

Understanding Pastoral Counselling & The Science of Psychology



A Layman's Guide to the

UNDERSTANDING
PASTORAL COUNSELLING
&
THE SCIENCE OF
PSYCHOLOGY

Adapted from
Friends of the Bridegroom Ch. 1 & 2

by
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Where Do We Stand?

Part I

The Relationship between Pastoral Counselling and Secular Counselling

PART I

Perspectives in Pastoral Counselling

Paul urged, in 1 Corinthians 14:20 (regarding controversial issues)

“Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regards to evil, be infants, but in your thinking be adults.”

Dr.D.A.Seamands stated:

“Pastoral counselling is a matter of the heart as well as an art.”

Therefore, it cannot be practised by a mere knowledge of techniques picked up formally or informally.

In earlier years, as the wife of a pastor who later turned seminary lecturer, I was eager to help those in deep spiritual and psychological needs. So I quietly observed and searched for models of ministry teams whenever suitable opportunities arose.

The Search

I recall vividly how I once tried to help a young lady whom I thought needed an overhaul in body, spirit and soul, but my good intentions was to no avail. I had seen one prayer team pray for others who felt better so fast...freed and “whole”. So I thought this overhaul ministry of deliverance and prayer for healing and blessing would solve so many problems quickly i.e. in hours, days or just weeks. Many

will be helped in a shorter period so that we could move on to help many more others in need! But as time passed and I looked at those who had benefited from such ministries, I felt something missing in the recipients of such healing. They were often left not knowing how to live their “overhauled” lives. Their lifestyles often typify those who have recovered from one illness just to get ill again. What happened in between? Were they not cleared of their past bondages? Or were their new problems due to new “sins” and/or oppressions?

Not knowing what to make of such happenings, I continued my casual search for models. I read books and watched mature believers from the East and the West ministering to those with deep needs in life. I compared notes. On hindsight, I now see that, gradually, the Lord was moving me nearer to the wounds in my own heart. Till He dealt with those wounds, I had no direction for formulating any guidelines for helping others. I could not pass on the hope in Christ to my counselees with confidence. But after receiving deep emotional surgery at the Master Surgeon’s hands and having known the healing power of His truth and grace, I was able to pass on the hope and reality of God’s desire to transform His beloved children [1]. Though I have not arrived, nor will I ever arrive in this world, with regards to pastoral counseling or any area of earthly life, I am more certain now that though certain principles are rooted in Scriptures, the task of counselling someone in deep spiritual, emotional and mental anguish requires a contextualised God-man-world view. This needs to be derived from humbly searching the Scriptures, from watching the life of Jesus, the Son of Man in the Scriptures and from learning from His faithful disciples’ ministries down

through the ages (by the reading of biographies) and through personal experience.

In addition, we also need to believe that God also speaks to us through His general revelation in the universe around us [Romans 1:19-21]. As one of Jesus' friends, John, said, if everything about Christ were to be written, there would not be enough space to store the books about Him [John 21:24,25].

So I realised that I have to be open to the Holy Spirit's constant counsel as I sit before someone seeking answers for his/her personal problems. No wonder then that counselling is a matter of the *heart* as well as an *art*. With tools of the written word of God in one hand and with general knowledge concerning God's creation on the other hand, we need to let the Counsellor of counsellors guard our hearts and minds as we exercise the gift of counselling. But wait...what is the gift of counselling? For this I shall need the help of professionals who have done more systematic research. As lay pastoral counsellors [i.e.those without any professional qualification in counselling such as a Bachelor of Arts or Masters in Counselling degree], we often help someone without being conscious of our roles. However, learning from systematically trained counsellors may sometimes help us clarify our own thinking about the subject.

Discovery of Gifts

I recall with a sense of guilt that, up till the eighties, though I knew what was wrong with friends who came for advice, very often, I did not know how to help them apply that knowledge to benefit them. Hence, with remorse, I had left a few trusting friends in limbo. Now I am more careful to ask the Lord for discernment and wisdom in each step of the counselling process so that I may hear them and Him correctly. Then will I be able to teach them to solve their own problems, by God's enabling grace.

In other situations, not realising what to focus on, I ran out of stamina and left a few people helped half-way. It was in 1986 that, through the confirmative discovery of the Creator's basic/natural giftings for me, that I was then able to begin to say "No" to what I was not called to do regularly and say "Yes" to what I believe I have been called to do. It is my hope that some readers will ask God to show them their giftings, especially if they are in their late thirties, so that the rest of their lives will be lived in fruitful service for God.

Definitions

*

"The gift of pastor is the special ability that God gives to certain members of the body of Christ to assume *a long-term* personal responsibility for the spiritual welfare of a group of believers." (Peter C. Wagner in his book "Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow") [2].

A cell group leader in a local church or a Bible-study group leader in a college Christian fellowship, for example, would need this gift for the effective caring of his flock. The ideal

number of group members would be around 10-15, as exemplified in Jesus' own discipling method. In fact, this has already been wisely suggested by Jethro to Moses in Exodus 18:13-26. There is a high possibility that *Jesus learned* this principle from the Old Testament!

*

“*The gift of exhortation* is the special ability that God gives to certain members of the body of Christ to minister *words* of comfort, consolation, encouragement and *counsel* to other members of the body in such a way that they feel helped and healed”

It is noted that the gift of exhortation is so wide and deep at times that there are few who could effectively exercise every aspect of it thoroughly unless their lifestyle allows them to be free enough for such a purpose i.e. if they were single or have no dependent children with them. In reality, we see more people helpers who have one or two of the *sub-gifts* (according to this definition) of comfort, consolation, encouragement or counsel. Having said that, I must say that gifts may also come in various degrees of *combinations*. For example, during a counselling session, the pastoral counsellor often has to comfort and encourage as well. Coupled with this sub-gift of counsel, the counsellor would also need the gifts of discernment and wisdom.

Further, as problems surface in people at odd and unpredictable times, the ratio of counselee: counsellor in the particular church or group may be increased as this is a *shorter term* ministry to someone, so that any one counsellor may help more members in a given time and energy capacity e.g. Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman were more like a pastoral

counsellor-counselee relationship than like a direct evangelistic relationship. Jesus probably had such short encounters with hundreds of people in His three years; but He intimately and intensively pastored only 12 disciples.

If you are not sure which special gifts you have, I would encourage you to read a biblically sound book which will help you identify your gifts. Before I discovered where my giftings were more focussed, (as I believe that in an emergency situation, we should all help a person even if we feel we do not have a special gift for the person's need), I had often harboured false guilt for not having the necessary stamina to follow through a friend needing pastoral care. In the end, the other person did not receive much long-term shepherding while I was left wondering before the Lord as to why I did not have sufficient energy to continue helping someone I cared for so much. Having discovered my strong and weak areas, I was freed from the false guilt of not taking on long-term pastoral care and was personally released for more short-term counselling work.

What then is the definition of a pastoral counsellor?

Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary:1971 defines:

- * a pastor as "one who has care of a flock or a congregation; a shepherd, a clergyman".
- * pastoral as "relating to shepherd or to shepherd life".
- * a pastoral letter as "a book on the care of souls".

Webster's New World Dictionary (3rd College Edition) 1988 defines:

- * a pastor as a "shepherd".

Oxford Student's Dictionary of Current English for KBSM (1988, 2nd edition) defines:

- * a pastor as a "Christian minister"
- * pastoral as "of (duties towards) the welfare of people: pastoral care or responsibilities"

The term "pastor" is used in the Bible to describe the leaders' caring roles in churches in the Old and New Testaments [Jeremiah 23:1; Ezekiel 34:11-16; 1 Peter 5:1-4]. It rings the Shepherd's bell in those who have read Psalm 23. Since the word "pastor" is rooted in the Shepherd heart of God [Matthew 2:6], any definition of pastoral counselling has to return to the inevitable implications of its pastoral/shepherding context in which such a type of counselling proceeds.

It is, therefore, the *attitude* and *heart* of a pastoral counsellor that *counts rather than the actual methods* used.

A pastoral counsellor, hence, is someone who counsels another person with the sole intention of bringing the lamb or sheep home to the Good Shepherd. This has been clarified and demonstrated by Jesus Himself in John 10:11-18.

Irrespective of the abundance or lack of formal training, the pastoral counsellor, above all else, seeks to follow in the footsteps of Jesus who leads and guides His sheep to the green pastures of nourishment and to cool waters of refreshment. This is done under the protection of His staff and rod, and with total trust in His wisdom and power to direct and to keep. Hence, the basic foundation and hope for the

pastoral counsellor and the counsellee is in Christ and His manner of of ministry. “As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” [John 17:18]. Jesus is our only Example of persistent compassion and empathy, as shown in His interpersonal relationship with the Samaritan woman at the well. He took the trouble to cross cultural, racial, social, personality, moral/religious barriers to counsel her...thus she was transformed [3]!

“Therefore, Christ realisation is our goal in pastoral counselling. A person may be emotionally healthy but spiritually dead. Our goal is to bring the people in need face to face with Him in order to receive His grace and truth.”

D.A.Seamands

Conversely, though God’s children in Christ are spiritually alive, many are emotionally unhealthy, unable to experience the abundant life that Christ generously offers to them. But there is hope in Christ...peace and joy will come as His children are more forgiven, more healed, walking more in God’s light and love. Also, we need to accept that in most instances, healing that **begins as a crisis** needs to be **completed in the process of sanctification**. The pastoral counsellor’s realistic hope is that though the process can begin NOW, in most cases, it may take time for the counsellee to feel well emotionally and mentally. Otherwise, disillusionment will result and the consequences will be worse than before counsel was offered.

As such, pastoral counselling cannot be separated from **spiritual formation** though one with more of a pastoral gifting and more time may take over to walk on with the healing counsellee. Therefore, I would prefer to describe

pastoral counselling as one arm of spiritual formation while the practice of the Christian disciplines is the other arm. (See chapter 6 of *Friends of the Bridegroom*). Consequent to this perspective of pastoral counselling, the pastoral counsellor is free to use various methods to help the counsellee. This includes the use of researched truth through the science of psychology, developed in the western world, as long as those methods lie within the boundaries of guidelines laid down in the revealed truth of God (as shown in the Old and New Testaments and in the life of Jesus our Saviour and Lord).

Further, from Revelations 19:6-9, we may deduce that the bride of Christ is to prepare herself for the Bridegroom by the putting on of garments of good works. But what do we mean by good works when we already know that we are saved by the grace of God through faith? In the context of the mandate in John 13:34-35, good works are whatever we do in love that help others recognise God as Lord (as was repeatedly stated in the book of Ezekiel and re-emphasised by our Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16.).

This implies that any type of work that helps others see Him clearer is good work. Non-believers will be brought to know Him and believers will be purified for the Bridegroom. In the doing of good works, the doer and the recipient of good works both move closer to God.

Counselling, therefore, is only **one of those good works** in the process of spiritual transformation.

Dr. Lee Bee Teik is the founding director of Reconre Ministries. She earlier laid down the practice of medicine to be with her children. In 1992, the Lord called her to the writing ministry and then to minister to His fulltime workers through pastoral counselling and quiet retreats. Her other areas of service include the training of lay pastoral counsellors and the facilitating of personal or small group quiet retreats and seminars. Dr Lee is married to Bishop (Dr) Hwa Yung of the Methodist Church in Malaysia and they have three adult children.



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