

What Makes Counseling 'Christian' ?

Since about 1990, I have known a number of Christians who have taken on the role of counselor very well, offering life-giving wisdom and direction for wounded people in search of healing and joy in life. Their counsel is grace-filled, loving, and patient, as well as helpful in terms of assisting broken people in both understanding the underlying causes for their distress and in engaging with God in ways that actually transform their lives. I myself have benefited from such counsel and have extended that kind of aid to others. In many cases the level of recovery is astonishing – and clearly miraculous.

On the other hand, I have also witnessed a whole host of advice from laypersons and professionals alike, given in the name of Christian (or Biblical) counseling, that might better be called a form of soul murder. I know those are harsh words. Yet they may not go far enough. Much of what masquerades as Christian counsel is neither Christian nor sound counsel, but is rather nothing short of Pharisaical condemnation and judgmentalism that destroys rather than builds up another. Certain Christian circles have long been known for their practice of "shooting their wounded." Unfortunately, many of these practices have made it into the world of Christian counseling.

Attempting to quantify toxic practices among Christians is not an easy task. This article will by no means be exhaustive and perhaps may not be balanced. Again, let me state that there are many counselors who are doing wonderful work, and this is not intended to be a blanket statement regarding the current state of Christian counseling. I am pointing this out because those who are doing good work are well aware that they spend a considerable amount of their time cleaning up the wake left by other well-meaning but poorly trained, mistaken counselors. It is not unusual for the damage from counseling to be almost as bad as the wounds left by perpetrators of abuse. So this paper may need to be amended from time to time, but I will attempt to identify some of these mistaken practices and go on to spell out a few characteristics of true Christian help.

First, some counselors seem to accept as an underlying premise that it is illegitimate for Christians to get stuck in emotional pain or any persistent self-destructive behavior. In the mind of the counselor, a wounded person is either holding on to some sin, groveling in self-pity, refusing to forgive someone, or is perhaps emotionally or spiritually lazy or uncommitted. In short, they look for how the hurting person is responsible for their own pain. From the counselor's perspective, there is a choice that is being avoided, a sin that is unconfessed, some person who is unforgiven, or some other failure on the part of the hurting person. If a Christian is living in pain, it must be their own fault. In a picture, this would be like a doctor chastising his patient for having fallen off a roof on the basis that if he had been more careful his leg would not be fractured. And why did he come to the doctor anyway, when what he really needs to do is walk around like a normal person?

In many instances, this premise may be underwritten by an even more basic view of spiritual life that understands the Christian experience as primarily one of commitment to obedience, for which the best support is accountability to others. This treads on a major problem that has plagued Christianity from the beginning: a legalistic dependence on self-effort to live up to the standards in the Bible. I have written extensively on the problem of obedience elsewhere, so I will not try to repeat it all here. But the basic

problem is that (despite professions regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit) what many Christians engage in from a practical perspective is an attempt to live up to biblical principles through a combination of education and motivation to make good choices through sheer willpower and the social pressure to conform to those standards. Consequently, any failure or weakness is deemed to be a failure of the will, which translates into a moral issue and sin that needs to be addressed. Such a perspective would explain why a counselor would essentially "blame the victim" for their problems

A close corollary of the above issues is the mistaken idea that painful emotions are expressions of a person's sinful nature, and that Christians ought not express such things. Emotions, by and large, are regarded as things that need to be restrained or repressed; vestiges of a fallen nature that should be overridden at all costs. In extreme cases, this theory of human nature rejects what we now know about attachment and our need for nurturing relationships in order to be whole. Thus, there may be little if any empathy or any effort on the part of the counselor to grasp the nature of a person's distress. They simply want it to stop. And if the person they are ministering to would just get right with God and stop whining, they could marshal their will and make it stop – like a good Christian should.

In truth, this is an assault on the human soul. It is a denial of God's character, to love and restore with grace. It is a refusal to believe that Christians are promised a rich emotional life, with God and one another. Above all, it is totally mistaken in its insistence that issues of the heart can be resolved in the will, or that the Christian life is primarily about performing a certain way.

Please do not misread me. I am not advocating being "soft on sin," nor am I guilty of some other similar charge that is often made by these counselors. Such charges come from a very black and white view of life, without any regard for the possibility that there might be other alternatives that have never occurred to them – which is in fact the case.

There truly are so many aspects that are missing from this paradigm that it is hard to know where to begin. First, their basic view of the Christian life is totally mistaken. What many Christians do not know today is that the Christian life is primarily the process of building a working relationship with God. And the reason they do not understand that phrase (or believe they do when they do not) is because they have never been mentored in what that means. Relationship with God is not an ethical lifestyle or a set of doctrines. It is a walking, talking, relating, experienced engagement with God that is tangible, not just theoretical.

What's more, it is our experience of God that restores our life and ministers to our soul – not our efforts to be good, not our pure doctrines, not our strong will. As we learn how to allow God to speak into our life, our wounds are healed, our self-hate is destroyed, our gratitude and joy increases, and our desire to be like our Father becomes the dominant force drawing us ever closer to Him for life. Once we discover how to live this way, our self-destructive patterns begin to dry up and blow away as if they were weeds deprived of water. We do not have to keep beating down the sinful desires in our life because instead they die from having the roots cut off by the very words of God in our heart. We do not have to "buck up" and look like a happy Christian when we are in pain, because the comfort of God is tangible and real and restores us to the joy we have in Him.

These are the premises of true Christian counsel. Rather than looking for a place to pounce on the person's failures, we hold them in their distress and show them how to be with God and to hear Him speak

into their darkness. And then we sing with them when they hear His voice, and we rejoice with them as they find joy, and we celebrate with them when they are set free. And when we have done well, they leave not only healed of their pain, but in touch with God for the rest of their lives.

Instead of trying to coerce people into white-knuckling their way to "proper Christian behavior," we nurture and mentor their relationship to God until it becomes functional enough to change their lives. Instead of blaming them for getting into their mess or for not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, we listen to their story, we feel their distress, and we show them the path that leads to life.

True Christian counseling comes out of a person who knows how God transforms lives, because they live there all the time themselves, being healed and mentored by God Himself. It is not enough to have a good understanding of Christian ethics. And ethics used illegitimately can be as wicked and harmful as the original violations endured by those who come for help. My deepest prayer for those who do not know by personal experience how God changes lives, is for them to encounter the living God in truth and love and to be changed by that encounter. Then they will know what they cannot know in theory alone, and only then will they be of good to another who is in pain. The only way a person can persist in such overtly harsh counseling practices is if they have very little if any practical grasp themselves of how God actually changes lives by grace.

Our ministry to the wounded is then primarily about helping them engage with God, and helping them with any barriers they may have to engaging well. We leave most of the healing work up to God, while being present with the person and walking with them through that process. The fundamental difference between counseling that is Christian and this moralistic ideology that claims to be Christian is that the faulty approach is rooted in distorted beliefs about the causes of pain and the means for recovery, while the other is deeply dependent upon God for the life we cannot find on our own.

I realize that there will be counselors who take offense at what I have said here and will disagree strongly. For them I can only pray – I have no other response. For those counselors who have wondered about their approach and for those in need of help who have experienced the painful methods I have described here, let me assure you that graceful, life-giving help does indeed exist, and that God is far more eager to help those in need than we might imagine. "Let those who have ears to hear, hear."

For further study regarding the dangers of misguided spiritual counsel, see:

David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen: ***The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse***

For further study on presuppositions every Christian counselor needs to know, see:

Karl Lehman: ***Outsmarting Yourself: Catching Your Past Invading the Present and What to Do About It***