gained wide-spread acceptance beyond the narrow field of psychology. Among these psychologists were Narramore, Larry Crabb, James Dobson, and Gary Collins. In this second phase, Christian psychology became a respected feature of evangelical Christianity.

The third stage in the history of the Christian counseling movement began in the mid 1980's as the teachings and principles of the movement and, indeed, became the defining influence on the church's view achieved great popularity of anthropology and sanctification. It was in this third phase that terms such as *dysfunctional families* and *victimization* became common language in church life. The best-selling books on the shelves of Christian bookstores were those that dealt with inter- and intra-personal pain, and many groups sprang up in churches to help people experience comfort and find strength.

This bandwagon acceptance of Christian psychology has come sometimes at the expense of adequate scholarship and has drawn negative attention from men such as John McArthur, who openly criticizes the movement.

Today, Christian counseling is at a crossroads. Popularity and inclusiveness can leave the ranks open to infiltration by secular and anti-Christian influence. However, a new platform of

scholarship built on opportunity afforded by popularity could provide for the profession a depth of character capable of sustaining the movement for the long haul.

Popularity made possible by a vacuum?

Some scholars claim that Christian psychology became popular simply because its practitioners stepped into a vacuum created by a weakness in contemporary pastoral counseling. The church, these scholars say, abdicated its God-given responsibility to speak profoundly to the complex needs of the people it served. Critics identify as problematic a preoccupied church engaged in battle against a liberalist challenge to the authority of Scripture. Thus preoccupied, critics claim, the church failed to provide adequate training for pastors pressed by the deep needs of congregants wrestling with the demands and complexities of contemporary living. Without adequate training, pastors frequently offered as antidotes to intricate problems simplistic pietism, rationalism, and/or voluntarism. The needs of the people were not well-served by such antidotes.

It is true that the character of pastoral counseling in the past century stands in stark contrast to the profound strength of pastoral counseling in, for example, the Puritan age. Pastors of the 17th and 18th centuries such as Richard Baxter and Jonathan Edwards were known and highly regarded as “true physicians of the soul” (Keller, 1988, p. 13, as cited in Herding, 2010, p. 4). They are excellent examples for us as we seek to develop distinctly Christian responses to life’s perplexities.

Keller wrote (2010):

The Puritans had sophisticated diagnostic casebooks containing scores and even hundreds of different personal problems and spiritual conditions. John Owen was representative when he taught that every pastor must understand all the various cases of depression, fear, discouragement, and conflict that are found in the souls of men. This is necessary to apply

“fit medicines and remedies unto every sore distemper.” Puritans were true physicians of the soul. Their study of the Scripture and the heart led them to make fine distinctions between conditions and to classify many types and subtypes of problems that required different treatments (Keller, b, Highly developed system, para. 1).

These Puritan caregivers would appreciate in the modern Christian psychology movement the desire to effectively address complex problems. It is probable, however, that they would find cause for concern as regards quality of care.

Keller wrote (1988, as cited in Herding, 2010):

Most modern evangelical counselors simply lack the firmness, directness, and urgency of the Puritans. Most of us talk less about sin than did our forefathers. [However] While the puritans were well known for their outspokenness and straight to the point plain talk, it needs to be mentioned that they also knew their audience well. They were not hard and cross sounding with all of their counselees as often wrongly characterized. The Puritans amazingly were tender, encouraging, always calling the [counselees] to accept the grace of God, and extremely careful not to call a problem “sin” unless it was analyzed carefully (Keller, p. 40 in Herding, pp. 47, 68).

Keller pointed out that a favorite text of the Puritans was Matt. 12:20: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoking flax he will not quench” (Keller, 1988, as cited in Herding, 2010).

We can learn much from the Puritans’ scholarship, methodology, astuteness, and genuine concern for those they counseled.

The uniqueness of Christian counseling

The *Journal of Psychology and Theology* conducted a study (1992) to determine the impact of personal faith on counseling practices of Christian counselors, the results of which were both

disturbing and instructive. The study was conducted with alumni of three doctoral and four master's-level Christian psychology programs. Responders were asked to indicate which of three statements most characterized his/her counseling practice. The statements were: (1) "My faith shapes my professional practice in a substantive way"; (2) "My faith provides the foundation for my beliefs, but the majority of my professional practice is guided by psychological principles"; and (3) "My faith is moderately related to some aspects of my professional practice."

Of the respondents 51.9% said their faith shapes their professional practice in a substantive way; 28.4% said their faith is foundational to their beliefs, but that their practice is guided by psychological principles; and 12.5% said their faith was only moderately related to some aspects of their professional practice.

From that study we can conclude that barely half of the professionals surveyed provide, or even attempt to provide, genuine Christian counseling care.

Collins (1988b) wrote of several unique characteristics of Christian counseling, including:

Unique assumptions: Most psychological paradigms involve the study of man in a closed system, that is to say, in a system based on the concept that the only way to learn about man is to study man himself. The Christian view, however, is an open system in which God, transcendent to man, reveals the nature of man as well as His own nature. Though Christians differ on various points of doctrine, we generally agree on the basic tenets of the faith, those that have to do with the nature of God, man, truth, and the authority of Scripture.

Unique values: Unique values, while not explicitly cited by Collins, derive from the unique assumptions that mark Christian counseling. There are secular counseling paradigms that claim to be values free. Many will remember that M. Scott Peck destroyed this illusion in a May,

1992, address before the American Psychiatric Association. Peck asserted that values belong to religion, that the concept of values-free counseling is nonsensical, and that doing anything absent of values is an impossibility.

Secular psychologists clearly acknowledge the need people have to find purpose in life. Abraham Maslow's body of work, is characterized by the recognition that apart from a system of spiritual and moral values people are likely to be psychologically unhealthy. Over and over he contends that the human need for a philosophy of life is as great as any human physical need. Frankl (1959) identified the drive for purpose or meaning as a potent motivational style.

Christian counselors also understand the importance of one's having a philosophy of life supported by a sense of purpose or meaning and by clear values. The Christian, of course, is motivated and guided by transcendent purpose and values, as Paul wrote: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

The Christian philosophy of life is constructed upon the implicit and explicit values of the Bible. The Christian counselor not only lives according to these clear values but accurately represents those values to his patients or clients.

Unique goals: Both Christian and secular counselors attempt to help clients gain insight into themselves and others and change maladaptive behaviors, attitudes, and responses. Both Christian and secular counselors teach responsibility and skills in communication and problem solving. The goal of the Christian counselor, however, is more expansive than that of the secular counselor in that the Christian counselor helps the client as he seeks to love God with all his heart and to live according to biblical values.

With this goal in mind, the Christian counselor may present the gospel to a client who is not a believer or who is uncertain in his faith. In appropriate times and ways the counselor may encourage a client to confess his sin, to experience forgiveness from God, and to extend forgiveness to others. The counselor may help the client to understand proper and substantive behaviors that follow on the heels of forgiving and being forgiven.

Unique techniques: Christian counselors do not choose techniques based upon the pragmatic values that may characterize various techniques. Rather, they test the validity of every technique by the values of the Scriptures.

Collins (1988b) wrote:

All counseling techniques have at least four characteristics. They seek to arouse the belief that help is possible, correct erroneous beliefs about the world; develop competencies in social living; and help counselees accept themselves as persons of worth. To accomplish these goals, counselors consistently use such basic techniques as listening, showing interest, attempting to understand, and at least occasionally giving direction....The Christian does not use counseling techniques that would be considered immoral or inconsistent with Biblical teaching (p. 18).

The Christian counselor must first be a good listener and a listener who hears. In listening he grants the client permission to express himself and in hearing he gains insight into the client's problem. The use of Scripture is much more effective when a counselor listens, hears, and gains insight before he applies Scripture.

The Christian counselor may confront a client's attitudes and behaviors with biblical mandates, and he may use instruction and prayer in the counseling process. However, a discerning Christian counselor will not use prayer if the counselor perceives that a client

professes he is “trusting God to take care of him”, when, actually, he is avoiding personal responsibility. One of the most important goals of a Christian counselor is to help the client find an appropriate balance in trusting God and meeting personal responsibility (Phlp. 2:12-13).

Unique characteristics of the counselor: Studies have shown that the counselor’s integrity is even more important to the effectiveness of counseling than are therapeutic skills. Patterson (1973) concludes that an effective counselor must be “a real, human person” who offers “a genuine human relationship” characterized not so much by the techniques the therapist uses as by what he is, not so much by what he does as by the way he does it” (pp. 535-536, as cited in Collins, 1988, p. 18).

As a servant of Jesus Christ, called to love and to strengthen others from the overflow of a full heart, the Christian counselor has limitless resources as he draws upon the wisdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. The counselor, just like the client, is in the process of growing in the knowledge of God and is being watered, pruned, and shaped by the Spirit’s work. It is this continuing process that makes the counselor increasingly effective and competent to counsel.

Psychology and theology meet in the human condition

Many fields of endeavor, such as medicine and engineering, rely on empirical evidence for the support of new theories. These theories if proven consistent with empirical evidence are useful in people’s lives. Similarly, secular observation of the human condition, which is the work of psychology, is useful in people’s lives if the observation proves to be consistent with the assumptions of Biblical anthropology and theology. This activity of observing the human condition, a province of psychology, is the province of the church, as well. When there are differences between psychology and the church in regard to values, techniques, and

interpretation of evidence gathered by observation, all such differences loom large in the working relationship between psychology and theology.

Collins (1988b) stated:

The Bible never claims to be a textbook on counseling. It deals with loneliness, discouragement, marriage problems, grief, parent-child relations, anger, fear, and a host of other counseling situations, but it was never meant to be God's sole revelation about peoplehelping. In medicine, teaching, and other "people-centered" helping fields, we have been permitted to learn much about God's creation through science and academic study.

Why, then, should psychology be singled out as the one field that has nothing to contribute to the work of the counselor? (p. 22)

Some degree of integration, psychology with theology, is inevitable because many of the people-helping skills discoverable in the Bible are echoed in psychology. These skills include among others, listening, loving, providing hope, extending forgiveness, confronting destructive habits and thoughts, identifying personal responsibility, and giving room to grieving processes. These are fundamental human concepts shared by psychologists and theologians. Appropriate integration of the disciplines occurs as each retains its distinct identity, the Bible being the ultimate authority.

At the same time, simply adding verses to a psychological model (proof texting) is not a valid academic way of proving compatibility between the disciplines of psychology and theology. Neither is there academic validity in syncretism, which often becomes an exercise in splicing together various aspects of several different psychological models in a way that suits our immediate needs. Generally ignored in the splicing is careful analysis of the presuppositions on which the models are constructed.

Appropriate integration of the disciplines of theology and psychology happens when God's truth revealed in all of creation, both by special and natural revelation, is brought to bear on a therapeutic endeavor that derives from the careful study, selection, and orderly combination of concepts compatible with Scripture, related to man, and gleaned from a variety of sources.

Because God is the source of all truth – truth comes from no other fountainhead – there is no fundamental incompatibility between truth as revealed in the Bible and accurate observable truth about man. Whatever incompatibility or conflict that seems to exist is the product of faulty observation or interpretation of either of both bodies of understanding. Thorough study and careful interpretation both of Scripture and of the human condition equip us to apply truth profoundly and specifically.

A multi-model approach

People yearn for a clear, simple answer to the complexities of life. Many people view psychological problems through a simplistic lens and long for one easily definable set of problems and solutions. These simple answers, however, seldom stand the test of close scrutiny. Some in the church community follow the sin model of solution; some in the recovery community follow the medical model; others follow the not-so-simple model.

The sin model reduces all problems of human interaction, personality, and physical function to issues of sin. In this paradigm, sin accounts for all emotional distress, addictions, and other behavioral difficulties. Idolatry is the fundamental problem of mankind; repentance is seen as the single solution to all problems. Individuals themselves are responsible both for the problem and the solution.

The medical model tells us that emotional problems originate from natural causes, an idea that was popularized in the early years of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement. A Dr.

Silkworth introduced the disease concept of alcoholism to Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA. Later, the disease concept was applied to drug abuse and, still later, to codependency. In this model the person is not responsible for what is perceived as a medical problem, in the same way that he would not be responsible for contracting the flu.

Indeed, many behavioral and emotional problems are related to specific, chemical deficiencies, and medical treatment is a vital part of care. The model is taken too far, however, when it is indiscriminately applied to any emotional problem. For instance, it can be argued successfully that alcohol addiction has a physiological component, but that argument cannot be accurately applied to issues of codependency. The issues of codependency do not include identifiable disease-related causes.

Many questions are raised concerning the validity of Christians' use of medications for emotional problems. Collins (1988a) wrote:

Among Christians...resistance to psychotherapeutic medication probably comes from those who believe that drug use is a sign of spiritual weakness. Many feel that Christians shouldn't have overwhelming struggles and psychological problems. When stresses arise, these people feel that prayer, trusting the Lord and meditation on Scripture are the only Christian ways to cope with anxiety...Even in Jesus' time, however, the God-given wisdom of professional healers was not dismissed. If the Lord has allowed us to discover new chemical tools to counteract the biological bases of human problems and to help us cope temporarily with the stresses of life is (the use of these tools) necessarily wrong? When drugs distract us from facing problems or prevent us from seeking biblically based solutions to our struggles then using them is not right. But psychotherapeutic medications can help us relax so that we can

think more clearly. Their use is neither wrong nor an indication that we lack faith (pp. 38-39).

The not-so-simple model encounters our fallenness. The psalmist proclaims that man is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14-15). We are made in the image of God, but we are deeply fallen. The complexity of our fallenness includes physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, and social aspects of our being. Virtually every problem we have is multifaceted. The solution to every problem, then, is multifaceted. The solution is multi-model.

This example: The addict has chosen a mechanism outside the will of God to block pain and to gain a sense of control and personal value. There are factors that contributed to that choice, some of which were/are beyond his control and, therefore, outside the bounds of his responsibility. Such factors may include childhood trauma, poor parental care, cultural reinforcement of his poor choices, and biochemical deficiencies. The biochemical deficiencies may require detoxification. Physical effects of depression, some of them related to factors beyond his control, may call for medication that will enable the person to think clearly in order to make wise choices. New communication skills may need to be learned and new courage must be acquired before those new communication skills can be effectively used. Repentance is right and appropriate in particular points of responsibility, but we neither rightly nor appropriately repent of wounds received from others or of biological factors beyond our ability to control.

Counseling considerations

Though the symptoms and contributing causes of a person’s problems are multifaceted, it is true that the root cause of all human problems is in our fallenness. This fallenness is manifested in apathy toward God, rebellion, and a desire to retain control of our own lives whatever the cost. All of our relational, behavioral, and emotional difficulties spring from this underlying condition.

Physiological and psychological analysis certainly enables us to understand the dynamics of destructive powers in our lives and to gain insight that helps us channel our motives and energies into constructive attitudes and behaviors. At the deepest level, however, the sin problem exists and must be addressed so that people can be rightly related to the God who created them, loves them, and wants them to live healthier lives by drawing on His strength and wisdom.

The complexities of the human experience demand that counselors carefully take a complete history on each client. This history rightly includes past and current emotional traumas, environmental and family difficulties, physical problems, and behavioral manifestations. All of these historical realities need to be considered in making an accurate assessment of the client's needs. It is a goal, of course, that the client feel better because of therapy, but a more important goal is for the client to take steps toward knowing, loving, and following Christ.

For Christians recovery is inherently a part of sanctification and must include foundational spiritual issues having to do with personal identity, repentance, and motivation. Bible-based teaching, prayer, meditation, and other Christian disciplines must be used knowledgeably. If the client uses these as spiritual crutches he or she will need loving, direct confrontation in regard to that problem. Often the spiritual crutches that are most tightly held falsely represent God, His ultimate authority, and the safety He provides. Giving up these crutches is difficult and confusing for many people. It is necessary to bring them to understand the negative impact of seeking ultimate meaning and safety in activity that is void of life. It is necessary also to present instead of crutches the Lord Himself and the attractiveness of vital relationship with the God of creation.

Most people come for help because they are in an emotional crisis, not because they are in a theological crisis. Our goal as counselors is not just to encourage right action in regard to

spiritual discipline nor to offer only correct theology. Our goal is to walk with the client as he seeks to build a vital and rich experience of Jesus Christ. Theology and spiritual discipline are important, but they are secondary underpinnings in relationship with God. Our calling is to offer care that is both emotionally sound and theologically astute.

The Scriptures are replete with profound and meaningful messages for those who have been devastated by divorce, disease, displacement, dysfunction, or depression. They are messages that every hurting person needs to hear. The psalmist felt liberty to pour out to God both painful and hopeful emotion. The Proverbs contain practical wisdom of inestimable value to every human being. We can find hope in a trustworthy God, Who loves, forgives, accepts, and gives to strength to follow Him.

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