

‘Counseling’ - Psychology, ‘Christian’ or Biblical?

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by

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Many large churches today have psychologists or trained ‘Christian counselors’ on staff. Pastors often also outsource people to professional counselors. True ‘Biblical counseling’ is today almost rare. Perhaps this is because the idea of ‘Sola Scriptura’ (‘scripture alone’ is sufficient for doctrine and the spiritual life) is a rarity indeed.

It is not uncommon today to see those who profess to be Biblical Christians, run to secular psychologists for help with life’s problems. This might beg the question - is the Word of God insufficient to address these problems?

One arguably needs to grant the fact that psychiatrists (as distinct from psychologists) can be useful in prescribing some medications for serious mental disorders. The brain is in many respects similar to other organs of the body in that it can malfunction and render some people mentally ineffective and even in danger of harm without some medication or supervision. Little is really known about the many malfunctions of the brain. Some problems can also be directly caused by physical issues and so initially a full medical check is wise.

However, often today I see Christians too easily take medications for depression, anxiety and other problems and difficulties in life, without first attempting counseling from God’s Word and allowing for spiritual growth. Many problems can also be traced quickly to clear stressors and resolved with God’s Word, growth and applying changes against the stressors.

The Root Issue

However, this author is more concerned with a root cause of why churches are increasingly using psychology or ‘christian psychology’ to counsel God’s people. What is lacking in God’s Word that would necessitate such relatively new forms of counseling - forms that use the wisdom and methods taken directly from the world? What should we think of the relatively new integrated forms of psychology, today called ‘Christian counseling’.

Arguably one can understand non Christians using the services of psychologists in attempting to solve life’s problems. Non Christians cannot understand the things of the Spirit (Rom.9:7; 1Cor.2:14). They rather need the Gospel first to open their enslaved hearts to be able to be counseled by the Word of God. But what of professing Christians needing such counseling? Is not the Word of God sufficient to speak to, correct, strengthen and counsel the mind and heart of a believer? Was Paul correct when he advised Timothy: *‘And that from a child you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works’* (2Tim.3:15-17).

Is ‘*all scripture*’ sufficient to make us ‘*wise*’ unto ‘*salvation*’ which includes the Sanctification of our souls? Is it all ‘*profitable*’ for ‘*correction, instruction in righteousness*’? What is ‘*counseling*’ but this? Is the ‘*all scripture*’ not enough to be ‘*perfect*’ (the Greek word ‘*artios*’ here meaning ‘capable, complete, proficient’ or, as Arndt and Gingrich sum it up, ‘able to meet all demands’). Paul teaches the Scriptures have the power to perfectly fit out the man of God for his task. Paul continues with the words ‘*thoroughly furnished*’ - the second word here is the intensive ‘*exartizo*’ meaning ‘equipped’. In the pages of scripture are stowed every principle we might ever need to perform any task God requires!

True, the scriptures are not a textbook for mechanical engineering. But they are entirely adequate as the textbook *for living*, and for *changing* our living to conform to God’s requirements - i.e. ‘*every good work*’. Did the church have to wait for over 1,900 years until Freud’s ‘psychology’ to perform this?

‘Counseling’

The term ‘counseling’ has often come to mean to refer to specially trained persons called ‘counselors’ who resolve issues to do with the soul. Yet the ‘counselor’ is not mentioned as one of the gifts to the church as is ‘evangelists’ and ‘teachers’ (Eph.4:11). There is no designated position of ‘counselor’ in the local church for the ‘*perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*’ (vs.12). If ‘counseling’ is to be a position or a gifting then why is it so much today taken *out* of the local church?

‘Counseling’ is surely as broad as discipling, teaching, encouraging, exhorting, correcting one another in the faith. Believers are called to comfort (1Thess.5:11), instruct (2Tim.2:24-26), edify (Rom.14:19), admonish (Rom.15:14), forgive (Ephes.4:32), and restore (Gal.6:1) one another. However, the only one who can see inside a person, and therefore be his real ‘counselor’, is the Lord Himself!

All Christians can have some part to play in ‘counseling’ others, in that the scriptures can be used to correct and encourage each other. All those who work in church ministries dealing with peoples lives should be counseling others where the need arises. *Biblical counseling is as wide and as simple as bringing to attention the Scriptures*. Preachers counsel every time they get in the pulpit. Pastoring elders counsel every time they shepherd, preach, teach and visit people in need. Parents counsel every time they parent, raise and correct their children. All Christians may use the scriptures to counsel others. *This wider understanding of ‘counseling’ has been largely lost today* and the term seems to be confined to those who are ‘trained’ and specialise in some way. No doubt some will have giftings in this area more than others. But *all* Christians should be ready to ‘counsel’ and build one another up in the faith.

Sadly too the understanding of ‘counseling’ today is that ‘counselees’ are ‘victims’ and there is ‘abuse’ from circumstances...often in the *deep past*. Yet the Bible calls our past *sinful*. *‘And you has he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins: Wherein in time past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath...’* (Eph.2:1-3).

‘Counseling’ today is usually expected to be many hours where the ‘counsellor’ does much listening to a ‘counselee’. Other people involved are often kept out of the counseling events. The counselee is often seen as a victim of circumstances and environment. In much of Christian counseling today sin is simply not addressed. Sin and its effects are renamed as abuse, sickness, poor parenting, etc. Words like ‘sin’, ‘sinner’, ‘sinful’ are simply not used. Yet that is where the root of all our problems lie - whether it be our personal sins or the sins of others and our sinful reactions to them. We live in a sinful world and inside tents of flesh which we have to contend with. The Word of God is our most powerful weapon in this spiritual warfare. It alone is the ‘double edged sword’.

Psychology

Psychology has run rampant through the modern church in preaching, doctrine and counseling. Yet no psychological theory has ever been invented by a Christian. Freud, Rogers, Maslow, and Jung were all God haters and anti Christian. This root is often ignored by Christian counselors who believe the world has something to offer in it’s wisdom. An ex psychologist once declared to this author *‘Psychology is the western world’s disguise for spirituality. Psychology is the best the world has to offer’*. (1) Psychology is humanistic at its core. Pagan roots must produce pagan fruits (Matt.7:15-20).

None of the hundreds of psychotherapies and systems of psychology recognise God’s law, sin, repentance, justification and sanctification. Psychology is really an alternative religion of the world when *it claims to deal with the psyche or soul*. But for a Christian this intrudes into an area in which the Bible claims to be the sole teacher! God claims that His Word divides between the soul and the spirit and shows the very intents of our heart. *‘For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do’* (Heb.4:12,13). This ‘word’ cuts between our spirit and soul and shows us what is in our heart. But it is only the Spirit that can do this. *That Spirit*

will not use the wisdom of the world! God is a Spirit and *‘he must be worshipped in spirit and in truth’* (Jn.4:24). And *the truth is in the Word* (Jn.17:17)!

The fruit of psychology is evident. Why did psychologists and psychiatrists at one time have the highest percentage of any profession who were under the care of counselors, even committing suicide, divorcing and needing medication. They themselves are as much in need of the great counselor and his ‘counsel’?

Psychology may well have ‘bandaid’ techniques for making counselees feel good about themselves. But for Christians the issue of sin and how we view ourselves in the sight of a holy God must be addressed *if the soul is to be further sanctified*. The problem for the Christians using psychology is that there is only ONE method by which the soul can be increased in the Spirit’s work of growth in sanctification - and that is *‘truth’*. That *‘truth’* God says is only found in his revealed Word - *‘Sanctify them through your truth: your word is truth’* (Jn.17:17). According to the Word of God *Christians will NOT grow by psychological counseling methods!* Behaviours may be stemmed for a time but God says *only His truth sanctifies a person*. Psychology may give sympathetic ears, feel good sayings and techniques to help with lusts and addictions. But unless the Christian is understanding of what the will of God is in any situation, these measures are really only *the wisdom of the world*.

I have seen countless professing Christians run to and fro to psychologists and problems are either pushed under a layer of blame elsewhere or the problems keep coming back in differing forms. Christians must go to the One who bought their souls with a great sacrifice and left us his final revelation - the Lord Jesus Christ.

But in man’s wisdom, if psychology is non Christian, being invented by three men who were God haters, then we simply invent ‘Christian Psychology’!...

‘Christian Counseling’

By ‘christian counseling’ this author refers to the most common form of counseling seen in churches today - ‘christian psychology’ or other eclectic forms of counseling which mix the Bible with the wisdom from the world.

There is no founder for ‘Christian Psychology’ and Psychology textbooks do not accommodate ‘Christian Psychology’. Arguably it does not exist because the two systems are fundamentally opposed to each other on the issue of man and sin. Can this relatively new ‘Christian psychology’ really improve on God’s Word as counseling for the Christian soul? If so that would be to deny the all sufficiency of God and His Word in which he has *‘given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that has called us to glory and virtue’* (2Pet.1:3).

A former psychologist once said to this author: *‘Can you filter psychology through the Biblical net? I wish people did, because they’d find 100% of*

psychology would remain in the net'. (2) There may be some things in 'christian psychology' that are truth or even derived from the Bible. But the mixture may well be more dangerous than straight out psychology. The root of the problem is again in the view of, or the lack of, 'sola scriptura' and the all sufficiency of the Word of God. When counselors who use christian psychology speak of 'values', 'behavior', 'attitudes', 'relationships', and beliefs, they speak about things which the Bible already speaks to clearly and can be applied in obedience. Is not the Bible sufficient to address these issues?

'Christian Psychology' has a *low view or no view of sin*, partly because it has a *low view of scripture*. As one author stated: '*Christian Psychology*' as the term is used today is an oxymoron. The word psychology no longer speaks of studying the soul; instead it describes a diverse menagerie of therapies and theories that are fundamentally humanistic. The presuppositions and most of the doctrine of psychology cannot be successfully integrated with Christian truth. Moreover, the infusion of psychology into the teaching of the Church has blurred the line between behaviour modification and sanctification'. (3)

But doesn't 'Christian psychology' use the Bible? At times it may; but how do you integrate the theories of godless humanists with the Bible? What does the Bible say about the wisdom of the world of which psychology is its mentor? '*...Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?*' (1Cor.1:20)...'*Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches; comparing spiritual things with spiritual*' (2:13) '*...For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God...*' (3:19).

Did the church lack this new 'christian psychology' for 1,900 years? Did the Holy Spirit leave something out of God's Word that would speak to the downtrodden soul? What does the Bible mean when it claims that it has '*given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness*' (2Pet.1:3-11)?

Spiritual mixtures produce confusion and confusion brings division. The enemy has sown much false seed into the body of Christ (Matt.13:25). The apostle Paul dealt with a *mixture* of Judaism and the true faith. In the third century the church and state *mixed*, resulting in pagan Christianity and Roman Catholic paganistic traditions. The 20th Century saw new mixtures such as 'theistic evolution', 'Christian Rock music', 'spiritual drunkenness' and recently '*Christian psychology*'. These mixtures are 'leaven' in the lump of truth. The will of the Lord is our sanctification (1Thess.4:3) and this must be in the '*unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*' (1Cor.5:8)!

Many men come down from their pulpits and don an entirely different cap when they enter the counseling room. There they often settle for a process of change that produces only outward, social results. These preachers have been sold a bill of goods at seminaries and colleges, or in 'Christian' books that promote eclectic counseling theories and processes.

Biblical Counseling

The counselor's ministry is one not of reformation but of the Gospel, which is a *ministry of transformation by the Spirit*. The change a counselor seeks is in bringing the counselee *to hear what the Spirit is saying through the Word* and thus bring them closer to knowing what God desires in their life. In Scripture there is plenty of guidance and advice - just read Psalm 1 '*Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly...*' This goes on *in detail* to advise, warn and counsel the Christian. Our problem is not that we do not have what we need in the Bible, but that we do not have enough of the Bible in us! In 2Timothy 2:16,17 Paul says the scriptures are '*profitable*' for all that counseling has to offer '*in righteousness*' to be '*thoroughly furnished unto all good works*'.

Rather than know ourselves better, we all need to know God better. Rather than focusing on trying to discover our self-identity, we need to know Him who lives in us both to will and do His own good purpose. Anyone who has done much biblical counseling will know that *many people can hear the truth but not necessarily apply it*. The 'homework' of conviction, repentance and application is often lacking. The hindrances in counseling is often that the living powerful Word of God is not applied to the situation at hand. Hence some people will say '*I've tried that and it doesn't work*'. But is this God's fault and is God a liar? To the anxious, troubled, fearful and depressed, Paul joyfully declares that God '*always causes us to triumph in Christ*' (2Cor.2:14). Only an uncrucified self prevents that victory! Paul testifies, '*I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me...*' (Gal.2:20). Surely Christ who is '*our life*' (Col.3:4), needs no help with psychological counseling! The Biblical counselor is to be an expert in one thing only - in teaching counselees how to become more and more dependent on God and less and less dependent on anyone else, including the 'counselor'. Often too we 'counselors' do not allow for a persons problems to be changed with *spiritual growth and time*.

The biblical model is that we are in a fallen sinful world. God's Word must be applied. *Bringing conviction to counselees itself is a part of the ministry of the Word. The Word is ministered properly only when it is ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit with a view to bringing conviction*. The prophet Nathan did this when confronting David with his sin. Many counselors overlook this crucial factor. Preoccupied with problems on the *horizontal plane*, they ignore or forget that problems must first be settled on the *vertical*! Confession of sin and faults needs to release the counselee to more sanctification, calling on the Holy Spirit to convict and enlighten. '*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*' (James 5;16,17).

The Christian counselor is to *minister God's Word in a life-transforming way*, such that God Himself changes the counselee - *from the heart outward*!

Conclusion:

Compare the lives of past Christians who did not have psychology and ‘christian psychology’ with Christians today. Has there been any improvement due to these new wisdoms? The Bible is our instruction manual for living. Why should we turn to humanistic methods now? The Bible claims that it has ‘*given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness*’ (2Pet.1:3-11). Part of the problem today is that many professing Christians do not want to see themselves crucified in the flesh.

Christian psychology rests upon the claim that the Bible and the indwelling Christ are not sufficient. Yet one of Christ’s names is ‘counselor’ (Is.9:6). Could His counsel ever fail or be not quite sufficient?

Terry Arnold

- (1) *Diakrisis*, 1999 Sept/Oct, P.4 (Harley Hitchcock, former psychologist)
- (2) Ibid *Diakrisis*, 1999 June P.3
- (3) ‘*Our Sufficiency in Christ*’ by John MacArthur, P.59

About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication ‘*Diakrisis (Australia)*’.

His ministry includes preaching/teaching and conducting seminars and conferences in a wide range of churches and colleges.

TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book ‘*To Catholics Whom I Love*’ was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named ‘*Diakrisis (Australia)*’.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.