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Christian Counseling The Past Generation and the State of the Field

Rick Marrs

J. T. McNeill asserts in his book *A History of the Cure of Souls*, that “soul care” (also known as pastoral care, soul healing, *cura animarum*, and *seelsorge*) has been around for three millennia, dating back to Israel’s wise men (*hakhamim*) and their Wisdom literature. He cites Jesus’s care of souls in verses like Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (*anapausis*, refreshment).” The last paragraph of McNeill’s classic work concludes:

The cure of souls has been a vast historic enterprise. The Christian Church has regarded it in the light of an unending warfare against the sin and sorrow of the teeming human generations . . . To the shining company of *curators animarum* whose efforts have claimed our attention, let us accord a reverential salute. May their successors, equipped with new skills, profit by their insights, avoid their mistakes, and surpass their achievements!¹

For centuries, soul care was done primarily, almost exclusively, by clergy. But in the past generation, at least in North America, the vocations claiming to do soul healing have greatly expanded. Gary Moon, vice president of Richmond Graduate University, says that Christian counseling, pastoral counseling, biblical counseling, and spiritual direction are all “sibling soul care disciplines.”² I agree with Moon that these four disciplines are distinct from one another, but interface with one another and share many of the core values. The purpose of this article is to help readers know some of the recent history and current practices of Christian counseling and biblical counseling.

A Personal History of Soul Care

Each generation introduces the next to “soul care.” Two mentors introduced me to these disciplines: John Saleska and Martin Haendschke. When I was a college freshman in 1976 at St. John’s College in Winfield, Kansas, Professor John Saleska taught both my introduction to psychology course and my Old Testament course. He encouraged me to read not just the psychology textbook, but also the book *What, Then, Is Man?* and Martin Scharlemann’s book *Healing and Redemption*.³ Later, I discovered that

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What, Then, Is Man? had a formative influence on many non-LCMS evangelicals who expanded the Christian counseling and psychology movement in the 1970s. Saleska emphasized the importance of 2 Corinthians 10:5 “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” It became a theme verse for me as I continued my pre-seminary and then psychology major studies at (then named) Concordia College in River Forest, Illinois.

While there, I let it be known that I planned to become a “Christian psychologist/counselor.” A pastor friend who knew of my plans to study counseling and psychology in graduate school challenged me to first pursue a Master of Arts in Religion (MAR) degree at Concordia Seminary to strengthen my theological foundation before exploring secular psychology in depth. At the seminary, I met Dr. Haendschke who had us read some of the Christian and biblical counseling authors of the 1970s: Gary Collins, William Hulme, Jay Adams, Howard Clinebell, David Myers, and Paul Pruyser. Haendschke emphasized to his students the importance of properly distinguishing law and gospel in pastoral counseling, and showed us that authors like Jay Adams did not comprehend that distinction. I will speak more about some of these authors below.

Saleska and Haendschke started me on a love/frustration relationship with the fields of counseling, psychology, Christian counseling, and pastoral care/counseling that I have to this day. There is much first article information we can learn from modern psychology and counseling, information that previous generations of pastors had no access to; however, I also learned from my mentors to be wary of the sub-Christian assumptions with which secular psychologists often begin. Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, and Albert Ellis were proponents of atheism in their generations as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins are in today’s generation. Carl Rogers was a prominent secular humanist who influenced modern psychologists to be more open to eastern religions than to Christianity.

In its proper place, there is much to learn from psychology, but it poses real dangers when it ventures into the spiritual realm. As a Christian studying and practicing in the secular realm, I had numerous non-Christian supervisors and instructors who treated my Christian belief system with respect. I also faced challenges to my Christian faith, even persecution, by several others. Some of the challenges that face Christian counselors today are discussed below.

Early Development of Christian Counseling and Psychology

Jay Adams and Gary Collins were two of the most prominent evangelical voices in soul care in the 1970s and 1980s. Adams was the leader of the biblical counseling movement, Collins of the Christian counseling wing. In *Competent to Counsel*⁴ Jay Adams writes a strong critique of the Freudian and Rogerian assumptions of modern psychology. According to Adams, mental illness is a misnomer; all emotional problems can be attributed to personal sin, and the primary role of the counselor is to authoritatively confront the unrecognized sin in the struggling Christian’s life. Adams coined the

term “nouthetic counseling,” based upon the Greek word *noutheteo*, to verbally confront someone. In Lutheran terms, Adams was heavy on the use of the law, but rarely emphasized the gospel, forgiveness, or Christian encouragement (despite the fact that the Greek cognates for encouragement and comfort, *paraklesis/parakaleo*, occur over 130 times in the New Testament compared to only eight times for *noutheteo*). Adams showed little appreciation for the first article mental disorder or trauma issues that might bedevil struggling Christians.

Gary Collins wrote *The Rebuilding of Psychology, Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, and many other books. In these, Collins too critiques the assumptions of Freud, Rogers, and behaviorists like Skinner, but he also calls for the integration of Christianity and psychology in places where they hold common ground. He emphasizes that since God is the source of all truth, truth is found both in nature (natural revelation) and in the Bible (special revelation). Science is the process humans use to understand nature, and theology is our means of understanding the Bible. His focus on presuppositions, in Chapter 5 of *Rebuilding*, is heavily influenced by *What, Then, Is Man?*

Collins was not alone in this integration movement. Bruce Narramore and Archibald Hart helped to form Christian doctoral programs in clinical psychology at BIOLA (Rosemead) and Fuller Seminary, respectively. Larry Crabb, C. Stephen Evans, John Carter, Paul Vitz, David Myers, and others began writing important articles and books about faithfully integrating psychology and Christianity. Frank Minirth, Paul Meier, and Robert McGee founded inpatient clinics around the United States specifically for Christians who were struggling with various mental disorders. (Many of these clinics have closed, not because of theological issues, but because of the advent of managed care making inpatient treatment less cost effective). Other influential people in the 1970s and 1980s included James Dobson and M. Scott Peck, but they were more independent, not directly involved in the organization of Christian counseling.

The Growth of the Christian Counseling Movement

In 1986, Gary Collins formed the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC)⁵ and became its first president. Prior to this there had been smaller professional organizations like the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS, founded in 1956), the Association for Biblical Counseling (ABC), the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC), and the American Association of Pastoral Counseling (AAPC). None of these earlier organizations ever grew very large (not one of them currently has a membership over 2000). However, under Collins’s leadership, the AACC began to eclipse these other organizations in size of membership. AACC has nearly 50,000 members and has had for many years. The AACC is as large as or larger than a few of the secular professional counseling organizations, and is only smaller than the American Psychological Association and the National Association of Social Workers, groups that have a significant number of “non-counselors” in their membership. Gary Collins retired as president in 1998; Tim Clinton, a professor at Liberty University and previously the AACC vice president, became the president and continues today. Liberty University and the AACC share a considerable amount of infrastructure and leadership.

I attended one of the early meetings of the AACC in 1987 at Trinity Evangelical Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois (where Collins was a professor). There I heard Dr. Archibald Hart of Fuller call for Christian counselors to engage with systematic theologians to develop a more sophisticated biblical anthropology. He understood that Christian counselors were typically undertrained in the area of theology, but were well-meaning Christians who truly wanted to help heal souls.⁶ Unfortunately in my experience of at least a decade, the field of Christian counseling attended more to pragmatic concerns and less to theological depth.⁷ Since the year 2000, theological issues and historical soul care seem (to me) to be more frequently written about and discussed at conferences. Now many of the magazine and journal articles and convention presentations are peppered with quotes from Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Edward, and others. For example, I have made workshop presentations at two AACC conferences about the importance of the use of law and gospel in Christian counseling (quoting heavily from Luther and Walther), with nearly 300 counselors attending.

Current Trends in Christian Counseling

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was considerable pushback from fellow Christians of those who studied psychology and wanted to become professionals in the counseling field.⁸ Even in the late 1970s, several pastors questioned my intention to enter such a secular field of study. In the 1980s that pushback subsided, especially with the advent of many Christian counseling graduate programs at seminaries and universities around the country. However, a sharp distinction between “Christian counseling” and “biblical counseling” was still prevalent into the 1990s. Biblical counselors tended to eschew any use of modern psychological theory and some of the science while Christian counselors integrated the parts of secular psychology that are compatible with a Christian worldview. In the past decade, the two groups have become friendlier; biblical counselors sometimes attend and present at Christian counseling conferences⁹ and have become much more open to psychopharmacological treatments for mental disorders.¹⁰ The AACC has formed a division for biblical counseling and spiritual formation.

The breadth of topics for books and workshops has expanded greatly in the AACC and other Christian counseling groups. There are professional divisions for addictions, cross-cultural counseling, grief and crisis counseling, marriage and family, military counseling, etc. The AACC hosts an international conference biennially in Nashville; 7000 attendees can choose from 200 different workshops in 23 different tracks. As the biblical and theological sophistication of many authors has increased through the decades, the emphasis on neuroscience and psychiatry, evidenced-based outcome research in Christian counseling, and the effects of faith on mental health also has increased.

One of the most intriguing and potentially helpful trends in Christian counseling is the development of distinctly Christian sex therapy. The acceptance of sex therapy in the general culture for the treatment of sexual dysfunctions and sex-related issues has been growing steadily since the days of Masters and Johnson (whose laboratory research began in 1954 at Washington University in St. Louis). However, if Christian couples struggling with sexual issues in their marriages came to their pastors

for help, those pastors would likely resist referring them to sex therapists because of the sub-Christian values that are part of the therapy. Since the 1990s however, several Christian professionals including Dr. Douglas Rosenau and Dr. Cliff and Joyce Penner, have been certified by the American Board of Sexology (ABS) and the Society for Sex Therapy and Research (SSTAR). These Christians start with biblical presuppositions about one flesh, monogamous marriage, and the gift of sexuality (e.g., the Song of Songs), and glean what is edifying from secular sex therapy to help develop counseling strategies. A book that I and some of my students have found most helpful is *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy* by Rosenau.¹¹

Current Challenges to Christian Counseling

Christian counselors face some of the same economic challenges that secular counselors do. Since the advent of managed care, remuneration from insurance companies for counseling services has become more difficult. Counselors must be on approved provider lists, the rates of reimbursement are often quite low, the amount of paperwork is very high, and the number of sessions is often limited. Many in private practice want to provide meaningful soul care to their clients, but find it a challenge to pay for office space, insurance, and continuing education. Churches that will trade counseling space for reduced rates for their parishioners may find some interested counselors.

In general, acceptance by secular counselors has been satisfactory, especially since secular counseling professional organizations publicly espouse meeting the needs of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, including those of various religions. Secular accrediting groups within the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association have regularly accredited masters and doctoral programs at evangelical Christian institutions. State boards have commonly accepted graduates from those institutions granting licenses in counseling and psychology.

However, the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) communities are making life increasingly complicated for Christian professionals. Those who seek training from secular counseling graduate programs may be dismissed from some programs or internships if it becomes known that they believe “homosexual behavior is sinful,” even if they agree to follow ethical guidelines for referring clients whose value systems differ from theirs.¹² Licensed counselors who practice “conversion therapy” or “reparative therapy” that seeks to shift another’s sexual orientation have been threatened with the revocation of their licenses. At least one state (California) has made it illegal for licensed counselors to do any type of “sexual orientation change efforts” with minors, even with parental approval and the informed consent of the teenager. Secular journals have routinely dismissed the research of Christians (and other religious groups) who have sought to provide empirical evidence about the changeability of sexual orientation. Leading researchers in this field, Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, eventually had to publish their research with a major Christian evangelical book company, despite the fact that their research designs met sophisticated psychological standards.¹³ They had discovered that religiously mediated change in sexual orientation was partially attainable among a substantial number of men.

Unfortunately, “holiness” theology provided the foundation for much of the early “conversion therapy” and “reparative therapy” practices and claims. Lutheran theological emphases like the “old Adam,” *simul justus et peccator*, Romans 7, and the lifetime need for daily repentance did not influence earlier strategies for changing sexual orientation. Instead, many clients were pointed to their own faith and wrestlings with God, and told that their temptations would eventually go away. When their temptations toward same-sex attraction did not heal as fast or as fully as they were led to hope, many left counseling and reported to the secular world that those strategies were ineffective and had even exacerbated their feelings of guilt and depression. Exodus International, an interdenominational umbrella organization to hundreds of local ministries for Christians seeking help with same-sex attraction, disbanded in June 2013, apologizing for the perceived harm its practices had caused. Some secular media and Internet sources assumed that Exodus was apologizing and backpedaling for its biblical theological position that same-sex behavior was sinful, but that was not true. They were apologizing for how unlovingly and naively their strategies had been implemented.

In recent years, Mark Yarhouse, Warren Throckmorton, and others have encouraged more sophisticated theological approaches, asking questions like, “What is the church’s response to enduring conditions?”¹⁴ They have also developed Sexual Identity Therapy (SIT) that empowers clients to distinguish between same-sex attraction, orientation, and identity, to weigh the various religious and sexual aspects of their identity, and to seek to be more congruent in these aspects of their identity. Practitioners of SIT seek to uphold the secular counseling values of self-determination and congruence, and SIT is therefore becoming more acceptable in secular circles.

Concluding Thoughts

McNeill again: “May their successors, equipped with new skills, profit by their insights, avoid their mistakes, and surpass their achievements!”¹⁵ This generation of soul healers, the successors to the many generations before us, face many new challenges from this secularizing culture. However, the Lord gives a variety of gifts to his body, the church (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12), and in this past generation he has raised up tens of thousands of Christians who have the culture’s counseling credentials and knowledge, but wish to serve their Lord faithfully in their encouragement of others. This new generation of soul healers generally knows little about our Lutheran theological distinctions, and how those distinctions can aid in their soul healing, but I have found many of them open to learning about these distinctions when we take the time to teach them.

Christian and biblical counselors are not evenly distributed geographically. Some pastors may have no Christian counselors within driving distance; others have ready access to several counselors to whom they would feel confident referring their beloved parishioners. If you do have access to such counselors, I pray that you will take the time to get to know them, discuss theology and soul care with them, and work together to bring the gospel message of refreshment (*anapausis*) to this generation of heavy-laden souls loved by Christ.

Endnotes

- ¹ John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 330.
- ² Gary W. Moon, "Growing Up with the 'Integration' Movement," *Christian Counseling Today* 18, no. 4 (2011): 56–58. This particular "State of the Art" issue of *Christian Counseling Today* may be of interest to readers who want to learn more about the history and current directions of the field.
- ³ *What, Then, Is Man? A Symposium of Theology, Psychology, and Psychiatry* was co-authored by psychologists Paul Meehl and Alfred Schmieiding, seminary professor Richard Klann, pastor Kenneth Breimeier, and psychiatrist Sophie Schroeder-Slomann. It was published by CPH in 1958 with a foreword by Martin Scharlemann. WTIM, commissioned by Concordia Seminary and the LCMS, did a superb job of wrestling with the tensions between the philosophical presuppositions of psychologists and the Christian view of humankind. Many of its insights are still helpful five decades later. Scharlemann then wrote *Healing and Redemption: Toward a Theology of Human Wholeness for Doctors, Nurses, Missionaries, and Pastors* (also by CPH) in 1965.
- ⁴ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970).
- ⁵ The AACC website is www.aacc.net.
- ⁶ In 2011, Tim Clinton, President of AACC cites that "[Archibald] Hart lamented years ago that Christian counseling had run dangerously ahead of its biblical and theological roots." Clinton goes on to argue that Christian counseling has matured as a field, both theologically and empirically, and is reaching out globally and through e-counseling strategies within North America. Tim Clinton, "Emerging Trends and Issues in Christian Counseling," *Christian Counseling Today* 18, no. 4 (2011): 34–38.
- ⁷ There were a few notable exceptions like Stanton Jones and Richard Butman's book, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1991, revised 2011). That classic spun off other books about how Christian counselors could view psychopathology and practice family therapy.
- ⁸ Diane Langberg, "History of Christian Counseling: Personal and Clinical Reflections," *Christian Counseling Today* 18, no. 4, (2011): 12–16.
- ⁹ I attended an intriguing AACC workshop in 2011 led by Ed Welch, a Presbyterian seminary professor and psychologist, in which he emphasized the biblical distinction between shame and guilt. He asserted that shame (often labeled "low self-esteem") is becoming more prevalent than guilt in American culture, and then explained the implications of counseling Christians suffering from shame with gospel metaphors of cleansing, honor, clothing, and belonging. Welch and his colleagues with the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF) Paul David Tripp, and David Powlison, are much more gospel-focused in their writings than was Jay Adams. Welch's books include *When People are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (1997) and *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (2001).
- ¹⁰ Michael R Emler, "Listening to Prozac... and to the Scriptures: A Primer on Psychoactive Medications," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no. 1 (2012): 11–22. Emler is a medical doctor who counsels and teaches at the CCEF's School of Biblical Counseling.
- ¹¹ Doug Rosenau, *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002). After reading this book, a group of my graduate students decided to start giving copies of it to their pre-marital counseled couples. Rosenau and others have formed the Institute for Sexual Wholeness which trains counselors in professional sex therapy from a Christian perspective. Their website is www.Sexualwholeness.com.
- ¹² I had a few challenging circumstances to get through in my own secular graduate training, but I was finished with my internship in 1991. Christian graduate students I have spoken with in the past decade have reported that the pressures on them to conform to the LGBTQ values are significantly higher than in the past.
- ¹³ Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press, 2007).
- ¹⁴ Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors and Friends* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2010), 177. Yarhouse's group website is www.sexualidentityinstitute.org.
- ¹⁵ McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*.