1

"Are You a Christian Counsellor?"

What Christian Counselling Could and Shouldn't Be About

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Some of you here will know that in the year 2000, I published a book entitled *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness.* Until about 2005, it remained a best-selling book in pastoral counselling in the US, England, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa, and it was a required text in seminaries and theological colleges in many countries of the world. Sales have tapered off now, after such a period of time, but it still sells well, and still generates invitations for me to speak at regional and national conferences.

In 2000, I was also a regular book-reviewer for *The New Zealand Herald*, and so when I informed the *Herald*'s book editor of the publication of *Caring for God's People*, she asked if she could arrange for it to be reviewed. As is usually the case, as the writer I was not consulted about the choice of a reviewer, so perhaps you can imagine my surprise when the book received quite a negative review in the *Herald* a couple of months later.

The reviewer, a Presbyterian minister from here in Auckland, wrote (Watkin, 2000):

> *Aucklander Philip Culbertson's very American references to school grades and his American spelling indicate who the real audience [of this book] is, even if some local examples are used. Not surprisingly, Culbertson begins with a number of assumptions. For example, he has chosen family systems theory, narrative*

counselling theory and object relations theory as the three most useful approaches from the field of psychotherapy for those in ministry. Of course, most ministers do trawl from a wide range of theories, so even if you do disagree with this view and are willing to grapple with the jargon, his analysis could add to any minister's melting pot. Another assumption Culbertson works from is his perception of ministry, which he defines as recognising God through self-knowledge and then simply being among others to point where God is already present and at work. Good ministry, according to Culbertson, is ultimately dependent upon the pastor's people skills, people knowledge, and knowing what wholeness looks like. As significant as these issues are, ministry must be more than this. What about our understanding of who God is and the skills in ministry that enable people to discover a closer relationship with God? What is Christian ministry without a living, active God? (p. I-11)

This reviewer's criticism has lurked in the back of my mind for the past eight years. It's the most negative review I've received publicly since I began publishing books nearly twenty years ago. In part I was bothered because of the contrast between what that reviewer said, and what another reviewer said (Albers, 2000):

Some might critique Culbertson for beginning with the context of human situations and then moving to biblical texts and theological reflection. I don't personally find that problematic, because as a pastoral counselor one is confronted existentially with the problems that afflict and affect individuals and families. Beginning with the "presenting problem" does not mean that a theological context or presuppositions are absent. Reflecting theologically with someone in counseling and integrating the faith tradition as it speaks to the struggles of the human condition often follows as a matter of course if a person of faith seeks out a counselor who operates from the perspective of faith. (p. 431)

So it is the case, in fact, that the conflict between these two reviews of the same book sets out the landscape of what I want to address today, and what I'm quite eager to hear my respondents speak to. In sum: Is there an agreed definition of Christian counselling? Can Christian counselling begin with the client and stay with the client, or should it begin with the client and end with the Bible?

I realise that I've just wildly oversimplified the problem by setting up two positions of potential conflict. Anyone who is a counsellor knows that nothing is ever that cut

and dried. But at least these two conflicting positions set up, via caricature, an extremely important distinction that points to the place of God, the Bible, and the many different interpretations of Christian faith and tradition when dealing not only with Christian issues in the counselling room, but many other spiritual issues as well.

"Am I a Christian counsellor?"

When a potential client phones to ask if you are a Christian counsellor, what do you answer? I was occasionally confronted with this conundrum when I had my private practice in therapy here in Auckland, because enough people in town knew enough about me to also know that I am an ordained Anglican minister. But my professional experience in the church, as well as in counselling and psychotherapy, is that ordained people can seem very frightening, or perhaps rigid, to potential clients. My policy was, when asked by potential clients, to say, "I am a psychotherapist and I am a Christian." That was a carefully constructed answer designed to avoid, at the point of initial contact, any discussion of what either "psychotherapist" or "Christian" meant, since I believe that the meaning of those terms needs to be worked out face-to-face with clients. "Psychotherapist" is not a term well-understood by much of the New Zealand public, it seems to me. More importantly, "Christian" is a term that can mean many varied things to different people—a lesson I have learned over the course of my nearly forty years of being ordained.

When I would answer, "I am a psychotherapist and I am a Christian," what was in the back of my head was the desire to leave open for face-to-face exploration all possible areas of spiritual belief, and wait to learn what the client meant by the various vocabulary words attached to both Christianity and spirituality. My use of this professional principle springs out of my deep-seated belief that the purpose of counselling and psychotherapy is to "sit with" people while they find a way to "wake up"; tell the truth as best they can; make sense out of their life; and then move into the task of living a fuller, more aware, more satisfying life in which they are making conscious, rather than driven, choices, and are able to live out interdependent relationships with those around them.

As an aside, perhaps you will notice that it is difficult for me to address this topic, on the whole, without using a vocabulary in which religious philosophies and the practice of psychotherapy overlap with each other—words like principles, beliefs, and spiritual—and some of you will have noticed that I just used the words "way, truth, and life" all in the same sentence!

The blurred boundaries of religions and spirituality

There have been times in the course of my practice when the line between Christian belief and a more amorphous spirituality seemed blurred. When I taught in the psychotherapy department at AUT, I used to familiarise my students with the work of American therapist Carlton Cornett. In his book *The Soul of Psychotherapy*, Cornett outlines five questions that he asks his clients in order to encourage them to bring their spiritual beliefs into the room, and place them in dialogue with the other ways in which they were making sense—or not—of their lives. The answers, he believes, to these five questions are the foundation of what he calls "an examined life." His five questions are:

- *What is a meaning of life?*
- *What values are especially important to you?*
- *Where will you go when you die?*
- *Who or what is in charge of the universe?*
- *Why do people suffer?* (Cornett, 1998, pp. 21–44)

Cornett argues that all people can—at least eventually—find answers to these five questions during therapy, which will feed their congruency and bolster their resiliency. You and I can look at these questions and immediately realise that the major religions of the world, including Christianity, also seek answers to these same questions—just as much as less structured spiritualities do. Most of the major religions also try to dictate that there are only certain "correct" answers to these questions, in the name of faithful orthodoxy. But Cornett's claim is that everyone, religious or spiritual, can answer these five questions, and that seeking such answers is an integral part of counselling and psychotherapy when understood holistically.

Are there standard, universal, Christian answers to these five questions? If you affirmed for the potential client that you were indeed a Christian counsellor, does that mean that you and the client would agree on the same answers to each of these questions?

Without turning this into a lecture in biblical studies, I will say that the Bible itself gives various answers to Cornett's questions, except for question four, where the clear answer is that God is in charge of the universe. For those of you who are less familiar with the Christian tradition, I will point out that question three—where will you go when you die?—has at least four answers in Christianity: immediately to heaven to be with God; or, into the ground to await the final resurrection of the dead; or, it depends on how you have lived your life, whether you will go to heaven or hell; or, this is all metaphorical language which does not indicate that one goes anywhere in particular.

Barbara Brown Taylor (2007), a brilliant contemporary Anglican writer, has yet another answer:

> *I suppose my greatest curiosity about the afterlife is whether I will continue to be me. I want to continue being me, of course. I want not only to see all of those creatures that I have rescued through the years; I also want to see the loved ones whom I have lost. I want to lay my head on Grandma Lucy's lap again. I want to shell field peas with Fannie Belle and listen to Schubert with Earl. The problem with this scenario is that it turns heaven into my perfect version of earth, with a perfect me in the middle of it. As appealing as this is, it strikes me as an underutilization of God's gifts.… In the face of all that I do not know about heaven, I am still willing to go where God wants me to go and to be what God wants me to be, even if I have to leave me behind.* (p. 10)

Question five—Why do people suffer?—is even more complicated. For example, in 2006, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and its environs, Pastor John Hagee, whose recent endorsement of John McCain proved to be a great embarrassment to McCain's presidential campaign, announced that God had sent the hurricane to wipe out New Orleans because that city was preparing to have a Gay Pride parade. This, of course, is not exactly a biblical answer to why people suffer, but Hagee was able to back up his logic by citing, among other things, the destruction of the whole cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because some of the adult males there had behaved rudely.

Now I'm left with yet another dilemma, as this presentation unfolds: If a potential client asks me if I am Christian, would she be expecting me to give answers consistent with Pastor John Hagee's logic? Would I be able to stay connected to her in a Rogerian manner if she gave me that explanation? These are practice questions of significant import, and behind them lies the issue of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics and clients' expectations

I am presuming here that if someone asks me if I am Christian, they are simultaneously asking me if I know and read the Bible, and if I interpret the biblical texts and precepts in the same way they do. Pastor John Hagee is an American ordained Christian minister, and I am an American ordained Christian minister, and we are about the same age. But we "interpret" the Bible very very differently. We each bring to the Bible our particular hermeneutic, which in turn causes us to draw very different lessons from the biblical text.

The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* defines "hermeneutics" as the theory of interpretation, with biblical hermeneutics being that which

> *inquires into the conditions under which the interpretation of biblical texts may be judged possible, faithful, accurate, responsible, or productive in relation to some specified goal. Hermeneutics…entails a study of biblical texts in order to understand not only the historical aspects of the writings but also the significance of these documents for the present as well.* (Metzger & Coogan, 1993)

Hermeneutics are like the lenses in your eyeglasses: they are unique to you and a small group of other people in the world, but there are more people whose eyesight is not like yours or mine than whose eyesight is. We put on our eyeglasses before we read a text, and our eyeglasses are themselves lenses crafted from the raw materials of our social location: our experiences with our families, race, class, culture, education, values, and unique life experience. Wars have been fought between people wearing different eyeglasses!

Note the words from the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*: whether a biblical text may be judged "possible, faithful, accurate, responsible, or productive in relation to some specified goal." Let me illustrate: for a conference presentation I was making in Auckland last week, I was doing research on the phrase from the Old Testament (Hosea 11:9), in which God says: "I will not execute the fierceness of my anger, *ki El anokhi, ve'lo ish*, for I am God, and not a male." As a Christian and an academic, I do not believe that God is male. I believe that we "gender" God because we humans think in gendered ways, but God is not gendered. As theologian Miroslav Volf (1996, p. 173) points out, we get our human concepts of gender from animals, not from God. But would a potential client, inquiring whether or not I am Christian, necessarily be able to understand why I prefer to speak of God in non-gendered language? I believe that my interpretation of Hosea 11:9 is "possible, faithful, accurate, responsible, or productive in relation to some specified goal," because to get to my interpretation, I have used a defensible hermeneutical process. But would my Christian potential client think so? The answer, I believe, is that some Christian clients would feel quite liberated by the opportunity to speak of God in non-gendered language, but that many others would find it confusing, suspiciously innovative, and perhaps not at all Christian. They would find my conversation about God to be not possible, not faithful, not responsible, and not productive for their specified goal.

Or should I immediately capitulate, and speak to my Christian client only in

masculine God-words? Frankly, I don't know if I can do that. We therapists and counsellors do have our own values which, however hard we might try to be neutral, do in fact co-inhabit the counselling room as we work. I've been a follower of second-wave feminism since its inception, in the late 1960s. For forty years now I have valued the challenge to speak and write in inclusive language, and the daunting task to think subversively about patriarchy and male privilege. This is a deeply embedded value of mine, and one that I doubt I could set aside without creating extreme internal conflict, even though unconditional positive regard is also a value, not just a technique. Our religious and spiritual beliefs as counsellors are also values, including our reactions to the assumed roles of women in scripture, to the use of exclusivist language, and to the way that the power assumed by human males is underwritten by entrenched masculine metaphors for God, such as King and Lord. These are contested issues in the Church which divide us already, and which prevent me from answering too facilely any question about whether I am a "Christian counsellor." Of course I am, in one sense, and have been for nearly four decades—but possibly not the kind of Christian counsellor a client might be expecting.

In many ways, we want our clients to be good, successful, and wise, just as we desire those values in ourselves. We want them to assume responsibility, to gain insight, to have personal integrity, to move toward more observable and functional individuation. Lucy Bregman (1989) comments, "therapists want their patients or clients to develop in certain ways, to become certain kinds of persons, to grow out of certain behaviours and attitudes" (p. 261). Counselling and psychotherapy also seem to discount or downplay certain other values. "For instance, nowhere are purity, chastity, and righteous indignation therapeutic virtues, nor does reaching perfection appear as a valid therapeutic goal" (p. 263).

Yet some would argue that purity, chastity, righteous indignation, and perfection —"Be ye perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48)—are biblical values that Christian counsellors ought to be actively encouraging in their clients. How do we negotiate and manage the presence of our own personal and religious values in the counselling relationship? How do we manage situations in which our Christian values or Christian hermeneutics will disappoint or even anger our Christian clients? What is the point at which a clash between our personal values as counsellors and a client's personal values becomes an issue of professional ethics? These and similar questions seem to be hardly addressed in the counselling and psychotherapy literature.

To double-check my hunch that there is a lack of guidance in a lot of these areas, I went to that perennial academic resource, Amazon.com. There I found a few books on the compatibility, or lack thereof, between Christianity and counselling. One of the leading texts was by someone named Gary Almy, who set the two up as diametrically opposed. His book, *How Christian is Christian Counselling? The Dangerous Secular Influences that Keep Us from Caring for Souls* (2000), started off selling really well, because he argued that Christians should stay as far away from counsellors and psychotherapists as possible, and only consult ordained spiritual directors. Unfortunately, the sales of his book dropped off quite sharply soon after it was published, when he was arrested for sexually abusing boys.

Amazon's best-selling book in Christian counselling is *Christian Counseling that Really Works: Compass Therapy in Action*, by Dan Montgomery (2007). Another popular book in Christian counselling was *The Christian Therapist's Notebook: Homework, Handouts, and Activities for Use in Christian Counseling*, by Philip J. Henry, Lori Marie Figueroa, and David Miller (2007). The book advertises itself as based on three pillars: the truth of scripture; the centrality of Christ; and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A fourth book listed was *Effective Biblical Counseling*, by prolific Christian writer Larry Crabb. Published in 1977, it has sold well, though recent comments from readers on the Amazon site suggest that they are dissatisfied with his "liberal" use of scripture, and found the book "too influenced by secularism, and people like Freud and Carl Rogers."

I became intrigued and did another Amazon search, this time punching in "Pastoral Counseling," rather than "Christian Counseling." Interestingly, a completely different set of books showed up. Most of the best-selling authors in that category are acquaintances of mine—people whose work informs my work, and who I run into at conferences. But there seems to be a gulf of some kind between Christian or biblical counselling, and pastoral counselling. To me, this again points to the complexity of the topic I am addressing here: the general level of suspicion which exists between the two polar ends of biblical hermeneutics. And if secular counselling is polarised from Christian counselling, and Christian counselling is polarised into biblical counselling vs pastoral counselling, then perhaps I've just stumbled into a minefield.

To complicate matters further, I need to note the existence of a large, and growing, body of literature in "spirituality and counselling." A sharp distinction is made in the non-Christian literature between spirituality and religion. Carlton Cornett makes this distinction, as does Froma Walsh, in her widely read recent book, *Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy* (1999). Citing Wright, Watson, and Bell (*Beliefs: The Heart of*

Healing in Families and Illness, 1966), Walsh (1999) describes the difference: "… distinctions between religion, as extrinsic, organized faith systems, and spirituality, as more intrinsic personal beliefs and practices" (p. 5). The field of humanistic spiritualities, for example, has mushroomed in the past thirty years. I'd venture to guess that there are as many books now on spirituality in counselling or psychotherapy as there are books on biblical counselling and pastoral counselling. This body of research is cited regularly in the pages of the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, as we in this country are increasingly open to engaging both Western and indigenous spiritualities among our increasingly multicultural client base.

In some ways, classical psychotherapy has been less adventurous in exploring issues of spirituality. Of course, Jung was deeply spiritual, as his writings show repeatedly, but as object-relations psychodynamic psychotherapy moved further away from Jung's analytical psychology, spirituality seemed to get marginalised. However, a few Christian and Jewish writers have persevered in pastoral psychotherapy with a deeply spiritual, and often religious, base. Here I would mention the writings of Pamela Cooper-White (2004), W. W. Meissner (1995), Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979), Edwin Friedman (1985), Carrie Doehring (2006), Harry Aponte (1994), David Augsburger (1986), Herbert Anderson (1993), and Donald Capps, whose recent book *Jesus, the Village Psychiatrist* (2008) is a fascinating exploration of whether most of Jesus' "healings" were due to his deep understanding of the psychosomatic, or somatoform, origin of so many physical ailments.

To liberate or to discipline?

To formulate how we should appropriately respond to a potential client who phones to ask, "Are you a Christian counsellor?" we perhaps need to explore our own fantasies in relation to the questions: What is the purpose of counselling—to liberate or to discipline? How do we know whether a client wants to be set free, or to be supported in conforming to assumed Christian expectations?

Both themes—liberation and discipline—are developed strongly in the Bible. On the one hand, we have the constantly surprising nature of God, who from Moses in Egypt to the end of the book of Revelation repeatedly promises the faithful that they will be liberated into an exciting new tomorrow which will offer opportunities beyond their wildest expectations. On the other hand, we have biblical phrases such as "Conform your minds to the mind of Christ" (2 Corinthians 3:18; see also Romans 8:29), or "wives, be obedient to your husbands" (Ephesians 5:22). The first example

illustrates liberation, leading people out of slavery into freedom and new hope, and the second examples illustrate the call to the discipline and submission of human lives and minds to the will of God as expressed in the Bible, however that will is perceived.

I would claim that this same tension continues unresolved throughout the Bible, and well into the subsequent history of the church. For example, among writers in the first few centuries, Matthew 25:31–46, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink," was called The Great Commission—Jesus' most important charge to his followers to continue his work. But as the Church began to grow in the 4th century, Matthew 28:19, "Go unto all nations and baptize them, making them disciples," was called The Great Commission (see Flusser, 1988, esp. p. 175, note 1). Both themes are found in the Gospel of Matthew, and the determination of which is weightier is generally influenced by historical circumstances as well as the personal opinions of diverse Christians. Both interpretations of what it means to be Christian—to liberate, or to discipline and disciple—have a long history in Church and theology. I can't help wondering which would be the preference of any potential client who asks, "Are you a Christian counsellor?": liberation, or discipline?

What is good practice in these situations?

While I was in active practice as a therapist, I received a call about once every three months, asking if I did Christian counselling. As I said, I always answered, "I am a psychotherapist and I am a Christian." I did that because I believed that anything beyond my simple answer needed to be explored face to face with the inquirer, and I hoped that my answer would be encouraging enough for her to come see me, at least for long enough to sort things out. However, if in the initial conversation the inquirer would rephrase and repeat her question—"But I asked if you are a Christian counsellor"—then I would say no, and offer to refer her to people that I knew advertised themselves that way. There's something about the question that signals me that I would disappoint the inquirer by not meeting an unexplored set of prior expectations.

This is not to say that I have not discussed Christianity or belief systems with my clients. Over the ten years that I was in private practice here, I would say that I discussed faith issues with about 25% of my clients. Some, of course, never indicated that they knew I was ordained; I didn't advertise that here because I believe it repels more people than it attracts. But a few clients did ask me if I felt a conflict between being a priest and being a psychotherapist, and a few asked me if I believed in God. Several clients brought material about their activity in local congregations into the room,

especially if they were having trouble "being true to themselves" within their Christian communities. (As you might guess, some of these clients were struggling with how to remain in their local congregations and still claim a gay identity.) This did raise the question for me about how afraid people are of disappointing God, or of God's disappointment in them, or the Church's basic inability to accept them for who they really are. These were usually productive conversations, but I don't think they qualified me as a Christian counsellor. Many other therapists could have done just as well, as long as we all adopted a position of "informed not-knowing"—about the Bible, denominationalism, or the perceived requirements for a healthy faith in God.

I'll close now with a story. In about 1996, I had an idea to teach a Masters level course within Theology, entitled "Spirituality and Counselling." The course was to be cross-listed with the MEd (Couns.) programme at the University. I had an idea what the theology students might need me to include in the course, but less of an idea what the counselling students might need to have included. So via Hans Everts and Margaret Agee, I arranged a two-hour meeting with some of the students enrolled for an MEd (Couns.). My initial plan for the course had included a brief introduction to beliefs of the major world religions which are practised in New Zealand—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The gathered students thought that was a terrible idea. I asked, "So if a client says that he likes Christianity because of its strong belief in *reincarnation*, you don't think a counsellor needs to know what's wrong with that statement?" "No," replied the students, "you just need to go with the flow of what the client believes, even if it is technically incorrect." I protested. The students replied, "What matters in a counselling session is what the client believes, not whether it's right or wrong!"

In writing this presentation, I realised that that exchange, too, has sat in the back of my mind all these years. Perhaps that's why I don't want to call myself a Christian counsellor: because I would feel the need to make sure that the client got Christianity "right"—probably "my kind of right"—before we could address the client's issues. I realised then that my tendency in the counselling room, when it came to issues of Christian faith and behaviour, would probably be to discipline and disciple—that is, to teach my educated hermeneutic based on 38 years as a priest and professor—rather than to liberate clients into a healthier, more congruent, more resilient way of living their lives, even if what they were basing it on was "wrong"—whatever that means and however they believed.

So I leave you with one simple question: "Are you a Christian counsellor?"

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