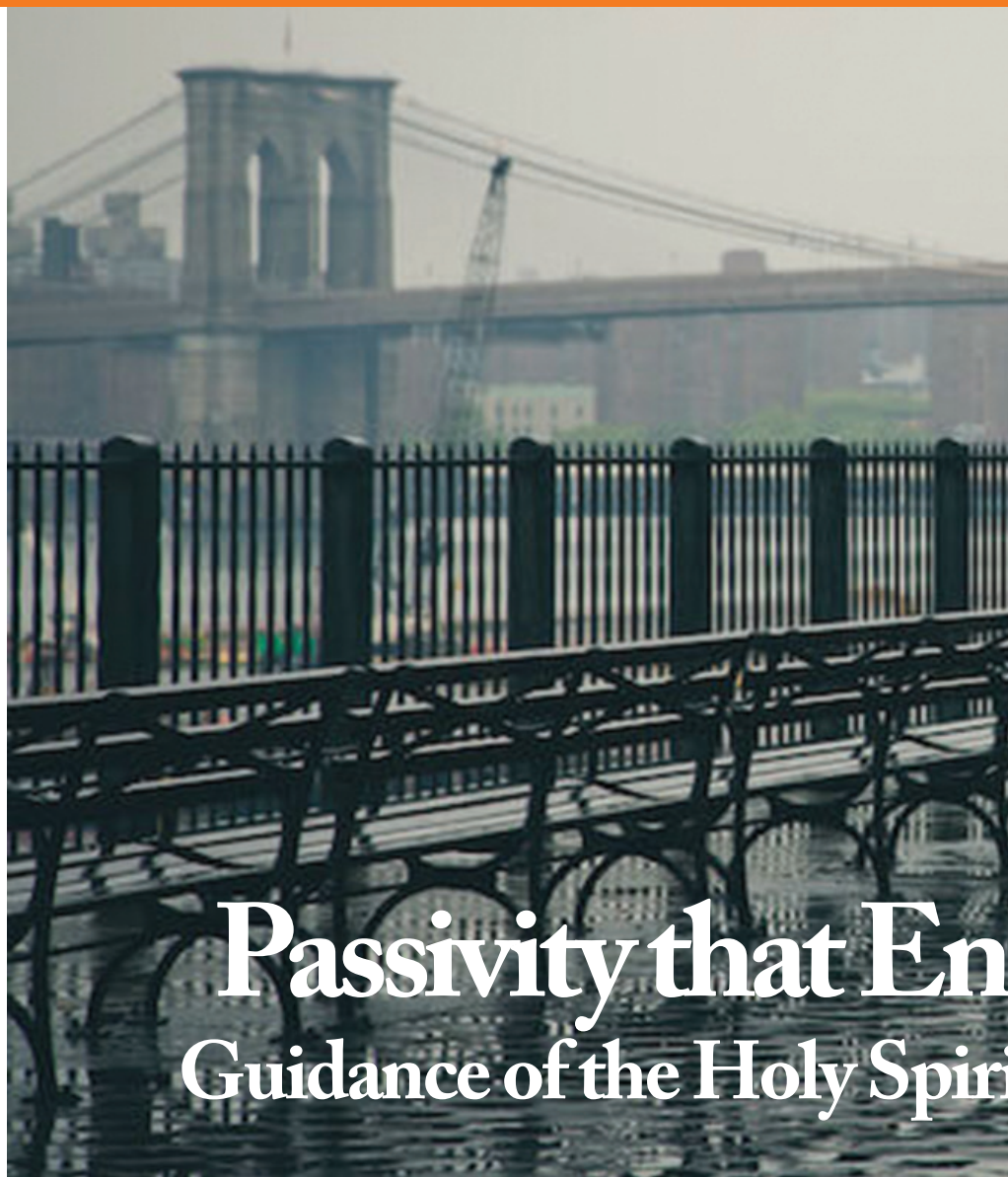


Integration of the Spiritual into Counselling

Two thirds of Americans view religion as important in their lives, and, of these, two thirds "prefer to see a therapist who holds spiritual beliefs" (Hage, 2006, pp.303-310). While these American statistics may not reflect Australian society, increasing numbers seek out Christian counsellors because they want help in their faith journey as well as other areas of their lives. James (1998, pp.233-237) suggested that the spiritual aspects are intrinsic to our being and many of our Life Scripts are derived from our religious backgrounds. It is important that Christian therapists have tools to engage in meaningful and respectful intervention even though it may be tempting to avoid this potential theological minefield. In therapy, simple symbolic spiritual events can become a fruitful areas for analysis and treatment. However, this comes with certain dangers – especially if the Christian counsellor is viewed as "God's messenger" to the client. In this essay we shall briefly describe ways "prayer ministry" can increase a passivity that endangers the soul and then analyze a personal experience of "spiritual therapy" received one of the authors, Peter, from an untrained therapist working in a small Pentecostal church setting that did not bring "blessings".

Prayer Ministry

The therapy Peter received was similar to the process used by Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) and other groups such as Elijah House, (Australia), Freedom House (Canada) and the Ryde Uniting Church in Sydney. Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) was developed during the 1990s in the United States by a Baptist minister, Dr Edward Smith. Concerns about the legal liabilities of offering "counselling services" using his method led to the name being changed to Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) (Theo= God; phostic = light). A TPM session is guided by a "Ministry Facilitator" and



Passivity that Endangers the Soul Guidance of the Holy Spirit

an optional "Prayer Partner" and their task is to "help emotionally wounded people (called the "Ministry Recipients") to acknowledge and to identify the true source of their inner emotional pain and find lasting peace through receiving personalized truth directly from the Lord." (Smith, 2004, p.39). In the TPM view, the Ministry Recipient's present situation is not the cause of on-going pain but it is rooted in a first-time experience which gives rise to "lie-based woundedness". Emotional release from these original events of emotional pain and the accompanying "lies" is facilitated by Ministry Recipients being encouraged to free themselves of deception – which can only be achieved by God's divine intervention and an experience of the truth that leads to a renewal of the mind (Smith, 2005, p.39). The TPM session begins with a brief explanation of the process and then a "prayer of encouragement". After this,

the Ministry Recipient is asked to close their eyes and remember an original painful event, to focus on the emotional feelings related to the memories and to describe them. The Ministry Facilitator then drills down to identify core beliefs that inform the "lie-based pain" by asking a series of questions. Once the troublesome core beliefs have been identified, the Ministry Facilitator asks God to provide a "new perspective" through a mental picture, a feeling, a Scripture, a word of knowledge or some other way and provide peace (Miller, 2006). This is then shared with the Ministry Recipient. Repeated sessions of "prayer ministry" are encouraged in TPM.

While TPM ministries may believe that they are clear in their claims that "prayer ministries" are not "counselling", there are many aspects of this process that are directly derived from psychodynamic counselling. The problem is that the

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dangers the Soul in Christian Counselling

TPM Ministry Facilitator is not trained in psychotherapy. The Christian Clinical Psychologist, Dr Entwistle (2004) was concerned that the distinction between "ministry" and "counselling" was not clear enough. For him, the overlapping areas has led to confusion of the "flawed explanations of basic psychological processes; dubious claims about the prevalence of Dissociative Identity Disorder and Multiple Personality Disorder; demonic activity; estimates of traumatic abuse that exceed empirical findings; the failure to sufficiently appreciate the possibility of iatrogenic memory contamination; and application to a variety of mental disorders without empirical validity. Apart from the danger of re-traumatising Ministry Recipient by untrained and ill-equipped Ministry Facilitators, the TPM process encourages a passivity to a divine message that is supplied though a message to the Ministry Facilitator. We wish to focus on

this last point because of the inherent risks of thought reform and even cultic behaviour in the process.

Peter's Experience of "Prayer Counselling":

Some of the dangers in 'spiritual therapy' can be seen in an example from Peter's (one of the authors) experience after he had responded to an invitation for prayer and ministry and was taken to another room for an extended session with a "spiritual therapist".

Peter: I feel that I am in a dark place.

Therapist: I have a word from the Holy Spirit about you. I see you walking into a dark place because of the demon of pride that you carry. What do you think about that? Is there anything you need

to confess?

Peter: Yes, um, I can certainly see the dark place because that's why I have come here. And the pride, yes I can see that I probably have a little of that too.

Next session (a week later):

Therapist: What did you think about last session?

Peter: Well I thought about it.

Therapist: What sort of pride do you think it could be?

Peter: I don't know.

Therapist: Well let's ask for guidance of the Spirit so that you can be freed from the demon of pride ...

Peter: Well, not right now ... (He never went back).

Peter reflects on this experience:

I accept that she may have been well-intentioned although unwitting in her approach toward praying for me. I wanted prayer because I thought that it would give me some ready answers to the painful events in my life. I was desperate enough to receive anything - including divine intervention - to relieve me from my pain. This may have been a desire for a quick fix. I felt that the first session may have had value because I was prompted to think about the contribution that my pride made toward my personal pain and darkness. In spite of the loaded spiritualized language in describing the "demon of pride I carried" being a source of darkness, I did think about it seriously during the following week.

However, the second session did not have value because I saw warning signs flashing all over the place. I thought that, no matter what my therapist intended, she acted as though she was the "voice of God". Maybe I was just

too nervous about it all because I had been caught before. The problem I had with her therapy was that I saw the "slippery slope" that she had started to navigate. I felt as though I had to return each week to get more prayer and insight from God through her agency. In her "prayer therapy" I felt as if I was expected to passively accept her revelations as being from God and that I was going to lose a bit of my human agency.

Human Agency

Human agency refers to the individual capacity to act independently and to make free choices based on their own will as opposed to reacting to unthinking deterministic processes (Bandura, 1999, pp. 21-41). While I suffered no long term effects from this brief encounter, there are many other experiences of "thought reform processes" ascribed to the Holy Spirit that have led to passivity, over-dependence and painful disengagement such as described by Shofar (2015). This is not a new phenomenon. More than a century ago, Jessie Penn-Lewis' observed similar problems in the Welsh revival when humans claimed to be the voice of God to which she stated:

The truth to be emphasized is that God never 'wills' instead of man, and whatever a man does, he is himself responsible for his action (Penn-Lewis, 1915/1996, p.34).

Penn-Lewis (1915/1996, chapter 4) described the resulting passivity of mind, conscience, and spirit as wrong humility that endangers the soul and may lead to involvement in Christian cults. Further, the degree to which human agency is surrendered to others is equivalent to the predisposition to cult domination. When people in their desperation and pain seek counselling, they may be already predisposed to passive acceptance – especially when the counselling or prayer process adds divine authority to the human voice. Appropriate counselling processes should lead to a freeing of clients from their therapists so that they can "work out

their own salvation" (Philippians 2:12). Therapy should strengthen the will and decrease passivity by waiting for the next revelation that could endanger their souls.

Lifton's Identification of Eight Methods of Thought Reform used by Cults:

In spite of the difficulties that Peter was facing at the time, the second session led him to seek counselling elsewhere because the therapist had already begun crossing into the classic "eight methods of thought reform" outlined by Lifton (1969):

1. Milieu control (The therapist allowed no other explanation in the session, the problem was spiritual and I needed the Holy Spirit to liberate me from the demon of pride. In more intense situations of control, I would be discouraged or prevented from being influenced by outside sources of information);
2. Mystical manipulation (The therapist heard from God and not me – I was expected to accept this as "truth" and I was supposed to passively accept and this placed her in a position of authority over me. The use of "mystical revelation" can be used to suit the designs of the therapist for their own ends and to the ultimate damage of followers);
3. Demand of purity (In the "black-and-white world" of the therapist, I was either under bondage to pride and darkness or liberated by her "guidance". Obedience to the absolutist demands/interpretations is intensified in situations of greater control);
4. Cult of confession (The therapist encouraged me to confess further elements of "pride" in my life during counselling so that I could be cleansed. The content of these confessions could be used later to increase dependency and gain greater control);
5. Sacred science (The therapist held

the gnosis [knowledge of the truth] so that her claims/insights were as true as the Divine and I was expected to obey. In extreme cases, the divine gnosis becomes illogical - harmful to followers and self-serving to the cult leader);

6. Loaded language (The therapist referred mystical concepts such as a "dark place" and a "demon of pride" that she claimed to understand while my insights were discouraged. In situations of increased cultic control, the unique language/understandings to create an in-group/out-group concept of understanding.);
7. Doctrine over the person (Instead of exploring possible sources of my "darkness", the therapist's revelations fully explained all while any other ideas were not entertained. In situations of greater control, the person comes to believe in these "doctrines" instead of listening to conscience);
8. Dispensing of existence (Through continued submission to her counselling and prayer, the promise was that my existence could be made "whole". In stronger cases of cultic control, behaviour is controlled by reward/punishment, rest/activity, future/past, friends/family so that every aspect of identity to that a person's existence is dependent on the cult leadership).

In Peter's case, it was a rather insignificant example of Holy Spirit guidance and a long way short of cult domination. However, in each of Lifton's elements, there were enough indications of the perils to diminish human agency and increase passivity. These elements should remind counsellors to think carefully about the way we place the Holy Spirit in counselling and also to be alert for signs of cult behaviour in religious organizations. The processes of thought reform have their genesis in mild activities such as described by Peter's encounter. However, when carried out over time with increasing strength, may

result in an increasing passivity that slowly destroys the soul - all under the guise of deepening the Christian spiritual pathway.

The Place of the Spirit in Counselling:

You may think that we are suggesting that the Holy Spirit does not have any place in the counselling room and that Christian therapists should depend only upon the insights received in professional training. Our response should be far more nuanced. All Christians should be "led by the Spirit" - including the way we carry out professional demands as Christian therapists. Professional training does allow the space to apply spiritual principles that benefits others but needs to be applied wisely. In therapy, neither the counsellor nor the client are passive automatons awaiting guidance of the Holy Spirit – each have their own agency. The therapeutic process should assist both therapists and clients to hear personally from the Holy Spirit's "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12) and to energize the human agency in applying it to their multi-faceted lives.

This was different from what Peter experienced. In his case, a more appropriate therapeutic approach would have assisted him to explore the reasons why he sought for and accepted "prayer" and to analyse his own agency in his faith journey. While a therapist may have suspected that "pride" was the "cause of the darkness", those impressions should have been held back because they could have been just plain wrong. Instead of bluntly sharing God's revelation about "the darkness coming from a demon of pride", a more appropriate process would have been to say "Tell me about the darkness". As it was, the linkage between Peter's darkness and his pride was immediately placed within a narrative developed by the therapist's perception of "God's voice". This prevented her from assisting Peter to strengthen his own search for the causes of his darkness or to assist him in reaching for the light. Follow-up

questions like: "Where do you think the darkness may have come from?" and "Are there any sources of light?" may have been more appropriate but she appeared to be more comfortable with her standard practice of providing a mystical message that gave her greater control rather than allowing for less familiar aspects to emerge from the encounter.

Any prayer should have increased rather than diminished Peter's agency and a more open-ended and personal approach is in line with Christian theology. The work of the Holy Spirit is "person-centred" as opposed to the Accuser's (Revelation 21:10). The Accuser's voice is harsh, generalising, condemning, and repetitious so that no amount of repentance and confession seems to relieve guilt – much like Peter's therapy sessions where the therapist bluntly suggested that he was overtaken by a demon, was a person condemned by his pride which could only be relieved by repeated repentance and confession. In contrast, Holy Spirit's voice is directed toward our human agency – a gentle "still, small voice" that is specific and directed towards the particular while building our confidence and faith and is only repeated when necessary.

The voice of the Holy Spirit is heard by both clients and therapists. Peter's subsequent soul-searching revealed that recent harsh experiences had crushed him and his soul required building up more than waiting for a therapist's "word from God" to search for a "demon of pride". He became aware that he was looking for "easy fixes" through a prayer from a parent figure to rebuild his confidence and that this would have damaged him in the long run if he had continued with her. The Holy Spirit also speaks to us as therapists. We may make mistakes in our sessions and reach impasses with our clients – at which time the Holy Spirit's response to our silent prayer may be to gently reveal our points of error and suggest other approaches. This contrasts with Peter's therapist. She may have been well-intentioned in her ministry but also unwitting in her descent into "mind reform" because she

may not have allowed the Holy Spirit to speak to her about her own activities. Human agency of both client and therapist in spiritual counselling should avoid therapeutic practices that increase "passivity that endangers the soul".

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