

# A DOCTRINE OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN COUNSELLING

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Behind every human practice stands a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes. These form the basis of theory. Christians have a set of theories about the nature of the human person, the cause and potential cure of human problems. They also have a set of theological beliefs about the nature of the human person and the cause and cure of human problems. For some these two approach integration, for others they remain embarrassingly separate.

The nature of the human person, or the "Doctrine of Man" is the subject of this article. What is the christian understanding of Man that can best help the counsellor to select from the increasing range of secular theories and therapies in our society?

A doctrine of man that limits itself only to eternal salvation is inadequate as a base for counselling. Our doctrine of Man must be a doctrine of human life in all its aspects. It must relate to the full range of human experience. It must have as its subject matter an understanding of the general problems experienced in daily life. It must address change, development, and uncertainty and it must do this in a way that shows a consistent dependence upon Scripture and reality.

It is easy to create a theology from the Bible that does not relate to life, or a theory about life that ignores the Biblical witness. The counselling Christian cannot afford to do either of these. The world is cluttered with the damaging myths of these two extremes. Often the problems presented by our clients are the result of bad theology both from the world and the church.

The increasing changes in society create an even greater pressure upon us to rethink our christian statements about humanity. As stated by John Paul II, "Perhaps one of the most obvious weakness of present-day civilisation lies in an inadequate view of man. Without a doubt, our age is one in which man has been most written and spoken of, the age of the forms of humanism and the age of anthropocentrism. Nevertheless it is paradoxically also the age of Man's

abatement to previously unsuspected levels, the age of human values trampled on as never before." (1)

This changing process arises out of the experience of humankind's technological power over life and nature in way never before experienced. In 1968 the atomic scientist Robert Gomer wrote, "Change has been the permanent condition, in fact, the precondition of man. ... The most striking feature of the world today is the rapidity with which it is changing. The changes we are experiencing are clearly man-made, but it is not totally clear what their real nature is, and it is very unclear what their effect on man is and will be; nor is it clear whether they are controlled by man or controlling him." (2)

In this context of unpredictability and uncertainty it is important for the Christian to check and refine the way in which she/he understands the christian truth about Man for this age.

In this article I will attempt to briefly present my "model" of a doctrine of Man from the Old Testament then add the New Testament dimension and comment on how these ideas inform or shape my choice of theory and "method" as a counsellor.

In The Beginning.

The Bible begins with the fact of God and Creation. The human person is the product of the creative act of God. A creation to be valued highly: "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31 ) This living breathing good creation is formed in the "Image of God". Theologians will probably argue forever about the meaning of this term. I have taken it to imply that human beings have a freedom to will, to choose, to communicate, and to relate.

Genesis 2 adds the key statement, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7 ). This sets our mortal nature thoroughly within the physical world of this age and subject to it. The question, "Is there a person beyond the body?" is answered here. The Bible agrees with the neurologist who would say

that everything about us that is human is lodged securely within the reality of the neural system. Genesis 2:7 then goes on to show that we are inbreathed and enlivened by the breath of God. It is not surprising that the Christian hope is the resurrection of the body.

My client, like me, is a good creation, a physical being subject to physical laws. While always respecting the creative breath of God, and recognising that I can never be fully objective about my own species, I can explore the physiology, psychology, social and behavioural life of the human person as a part of the total physical creation.

"But what about SIN?", a voice cries out in the background. A common complaint from Christians about counsellors is that they seem to water down the seriousness of sin. "If one keeps finding causes in childhood or other places for current behaviour doesn't this weaken the plain fact of sin?" they would ask.

The Biblical story of the fall states that God's good creation now contains the distortion and rebelliousness that is sin. The two themes of responsibility and sin are a part of mortal human life. A key passage for me is Genesis 4:7. "If you do what is right will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Sin is externalised as a monster waiting to grab Cain. The responsibility to choose his response lies within Cain. While the Biblical message proclaims that apart from Christ there is no solution to the problem of sin, it never disallows human responsibility for choice.

Four times in Exodus through Deuteronomy the Bible recognises the effect across the generations of damaging behaviour (e.g. Exodus 20: 4-6). At the same time it recognises the responsibility of each individual to deal with whatever life brings into his/her generation (Ezekiel 18). The call of Moses in Deut. 30:19-20, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that they may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him," is often in my mind as I sit with people agonising over the painful and difficult decisions of life. Fortunately the Bible also tells how hard it was for Moses to know what was the choice of life in many

situations. I rarely find it a simple answer. Fortunately my task is to assist each person to express the reality of the image in them and make a responsible choice.

The rest of the Old Testament is rich in story and teaching about human life. It tells an ongoing story of human communication and relationships at all levels. The Biblical view of Man is one of Man in relationships with God, self and others. (3)

Out of the creation and Old Testament stories I hold the following basic beliefs:

1. The human person is the good creation of God having within his/her nature the image of the divine capacity for choice, freedom, relationship and change.
2. The human person is a product of the earth, a natural part of the ecology, subject to natural laws, yet holding within the essence of life given by God. Humanity has potential for full life in this age, with potential of life with God in the age to come.
3. The presence of evil and the action of sin are a real part of all human experience. The fact of sin is not to be placed above the God-given capacity for human responsibility for choice.
4. Each individual is to be approached within the context of all her/his relationships. This includes relationships both past and present, including relationships with God, self, and others.

I am sure the models of therapy that attract me are already becoming obvious. This discussion so far is based from Old Testament writing, although interpreted from the perspective of the New. The highest view of the human person comes for the Christian from the person of Christ.

In Christ.

Jesus Christ is the high point in a Christian understanding of Man. In Christ God has become the man, Jesus, and in this man, Jesus, has shown what man is capable of becoming and the quality of the relationship that God intends between man and Himself.

The incarnation adds to the creation message of the value God places upon human kind. From a personal worship point of view I wonder at the mystery that the

living God is present in this man who is perfect God and perfect man in one person. I thrill at what this means through the Cross and resurrection for my personal salvation in eternity.

From a counselling point of view I focus on the person Jesus as fully human and as the model of humankind intended in God's ultimate plan for the cosmos. I tend to see the sensitivity and awareness of Jesus, not as some extra divine intervention but as the normal action of a complete and perfect human person.

The ideal "type" or pattern for humanity stands in this one person. Jesus is the Ideal both in the capacity to live life fully and to do it in harmony with God at all levels, so that God and man are in a unity of oneness.

The New Testament teaching on Man follows on from the person of Christ.

From Paul.

The writings of Paul follow. In them he develops a complex anthropology, "Paul did not in general evince any interest in producing a truly consistent anthropology. If there is an underlying consistency in his doctrine of man, it would seem to be most closely correlated with the Judaic term "heart", which connotes a view of man as an integral, intentional self who stands in relationship before God."

(The writings of Paul develop a complex anthropology (3), emphasising both heart and mind. This article will not allow space for a discussion of this but it is worth studying. (See ref. 3)

In his varied responses to the problems of the early church, Paul uses a few significant terms in attempting to describe the human condition. These include terms such as body, flesh, heart, mind, soul, conscience, and spirit. As well Paul describes in graphic terms some tensions that underlie our life as Christians in the world, the battle between the inner and the outer man, between the new and the old, between the mortal and the eternal, between the flesh and the spirit.

The human person not only has a body, but is a body (soma). All human life is lived in the body, it is in the body that man can become divided against the self, "It is in the harmony of the "I" and "the body" that the unity of human existence is

disclosed, in the good as well as in the evil; on the other hand it is in this distinction between the "I" and "the body" that there is also the possibility of inner discord in human existence." Paul emphasises the place of the mind ("nous") "the constellation of thoughts and assumptions which makes up the consciousness of the person and acts as the agent of rational discernment and communication."

All this summed up in man being a living soul (psyche) an individual whom at core presents as human spirit. This natural man has the possibility of receiving the Spirit of God to become fully human in Christ.

The Pauline literature also attests that human life is lived within the context of relationships. All biblical language is relational language. With God as Father and Jesus as Son the New Testament is rich in images of the structure of human life lived in a network of relationships. A close study of Romans 12-16 gives a vivid picture of the relational framework of human life.

#### A Model For Counselling.

Arising out of this summary statement on the Doctrine of Man I can now briefly state my practice. I begin from the belief that each person is a unique expression of the creative act of God, to be treated with respect and valued.

Each person has the God given trust to make self directing choices. The counsellor's task is to help in providing a milieu where the person can work toward an integrated wholeness in decision making.

Each person is to be understood within the context of all his/her relationships, both past and present.

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.

My model draws from three areas of the therapy world.

Humanist/existential therapy: Assisting my client(s) to live fully within their created human experience as possible.

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.

Cognitive therapy: Helping the client(s) create a clear understanding of their choices, with meaning and direction.

This movement from experience through relational system to cognitive reflection fits well with my understanding of the Christian Doctrine of Man.

My first counselling goals are to creatively make contact and meet with my client(s). Then I move to create in the counselling relationship a safe space so that my clients will have the freedom to fully experience and explore the dimensions of the problem they have brought to counselling. In this space the client(s) have the opportunity to choose to experience the positive and negative aspects of themselves as valued and respected human beings.

The counselling theories that best assist me in this first phase are those of Carl Roger's "Person Centred Therapy" and the emotionally focused expressive therapies such as "Gestalt Therapy".

The gentle but highly focused skills of empathic reflection, open ended and specific questioning, awareness focusing and confrontation all allow the client to begin to bring to awareness the disowned parts of the self and move towards a more total experience of the self and the self in relationship. This process alone often empowers the client to begin a reconstruction of the problem situation in a way that allows the client's emerging resources to be mobilised for change. A christian critique of these therapeutic models would warn of the dangers of accepting their philosophy as a final word, this does not deny that they provide an excellent base to assist a fellow human move toward the fullest possible expression of their created potential in this life. These models fit well with the first three statements on the doctrine of the human person.

In almost, but not all of my counselling the next step is the recognition of the relational or systems aspects of the client's problem. Current or past marriage and family experience moves to the front of the stage. Often the current situation becomes a window on the past, a replay of past trauma or loss, or another failing attempt to get it right in life. Here I draw upon a number of therapeutic models each speaking to particular type of situations.

The concepts and skills of "Structural Family Therapy", "Family Systems Theory", "Problem Solving Therapy", "Conjoint Family Therapy", "Transactional Analysis", "Developmental Family Theory" and some aspects of "Object Relations Theory" all provide important tools in assisting clients and their families move to new ways of being. These are used within the context of statement four.

Both Old and New Testaments recognise the importance of the mind and rational belief as part of full human life. It is important for me that, as much as they want, my clients have a rationale for the experience of counselling. For this reason I will often, as a part of an intervention, give a phrase of explanation of my purpose in the use of the intervention. I have found that this often adds to the effect of interventions, even paradoxical ones.

The whole scripture attests that human kind for all its created grandeur is lost in sin. Sin corrupts the capacity of the mind and is expressed in the destructive behaviours of the body. In dealing with the human person one is always dealing with a fellow sinner. The evangelistic message is a call for each person to turn to the Christ who saves. The counsellor works within the confines of human sin and failure seeking in relationship to assist each person christian and nonchristian to live as fully as possible within the present created order.

Counselling, when it works well, offers greater access to oneself, a greater potency in dealing with ones relationships, and new levels of meaning for life. These counselling goals I believe are consistent with a christian view of the human person.

For the nonchristian this experience can prepare the way for a renewed meeting with God, for the christian it can become another step, from the human side, in the journey of sanctification.

1. Quoted from, "John Paul II in Mexico: His Collected Speeches." 1979, in Grahame Clark, *The Identity of Man*, Methuen, 1983, page 149.

2. Robert Gomer, "The Tyranny of Progress" in Rothblatt Ben Ed., *Changing Perspectives on Man*, University of Chicago Press, 1968, page 257.

3. Hans Walter Wolff *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, SCM Press, 1974.