

The Practice of My Faith and the Faith of My Practice

by Doug Sotheren

How much does your theology shape your therapeutic practice? There are many great therapists who have no Christian faith and yet we know they do great work. There are also so-called Christian Counsellors who make much of their beliefs but demonstrate very poor therapeutic practice. So it is valid to ask the questions: "Does theology have anything to do really with counselling?" "If theology is relevant in what way and what theology?"

Why this subject? In my experience there are four pathways I have seen evolve for counsellors who begin their career within the Christian world:

- 1. They become disillusioned with the limiting beliefs of our current Christian world, go secular and lose or deny their faith.**
- 2. They become rigid and controlling locked into their faith. From this secure position they set out to use their so-called Christian ideology to direct and in some cases deny their clients right to self-determination.**
- 3. They split themselves up the middle and ride two horses living a double life secular and Christian.**
- 4. They spend their lives wrestling with the constant challenges of faith and practice. This usually means living with constant change and at some level uncertainty about what's next.**

In my life I think I have oscillated back and forth between the last two of these. I keep returning to the fact that my personal experience of Christ as Lord and my sense of call to ministry through counselling demand that I spend my life wrestling. I remember some years ago disgracing myself when I attended a conservative Christian convention where the old fashioned word was being preached with gusto and at great length. A colleague shook my hand and proudly told me that his faith hadn't changed in thirty years. My uncensored shock response was, "You must be dead. I can't stop mine from changing every twenty four hours." Neither he nor those with him were amused, and I crept away with the label of lost backslider.

Theology as I understand it is always a post the event reflection. Theology is the word arising out of the experience of God. Theology as an academic discipline may be a useful tool to inform and guide but it must always be open to the revision that is possible with every new event on the pilgrim way. Unfortunately because of the power dynamics in the church and theological world, theology often is set over against and tries to deny experience. I had the privilege of reading a Doctoral dissertation by a lecturer at the RC College in Sydney in which he attempted to address a theology that was tied to the experience of God. He made the valid point that theological systems, often fine tuned in ivory towers, are embarrassed by and do not want to face the questions raised by the experience of faith. In fact through history theological systems have often become the benchmark by which inquisitions and persecutions have been perpetrated against experience.

Working as a counsellor who seeks to be truly present to the experience of others is to be in a place of constant challenge of one's faith, ethics and theology.

At one stage of my career I acted as consultant to the staff of a Palliative Care service. One meeting, after some years of working together, I asked would the group of about eleven people, be willing to share their stories of faith. As each was working directly with dying people and their families I suggested there might be some value in knowing each other's story. There were Catholic, protestant, atheist and some other faiths represented in the group. Each described how the constant confronting with death and the sometimes bizarre reactions of people forced them to question their received faith. Each came to feel that their religion was of little use in the face of real death. Each to some degree backed away from their faith and went on a journey of wondering, then after some years almost all of them returned to the practice of their faith but differently. They had come to recognise the need for the experience of spiritual community so they participated but no longer with a commitment to the dogma. As a group we all found ourselves struggling with language and moving to poetic or mystical concepts. In this deep and searching discussion I felt I was in a sacred place of worship. I often reflect on this meeting and it seems a metaphor of many counsellors' journey as well. The experience of the therapeutic field challenges and demands change in all beliefs, yet if we

are to be true in the place of therapeutic encounter we need to accept that our beliefs are also present and active. For me this means constantly checking the theology that guides my life and my practice both as a believer and a clinician. My relationship with my client is an intersubjective field that also includes my relationship with God as present in His Spirit.

So what theology? In the rest of this paper I want to introduce the five areas of theology most challenged by my work as a counsellor and then state the position I now hold for a theology that underpins my counselling model. As well I will briefly mention the theologians who have most helped me in this journey. I will conclude by showing this model as it stands next to the first paper on "What works in Counselling".

The five areas are:

1. What does constitute the Core of the Christian Faith?
2. How after years in counselling can one read and use the Bible?
3. Does the current Church teaching in Creation, Incarnation and the Cross add up?
4. Is there a need to create a separation between "Religion" and "Morality".
5. A conclusion on being a counsellor "Intersubjective field" with Christ and my Client.

The following are a brief statement of my current thoughts on these five areas and a reference to the Theologians that have assisted my thinking. They are incomplete and I guess will be in process while ever I am alive.

What does constitute the Core of the Christian Faith?

I grew up in an age where a Christian was defined by don't. A Christian was someone who did not smoke, drink, swear, gamble, masturbate, or smile. I've lived through the age, some years later, where to be a Christian one had to speak in tongues and stay married as well as all the above. Fortunately in the midst of all that I had a deep personal meeting with Jesus, a meeting in which God in His Son spoke to me and changed my life and its direction. From that moment on I have become more and more suspicious of what human groups teach constitutes a Christian.

In his great book "Christianity: The Religious Situation of Our Time" Hans Kung spells out in detail the six ages of Christianity so far. His thesis is that Christianity can be looked at as two parts; 1. The essence of the Gospel "the abiding substance of faith"; and 2. The particular way this essence has been shaped and at times distorted by the social and religious communities of the time. He suggests there have been six of these so far and that we stand on the edge of the seventh that could decide the long-term future of Christianity in the world.

Kung makes the point that the core of Christianity is the message "Jesus the Christ" the recognition that Jesus is God come amongst us, God's messiah. "The name of Jesus Christ is thus the abidingly valid, constantly obligatory and simply indispensable element in Christianity" (pp. 26) This element, over the past 2000 years, has been shaped, sculptured, distorted and blended to create everything from inquisition and massacre to movements for peace, healing and loving Spirituality. As Kung admits it may be a set of simple words but from then on one enters into some of the most profound work in theology, philosophy and history as to how one makes sense of these words.

Another theologian, the "atheist bishop" Don Cupitt in his book "LIFE LINES" outlined a suggested map of the religious Christian life across the last 2000 years. While Cupitt has moved with his "Sea of Faith" group to see religion as a purely human creation, 'God, if there ever was one has poured himself into humanity in the message of Jesus and its now all up to us', not a faith I would want but his analysis is superb and demonstrates well the many ways we have shaped the faith to lose its founder.

The core of my faith is Jesus and in my work as counsellor I see clients who have taken Jesus and shaped him in a myriad of different ways. I need to be careful that my particular shape is seen for what it is a socio-cultural expression, with some accretions, of a true and wonderful essence and not use it to stop listening to my clients and honouring their particular way of dealing with that essence.

HOW IS THE BIBLE TO BE READ AND USED?

Counsellors are wordsmiths. We are constantly dealing with words and deeply aware of how totally limited and entrapping language is. In this postmodern age the nature of language and the interpretation of texts has become a major issue for both church and society. We have become deeply aware of the limits of language while also deeply aware of our total dependence upon it for both individual and social life. One can spend hours attempting to assist a married couple hear each other and together find an almost joint interpretation of one sentence. In more recent times I have come to view language as a tool of our embodiment as social beings. All language is metaphor based on the expression of our existence in a social body "the very properties of concepts are created as a result of the way the brain and body are structured and the way they function in interpersonal relationships and in the physical world." (Lakoff & Johnson. Pp. 37). I find it interesting that God did not send a book, God sent a person, the person of Jesus, a living embodied being who then shared language and more than language. Out of the experience of God people wrote the book. The book is second to and points to the person, and yet, at the same time like language the book is essential to our dialogue with the person.

In coming to the Bible the task is: 1. combining a valid experiential faith in Jesus Christ as Lord in modern society with, 2. a realistic understanding of the Bible as an historical document.

This combination is required to overcome two common errors that arise when the Bible and faith are divorced from history.

The first error comes from Christians who treat the Bible as though it were some eternal document that contains all truth and is not rooted in historical experience. This error results in the extreme abusiveness of fundamentalism, the use of the Bible as a weapon to deny or distort human experience, a commitment to questionable propositions rather than the experience of God offered in Christ, and for some, a naïve belief system that does not assist them to deal with the real issues of life.

The second error comes from those who, using the Bible as a historical document, then deny its significance as a document of faith, the Word of God.

A true faith will acknowledge and be keen to study the truth of God expressed in Jesus Christ as mediated through the Bible. At the same time it will acknowledge and wrestle with the implications that this book is an historical document. As an historical document it must be read in the light of times in which it was written, the differing viewpoints of the authors, and the specific cultures in which it arose.

"From a historical point of view the N.T. writings make up a ... fragmentary collection of different theologies " (54). The connection between these writings is that they are all based on the experiences of the early church that, in some unique and binding way Jesus Christ is Saviour and Lord.

Each writer wrote from in the midst of struggling with a life of faith within the life and culture of the times. **The unity of the N.T. is in the fact that the writers had found faith in Christ not that they agreed with each other or had some right to present an absolute worldview of morality.** Rather, they had found Christ as Savior and found that their lives changed. This required them to rethink and build a whole New World view of morality for living within their historical time.

"The revelation of Christ in its progress and varied interpretations is the real clue to the New Testament" (Kaseman). Consequently, the N.T. demonstrates the variety of peoples' experience of Christ, and how that experience developed in different people and places. It does not present a wooden picture of an artificial unity of the church. In fact, the growth of Christianity is a "complex process, full of controversies and difficult decisions" (Koester 1981). It continues to be such in today's world with its many denominations and cultures.

The Christian reader of the New Testament must be always engaged in a discriminating dialogue between life in the first century and life in the 20th. Otherwise the church becomes lost in a pile of anti intellectual faith of denial, potentially losing touch with both its living Lord and society.

If God has broken into history by sending his Son, Jesus Christ to die and rise again for us, then, in Christ, God calls us to be open to the future with a sure hope, willing to find and live in the truth of the present. Not, as so often happens in religious circles today, closed to the present and focused on the past. The choice is: 1. Stay with the past traditions and attempt to make irrelevant rules for today. Or 2. re address the Bible as the book that mediates Christ for

all humankind and constantly seek and re seek the core principles that can assist in living a true life open to the future yet within the culture of today.

My choice is to follow No. 2 above. **This requires my approaching the Bible as a source book describing the essential early experience of faith in Christ.** From understanding how issues were dealt with in the first century, and reflecting on the principles applied, I can develop a guide to living with faith today. The Bible then becomes a casebook of situations from which I can find guidance in living for today, not a codebook of unchangeable religious laws.

It is by trying to make the Bible function as a codebook that the church has been making itself irrelevant to modern society. The Bible becomes a dead record of useless laws, rather than a living testimony to Christ and the constant change He brings when people come alive in him. The idea of casebook or Codebook has been well developed by The Seventh day Adventist Theologian, Alden Thompson in his 1991 book "Inspiration: Hard Questions Honest Answers". Thompson proposes the integration of Human reason with divine revelation, seeing the scripture as the record of our human meeting with and reasoning about the experience of God. A Codebook, he writes, is an instrument of precision requiring application and compliance rather than interpretation and reflection. While some aspects of the Bible are codebook the majority of Scripture is more like a casebook. A casebook is more applicable to the social and behavioural sciences providing raw data, and various examples that with reflection guide our responses in particular situations. "The casebook approach allows us – indeed forces us – to recognise that revelation and reason must work together. Revelation always deals with specific cases. Reason in dialogue with the Spirit, determines which of those cases are most helpful in informing the decisions we make day by day" pp 109

As a counsellor I find a casebook incredibly helpful, a codebook would block growth, thought and life and become a tool of abuse.

DOES THE CURRENT CHURCH TEACHING IN CREATION, INCARNATION AND THE CROSS ADD UP?

Often in my counselling work as clients move through the therapeutic process I have felt I have been watching the great themes of the Christian faith unfold before. This happens as clients move from living in the past or future unrealistic expectations into the immediate present of accepting themselves for what they are. Slowly clients allow the falling off of the impossible shoulds of family, church, and culture and the dawning rejoicing in their mortal humanity and capacity for life within the limits of humanness. This process seems to me to model the whole theological schema of creation. God in his love creating real beings with potential for both light and shadow.

In an old 1950 book, "Psychotherapy And The Christian View Of Man" David Roberts makes the statement concerning the "The Christian Doctrine of the Imago Dei. First it provides a basis for the acceptance of our creaturliness. It implies that there is nothing wrong with being finite, with having a body, with being this particular individual, with being subject to the vicissitudes of life and death in the environment of nature. Therefore the doctrine has been an important safeguard within the Christian tradition against all views which attempt to regard the finite temporal world as unreal, the body as evil, and death as an incident which relieves man of a temporal encumbrance without touching the intrinsically immortal core of his soul" (pp. 88)

Now so many of my Christian clients seem to not have this view. In fact they seem to think God created them to be a perfect automaton who should know what is right without thinking and be able to be pure and powerful in every way. This is a terrible view of creation creating profound guilt and stuck ness.

Mathew Fox in his latest book makes the point that the concept of sin has become totally trivialised by organised religion with its focus on titillating sins of the flesh overemphasizing morality against spirituality, and refusing to acknowledge sin within the context of God's good creative act. If sin is truly the refusal to become who we are, to be what God has created us to be then our evangelical extremes have worked hard to support sin.

The same problem seems to apply with the Incarnation. Part of the wonder of God coming in the flesh is the honouring of a deep respect for humanity as humanity. Yet our Christology's so emphasise the divinity of Christ that his blessing and acceptance of us in our own sinful weakness, just as I am, is lost on the average Christian in trouble. Which leads me to the greater problem. That is the failure of much evangelical Christianity to really believe that the

cross did finally and irrevocably deal with sin. It almost seems that **instead of a radical release for all humanity the cross has been whittled down into a basic passport of possible forgiveness for the past and entry into anxious legalism for the future.**

Instead of rejoicing that we are God's creation as we are, and that Christ has come to be fully with us as we are and died to set us free as we are, so that whatever troubles or failures we experience along the way are already fully covered in his giving of himself on the cross, we seem to be seeking a perfection by our own works that is not possible and then loading ourselves and those around with deadening guilt and fear.

This becomes even more obvious when we are confronted with the results of the new research on the brain and behaviour. Does God only save those people who have the physiology of a fully formed brain and of course have had it grown within a middle class western culture? Is salvation available for the autistic, the demented, and son on? How limited is the efficacy of the cross you believe in?

I now work with the belief that all are saved in Christ, and I am constantly surprised how that belief seems to free the most apparently ungodly to become open to belief.

Which leads to my next point. The longer I work as a counsellor the more I want to make some big separation between morality and faith.

THE NEED FOR A SEPARATION BETWEEN RELIGION AND MORALITY

In my youth Christianity seemed often to be defined by the current morality of the day. The list I gave at the beginning of this talk was all about a particular view of morality. This pattern seems to continue today's society as well. Sexual orientation and gender seem to some to be more important than faith in Jesus in defining a Christian. How would you handle a situation like this that came over my desk recently:

"A "Male" who has medical research to back up that he is genetically, dna wise a female. This man wishes to marry another male. He wants assistance to change the laws to allow the marriage to go ahead given the medical research that says for all intents and purposes he is a woman.

The Question then he is asking is What is the biblical view of a women?"

For me there are two issues here; the first one is about faith. Does whether he is medically male or female have any significance whatever to the fact that he is saved by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. The answer is no. The second question, do I with my beliefs about God and morality want to explore with him the potential to realize a full life for himself in a committed intimate relationship? The first question is an eternal one, the second question is a political, cultural, ethical one and I believe informed by, but secondary to, theology. I believe a personal experience with Christ will be of great support to him as he wrestles with the second issue of his sexuality, I don't believe that it defines it. The constant defining of faith by morality has been at a terrible cost to the potential of the healing presence of Christ to humanity and leads to the sort of stupidity highlighted in the currently circulating email about Dr. Laura.

Laura Schlessinger is a US radio personality. Recently, she said that as an observant Orthodox Jew, homosexuality is an abomination according to Leviticus 18:22 and cannot be condoned in any circumstance. The following is an open letter to Dr. Laura penned by a US resident, which was posted on the Internet:

Dear Dr. Laura

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to follow them.

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odour for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbours. They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell ? I have tried asking, but most women take offence.

Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

I have a neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some room for negotiation here?

Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev.19:27. How should they die?

I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev.24:10-16) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your devoted disciple and adoring fan

While ever faith and morality are so tightly tied together I believe we limit the power of Christ to work in peoples' lives and we do a profound disservice to the Gospel. I am a distant fan of Simone Weil who though she loved Christ refused ever to join a Church because the churches draw lines to keep people out while Jesus drew lines to bring people in.

From the point of view of the Gospel behaviour arises out of the saving influence of Christ through the Holy Spirit, it is not proscribed by it. The core goal of the message of Christ is to invite us into the process of Justification, Regeneration, Sanctification, Glorification; each of these is a step towards wholeness rather than a prescription for behaviour. I would rather look at Scripture as a casebook from which we can draw Meta models for morality, for example concepts such as respect for and genuineness with others. Some years ago I did a study of Romans 12 to 15 to explore what are the ethical or moral principles underlying this first century document. I found three principles for both individual and community:

INDIVIDUAL IN RELATIONSHIP GUIDELINES

1. BE REALISTIC ABOUT YOURSELF (Rom 12:1-3) IN DECISION MAKING INCLUDE YOURSELF AS A PART OF THE PEOPLE TO WHOM YOU BELONG (Rom 12:4-21)
2. BE FULLY RESPONSIBLE FOR YOURSELF (Rom 14:5-12) ACT TOWARD OTHERS IN A WAY THAT HELPS NOT HINDERS (Rom 13:8-14:21)
3. MAINTAIN YOUR INTEGRITY BY FOLLOWING THE MODEL OF CHRIST IN ALL YOUR RELATIONSHIPS (Rom 14:22-15:13)

I use these principles as the basis for exploring a morality that can be applied in the real life situations of my life and the people with whom I work. It is these core ways of approaching the human person that I believe underlie a truly theological approach rather than a slavish connection to culturally dated moral laws.

God has created us as living beings on a journey of constant renewal and change in relationship with Christ. Inviting, allowing, loving, not controlling but offering the Spirit's presence in continuous opportunities of the experience of renewal.

In another paper, I made much of the "between" the intersubjective field of relationship. In his birth, life, death and resurrection Christ has created that field with us. It is the encouragement of trust in this relationship that I believe Christian morality arises as fruit not as law.

CONCLUSION:

I want to conclude by revisiting my model for counselling and this time adding in the theological motifs that I believe inform my practice

1. Each person (and each truly personal relationship) is a unique expression of the creative act of God, to be treated with respect and valued.
2. Each person has the God given trust to make self directing choices. The counsellor's task is to help in providing a space in which the person can work toward an integrated wholeness in decision making.
3. Each person is to be understood within the context of all his/her relationships, both past and present.
4. All human relationships have within them the potential to be unique expressions of the love and creativity of God, and are to be treated with respect.

1. INCARNATION & PRESENCE

Modelling Meeting

Humanist/existential therapy:

Assisting my client(s) to live fully within their created human experience as possible.

2. RECONCILIATION & COMMUNITY

Modelling Salvation

Systemic and Family of Origin therapy models:

Working with the relational structures both past and present of which the client(s) and the problem situation form a part.

3. WORD and MIND

Cognitive / Narrative

Helping the client(s) create a clear understanding of their choices, with internally consistent meaning and direction.

Movement from experience through relational system to cognitive reflection.

As I as counsellor hold deep within the presence of the non-invasive loving Christ through His Spirit in the counselling room so Grace is offered to us all and the process of the Gospel is re enacted in the healing meeting between counsellor and client

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