

1 Perspectives in Pastoral Counselling

Paul urged his readers,

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

1 Corinthians 14:20

Dr D.A. Seamands stated,

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

Counselling cannot be practised by mere knowledge of techniques picked up formally or informally.¹

In my earlier years, when I was the wife of a pastor and later, seminary lecturer, I was eager to help those with deep spiritual and psychological needs. Being a mother of three young children, I could not be as actively involved with others as much as I would have liked. But I was able to attend several ministry/counselling/spiritual formation seminars by speakers such as Pastor Selwyn Hughes, Dr John White and Dr James Houston.

THE SEARCH

I recall trying to counsel a young lady whom I thought needed help in body, spirit and soul, but to no avail. I had seen one team pray for someone who felt better quickly – freed and “whole”. I thought this ministry of deliverance and prayer for healing would solve problems in just a few days. If it were possible to help people in a shorter period of time, then we could move on to help many others in need. However, later on when I observed the recipients of these ministries, I felt something was missing. Often they did not know how to get on with their lives. They typified those who had recovered from one illness only to get ill again. I do not know what happened in between. I thought they had been freed of their past bondages. Were their problems due to new “sins” and/or oppressions?

Not knowing what to make of such happenings, I continued to search for models. I read books and watched mature believers from the East and the West ministering to those with deep needs. I compared notes. On hindsight, I now see that the Lord was moving me nearer to the wounds in my own heart which had to be dealt with first. I had to face deep emotional surgery and know the Master’s healing power, otherwise I could not offer hope to my counselees, nor pass on God’s desire to transform His beloved children.²

I have not arrived, nor will I ever do so as far as pastoral counselling is concerned. But I have more confidence knowing that certain principles are found in Scriptures, and that the task of counselling someone in deep spiritual, emotional and mental anguish requires a God-man-world view.

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). Jesus’ disciple, John, commented on this: *“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written”* (John 21:25). The “many other things” include what we now may view scientifically.

I realised that I had to be open to the Holy Spirit's constant counsel when seeking answers to someone's personal problems. Counselling is therefore 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 exercise the gift of counselling under the Counsellor of counsellors' guidance.

Lay pastoral counsellors (i.e. those without any professional qualification such as a BA or Masters in Counselling) often help someone without being conscious of their roles. Even though they might discern what could be wrong with someone who comes for advice, they do not necessarily know how to apply that knowledge to benefit them. This is where spiritual gifts and practical training can work together to edify others.

DISCOVERY OF GIFTS

I recall with a sense of guilt that, up till the eighties, I had left a few trusting friends in limbo. Now I am more careful to ask the Lord for discernment and wisdom for each step of the counselling process so that I may hear them and Him correctly. Then I hope I will be able to teach them to solve their own problems, by God's enabling grace.

In 1986, through the confirmative discovery of the Creator's basic giftings for me, I was then able to begin to say "No" to what I could not do well and say "Yes" to what I believed I had been called to do. It is my hope that some readers will ask God to show them their giftings, so that the rest of their lives will be lived in fruitful service for Him.

What is the gift of pastoral counselling? Learning from systematically trained professionals may help us clarify our own thinking about the subject.

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" (C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*).³

A cell group leader in a local church or a Bible-study leader in a college Christian fellowship, for example, needs this gift for the effective caring of his flock. The ideal number of group members is around 10 to 15. This was suggested by Jethro to Moses in Exodus 18:13-26. It is possible that Jesus also applied this principle to his method of discipling.

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.

The exhortation gift has such broad scope that there are few who can effectively exercise it thoroughly, unless their lifestyle allows them to be free enough for such a purpose i.e. if they were single or had no dependent children. 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. However, gifts may also come in various 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 also needs gifts of discernment and wisdom.

Further, as problems surface in people at unpredictable times, the ratio of counsellor:counselee in a church may be increased as a *shorter term* ministry, so that any one counsellor may have more time and energy for each counselee. Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus was more a counsellor-counselee relationship. Jesus had similar short encounters with hundreds of people in His three years; but He intimately

and intensively pastored only 12 men.

However, in an emergency, we may need to help a person even if we do not have a special gift for the particular need. It is good to read a biblically sound book to help you identify your gifts. Before I discovered where the focus of my gifts lay, I used to feel guilty for not having the necessary stamina to follow through with the long-term shepherding that was needed. Meantime, I was left wondering why the Lord had not been given me 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 released for more short-term counselling work.

The Definition of a Pastoral Counsellor

Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary (1971):

- A pastor as "one who has care of a flock or a congregation; a shepherd, a clergyman"
- Pastoral — "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):

- A pastor as a "shepherd".

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

- 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 (e.g. Jeremiah 23:3-4; Ezekiel 34:11-16; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Since the word "pastor" is rooted in the Shepherd heart of God (Psalm 23, Micah 5:2-5), any definition of pastoral counselling has to return to the inevitable implications of its pastoral/shepherding context out of which proceeds this area of counselling.

Therefore, it is the *attitude* and *heart* of a pastoral counsellor that counts rather than the actual methods used. The pastoral counsellor, therefore, is someone who counsels another person with the sole intention of bringing the lamb or sheep home to the Good Shepherd. This was clarified and demonstrated by Jesus Himself in John 10:11-18.

Irrespective of the 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 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 (John 4).⁴ He crossed cultural, racial, and religious barriers to counsel her — thus she was transformed.

"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 forgiven, healed and 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 counsellor's hope is that the process can begin now though, in most cases, it may take time for the counsellee to feel well emotionally and mentally. If this is not realised, disillusionment will result and the consequences may be worse than before counselling began.

As such, pastoral counselling cannot be separated from spiritual formation, though one with a different gifting and more time may be needed to journey on with the 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). Consequently, the pastoral counsellor is free to use various methods to help the counsellee. These include using psychology, as long as it lies within the guidelines laid down in the revealed truth of God through the Bible and in the life of Jesus our Saviour.

From Revelation 19:6-9, we may deduce that the bride of Christ prepares herself for the Bridegroom by putting on the garment of good works. 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 (also stated by Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16). This implies that any type of work where others are helped to see Him is good. Non-believers will be brought to know Him and believers will be purified for the Bridegroom. Both the doer and the recipient move closer to God.

Counselling is one of the good works in the process of spiritual transformation.

THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION FRAMEWORK

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality...”

1 Thessalonians 4:3

“It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption...”

1 Corinthians 1:30

Spiritual formation is a term used to describe the process whereby God uses various means to transform a child of His so that he becomes more and more like His Son Jesus. We also need to see the counsellee as a whole person, **not** just as a case or a problem, though it is more practical to refer to them as “cases”.

The apostle Paul reminds us that we have to put off our personal old traits — the weaknesses and sins in us — while putting on Christ’s character, and imitate His behaviour (as in Colossians 3:1-17 and Galatians 5:16-26). We know that only the Holy Spirit can do the internal work of transformation of character. But there is a factor directly related to this transformation process. In Romans 12:1,2 that process is the renewal of our minds — about God, His creation, self, others and our relationships with them. Our whole God-view, people-view and worldview have to be renewed. If we have been called to put off and put on, then this renewal must be done as God’s children. There is much work for a believer to do for himself and for others as well, as Paul exhorted in Philippians 2:12,13. The two aspects of the spiritual formation process, which may overlap in time, include:

1. Sanctification: Putting Off

Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, came to save us from our sins, diseases and infirmities or weaknesses (Isaiah 53:4-5). Therefore, any man or woman, adult or child on earth needs help in these areas of their life. Sin and its effects have to go as the life of the Son of God grows in them:

- a. The spirit needs repentance and forgiveness of sins
- b. The emotions need healing from wounds caused by personal or others’ sins; the mind needs renewal from old ways of thinking and the will needs to be submitted to serve God
- c. The physical body needs healing from diseases
- d. The oppressions (which may produce symptoms and signs similar to those caused by the other problems mentioned above) caused by God’s enemy need renunciation and/or deliverance from the powers of darkness.

i. *Our Spirits*

Whether counsellor or counsellee, we have to accept the fact of sin. God the Father punished Jesus because of our sins (Isaiah 53:5). Ultimately, the whole creation has been damaged by sin. Consequently, human problems are also caused by the existence of sin, whether our own or others' sin. But most of us choose to avoid or deny the possibility that our personal sins still can and do cause us emotional, mental and physical problems.

A.W. Tozer quoted John Wesley as saying, "...that we will not injure the cause of Christ by admitting our sins, but that we are sure to do so by denying them."⁵

He further wrote,

*"A dreamy sentimental faith which ignores the judgements of God against us and listens to the affirmations of the soul is as deadly as cyanide. A faith which passively accepts all of the pleasant texts of the Bible while it overlooks or rejects the stern warnings and commandments of the same Scriptures is not the faith of which Christ and His apostles spoke."*⁶

Oswald Chambers reiterates this point,

*"Not being reconciled to the fact of sin — not recognising it and refusing to deal with it — produces all the disasters in life... If you refuse to agree with the fact that there is wickedness and selfishness, something downright hateful and wrong in human beings, when it attacks your life, instead of reconciling yourself to it, you will compromise with it and say that it is of no use to battle against it."*⁷

When we think about sin in our personal lives, do we think of some vague presence of evil intent in us or a specific fact we have to deal with in our lives today? Oswald Chambers puts it this way,

"A person will easily say, 'Oh yes, I am a sinner', but when he comes into the presence of God he cannot get away with such

*a broad and indefinite statement. Our conviction is focused on our specific sin, and we realize, as Isaiah did, what we really are. This is always the sign that a person is in the presence of God."*⁸

The Lord Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, "*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*" (John 4:24).

It is not surprising then, that in Revelation 3:20, Jesus' request is that we open the door of our lives to Him. Cleansing begins from our innermost selves even if God has to separate the soul and the spirit, the marrow and the joints, as the writer to the Hebrews taught (Hebrews 4:12,13). The cleansing of the physical temple in Ezekiel 43 is but a symbol or type of the cleansing of the spiritual temple of God's people after Christ has reconciled us to His Father.

ii. *Our Minds, Emotions and Wills*

Paul urged us in Romans 12:1,2 to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. If we think about how we arrive at certain actions we take, the sequence of events goes like this:

- We are first presented with a *mental picture* of something or someone in a given situation e.g. a hungry child.
- Then we *feel* for the child's condition, as Jesus had compassion on the "*sheep without a shepherd*" (Matthew 9:36-38).
- Finally, we may be *moved* to give the child food e.g. by sponsoring a child through an organisation such as World Vision. Faith without actions is dead (James 2:14-26).

Therefore, an action begins in the mind which stirs the feelings into action by the exercise of our wills. This is clearly seen in Jesus, who, on seeing the condition of the crowds, feels for them and then teaches them to ask God for help. He then personally called His 12 handpicked disciples together, instructed them and sent them out to care for the lost sheep (Matthew 9:35-11:1) (He did not do it all by Himself).

Having been influenced by cultures that emphasise the importance

of the mind and willpower more than the emotions, we are often unsure of the significance of our feelings. Many feel guilty about expressing them or just talking about them. Some believers preach, teach and nurse without compassion while others focus so much on their feelings that they never get to do any good for others. However, if we are aware of the way human beings are made to function, we will be able to better help one another work out the salvation God has worked in us.

iii. *Our Physical Bodies*

We cannot overemphasise our need to be healed of diseases. Jesus' instructions to the 12 disciples summarised this ministry (Matthew 10:1). In today's churches, God has shown time and again that though we may ask Him to heal in a certain manner, the prerogative is His as to which method He uses...whether miraculously, by exercise or by medication. In middle age, I am learning to cooperate with Him in following the laws of nature in which He has ordained for us to function healthily though, in His mercy, He still heals miraculously and we shout for joy when that happens!

iv. *The Enemy's Oppression*

In Genesis Chapter 3, Satan lied to Eve about the reason for God's command for Adam and her — they were not to eat from the tree of life. He wanted to show that God was not so good after all and he was also probably envious of God's love for the couple He had created in His image. God was portrayed as self-centred and fearful of man's abilities. Adam and Eve believed his lies about God. Consequently, they had to suffer for their sin of rebellion against God.

Job faced suffering which was used to challenge his sincere devotion to God. Satan wanted to show that God was not worthy of man's fear, worship and love. He was probably envious of God's generosity to Job, who had to *suffer though he did not sin* because he trusted in God whose character he knew well.

We need to be alert to recognise the cunningness and wickedness of one who wants to jeopardise our relationship with God. What God

wants us to do is to put on the whole armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) daily, constantly, for Christ alone is our Protector (John 17).

By definition and experience, therefore, the work of a pastoral counsellor mainly deals with the emotional, mental, spiritual and volitional aspects of a person, though one may also meet with physical and oppressive problems in the counsellee.

2. Sanctification: Putting On

This is working out the salvation that God has worked in us (Philippians 2:12). For this purpose, we need to exercise certain basic "spiritual disciplines". This is reiterated throughout the New Testament. For example, we need to:

- a. Feed on God's written word by reading and meditating on Scripture (1 Peter 2:1-3)
- b. Feed on the living Bread by spending time sitting in His presence, and like a mirror, reflecting Him (2 Corinthians 3:18)
- c. Pray and fast in order to do His will (Mark 9:29)
- d. Listen to God prayerfully in silence and solitude (Matthew 6:5-18)
- e. Give generously to those more needy than ourselves (2 Corinthians 8 and 9)
- f. Worship Him in adoration and with pure and undivided devotion, relishing friendship with God (Revelation 3:20)
- g. Serve God through serving others by the use of our natural and spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:7-13).

In all these aspects of our Christian life, we need to be continuously filled with the Holy Spirit to be purified as we grow into Christ-likeness. We must not only pray but practise what we pray. We cannot and dare not substitute obedience with mere prayer (Matthew 7:21).⁹ Prayer must lead to active obedience to God.

Therefore to put off without putting on will not result in growth in maturity as God's child. Jesus Himself showed us that to drive an evil spirit away from a home without filling the cleansed home with His Holy Spirit will only lead to more evil spirits inhabiting the home.

However, we also realise that to put on without putting off will hamper the normal growth process. Who wants to be suffocated by the carbon dioxide of our original unregenerated brokenness?

Therefore, firstly, counselling will only have short-term benefits unless we *work alongside others* in our church or society who have other gifts that we do not have. One area of a person's life affects the rest of the person. We cannot say, "Well, my job is finished... now please take care of yourself", if there are other areas of his life that may need other follow-up. Leaving the counsellee in the lurch after your sessions with him may be devastating. As a counsellor I have experienced unintentionally dumping a counsellee; I have also been fruitlessly exhausted when I could not find someone to follow-up counsellees in the areas where I could not help. I had to hang on to them.

Secondly, we need to *accept our limitations* when we encounter a problem that we cannot handle. It may be better to over-refer than to under-refer though we should not refer just to get out of a job that we do not like!

Thirdly, you may meet with counsellees *who see several counsellors* at the same time, for the same or different problems. This is one of the most difficult situations to handle if we want to help someone move to a deeper life of renewal of the mind and transformation. If Christian counsellors learn to trust each other, things can be worked out so that there will be no misunderstanding or competition among the counsellors (to the detriment of the counsellee). It is best if one person deals with the counsellee for a period of time. Even if extra people are helping him with different problems, the counsellee may not be able to cope with different advice all at once. Our aim is to help the counsellee see his problems from God's perspective. If the other person can do a better job, gladly hand over the counsellee to him or her.

EFFECTIVENESS

The aim of most counselling sessions is to help a person function as a freer person in his relationships with others and self. While secular counselling involves the counsellor and the counsellee with or without the evil spirits (as in seeking "bomohs" and mediums' advice, for example), pastoral counselling involves the counsellor, the counsellee and GOD, the Holy Spirit. We believe the presence of God makes pastoral counselling hopeful and wholesome, because of His work of truth and grace in us. As those exercising His gift in this area, we need to live transparently in His presence.

Effectiveness in a project, as I have come to understand, is the ability to achieve a goal. Therefore, if the purpose of pastoral counselling is to help someone be reconciled to God, as well as to self, others and the environment, in preparation to meet with Jesus Christ as His Bride, then, whether a counsellor is effective or not depends on whether the counsellee can find this reconciliation.

However, there is difficulty in assessing a counsellor's effectiveness. By nature of the counsellee's *private* needs, no other person may know about his problems or the process of discovering solutions to his problems. If a counsellee seeks help only once, the counsellor will not know how effective he has been unless the counsellee returns to share the joy of his reconciliation in relationships. Our hope, of course, is that he has been able to forge forward in his life in Christ without the counsellor's help any more.

The counsellor-counsellee relationship is very different from that of a teacher-student one. A good teacher sees the fruit of her labour in her students passing examinations and moving on in their careers. A good architect has his completed structure to display to the public. A

good doctor has the joy of hearing his patients tell others about their recovery after receiving treatment. BUT a good counsellor is bound by confidentiality, and very few counselees who have been helped will divulge their own secrets. Even when they do, they speak with the utmost care for the glory of the real Healer.

Who then may assess your effectiveness as a lay counsellor? If you are taking a professional course, everything is structured so that your professor makes sure you have fulfilled certain requirements e.g. you will have seen 500 cases before you are certified to be a clinical psychologist. But even then, after that, you may not be very sure that you are effective!

The comfort is, however, that God supports those who genuinely desire to follow in Jesus' footsteps in this area of His ministry of reconciliation. We must be clear in our minds before we go deeper into this work, that what we do in secret before the Lord must be marked with excellence. We need to also continue to live as real people, children of the living God, and as learners in the skills of counselling. We need to learn through experience how to help our counselees, learn from them, other counsellors and from our own reading, whether of Scripture or other literature. Indeed, if the ministry of reconciliation is to bring man and God together, then we need to know God well and to know man well too.

TEAM WORK

Originally, pastoral counselling was fulfilled by a pastor who was deemed to be closer to God. However, in our larger churches and in the fast lane of a new century, it is not wise for congregation members to rely solely on their pastors to fill this role. In addition, with the effects of globalisation, members are more exposed to experiences that their particular pastor might not have come across. So it is wiser, I believe, to ask God for the gift of counselling for lay people and to encourage them

to be involved in this much-needed ministry. They may work side by side, but under the supervision of their pastor or other church leaders.

As God has created us to be community in Him, team work is necessary. It is not new as far as Scriptural guidance is concerned. If it is needed in smaller churches, the need is even greater in larger and often more complicated churches. Pastors may then concentrate on preaching and teaching the word of God which can seldom be fulfilled fruitfully by untrained members. In Appendix II of this book, I will attempt to suggest a plan and structure for the training and assigning of local church lay pastoral counsellors.

CONTEXTUALISATION

We need to be like Jesus in identifying with the world views of our counselees. In our Malaysian context, we will have to be sensitive to the backgrounds of our counselees. We may also often need to cross cultural, religious and social barriers in order to love someone in a way that they understand. Dr D.A. Seamands, having been a missionary in India for about 17 years, illustrates this point. For example:

- If we persuade our listeners to be born again before they can enter the kingdom of God without clarifying what that means, many Buddhist or Hindu listeners may readily agree. Due to their belief in reincarnation, they in fact expect to be born again...and again...and again...and again...
- To comfort someone in grief by saying that God has taken her loved one home may cause terror in her mind if she has come from a broken home. While "home" means "heaven" to some, it may mean "hell" to others.

We must ask God for wisdom, understanding and sensitivity to others' world views particularly in our use of language. Pastoral counselling is basically a ministry of words though the life of the counsellor is essential for the authentication of what is spoken.

THE ULTIMATE DIFFERENCE – THE PRESENCE OF GOD

What distinguishes pastoral counselling from other counselling forms is not the specific methods used, but in the persons involved in a counselling encounter. Here, God as revealed in Jesus, is present and welcomed to be the invisible but not silent listener. He ministers through the listening, feeling, thinking, guiding, revealing, inspiring and enabling Holy Spirit who alone knows the secrets of the human heart.

It is His awesome yet gently gracious presence that makes counselling “pastoral”; it is His presence that differentiates pastoral counselling from all other types of counselling, be they called Christian, secular or religious. It is God that enables limited and feeble human counsellors to walk with counselees of similar limitations and feebleness till the counsellee can walk more confidently with God in His truth and grace.

The Presence of God

“Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle”

Exodus 40:34,35

“...For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people.”

2 Corinthians 6:16

Wayne Oates, in *The Presence of God in Pastoral Counselling*,¹⁰ discusses the reality of God and the need for His presence both generally and particularly in a counselling situation. When I read this, I felt encouraged that a lay person like me could be used as His instrument if I continue to trust and obey Him day by day.

Francis A. Schaeffer in *No Little People, No Little Places*¹¹ said that Moses’ rod was a mere piece of old wood. But when used by God through the obedience of His servant Moses, the rod did wonders. A modern example of such an experience would be Rosemary Green, wife of the evangelist pastor Michael Green. In her book, *God’s Catalyst*¹², she testifies to how God called her, a homemaker, and turned her into a lay pastoral counsellor when she followed Him through each step of informal training. I hope that you will read these books so that you too will be encouraged to be the unique “rod in His hands”. We need to immerse ourselves in His presence, like fish which cannot live without water.

A.W. Tozer lamented: *“Stillness today is hard to find. Christ’s presence and power are offered to us in this time of mad activity and mechanical noises as certainly as to the fishermen on the quiet lake of Galilee or to shepherds on the plains of Judea. The only condition is that we get still enough to hear His voice and that we believe and heed what we hear.”*¹³

Let us look at some Scripture passages which express the presence of God in our lives.

1. Psalm 139

The writer talks about the presence of God who will not leave him alone; He who created him desires to care for him wherever he may be. Psalm 100:3 affirms this message.

We may thus assure our counselees that though God knows all about us, He still loves us. We cannot simply fall out of His watchful presence. Wayne Oates calls it the all-pervasive and all-knowing of humankind’s thoughts and doings.

2. Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus Himself said that wherever His disciples went, they would see Him in the faces and forms of the people they met.

Mother Teresa was one of those who knew and experienced His

presence this way and God used her life to bring many into His kingdom, in several cases just before they died.

3. Psalm 19:1-6

The psalmist declares His presence in the environment around us. Paul said the same in Romans 1:18-20 and Acts 17:24-31.

The presence of God is different from pantheism which believes that god is in and is part of everything and everyone. In the Bible, God is always portrayed as different from, and sovereign over His creation. Thus, to worship His creation is to exchange *“the truth of God for a lie and serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator – who is forever praised”* (Romans 1:25).

a) The Presence of God dwells with humankind

As we are assured of His desire to be with us, we can persuade our counselees not to lose hope as God is waiting for them to return to Him.

b) The Presence of God dwells in people with a clear identity

This knowledge will confirm in God’s precious people, the security of His covenant love sealed by the blood of Jesus and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. They will be reminded to live as God’s community of believers through whom His healing grace flows.

Wayne Oates: *“Increasingly, in Pastoral Counselling, the isolated care of an individual is helpful but incomplete. A community of concern, of faith and free of pretence is needed.”*¹⁴

Howard Clinebell: *“It is in communities of mutual caring that the fullest possible liberation of spiritual potentials takes place.”*¹⁵

L.C. Marsh: *“By the crowd they have been broken; by the crowd shall they be healed.”*¹⁶

c) The Presence of God in Human Suffering

God participates in the wounds of His people. When we are crushed, He

is crushed even though we often suffer because of our sins (Jeremiah 8:21, Isaiah 1:5-6).

THE BIBLE AS THE UNCHANGING AUTHORITY OF PASTORAL COUNSELLING

We affirm the authority of God’s Word in our lives and by grace we receive life. In my meeting with people in need, I have also seen the “utter trappedness of husbands, wives and children”¹⁷ who suffer emotionally and mentally from one family member being an extreme perfectionist, for example. Such a person, though saved by grace, expects the impossible from other members of the family even if he himself cannot reach his own self-imposed ideals. The victims suffer in silence, especially those who are Christians. Quite often, the Bible is erroneously used to support one’s demands on others.

The Bible by itself cannot save a person. Only the Son of God can. *“In pastoral counselling, whenever I have seen the Bible used as the very centre of the process, invariably, the problem being considered – divorce, remarriage, Christians suing each other in court – ceases to be the issue. The main issue becomes the infallibility of the interpretation being given. But our eyes are closed to this.”*¹⁸

Oates urges us to interpret the pastoral counselling relationship with the Presence of God as its lasting and abiding centre. His hope is that this reality will bring a breakthrough into the wilderness of the human spirit in which we journey with our counselees, especially on those occasions when we are humanly at a loss. Then both counsellor and counselee are surprised by the presence of God when guided by His written word.

The gift of discernment is needed in order for us to function as God’s temporary assistant so that the counselee hears the sovereign Word of God for himself/herself. It is helpful not to see things from a human point of view, but from God’s perspectives. The church is an organism, NOT an organisation, for which Christ died. 2 Corinthians

5:16-20, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." Further, Romans 8:26 states, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express..."

D.A. Seamands¹⁹ describes the Holy Spirit coming alongside us as a nurse coming alongside a patient to help him walk again. The patient, though, has to do the walking in order to be restored to health.

In the role of ministering God's reconciliation, the counsellor is, in effect, merely walking alongside the counsellee, if he allows him to. The counsellor leads him into the presence of God till that person sees the very face of God, understands the will of God for him and is transformed by His truth and grace, as he obeys Him.

Oates Describes Three Basic Types of Counsellees

1. *The Helpless Counsellee – "I Cannot"*

He feels weak and needs help much of the way. He wants to be healed but feels that healing is for others, not for him. He believes that he is not good enough for God. He comes through as one who is against the will of God. If we recognise him as a helpless counsellee, we will not feel too discouraged when he keeps trying to stop the sessions for fear of not getting the answers again. Many have gone through years of vicious cycles. Our part is to be patient and eventually move with him into the awareness of the presence of God to discover newfound freedom...and then leave him with his Friend and Healer.

2. *The Hostile Counsellee – "It's All Their Fault"*

He fights against the will of God most of the way and is reluctant to change or be changed. He thinks and feels there is no need to change his ways but he still wants his problem to be solved. Usually our only help is in crises intervention, as such a person in need moves from crisis to crisis. I once tried to help a woman physically and verbally abused by her husband. Each time she would talk about his faults and her anger and threats to divorce him. Eventually, when I urged her to repent of some of her ways which had stirred up his anger against her on certain occasions, she stopped contacting me. She would not face her own brokenness. As far as I know things have not changed much yet.

3. *The Collaborative Counsellee – "Please Walk With Me"*

He forms an alliance with us as "pilgrims on the way", realising that we are but interpreters of God's signs for him. He is keen to walk in the presence and will of God but needs spiritual direction. He needs someone to check out the maps with him. He assumes we know the territory because somehow, he senses that we have trod that way before. He knows that he carries the load, not us. He represents the many tired full-time or lay workers in God's kingdom. They carry the burdens of the church on their shoulders in the heat of the day. They too need our companionship. Will we walk with them?

The function of a pastoral counsellor is to work with the counsellee in the presence of God. As we do so, we will witness a shifting from a position of walking away from God and His will for him (against God, others and self) to a position of walking with God in His will for him (a coming-alongside God). What liberation! What joy!

Pause to reflect on what you have read.

*If you need to reread certain parts, please do
so before you proceed.*

Remember to listen to the Counsellor Par Excellence.

REFLECTION

1. If I were a counsellee, which of the three types above would I be?
2. Is pastoral counselling needed in my church? If “Yes”, how may I help my pastor minister to those who need pastoral counselling?
3. What is God saying to me as I read this chapter? How will I respond?

2 Understanding Pastoral Counselling and the Science of Psychology

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Romans 1:20

This chapter has two aims:

1. To show what psychology teaches and what it does not teach;
2. To show what biblical faith in the Creator God encourages us and what it does not encourage us to believe about the nature of man.

A question to consider:

When there is a need for pastoral counselling, why do we have to bother about understanding psychology? Some think that prayer and the Bible are enough for a believer’s transformation.