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Pastoral Counseling: Biblical Foundations and Framework



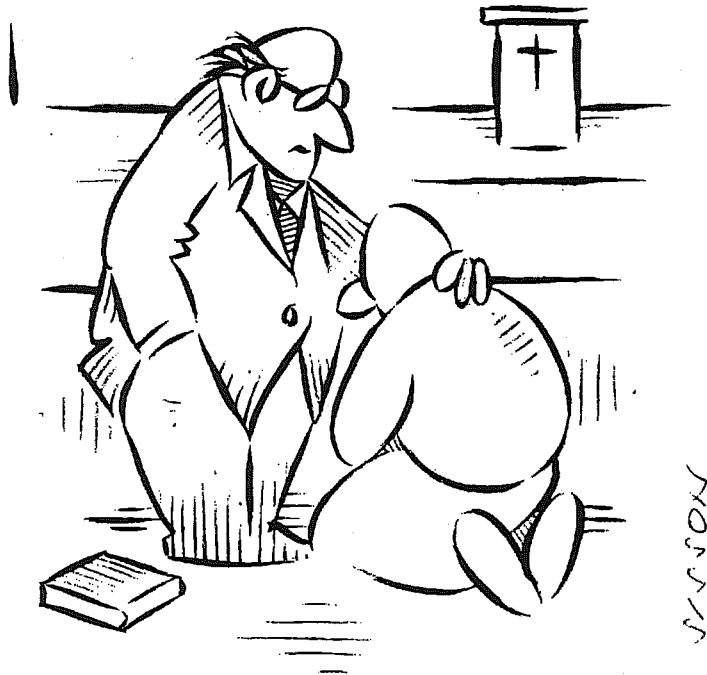
Noel Due

INTRODUCTION

Counseling is an accepted and ubiquitous part of the social landscape today, both within and outside of the Church. Its prevalence, necessity and effectiveness are often taken for granted, though much popular sentiment (which seems to treat it as a panacea) must be treated with caution.¹ Moreover, a plethora of counseling methodologies exists. Each one is built on its own core theoretical model, and each one expresses that model in attitudes, actions and assumptions that inform the counseling process.² The shape of therapy is as much governed by the assumptions of one's core model, as by its content.

In addition, there has been a long and ongoing debate, still unresolved, as to the relationship between counseling models developed in secular situations and those developed within a distinctively biblical framework.³ The spectrum ranges from complete isolation (rejecting any insights from secular psychology) to complete assimilation (where anything distinctively Christian is lost).⁴

Given all of this debate, however, the comment made by Jones and Butman over a decade ago still holds true. "The work of the church has suffered from those who promote either hastily 'baptized' versions of secular models or superficial



YOU WILL NEED TO REPENT OF YOUR SINS...
I HOPE THAT DOESN'T AFFECT YOU NEGATIVELY.

renderings of 'biblical' models." (1991, 23). They then point to the ongoing challenge "of developing the comprehensive Christian model we all so need."

The knack is not simply to identify biblical models without becoming reductionist, though this is important enough!⁵ It is to be sufficiently comprehensive in our approach to the Scriptures to build a view of human beings that is both theologically robust and pastorally thorough. This is a work that cannot be done alone, and this article is only one small contribution to the task.

My aim is to identify a number of areas in which we can and must engage in some meaningful biblical/theological reflection in order to ensure that our pastoral counseling ministries are neither uncritically adoptionist, nor unnecessarily reductionist. These questions are not to be answered in methodology, but in fundamental presuppositions. These are the sorts of building blocks we need to construct a properly comprehensive "core theoretical model," and represent my attempt to identify a number of key areas often neglected or under-emphasized in the literature on pastoral counseling. They make no reference to the integration/isolation debate *per se*. Rather, I believe that they will provide a stimulus to the theological reflection on our pastoral practice that is so needful, irrespective of the location we occupy along the spectrum.

In short, I am arguing that we need to ensure that we begin at the beginning and end at the end, so that we may more properly understand the middle—that is, the present in which our pastoral counseling theories are formulated and in which we function.

BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

Humanity *Coram Deo*

Who are we? Why are we here? What are we about? Why are we about these things and not others? What have we done? Why have we done it? What shall we do about it? How shall I deal with this particular problem? How shall I live in this relationship? What sense do I make of this tragedy? Questions like

these and a thousand others form the matrix of the counseling relationship and in some sense govern its purpose.

In view of the biblical framework of creation, redemption and glorification, such questions should never be considered as self-referential ones. Human beings cannot be understood by reference to human beings alone. The creation accounts leave us in no doubt that the only way in which human beings can be properly considered is as creatures *coram Deo*. This very simple and fundamental fact must inform all of our pastoral theology, though it has not always done so.⁶ In terms of biblical theology, there can be no conception of humanity *qua* humanity (or the creation *qua* creation). To attempt any analysis of humanity on the "horizontal" level is biblically unthinkable. From a biblical theology perspective, human beings stand in relation to God, no matter what their state, so that the totality of human life (even rebellious human life) can only be understood with reference to him.⁷

Creational Considerations

In particular, we must pay close attention to the doctrine of creation. We must begin at the beginning. "Who are we?" cannot be answered biblically, except in terms of "Who have we been created to be?" Much has been written on the biblical concept of the image of God in human beings, most of which has remained in the realm of systematic theology, in contradictory attempts to locate the image in one faculty or another. Rather, I agree with Motyer who says, "in Genesis 'the image of God' is descriptive of human nature in its entirety and is not to be linked with or limited to any particular part or aspect. The distinctiveness is as much in one part as another; it is the common denominator of the whole."⁸

Rather than focus simply on the phrase "image of God," abstracted from its context, we must consider the place of humanity within the creation accounts and the themes that arise from a wider consideration of the literary structure of Genesis' primeval prologue. When this is done, at least ten "organizing principles" emerge from the opening chapters of Genesis that inform our understanding of human beings.⁹

- (1) They are sentient creatures, and therefore created to live in joyful, acknowledged dependence on God. Faith in God (especially understood as "trust") is the appropriate human response to the reality of their contingent existence. When such contingency is not acknowledged trust must be placed in other objects/persons/systems for security and belonging. Because none of these is God, anxiety is the result.
- (2) They are created to live under the authority of God, and thus exercise authority in the creation. A refusal to live under God's authority leads to an inability to exercise true authority, and thus leads to loss of human dignity through authoritarianism and exploitation (both of the creation and other human creatures).
- (3) They are created for relationships. Not only have they been fashioned as male and female (so that they may share in the joy of procreation and the fullness of a one-flesh union in marriage), but they have also been formed for communion and societal existence in which they find their meaning. The moral order and unity of their relationships in every sphere is designed to image those of the Triune God.
- (4) They have been created for worship (service), and cannot live without this orientation. True service of God is the ground of true human dignity and freedom, with the creation accounts picturing Adam as the king/priest over creation, with the task of leading all creation in glorious worship. There is no vacuum of non-worship for human beings. When true, liberating worship is usurped by the idols, human beings surrender their true glory and are rendered slaves to the idols they must serve.
- (5) They have been created to live in the rest of God, the seventh day being the culmination of the creational activity of God. The Sabbath rest of God is the goal for which human beings have been made, and it is thus the only sufficient ground of all true work.

- Where the rest is lost or refused, toil replaces fruitful labor and the biblical concept of "rest" is replaced (at best) by "leisure."
- (6) They have been made for the Spirit's fullness, thus to live in conscious and continual knowledge of the personal presence of God by which they are empowered. By such fullness all human labor was designed to be subsumed in the life of God. Where such fullness is lost, surrogate fullness must be found, but without satiation. In seeking to be full apart from the Spirit of God, men and women are in fact empty.
 - (7) They have been made to engage in vocation, being given a creational mandate so that they are both purposive and co-workers with God in the Edenization of the earth. Vocational existence is fundamental to true human life. Where the true creational mandate and method is abandoned, human beings seek other purposes for life and supplant the vocation of godliness for other vocational activities, frequently being used as vehicles for ambition and pride.
 - (8) They have been made as vice-regents of God, his royal representatives on the earth, to both represent him to the rest of creation and to rule with dignity over it. When such subjected representation and vice regency is abandoned human beings seek to become kingdom builders and exercise control (in all the diverse spheres of life) based on a system of authority that they deem acceptable.
 - (9) They have been made as sons and daughters of God, to relate to God as Father and to live in the communion of his family. The Father/son relationship of God to human beings is the most fundamental of all relationships. Where this is lost, surrogate fatherhood is sought and embraced, and earthly fatherhood loses direction.
 - (10) They have been created to live in dependence on the will of God, rather than to have a self-referential

knowledge of "good" and "evil." Human existence outside of the knowledge of the will of God is based on an autonomous assessment of good and evil, which, cut off from the knowledge of the will of God, is inherently sinful and contradictory. Because of this, human beings will call evil "good," and good "evil," perpetrating horrendous wickedness in pursuit of a "good" outcome.

Indelible Principles

All of the above notions are what we might call indelible principles. This means that they are inescapably part of human existence. The only question is in which direction they will be orientated. For example, the question is not whether a person will worship or not, but whom or what they will worship. It is not whether a person is a creature or not, but whether they recognize this and respond appropriately in thankfulness and faith. It is not whether human beings will live in and for relationships, but what is the nature and substance of these, and what is their goal.

Moreover, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Adam was a son/servant/creature who was also the vice regent, living in obedient faith within the context of relational communion. Likewise, in the fallen human situation none of these things stands alone. For example, the worship/service which human beings render to idolatrous powers is linked with the exercise of authority (since we worship the idol(s) which we think will allow us to gain or maintain control) and all of this is based on our own understanding of what is "good" for us.

Big Picture Thinking

In the light of these comments, the danger of reductionism can be clearly seen. Human beings are complex creatures whose identity is only fully known in connection with the complex matrix of creational structures to which they are subject, and the re-rationalizations of these in the current conditions of the Fall. There is thus no "silver bullet" to pastoral counseling situations, where a "one size fits all" formula can

be easily pressed into use. Our foundations in biblical anthropology must be deep enough to realize the diversity of influences on (and effects of) human behavior. We must formulate our approaches to pastoral counseling in the light of the big picture, and educate our congregations into such ways of thinking also. Enormous benefits accrue from this, not just for their own congregational/spiritual health, but for their understanding of the world and their mission to it.

AND END AT THE END

Protology and Eschatology

If one of the deficiencies of much pastoral counseling literature is the lack of protological content, a second is the lack of eschatological content. (And a third is the failure to connect the two!) Any attempt at building the "comprehensive Christian model" referred to above must wed protology with eschatology.

Human beings can only be understood in the light of the entire biblical narrative that links creation with glorification. Creation tells us only part of the story. Human beings can only be fully understood in the light of the eschatological statements about their destiny in Christ (and outside of him, in judgment). Thus, human identity and meaning can only be complete in the light of the end for which they have been created and toward which they are currently moving. Without this frame of reference, counseling is not just "horizontal" in its approach, but temporal in the measurement of its outcomes. In effect, we do the opposite of what Paul commends. We fix our eyes on the things that are seen instead of the things that are unseen. We walk by sight and not by faith.

Christology Is the Connection

Neither protology nor eschatology can be separated from Christology. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega of human creation and redemption. Adam was made through him so that he would be conformed to him. The designation of Jesus as the Last Adam indicates that he is the archetypal head of a

new humanity, who not only redeems that humanity as its representative head, but also is the one who provides the model to which that new humanity is ultimately to be conformed.

The creation accounts provide us with a picture of human beings as created, but not yet matured. The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 indicates that that maturity cannot come without the intervention of saving grace. The coming of Christ reveals to us the dignity and glory of the image of God in all its fullness, while the redeeming work of God accomplished through him is the means by which enslaved human beings are set free in a new exodus accomplished through the Cross. This redeemed humanity is united with Christ, eventually to be conformed to his image, thus bringing full glory to God the Father.

In Christ, all ten of the “organizing principles” we have noted above are fully revealed. But he does not just reveal what it means to live as a human being in each of these ways, he redeems a new humanity so that they may share in his glory and be released into their creational freedom. In the end, all the redeemed will find themselves functioning according to the creational headings outlined above, without hindrance. Even now the redeemed know the foretaste of these things in the present. While the ongoing battle with the world, the flesh and the devil all make for a bitterly contested situation in the present, the reality of the victory that the Last Adam has won is undeniable and irreversible. All our pastoral counseling must therefore be Christologically orientated: Christ’s character is the goal of the Christian life, his incarnation and redemption the means by which it is secured, and his second coming the means by which is sealed for eternity.

SO THAT WE MIGHT BETTER UNDERSTAND THE MIDDLE

The Messy Middle

Hollywood knows the formula very well. The beginning sets the scene, the endpoint is assured (the bad guys lose), but the middle is always messy. It is full of twists and turns, plots, schemes, double crosses and other surprises. We conduct our

pastoral counseling in “the middle.” The “middle” bit is the world in which we live, the milieu of human existence and relationships that obtain between *protos* and *telos*. It is the place in which we are engaged in the constant “now” and “not yet” tension of New Testament eschatology. How we counsel in the middle will depend on our understanding of the beginning and the end, and the means by which the middle is rendered holy ground in the present.

Remember, Remember . . .

The noetic effects of sin are real. Not only must hearts and minds be illuminated by the Holy Spirit to give entrance to God’s Word, but even once the process of new birth is accomplished, sin’s abiding presence affects the heart and mind until the end. As long as we are in this body we will suffer from the inbuilt deceitfulness of sin. We will be tempted, seduced, led astray and willingly subject to the wiles of world, flesh and devil.¹⁰

Sin is *anomia*, irrational and unpredictable. It is not subject to reason or controlled by our mere willpower. Indeed the doctrines of original sin and total depravity indicate that every function of a person’s mind and heart is affected by sin. The mind, emotions, will and conscience are alike subject to the deleterious affects of sin. Minds must be informed, with patient instruction and much love, and shaped according to the renewal of the Spirit through the Word. Emotions must be disciplined by faith to refuse the contemporary axiom, “I feel, therefore I am,” and wills must be aligned to the command of God rather than the demands of the world. Consciences must be aligned to the gospel and (in rarer cases these days) be liberated from legalism to the freedom of grace.

The battle against the noetic effects of sin takes a variety of forms, but one of the most important is that of “remembering,” especially the remembering of the fact that God has remembered us. Remembering was an important theme in Israel’s history, which is evident throughout the Old Testament—from the Pentateuch (e.g. Deuteronomy!) through the worship of Israel (e.g. Psalm 106) and in the proclamations of

the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 17:10). In the New Testament, both baptism and the Lord's Supper have the function of calling the Lord's people to recollect the Lord and his work and our participation in its benefits. Much pastoral advice in the epistles is based on remembering: the indicatives (remembering God's action) precede the imperatives (the response of obedience).

This aspect of remembering is, by the very nature of the case, corporate rather than individual. The community of faith holds the story of faith, the dimensions of its nature and effects being beyond any one person to comprehend. It is understood not alone, but in company with all the saints. It is the action of the believing community speaking to itself, and hearing the voice of the Spirit through the Word.¹¹

In this way pastoral counseling finds its locus beyond the study or the therapy center, which is but one axis of pastoral care. The repository of wisdom lies with the Spirit in the whole community of God's people, and in all the means of grace. Any specialist pastoral counseling is an adjunct to the wider work of the Spirit in the community of faith. All manner of gifts and circumstances are pressed into service. Friendship, prayer, corporate worship, encouragement, forgiveness, admonishment and mercy are all manifest in the community of faith for the maturation of all members of the Body of Christ. The pastoral counselor is only one of the means by which the Great Shepherd cares for his sheep, finally leading them to rest.

Paradise Is Yet to Come

One of the great consequences of recognizing the age in which we live is that it allows the community of faith to live with the unanswered and perplexing questions of the present. This world is not yet Paradise fully restored. We live in the penultimate age, not the *telos* itself.

In this situation, we can then be realistic about the ongoing presence of sin in the world (and in the life of a believer), as well as aware of the danger of raising false expectations that this current world and its relationships are perfectible. There

is nothing so deep as the disillusionment that comes from expecting in this world that which is only promised in the world to come.

In the time in which we live, therefore, we must expect suffering, and expect to suffer without always knowing the "Why" of the event. Sometimes suffering may come as a direct consequence of sin, though most times we will not be able to draw a *direct* connection between any specific act of unrighteousness and a neatly matched consequence. Illness will afflict the godliest of saints, while even those with orthodox theology may be subject to doubts, dark periods of confusion and times of deep distress of soul. Likewise, we must not be surprised at sin and its effects, nor be thrown into confusion when, even given the best teaching in the world (as happened in many a New Testament congregation), situations of deep sinfulness manifest themselves in the Church.

Paul's autobiographical statements (as I interpret them) in Romans 7 should alert us to the nature of the time in which we live. Some of the older writers had a much better grasp of these things than we do today.¹² Even the redeemed human heart is a mystery, being affected not just by the Word but also by the siren call of the world systems that are opposed to it. Whichever way we look at it, the time in which we live is not the end point for which we have been created. As people of faith in the present, we look forward to the City that is yet to come.

The Battle Is Incessant

One cannot gain any understanding of the pastoral approach of the New Testament letters, without recognizing the reality and inevitability of the clash of the kingdoms that forms the matrix of life in this current creation. Believers are those who live in the midst of the battles between great forces. The book of the Revelation takes us behind the scenes of history to see the pervasive and deceitful workings of the great enemy of our souls, Satan himself. He works in league with principalities and powers which have willingly aligned themselves under his lordship, and great forces characterized as the

harlot city, Babylon, the false prophet, etc. The visions of the apocalypse are not given for speculation, nor for the construction of a system of prophetic interpretation by which we are to judge another's orthodoxy. They paint with startling style and graphic portrait the nature of the conflict in which the Church is involved.

In Pauline language we are introduced to other, allied dimensions of this battle. Great dualities are painted for us: Flesh and Spirit; Law and Grace; Sin and Grace; Death and Life; Darkness and Light; Wrath and Justification; First Adam and Last Adam, etc. These are the context of Christian existence in the present. The battle is incessant and unrelenting.

Pastoral counseling cannot do justice to the full picture of biblical pastoral care if it neglects the dimensions and subtleties of the battle. This is a demanding task, and one that cannot be separated from the wider teaching dimension of pastoral care. The Galatian letter is a fine case in point. The pastoral issues evident here (many of which would have ended up crossing our doors as counseling contacts) can only be dealt with by a sound understanding of the flesh in its operation with the Law, and its antipathy to the Spirit. The terrifying list of behaviors, attitudes and actions listed in Galatians 5:16ff. (and who can say that we don't encounter any or many of these in our pastoral counseling ministries?) need to be handled with Paul's demanding mix of biblical theology and pastoral application, and all in the light of Christ's work on our behalf. What surprises us in this, and other New Testament situations, however, is the fact that Paul does not regard the presence of the battle or its affects on his congregations as a failure in his ministry. His perception is both realistic enough to be resistant to disillusionment, and eschatological enough to allow him to recognize the necessity (and triumph) of faith, hope and love in the present.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral counseling literature has often wanted to "cut to the chase" in the task of pastoral counseling. Understandably, it has sought to develop systems and methods that are

easily transferable, but this has often left it prone to a sort of pragmatic reductionism. The task outlined by Jones and Butman still remains incomplete, but in attempting to build out our foundations and establish our frameworks we must do so with a commitment to exploring the biblical fundamentals as fully as we can. Any one aspect of biblical anthropology or pastoral care cannot be pressed into service for the whole, nor can any secular personality theory or approach to counseling be adopted without it being subject to, and challenged by, sustained biblical and theological reflection. Almost a century ago, the Scottish theologian, P. T. Forsyth, wrote of the preaching ministry: "seek truth first and effect thereby."¹³ This dictum applies to the other aspects of our pastoral ministries equally well, not least to our approach to pastoral counseling.

Author

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Notes

1. There are a number of methodological problems involved in assessing the effectiveness of counseling, in any of its forms, and there have been no shortage of critics (both secular and Christian) of the processes and outcomes involved. This being said, there can be no doubt that counseling (in a non-professional and *ad hoc* form) has been a feature of human societal life throughout its history. There have always been wise men and women in communities, often associated with age (the word "elder" in any of its derivations, Hebrew, Greek or Latin, has to do with

age more than status), who have acted as listening and guiding figures. The term "pastor" embodies the concept of shepherding imagery in the Bible, which includes functions that we could call counseling. The spiritual depth of these people, wisdom gained through experience, marked them out as being men and women provided by God for the benefit of the community.

2. It often comes as something of a surprise to people who embark on counseling studies to discover that "counseling" is not *one* homogeneous process. It is also a matter of some concern that most people who attend a therapist will not have the core theoretical model explained to them. The assumptions about the nature of human beings that underpin psychodynamic counseling are quite different from those which underpin Rogerian counseling, cognitive behavior therapy or transpersonal counseling and so on. Many counseling theories have been deeply influenced by New Age assumptions and methods. All these approaches reflect core assumptions about the nature of the human person, the meaning of human relationships and the essence of human identity.
3. See, for example, the debate between Hurley and Berry, and Welch and Powlison in *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Volume 16, Number 4, Winter 1997. Also see the range of approaches presented in *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views*, edited by E. L. Johnson and S. L. Jones (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2000).
4. At one end, for example, see the contribution of Richard Ganz, who speaks of "the myth of integration" in *Psychobabble: The Failure of Modern Psychology and the Biblical Alternative* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 61, while at the other end, see Michael Jacobs in *Still Small Voice: An Introduction to Pastoral Counselling* (London: SPCK, 1993) who says that while there may be Christians who counsel, there is no such thing as Christian counseling *per se* (34f).
5. As an extreme example, one might take that model of counseling which sees every sin, addiction and irrational manifestation of the *anomia* that still resides in even redeemed human beings, and attribute this to spiritual forces directly, often dealt with by exorcism (repeatedly!). Other examples could be advanced. Many models of Christian counseling fix on one or the other aspect of biblical truth and seek to make it a "one size fits all" approach to pastoral care.
6. "The danger in a pastoral anthropology is to become so spell-bound by our being human (the issue of personal identity) and the contemporary quest for justice and humanity (anthropocentrism) that the relationship with God becomes irrelevant." Louw, Daniël, J., *A Mature Faith: Spiritual Direction and Anthropology in a Theology of Pastoral Care and Counseling* Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, Number 25 (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1999), 2.
7. Berkouwer rightly captures the importance of the matter when he states, "Man's relationship to God is not something added to man's nature . . . therefore . . . any view which abstracts man from this revelation can

never penetrate the mystery of man." A little later he says, "In all his relations and acts, he is never man-in-himself, but always man-in-relation, in relation to the history of God's deed in creation, to this origin of an inalienable relation to his Creator." Berkouwer, G. C., *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 29, 59.

8. A. Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to our Understanding of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1996), 68.
9. I am currently working on an extended treatment of these and related themes. In these statements I have conflated some of the statements that apply to the creational accounts specifically and some of the implications that emerge from wider biblical reflection on them.
10. The deceitfulness of sin is well recognized in the case of ministerial adultery, where pastors who have been caught up in such a sin will often declare that the love they have for the other person is so deep, and the return of affection so fulfilling that it patently must be God's will for this relationship to exist.
11. Paul Goodliff's, *Care in a Confused Climate: Pastoral Care and Postmodern Culture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998) is one example of pastoral theology's reflection on the communal nature of the Christian life and pastoral care. In an age where the psychotherapeutic model has dominated the field, such treatments are a helpful corrective.
12. See, for example, John Newton's *Collected Letters*, edited by H. Backhouse (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).
13. I have been unable to source details of the original quotation.