

Basic Issues in Christian Counseling

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Introduction

In the following article I'd like to touch on three issues related to Christian counseling. The first clarifies some of the differences between those who call themselves biblical counselors and those who call themselves Christian counselors. The second is the question of whether a Christian who is living a life of faith and not involved in sin should ever need counseling. The third is an examination of some of the reasons that Christians seek counseling.

Biblical Counselors and Christian Counselors

There is a controversy within the field of Christian counseling between those who call themselves biblical counselors versus those who call themselves Christian counselors. Those who call themselves Biblical counselors, such as Jay Adams and those who follow his teaching, often assert that our only textbook for counseling should be the Bible. Christian counselors, in contrast, often believe that secular psychology has discovered some valid insights, and these can be integrated into the counseling process as long as they are compatible with Scripture.

Those who call themselves biblical counselors often assert that the main cause of emotional difficulties is personal sin, and that the primary purpose of counseling is to identify that sin and exhort the counselee to acknowledge it, confess it, and turn from it. Christian counselors often assert that problems come from a variety of sources. Personal sin is one source, but not the only source.

Those who call themselves biblical counselors often hold up a stereotype of counseling as involving people lying on a couch talking about themselves for years, with little concern for translating their insights into action, or concern about the impact of their behavior and decisions on anyone else. Christian counselors agree that therapy has sometimes been done that way in the past, but that that stereotype is not an accurate picture of what Christian counseling can be and usually is today. Good Christian counseling encourages clients to consider both their own needs *and* the needs of those around them, and it encourages them to translate the insights they have gained in counseling into action.

A Definition/Description of Christian Counseling

Christian counseling is a process in which a counselor creates an environment where another person, the client, feels safe discussing their struggles, including the areas where they feel they are failing to live the Christian life, without fear of being judged or rejected.

It is a process that often stays focused on the present, but when it seems helpful, may involve examining the past to understand how a person developed the thoughts, feelings, and behavior he or she presently expresses.

It often focuses on *conscious* thoughts and feelings, but also recognizes that sometimes we do things for reasons which we do not fully understand and that we are sometimes unaware of our true motivations (cf. Prov. 30:12, Jer. 17:9-10, Matt. 7:22-23, Rom. 1:18-25, Ja. 1:23-26, 1 Jn. 1:8-10, Rev. 3:17). It therefore sees value in sometimes helping people understand what lies below the level of conscious awareness.

Two Biblical Concerns about Christian Counseling

But some might ask, Doesn't the Bible prohibit introspection that involves looking at the past? Two verses frequently come to mind in this regard. One is Philippians 3: 13b-14, which says: "*Brothers . . . one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which Go has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*"

On the face of it, one could interpret this passage as saying we shouldn't examine or focus on the past in counseling. In context, what does Paul mean when he says "Forgetting what is behind . . .?"

This is probably a reference to Paul's Jewish lineage and his behavior before salvation. Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews (vs. 5). Before meeting Christ Paul had ambitiously attempted to earn salvation through the works of the law (vs. 6). This is what Paul says he was "forgetting." Paul is not talking about examining one's life as a means of understanding oneself and understanding how one could grow, but about forgetting legalistic past accomplishments and reasons for feeling self-righteous. Many times Christians come to counseling precisely because they know they are not responding in a biblical manner to a situation or a person. They want to stop, but do not know how. The above verse is certainly not a prohibition against this kind of self-examination.

Another passage that has seemed to some to prohibit self-examination in counseling is found in Luke 9:62, where Jesus says: "*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.*"

In this passage (vs. 57-62) Jesus is stressing the radical nature of his call. He will only remain on earth a short time longer. Depending on exactly when this conversation took place, he had only a few weeks to a few months until his crucifixion. Those who wished to become his disciples must be willing to give up everything immediately in order to follow him.

"*Putting one's hand to the plow and looking back*" meant to follow Christ with half one's heart, but to continue to be thinking about earthly activities with the other half. It is a prohibition against divided loyalties. It is not a prohibition against examining our past to understand why we behave the way we do. Thus we see that neither of these passages, interpreted in context, prohibit one from being involved in counseling. On the contrary, there are a number of passages that should encourage us that accepting counsel is a wise and Scriptural thing to do, provided that we choose counselors who provide counsel in keeping with God's principles, and that the person who shuns ever receiving counsel is acting unwisely.

For example, God says in Prov 13:1 "*A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.*" Later in that chapter He says: "*Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice*" (vs. 10). A few chapters later God says: "*Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed*" (15:22). Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are called counselors (Isaiah 9:6, John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7). Thus there is certainly nothing unbiblical about receiving counsel. On the contrary, it is unbiblical to believe we are so wise that we never need the insights of others.

Why Do Committed Christians Sometimes Need Counseling?

There is a third set of attitudes that prevent some Christians from feeling comfortable asking for counseling. Those beliefs are that the committed Christian has all his or her needs met in Christ. To need counseling means either that (a) the person is sinning, (b) the person is lacking in faith, or (c) the person must be a weak person intellectually or emotionally.

Occasionally people do come to a Christian counselor for one of the above reasons, i.e., they are sinning, or they are having trouble trusting, or they have a low stress threshold. But the majority of Christians who come for counseling are not sinning any more than the rest of us—many of them are living exceptionally moral lives. Second, most of them are not weak in their faith—many have a faith and trust in the Lord which is as strong as yours and mine. Third, many are very strong people, both intellectually and emotionally, but are facing very difficult situations.

Why then, do sometimes even committed Christians need counseling. Let me suggest ten common reasons:

1. *Because they need information they could not readily gain on their own.* One example of this kind of situation involves deciding on a career. One way of conceptualizing a satisfying career choice is the theory that a good career fit depends on finding the intersection of one's abilities, interests, personality needs and values. That is, for a career to be fulfilling for people it must be something

that they have the ability to do well, involves activities that they intrinsically enjoy, is consistent with their particular pattern of personality needs, and is compatible with their values. The average high school junior or senior (or adult for that matter) is not aware that these components are necessary in making a good career choice, nor are they aware of how to obtain this kind of information about themselves. Counseling can help them obtain the information they are lacking.

2. *Because they are facing a crisis situation for which life does not usually prepare them.* Christians today often face problems for which life does not usually prepare them, and for which the Bible does not give specific answers. For example, they may be confronted with a family member who begins abusing drugs or alcohol. Or they may be faced with a family member who begins acting in very uncharacteristic ways because of a mental or physical illness.
3. *Because some psychological problems are caused by chemical imbalances in the body and have little to do with our spiritual state.* We all live in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7), and our bodies sometimes suffer from genetic and chemical imbalances just as do all human beings. Examples of genetically- or biochemically caused emotional problems which some Christians struggle with include some forms of depression, agoraphobia, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADHD, learning disabilities, mental retardation, schizophrenia, and bipolar illness.
4. *Because of the sin of others.* If there is a sin problem that causes people to come for counseling, very frequently the major culprit is the sin of others rather than personal sin. Two examples, of which many more could be given, illustrate this. One woman who came to see me for depression and frustration was the wife of a highly respected church leader. Whenever they had a difference of opinion, he was right and she was wrong. A second was the wife of a very respected and wealthy Christian businessman, who was now on his 12th or 13th affair. In these cases, and in many others, sin caused the need for counseling, but often it is the sin of others, and not necessarily the client's personal sin.
5. *Because of emotional difficulties that are caused by unrealistic expectations.* Sometimes we have expectations that are unrealistic, and when these are not met, it often causes dissatisfaction or frustration. For example, I remember counseling a husband who expected his wife to be as focused on meeting his needs then as she was before the birth of their first child. I have counseled many couples where one or both expected to feel the same intensity of romantic love several years after marriage that they felt while dating. Often through counseling we can recognize that some of our expectations are unrealistic, and we can exchange them for more realistic ones.
6. *Because of lack of awareness of our feelings or expectations, resulting in a consequent inability to discuss them with our partner.* We may be trained from an early age not to be in touch with certain feelings such as anger. Consequently we may act out those feelings, causing problems in our relationships, without necessarily being aware that we are feeling them. Similarly, we may be unaware of our expectations and may become frustrated when they are not met. Only by becoming consciously aware of them and articulating them can we examine whether they are realistic or unrealistic, overly self-centered, etc. We can often gain these kinds of awarenesses through counseling.
7. *Because of lack of awareness of communication skills, causing us not to be able to communicate about troublesome issues in a caring way.* Although communication skills training is beginning in a few high school settings now, the vast majority of us have never learned good communication and listening skills within our families or through the educational process. For example, most of us, when discussing an emotional issue, listen to our partner during the first half of what they say, then

prepare our rebuttal during the second half, rather than listening to our partner all the way through. Many of us, if we disagree with what our partner is saying, allow verbal or nonverbal behavior to slip out that says to them that we think their point(s) are invalid. Many of us, when our partner brings up one issue about which they're dissatisfied, will bring up an issue about which we're dissatisfied, virtually guaranteeing that neither one will be resolved. Counseling can help us learn better communication and listening skills.

8. *Because of lack of awareness of appropriate conflict-resolution skills.* Resolving disagreements in a way that is satisfying to both people (or to a family), involves a second set of skills that build on communication skills—namely, conflict-resolution skills. Most marriage partners unconsciously enter disagreements with the idea that either I win, you lose, or You win, I lose. We need to learn a number of ways to develop workable compromises, where both people end up winning. Christian counselors can help couples develop awareness of the variety of workable compromises available, and help them learn to use them.
9. *Because the effects of past traumas make it impossible to respond freely in the present.* I remember one man, who as a child was raised by a dominating, manipulative mother. Whenever his wife voiced an expectation (even when it was a reasonable one raised in a tactful way), he immediately viewed it as an attempt to control him, and responded with irritation and rebellion. Another example was a young woman, who was raised by a domineering, abusive father. She now had difficulty trusting God the Father. Counseling can often help persons work through the effects of their past, so that they can respond more freely and healthily to other people and to God in the present.
10. *Because of habitual thought processes that occur below the level of conscious awareness.* In his *Institute of Basic Youth Conflicts* Bill Gothard tells of a well-respected Christian businessman who, on a rainy night, hit a child on a bicycle and killed him. Panicking, he drove away. However, his conscience gave him no rest, and a day or two later he confessed to the police. Eventually he came to trial, and the judge, in an attempt to make a lesson about hit-and-run drivers, gave him a severe sentence. The Christian man had a conversation with someone while in jail, who asked him to explain why he had left the scene rather than attempting to get aid (it had been an accident, and the judge indicated that if he had immediately sought help for the boy, there probably would have been no jail sentence). The man recognized, through the conversation, that as a child he started the habit of running away when he made a mistake, and he had continued this pattern throughout adulthood and on the fateful night of the accident. Counseling can help us become aware of habitual thought processes that often occur below the level of conscious awareness. By becoming aware of them, we are able to decide whether those processes are healthy and biblical, or whether they need to be exchanged for new ones.

Concluding Remarks

This article has reviewed several of the reasons that cause Christians to feel uncomfortable seeking counseling. It is my hope that the above shows that there are no biblical passages which, when correctly interpreted, prohibit counseling, and that there are several passages that indicate that it is only a fool who thinks he or she is so wise that there is never a need to seek insights from others. There are many reasons even committed Christians sometimes seek counseling, and such efforts do not indicate that one is sinning, or has weak faith, or is emotionally weak.