

BY WHAT AUTHORITY

Christians Counselling

Doug Sotheren (1993)

The Christian world today is faced with a crisis. The crisis of authority. By what right in this modern world can any Christian make a pronouncement about God, Human kind, or truth?

An academic and two popular theologians are the sources of following three quotes from my recent reading. They present clearly the question that many of my clients act out in counselling.

"Boredom with language, boredom with words. This tells us in a phrase what the present crisis in Christianity consists of, and where its deepest roots lie. For Christian faith, above all in its reformation form, the word is an essential element; and yet confidence in it has largely disappeared." [1]

"No ultimate authority exists that can define truth in any area for all time. All claims to possess infallibility that have been historically employed in Christianity are simply losing their place." [2]

"We should not try to persuade people that there is an eternal cosmic law, or that there is a spirit standard in the sky. Such ways of speaking do not work any longer, and cannot convince people who can now see that the whole of our life is now lived inside history and inside language. Every detail of religion, of morality, of culture generally is subject to historical change. There is no point trying to keep up the pretence that any of our religious and moral ideas are certified from somewhere outside history... all our moral and religious ideas and values are intimately bound up with the contingent details of our bodily constitution, our feelings, our needs and desires, our practices, our social relations and our history." [3]

These three statements sum up the problem that many both within and outside the church are currently experiencing with authority. Can it be valid to hold to a belief in a transcendent God who has given an eternally unchangeable Word to all generations. How can such a belief stand up against our modern knowledge of the nature of human language and the constant change in human culture.

We now live in the age of immanence, where people find their authority in truth as it is experienced rather than in truth revealed. In the counselling world the accelerated growth in demand for the Somatic or body oriented therapies is a measure of this. Change is sought beyond words within the tissue layers of organismic experience. Truth comes from within.

From listening to my clients I can formulate three types of approach to the problem of authority.

Firstly, the Christian client who has been "Authoritised" by every Christian authority one could imagine. Pastors, Bible Study leaders, and Christian friends have all told this poor soul what God says they ought to do. At times they have been lent dozens of books all purporting to make plain exactly what God wants.

These people seem to fit into two further categories. Those that are very angry, waiting to reject what this next authority, the counsellor, is going to lay upon them. Or those that are quite broken, waiting to have proven again how they have failed to live up to God's unquestionable standard.

Secondly, the Christian client who has come to this Christian Counsellor with the hope that they or their partner will be authoritatively told how to live their lives. These people are more

than willing to abdicate any responsibility for their behaviour if they can find the verbally inspired word of the counsellor. Here the subtle and sometimes not so subtle abdication of human responsibility on the part of the client can set a fearful trap for unsuspecting counsellors.

Thirdly, the nonchristian who facing a major life crisis says, "I've never been a person with a faith, but now I wish I had one. It would be good to have a word from some God just now."

Each of these extreme forms are a comment on the problem of authority as it faces Christians in counselling. Each of these can seduce the counsellor into changing role and becoming a proclaimer of his/her brand of Christian truth to the detriment of therapeutic process.

The problem as I see it expressed by various approaches in Christian counselling is in two areas. A conflict about the responsibility of the counsellor to become an expression of the authority of God. Secondly a conflict about the nature of Scripture and its use in the counselling room.

I will discuss each of these after first presenting what I believe and attempt to act out in my counselling practice.

I believe that counselling is a human activity that is aimed to assist people to fully develop their created potential in this life. Counselling is not so much concerned with eternal salvation as with developing positive mortal living. The theological area of focus for the counsellor could be considered as the area of the doctrine of man and sanctification.

As a counselling Christian I hold implicitly within myself, the belief that God has spoken in the Scriptures, through history, and by His Spirit continues to speak in the life of the church. This knowledge within becomes a vital resource to keep me grounded in my own reality.

The transcendent God is present in the counselling room mediated through the beliefs and the Spirit's presence within the counsellor. In most counselling I do not believe it is appropriate for this to become explicit in the counselling interview unless it arises out of the material presented by the client. The fact that God is present is a foundation for the counsellor and the counsellor's personal survival, not so much for the client. I would like to believe that a sound Christian faith will make it less likely that the counsellor will become lost in the labyrinth of the clients reality. This is not to suggest that faith would stop one making genuine contact with that reality, rather that the counsellor can remain truly his/herself while in deep contact with the client's world, whatever that is.

The counsellor's initial task in counselling is to become open to the client and the clients experience of the world. In these moments of contact between counsellor and client both can allow for the truth of the moment to arise in the counselling process.

In the counselling interview the emphasis is upon immanence. The encounter between these two people in which the counsellor enters into relationship with the client and joins forces with the client in a movement for change becomes for me an enactment of the work of Christ. Jesus Christ entered my world as a child, experienced fully the moment by moment existence of human life, through His death and resurrection He has joined Himself with me in a journey for change.

Likewise as a counsellor I incarnate my faith in the transcendent and work at becoming truly immanent in the encounter with my client.

While many evangelicals would want to strongly reject the teaching of Don Cupit [Quote 3 above] yet he makes an important point.

The distinctive of Christianity is that God has poured Himself out into human life and culture. Christian authority is based on the incarnation [John 1]. It is Christ who has entered into humanity and who has made God known. In essence Christian authority is based not on words, although words are vital to its transmission, but in presence and enactment. Jesus teaching does not form a coherent corpus of knowledge to make life right. Rather the truth of the

gospel is in the action, the story of one who became God with us and then through loss and resurrection opened the door for change and new life. No counsellor has the words of life.

No counsellor has the advice to make life right. All we have is the developing capacity to join with another and in the ensuing relationship, at whatever depth is appropriate become part of an enactment for change. It is in this meeting, if we are truly able to risk it, that the potential for resurrection to a new quality of life becomes possible.

What authority in a Christian sense does the counselling Christian offer? My answer is, the authority that comes from being a fellow human being with the client who shares all the limitations of human mortality yet is grounded in a faith and experience of the love of God as expressed in Christ Jesus. As counselling is not evangelism the counsellor has no authority to proclaim. Rather the task is to enact and the use of words or story only arises out of the needs and encounter with the client. At times this may mean some deep sharing of Christian truth. More often it means a deep acting out of love without specific Christian teaching.

I have come to suspect that counsellors who need to make their faith explicit within the interview situation are more likely to be responding to their own sense of insecurity and need for control rather than the clients need. In my experience when I can truly be present with my clients they often of their own accord begin a process of spiritual change and growth.

A recent article in the Adventist Ministry journal [4] discusses the problem facing those who wish to make direct use of Scripture as a codebook to proscribe human behaviour. Such possibilities as; "Do you think a man should even the score when a near relative is killed?" [Num.35:9-28], can bring the response; "If we practised blood vengeance today we would have a lot less trouble with law and order."

The author points out that as a guide to assist us in determining how to live our lives as Christians the Bible is more of a casebook than a codebook. A casebook provides a series of examples that allow us to reflectively choose responses to our life situations. It is not definitive or prescriptive but provides a basis for illumined choice in union with God's Spirit. In this sense Scriptural authority is in the capacity of God's written word to speak to our life situation and provide us with clarity of choice.

I believe that in presenting the way of salvation the Bible is a final definitive Word, salvation is a gift of Grace available by faith alone in the person and work of Christ. In finding guidance for daily living the Bible is a casebook of examples from which I can make choices. At those times it seems appropriate within the client counsellor relationship I will make use of some Biblical imagery as we sit together exploring what this may mean for this particular persons life.

I would never presume that I had the correct Biblical interpretation for any other person, but I am happy to share with and explore together what the Bible says.

The church faces a crisis of authority. I suspect the church has always faced this crisis in some form or other. The counselling Christian needs to work out the way in which Christian faith is present or explicit within his/her practice. As I see it there is a range of Christian approaches to authority in counselling. At one extreme, the far right in my mind, are those who use counselling as a base for a prophetic ministry to proclaim an objective truth, the emphasis upon transcendence. On the far left, where I belong, are those who choose the incarnational model and seek to be a Christian presence. In this stance the knowledge of God is seen as a resource within the counsellor who is open to the search for truth in the client, the emphasis is upon immanence.

[1] Gerhard Ebeling. Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language. 1973 Collins.

[2] John S. Spong. Living In Sin. 1990 Harper and Row.

[3] Don Cupit. The Long Legged Fly 1987 SCM Press.

[4] Alden Thompson "God's Word: casebook or codebook?" Ministry vol.64, No.7, July 1991.