

The Heart AND SOUL

What is it about the heart and soul of Christian counselling that makes it distinct from simply counselling provided by Christians? This is the question I am going to reflect on with you within this article. There are hidden and open differences in the process of counselling that are distinctive to Christian counselling. These differences arise from doing theology in the counselling room. In presenting my argument I make some assumptions. The first assumption is that God who is the Father and Creator of us all is already involved in the life of every client – regardless of that person's faith or belief in God. God is involved with the atheist, the New Age spiritualist, the Muslim, the agnostic, and the believing Christian alike.

The differences lie in the quality of the relationship each person has with God, and the amount of room that person has for God. Therefore, we can pray and expect that God brings every client who approaches us for counselling, and furthermore, God has an agenda for what God wants to accomplish through our work together. This expectation is not restricted to just Christian clients. The second assumption is that every client is the object of God's love and compassion. So it is appropriate to extend the Christian ministry of care and compassionate presence to every client.

The third assumption is that God the Holy Spirit is present, so there are a minimum of three persons in the counselling room. This assumption has important implications for counselling process. Christian counselling process involves relating to the Holy Spirit as co-therapist. This means the counsellor is attentive to both the client and the Holy Spirit. I frequently privately pray for the Holy Spirit to guide and be active in the counselling conversations with clients. I then remain attentive, alert for anything the Spirit may say to me in the counselling session. I expect the Spirit to be involved in the process, so I have learned to trust CHRISTIAN COUNSELLING where the process goes.

When I enter the counselling room I do not go in with an agenda, but with an expectation. I do not need to be in control; I can trust the Spirit through the unfolding process. The second key to Christ-informed counselling is listening. Listening to the Spirit is the key to my creativity as a therapist. I rapidly gained a reputation for being a creative therapist when working in Nebraska, and the secret was I listened to the Spirit, and it was the Spirit's creativity. Creativity can take the form of metaphors, new revelatory insights, hunches, questions, activities – you

name it. And they often work, and I discover a new intervention in the process! The Spirit is insightful. The Spirit is on the money.

The Spirit is creative. Learn to listen and be attentive to the Spirit. Learn to recognize the Spirit's voice, and act on it. Making room for God to work as co-therapist alongside me in counselling is an important distinctive feature of Christian Counselling. A good therapist listens to his or her clients¹. I am also alert to what the Spirit may inspire the client to say. I look out for those serendipitous moments when the client makes a profoundly insightful statement, often unknowingly. Such a moment provides the key for therapeutic engagement. Frequently the Spirit alerts me to it, and I immediately intuitively recognize the client's statement is key. It becomes the focus for the rest of the session. Christian counselling is informed by Christian values.

There is no such thing as value neutrality. However, value respect is an ethical obligation. Christian values blend into common sense wisdom. Actions in line with Christian values generally make good therapeutic sense. The wisdom I provide as a counsellor is informed by my Christian values. There is a place for wisdom. This is an important consideration that Christians make in choosing a Christian counsellor. They want a counsellor who shares their Christian values.

Yet I need to be mindful that my task is to help a client make good decisions. Therefore, I can offer perspectives, options, opinions, as long as I am mindful that the client is free and responsible to make his or her decision. I am not responsible for the quality of the decision a client makes. Neither do I have to defend my Christian values or morality. Thus I can sit with a client who responsibly makes a decision to do an abortion without compromising my Christian anti-abortion stance.

My Christian morality is concerned with my actions, not the actions of my client. The line is drawn in that I must not advocate a course of action that is contrary to my Christian values yet I do not, however, compromise my Christian values, when I evenhandedly explore alternative moral options available to my client. Christian counselling is most openly distinctive when we engage in theological reflection with our clients. Theological reflection is often needed. Christians in

¹ A CHRISTIAN COUNSELLOR IS A PRACTICING THEOLOGIAN ENGAGED IN THE WORK OF THERAPY (P.55 Counselling Connections Across Australia Edition 5 Oct 2014)

OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELLING

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psychological distress commonly have important theological questions they need to wrestle with. Alternatively,

Christian clients suffering from psychopathology or troubled relationships often have personal theological outlooks that support, legitimize and maintain that psychopathology or behaviour. So we need to challenge painfully constraining personal theological belief systems. We need to open up biblically based theological perspectives that reflect God's love and life giving grace to the believer. Common theological problems that need to be addressed in Christian counselling are: If God is a good God who loves me, why did he allow this to happen? Where was God when the abuse happened? Clients have developed an image of a perfectionistic judgmental condemning God they can never satisfy?

They maintain self-images of guilt and shame, that warrant God's condemnation, rejection and judgment. "I am a contemptible sinner [saved by grace], but that makes no difference." People have been hurt and disillusioned by the church. Christianity had become in too many quarters a "do more, better" religion, where the love and gracious acceptance of the person by God has been lost to view. It is a common occurrence that a client's theology is itself part of the problem.


A client's own pain and negative self-image is projected onto God, leaving a person feeling hopelessly unloved, condemned and unacceptable. And bringing about lasting change may include challenging dysfunctional theological beliefs, so the gospel can indeed become life-giving good news for the client. Therefore, we need to be able to do theology with our clients. Being a Christian counsellor requires that we become practicing theologians. Just reproducing the theology we have been taught won't cut it.

We need to pursue these theological questions ourselves. We need to ask whether the Bible really teaches what our traditions have taught. What does the Bible teach about love, acceptance and grace? What does Job teach us about suffering? Are the doctrines of total depravity and original sin biblical or merely theological? What is God really like? Are Christians righteous saints or remain sinners saved by grace? Where is God when it hurts? How do we handle disappointment with God? We need to develop theological answers and insights that are truly biblically based. An accurate understanding of the Bible enables us to provide the theological restorative work that our clients need, to allow

them to move from legalistic judgmental Christianity into the freedom of the love and grace of Christ.

Doing Christian counselling requires that we not only become competent therapists, but also practicing theologians who not only draw upon the body of our clinical knowledge, but also our of our spirituality. This means additional demands upon our professional development. We not only need to do the ongoing professional development with reference to clinical theory and interventions that is expected of counselling professionals.

We also need to do professional development focused on theological reflection and study, as well as paying attention to developing our own spirituality and spiritual maturity. Christian counselling, then is a distinctive approach that is based upon the presumption of the presence and involvement of God in the lives of clients and in the counselling room. It involves listening to and trusting the Spirit in the counselling dialogue, being informed by our Christian values, and finally doing theological reflection with our clients.

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