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What Makes Counseling Christian

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Over the last 25 years, Christian counseling has been defined in a number of ways. Definitions have focused on the context, content or intervention techniques, the motivations or goals of counseling, and counselor characteristics. Strengths and weaknesses of various approaches will be examined and a resolution proposed.

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Discussions of Christian counseling have identified several distinct definitions for what makes counseling Christian. Worthington (1986) suggests that the two major emphases of definitions revolve around context and content. By contextual definitions, counseling is Christian when it occurs in Christian and religious settings--churches, parachurch organizations, and the like. Worthington, Dupont, Berry and Duncan (1988) suggest that Christian counseling techniques (content) can be grouped into three categories. The first of these emphasizes the goal of counseling as conversion and discipleship or spiritual growth. In terms of content, Worthington, et al. distinguish two emphases; the first includes techniques derived from Scripture and the spiritual guidance literature; the second involves focus on Christian topics or issues as an emphasis of therapy or counseling.

Crabb (1978, 1982?) and Kirwan (1984) are examples of persons who emphasize the goals as what is distinctive about Christian counseling.

An alternative proposed by Bufford (1992) is that counseling or psychotherapy is Christian when the agents providing it are consecrated or set apart for the purpose of service to God and their fellow human(s); this is a motivational explanation. This goal surely can include evangelism and discipleship, but is much broader; it includes service, which may not have the outcomes of evangelism or discipleship either as an immediate or long term goal.

Collins (1988) suggests that what makes Christian counseling unique includes unique assumptions, goals, techniques, and counselor characteristics. Among the unique assumptions are those of a Christian worldview; this implies that the therapist him/herself is Christian, though this important emphasis is more often assumed than stated explicitly.

Powlison (1992) suggests that there is no place for psychology in Christian counseling. According to Powlison, "the interpretive categories that psychologists use are highly distorted. . . . They inevitably end up feeding covert or overt idolatries" (Powlison, 1992; p. 212). Thus Powlison is both for Christian counseling and against Christian psychology; this places him within the Christian anti-psychology movement.

While Powlison's view appears to be incompatible with the others at a number of points, what is central to Christian counseling is the worldview and motivations of the counselor. For counseling to be truly Christian, the counselor herself must be Christian, and her/his attitude

must be one of service to God and fellow humans. All approaches which profess to be Christian should be united in these respects. However, diversity of contexts, varied contents and intervention techniques, and even a diversity of goals, seem compatible with this framework. Such a diversity is consistent with the emerging variety of approaches and emphases manifest in the Second International Congress on Christian Counseling and with the growing diversity of affiliations within the Christian community. Moreover, such diversity should be welcomed and encouraged.

Defining Christian Counseling

Context

Church setting

Parachurch setting

Content/Interventions (Means)

Techniques derived from Scripture (Theology)

spiritual guidance

spiritual formation

church traditions/practices

Techniques avoided if contrary to Scripture

Issues/topics of focus involve Christian faith

Motivation/Goals

Goal: Conversion, Discipleship/Spiritual Formation

Goal: Service to God, fellow man (= consecrated counseling)

Counselor characteristics

assumptions/worldview

(personal relationship with God)

Ecclesiastical role (i.e., pastors)