

What makes Christian Counseling Christian?

A Primer on the Integration of Christianity and Psychology

The idea of integrating Christianity and psychology is not a new phenomenon; soul-care was a central mission of the Christian church long before the advent of modern counseling.¹ In fact, the concepts found in many modern applications of counseling were articulated in early church fathers' writings on the subject of pastoral care.²

Following decades of antireligious psychologists and anti-psychology religious leaders tearing apart the disciplines of theology and psychology, great progress has been made in reuniting them.³ Many of the founding fathers of psychology were hostile to Christianity; Freud argued that all religious ideas are rooted in wishes and illusions.⁴ Others believe that the Bible is the lone authority and to investigate professional counseling is to compromise biblical authority.⁵ A more balanced view is one that recognizes the independent validity of each source of knowledge and is able to integrate them in a responsible manner.⁶

One's perspective on counseling is dependent upon one's value system.⁷ Value systems include not only theological foundations, but psychological foundations as well. A beautiful home cannot be constructed without an adequate foundation. Likewise, a good counselor needs to have adequate foundations in both worldview and theoretical orientation.⁸ Good practice is preceded by good theory. For the Christian counselor, good theory is built upon good theology; it must be with extreme caution then that secular

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conclusions be accepted into Christian thinking.⁹

Christian counseling has been defined as the integration of theology and psychology into a workable counseling model.¹⁰ Many of the techniques developed by secular theorists and practitioners are the same techniques used by those practicing Christian counseling.

The distinctions that separate Christian counselors from their secular counterparts include unique assumptions concerning the attributes of God, the nature of human beings, the authority of Scripture, the reality of sin, the forgiveness of God, and hope for the future. Christian counselors have unique goals related to spiritual growth. They have unique methods that are consistent with biblical teachings such as prayer, Scripture reading, confrontation with Christian truths, and encouraging church participation. Christian counselors demonstrate unique characteristics to include a deep commitment to Spirit-filled servanthood, a dedication of God-given abilities and a desire to help others in their move toward personal wholeness, interpersonal competence, mental stability, and spiritual maturity.¹¹

Christianity provides a basic framework that reminds each person that they are precious to God and have innumerable value.¹² In a Christian worldview, people have value; they have value as God's creation; value as being created in the image of God; and value because God sent His Son to die for the redemption of His people.¹³ It is the Christian assertion that humans are created in the image of God that serves as the basis for human dignity.¹⁴

The Bible is the primary source for all meaning and purpose and that it is the guidebook given by God so that believers may live happy lives in communion with Him¹⁵ but it is not God's sole revelation.¹⁶

It is not unfaithful to God's Word to expand knowledge and understanding.¹⁷ Christian counseling affirms the Bible as the sourcebook for revelation and relationship and, as an extension, as the guidebook for treatment.¹⁸ While not claiming to be a textbook on psychology, the Bible does address issues pertaining to loneliness, discouragement, relational conflict, grief, anger, fear and a variety of other issues often addressed in counseling.¹⁹

The concept of integration appears most consistent with the theological methodology of John Wesley.²⁰ Wesley's quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience lends to the idea that psychological data and theory, as a function of both reason and experience, should be integrated into the preeminent theological content, Scripture.

Counselors who are committed Christians are going to have fundamentally Christian views of persons, conceptualization about the cause of problems, goals for therapy and techniques to facilitate change.²¹ Christian counseling can only be practiced by counselors "who have a personal relationship with God" and "have received Jesus Christ into their lives and are now children of God."²²

Helping others is not an option according to Scripture. Rather, it is the responsibility of every believer.²³ Christian counseling is built upon the guiding principle of helping people to "recognize, understand, and solve problems in accordance with the Word of God."²⁴ The claims of the gospel are all-encompassing and should penetrate into every area of a Christian's life, vocation included.²⁵ There are those who believe that all Christian counselors have a mission to evangelize.²⁶ Christians such as Jay Adams and his biblical counseling model emphasize that unconfessed sin is the reason for psychological troubles and that God's Word provides the all truth necessary to resolve those troubles²⁷ and, further, that their view is the only one that is truly biblical.²⁸

Psychology and theology have a common primary concern: human nature and functioning.²⁹ For the Christian counselor, the question is not whether or not psychology can be related to Christian faith, but how.³⁰ A value-free approach to psychotherapy is impossible; psychology and counseling take place, not in a vacuum, but in the context of the counselor's worldview – and the counselee's worldview.³¹

There are mental disorders that appear to be more spiritual in nature than the secular community believes; yet there are also some mental disorders that Christians attribute to spiritual causes that are not so.³² Confrontation armed with Scripture is certainly not the only way to address psychological issues for not every psychological problem comes directly from the sins of the one experiencing the problem.³³

Wrong actions come from a deeper problem. Specifically illustrative is the concept of cleaning the outside of a cup; if a cup is cleaned on the outside while the inside is ignored, it remains dirty.³⁴ If it is washed inside-out, then real cleansing has occurred. Actions reveal what is in the heart. It is not behavior that should first be addressed; rather it should be that the inner life of the soul is transformed.

Still others become lazy in their fulfillment of living out their calling. Rather than working diligently in the tasks before them, they begin to give up on the genuine pursuit to which they have been called and begin to live a lethargic existence in which their primary motivation is to escape work. When people fall into this trap of slothfulness they often do not enjoy their work or their personal lives.³⁵

Moral failures, financial abuses, or the general similarity between Christians and non-Christians is rooted in the lack of biblical discipleship.³⁶ One barrier to discipleship is what appears to be a lack of confidence that Jesus is indeed Master of the Universe. It is not so much which beliefs need to be challenged and changed as it is this foundational fact that God must be real, the official reality.

A key component to counseling is the education of clients, helping them to understand their vulnerability and their need for appropriate self-care.³⁷ The goal of counseling should be to help others to feel that they are worthwhile, both to themselves and to others.³⁸ Faith in God is vital to successfully overcoming.³⁹ Healing is found in connecting.⁴⁰ Connecting is found in community.⁴¹

To deny that salvation is relevant only to life-after-death is to put forth a belief in sin-management rather than a new birth. Human approval cannot be the aim. Just the opposite; the aim must be to treasure God. Contrary to common perception, the laying up of treasures is not something to be collected after the return of Christ; this treasure is available now. Believers can rest on the promise of Psalm 34:19, “many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers from them all.”

The use of “religious and spiritual beliefs can be very important in helping people find meaning and direction in their lives and maintain appropriate self-esteem.^{42”} Mainstream counseling strategies and approaches are appropriate, provided that they are framed in a manner consistent with spiritual beliefs and

do not undermine biblical teaching.⁴³ Every system of counseling has the goal of greater health and functioning of the individual but with differing perspectives.⁴⁴ Spiritual and psychological health requires a confident sense of self, an awareness of need and limitations, and confiding interpersonal relationships.⁴⁵

It is not the theory that is important so much as it is the genuineness and warmth demonstrated by the counselor.⁴⁶ A Christian counselor must be characterized as “a deeply committed, Spirit guided (and Spirit filled) servant of Jesus Christ who applies his or her God-given abilities, skills, training, knowledge, and insights to the task of helping others.⁴⁷”

Theological competence as counselors determines the ability to accurately articulate the character of God to those being served with the goal of establishing the significance of His character in meeting people’s deepest needs and expanding their hope for ultimate transformation.⁴⁸

The integration of Christianity and psychology must be implemented in a manner that is “eschatological, culturally sensitive, outreach oriented, and Spirit led.⁴⁹” Even the best Christian programs cannot set anyone free; only Christ can set free.⁵⁰ Truth comes from God; the key to effective integration is to recognize the difference between facts and interpretation of facts in relation to God’s Word, the Bible and God’s Work, His created order.⁵¹ 🙏

endnotes

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