

CHRISTIAN CONVERSION and COUNSELLING

Article 3 (1993)

What effect does conversion to faith in Christ have when it comes to counselling? Is there a difference between christian and non-christian clients in the counselling room?

These two questions are of great importance to christians who work as counsellors. Particularly so for those who operate within the local church or church agency. The answers will influence to some degree the stance of the committed christian counsellor. Too simplistic an answer will lead to abortive attempts to evangelise inappropriately or at the other extreme a failure to make use of the resources of faith.

The counselling Christian needs a clear understanding of the nature of conversion. What, from a Biblical viewpoint, happens when a person becomes a Christian? This article will present four movements that seem essential in the formation of the christian convert. It will discuss their impact upon an approach to counselling. These are: Justification, Regeneration, Sanctification, Glorification. In doctrinal history these terms have been used in various ways with different groups emphasising one over the other. I take them as working terms that I can use to gain an explanation of what happens in the life of faith in Christ. The coming together of the completed work of Christ, the witness of the scriptures, and the present activity of the Holy Spirit in the decision for life by a fellow human can be summed up in these four movements.

JUSTIFICATION.

When a person becomes a Christian the first thing that happens is with God. God treats the sinner, deserving of death, in a whole new light. In confessing faith in Christ the believer receives a new standing, "it means the pardon, remission and non-imputation of all sins, reconciliation to God and the end of all His enmity and wrath." Justification does not imply or offer any other thing such as the giving of a new moral strength. It is a statement of what God does through Christ for all who believe. The human side of justification is the act of believing, the experience of faith. The old reformer's statement still stands, salvation is solely by faith, scripture and Christ all we do is accept. Justification points up the complete acceptance of the sinner in Christ. God has fully forgiven this person.

REGENERATION.

Regeneration describes the immediate work of the Holy Spirit in bringing change in the life of the new convert. When a person makes a commitment to Christ, God unites His Spirit with our spirit to begin the pilgrimage of the Christian life in this age. "If the doctrine of regeneration found a ready entrance into Christian teaching, it was because nothing else was adequate to express the sense of newness which men experienced in Christ; the sense that the old life had ended and a new had begun - new, not merely in direction and intention, but in essence; the sense that the supernatural, the heavenly, the divine, had broken in and displaced the earthly, natural, mortal life."¹

Something happens in the life of a believer when that person becomes a Christian. The Bible calls it a new birth. "... the word of truth is implanted in the heart of the receptive believer to bring into existence the process of spiritual conception and birth in the new life."²

There is no doubt that it is the reality of the experience of regeneration that keeps the Church alive through history. It does not seem to matter much what theology is in vogue, people keep meeting Christ. Across generations and cultures the Church continues.

¹F.W. Beare The First Epistle of Peter 1947, Oxford, p.38 quoted in Leon Morris The Cross in the New Testament The Paternoster Press, n.d., p. 319.

²Dale Moody The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation, 1981, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, pp. 319

What really happens? I have come to the conclusion that the work of the Spirit at this moment of regeneration is a unique action specifically suited to the life of the new believer. Each human person is such a unique combination of biological, genetic, social, mental and emotional factors that it is not possible to assess how any one person will change at the point of conversion. I believe that each person is influenced by the Holy Spirit in a way that perfectly suits their own need for the ongoing journey of faith. This results in a dramatic change for some. For others there seem to be minimal changes.

I assume when a client says they are a christian that the Holy Spirit of God is in them and that there has been an initial regenerative change. I also assume that the Spirit will be adding life to the counselling process. At the same time I am careful not to jump to any quick conclusions about what this may mean in counselling.

Christian clients seem to come in two broad categories. First there are those who are obviously alive in Christ and have the openness and flexibility to make change. These people seem able to admit need and be willing to wrestle with their own humanity to work for change. They are responsive to the counselling process, and gain greatly from the spiritual components of their lives expressed in counselling.

Secondly there are those, who, while claiming to be christian, seem to fear trust in anyone. They are often locked into rigid religious belief patterns and terrified that any real change could cause them to lose control of themselves and their salvation. With these clients the use of spiritual tools often becomes a cover to avoid anything but maintenance of a dogmatic status quo.

While expecting to find evidence of a renewed openness to life as a result of God's action in the christian client, I am always careful to test this first. When it becomes evident in the counselling room then I am delighted to draw upon the tools and gifts of the Spirit.

When with the second type I know there will be a long slow and careful task of being with the clients in the hope that we may develop enough trust to allow counselling to begin to open them up to themselves, and the God of freedom that they have lost.

The primary work of God in regeneration is a resource to be taken seriously in dealing with the new christian believer.

SANCTIFICATION.

By Justification the new believer stands eternally accepted with God through the finished work of Christ. In Regeneration the new believer has received the energising touch of the Holy Spirit within his mortal body. This whole saving process includes the commitment on the part of the believer to a new heart obedience to God. A commitment to walk in newness of life. Thus begins the journey of Sanctification, a journey that involves both human will and energy in company with the dynamic of the Spirit, guided by the scripture. The believer is now walking a lifelong pathway putting off the old man of the sinful nature and in union with Christ putting on the new man. This process is often described in the new testament as a battle fought daily in Christ.

As a counsellor the important thing about this aspect of salvation is the two active sides, human and divine. Sanctification is something God does with our participation. Sanctification is something we do with God's help. Both are a true and necessary statement of christian growth.

In the history of the church both sides have been over emphasised to the exclusion of the other. Sanctification is not all Gods work, nor is it all our work. Rather it is the combination of God's loving action and our loving response as together with Him we seek the expression of the Christ life within our human flesh.

It is at the human side of assisting another person to grow in preparation and empowerment of their human capacity for living that counselling can become a part of the work of sanctification. When a Christian believer seeks counselling help the counsellor can consider that their part is in the journey of sanctification.

Richard Lovelace in his book "Dynamics of Spiritual Life"³ discusses the first of two issues that are important for christians in counselling other christians: "The counsellor who is attempting to move people further in sanctification should therefore begin with a strong emphasis on justification and reiterate this often in the course of his work. Psychoanalysts speak of the "resistance" patients have toward the discovery of traumatic material hidden in the unconscious. The same automatic fear of having repressed problems uncovered will grip and bind christian believers unless they are very deeply assured that they are "accepted in the beloved," received by God as if they were perfectly righteous because their guilt is cancelled by the righteousness of Christ laid to their account. The human conscious is very deeply disoriented in its conviction that we must have works and sanctification to recommend ourselves to God. We must carry out a very deliberate replacement of this misunderstanding with the awareness that God simply wants honesty, openness and a trusting reliance on Christ our Saviour. We cannot bear the light on our needs unless we are also in the light concerning God's grace to meet those needs."

The second issue that confronts me is already touched in Lovelace's quote. Uncovering and facing the issues of our lives is often terrifying and at times appears to go against all we have believed in our christian faith. If the christian client is facing the fact that the marriage to which they have committed themselves with so much pain for so many years is in fact ended, how can such a realisation add up with a belief in christian commitment? The lives of the old testament saints bear full example to the complexity of living honestly on a walk with God. I believe the allusions to the many problematic human situations in the new testament show the same fact. Life is complex. Christian living at the level of honest growth is complex.

The task for the counsellor is to assist the client, from a human point of view, to be as open and honest with themselves and the Spirit of God within them. With this honesty then to seek to make decisions for behaviour that live out the truth in love and responsibility. At times a daunting, or seemingly impossible task. Yet this is our sanctification.

GLORIFICATION.

This is the final act of our earthly salvation drama. God in Christ receives us unto Himself. "He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ." The Christian battling the painful yet exciting spiritual warfare of this life knows that in the final hour Christ is victorious, we will stand whole in Him. The counsellor needs for him/herself the assurance of this as she/he attempts to work within some of the overwhelming mess that we humans, christian and nonchristian are constantly creating. Thanks be to God, He gives the victory.

CONCLUSION.

This is how I have attempted to sort out an understanding of my role as counsellor with christians. With humility I come alongside my brothers and sisters in Christ and share in the hard won personal steps on their journey with the Lord in Sanctification.

³Richard F. Lovelace Dynamics of Spiritual Life Intervarsity Press, 1979, pp114.