A Response to Philip Culbertson's Presentation

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In his paper, "'Are you a Christian counsellor?' What Christian counselling could and shouldn't be about," Philip asks, "What is the purpose of counselling—to liberate or to discipline?" My attention was caught by this question, as it was a similar question that led to my own decision to leave my role as church pastor in order to become a counsellor within the wider community.

As a pastoral counsellor in a church strongly influenced by the "discipleship movement" of the 1960s and 1970s (O'Malley, 1997), I was confronted with a stark conflict between my personal desire to offer people the freedom that could lead to genuine transformation, and the expectation that as a Christian leader, I should maintain a standard of behaviour in my parish. Employed by a church that held a specific moral code, I was expected to uphold the rules of the club. In that situation, the words "Christian" and "counsellor" created a conflict that I was unable to reconcile.

Many years on, I am still a counsellor and still a Christian. However, those two descriptors of myself no longer sit in such an uneasy alliance.

Like Philip, I choose not to run those two descriptors together, though within myself, they are inseparable. I cannot extricate being a Christian from my everyday experiences, any more than I can extricate my Judaism, or the fact that I am a Kiwi or a woman. These factors, and many more, shape my values, my behaviours, the discourses I live by, and the expectations I have of myself and of others. Because my faith has played an integral part in learning to love and value myself, it remains part of the foundation that allows me to love and value others. If we are committed to the level of genuineness that Rogers (1961; 1980) so strongly advocates within the therapeutic relationship, how can we separate the factors that have shaped us from the people who we are?

Philip asks, "Are you a Christian counsellor?" My answer is, "Yes. I am a Christian counsellor—and a Jewish counsellor, and a Kiwi counsellor, and a white middle-aged female counsellor." All these factors influence who I am and how I am perceived. Therefore, just as it may be necessary to ask a client how it is for them to be working

with a woman, so it may be important, if they know of my history, to ask how it is to be working with a Christian and an ex-minister.

The moment I am identified as a Christian, I become an image-bearer. For good or ill, my actions and personhood can become a measuring stick for Christianity and for God. Until I am known for myself, I am also likely to wear the faces of image-bearers who have gone before. For me, therefore, the question is not so much, am I a Christian counsellor, as it is, "What sort of Christian counsellor am I?" What does it mean for me to take my whole self, including my faith, into the counselling room? How does that faith influence the way that I treat my clients, my way of being with others, and the way others perceive me?

Within the New Zealand Christian Counsellors' Association, the debate about what it means to be a Christian counsellor has been a familiar and ongoing one. Members join the association because they see their faith and their counselling practice as being linked in some way, but the ways that different members would describe that link may be very, very different. As an organisation, NZCCA is constantly holding the tension between differing, and at times conflicting, expressions of faith, all of which come under the broad heading of "Christian." Our challenge is to remain inclusive of these differences in a way that models grace, while at the same time creating opportunities for members to critique the impact their faith has on themselves, their clients, and their counselling practice. Under the NZCCA umbrella would also nestle some strongly opposing ideas of what it means to bring Christian faith into the counselling room. Some would say we bring it in through an attitude of grace and acceptance. Others would say we bring it in by conscious reference to scripture and theology. Rather than ask which is right, perhaps we would do better to ask which is most appropriate for the client that we seek to walk alongside.

Philip has invited our response to two positions of potential conflict: "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 would respond with my own question: "Which 'Bible' are we talking about? The Bible that's written down as scripture, or what Michael Quoist (1963, p. 2) calls 'that new gospel, to which we ourselves add a page each day'?"

It seems to me that most people of faith carry two different theologies—the espoused theology that they have been taught, and the embodied theology that they live out of. These two may carry a degree of harmony, or bear little resemblance to each other. As counsellors and Christians, which of these do we most value? Which do we invite into the counselling room, and is it the counsellor or the client who decides whether either is relevant?

Perhaps because of my Jewish ancestry, I find it very difficult to separate sacred from secular in the way that much Christian doctrine does. Even the question of whether we can "start with the client and end with the Bible" suggests that humanity and spirituality are somehow separate from each other and that we need to leave something of our personhood behind to advance into spirituality. David Benner (1998) writes:

> *Efforts to separate the spiritual, psychological, and physical aspects of persons, inevitably result in a trivialization of each. When spirituality is equated with "that part of us that relates to God," suddenly we are in a position of relating to God with only a part of our being. It is then only a small step to God being seen as more interested in certain parts of us than others. The dividing line between sacred and secular then cuts through the fabric of personality…when spirituality is separated from the physical, the result is a spirituality that lacks groundedness—an ethereal experience that has no connection to the rest of one's life.* (pp. 62–63)

If we see ourselves needing to add specific Christian practices into our counselling work for it to be "spiritual," are we in fact adding to the split between humanity and spirituality?

In my own experience and my work with clients who have been spiritually abused, espoused theology and the Bible have been a source of great injury rather than a source of life and healing. For clients who have experienced dominating and legalistic churches, the Bible has often been the weapon that has brutalised them. With such clients, the Bible is inevitably present in the counselling room, just as the shadow of the perpetrator is present with clients who have been sexually abused, and that presence is far from benevolent or benign. The very tool that some streams of Christian counselling (Adams, 1973; Collins, 2001; Crabb, 1977; McMinn, 1996) would see as pivotal to healing may in fact be the enemy to be faced and conquered. With some of my clients, it has been necessary to negotiate a "Bible-free" space within the counselling room, where they can go to explore their own thoughts away from the tyranny of "God-sanctioned Truth." For others, the Bible has represented a trusted resource for their healing and move toward wholeness. Benner (2003) points out the need for care and sensitivity when using any religious resources, stressing the importance of understanding how "they are experienced by the person seeking help" (pp. 37–39).

As counsellors, how do we manage the power dynamic that comes into the room when clients themselves bring in beliefs that carry a quality of divine authority? How do we create a safe place for challenging these beliefs and how do we know if

challenging these beliefs is in a client's best interest? Similarly, how do we manage power dynamics when asked to pray for a client? What does prayer mean for them? Is prayer a cultural practice, or a step of holistic processing, or an act of avoiding responsibility, or a request that comes out of a belief that God is more likely to listen to our prayers than to theirs?

The greatest challenge for me as a Christian and a counsellor is to respectfully hold, and genuinely value, a client's beliefs in a punitive, judgemental God. Everything in me wants to rise up and shout, "But God isn't like that! What about love and grace?" If I say this, am I still being a counsellor, or have I moved into the role of evangelist? How can I enter my client's world in genuine empathy and respect if I am looking for a chance to correct their theology? When I review the way that my own theology has radically changed over the years, and will likely change again, how can I assume that my version of "truth" is right, anyway?

It seems to me that if I am to work holistically with my clients, I am better to look for what is already present and life-giving in their spirituality, than to look for what is lacking. If I have the audacity to believe that I model something of the face of God, am I equally expectant and willing to see God modelled in my clients, whatever their beliefs? Perhaps, for me, being a Christian counsellor is less about what I promote and more about what I am willing to hear and see—a willingness to hear and value spiritual longings and to see the sacred in those whose lives I am privileged to share.

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