

HeartLife Soul Care - Position Paper

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The Current Debate

The current debate about how churches should engage in soul-care (counseling and pastoral ministries) is of such great importance, evangelicals can no longer remain disengaged. This issue is central to the role of the church in the Christian's life. Our position reflects our theology concerning human suffering, and the soul's cure and care. A little history might add clarity.

In the mid 1950's, evangelical Christians did not have educational programs to equip or train those entering ministry to engage in face-to-face care, or care of souls. There were few Christian books dealing with the specific and prevalent common problems and the process of specific biblical change. Practical theology involved preaching, missions, evangelism, church government and administration. Discipleship training consisted of doctrine, morals, and devotionals.

At that time in our history, there was no systematic analysis of care for the soul in the local church. The twentieth century brought with it the proliferation of the modern secular psychologies, the mental health industry, and the church's authority as the primary institution for human sanctification began to diminish.

Without a well-developed practical theology of change and counseling – and without the institutions, books, and practitioners to embody and communicate such - churchly resources were reduced to religious forms in abstraction from systematic understanding: a prayer, a Bible verse, a worship service, a banished demon, a creed, a testimony, an exhortation, a commitment. Should these fail, there were no options but referral out to the secular experts. [\[1\]](#)

Now, we can clearly see that the Bible became less significant for objectively illuminating and addressing the human condition, pain, sin, and suffering. God became less relevant with regard to the human psyche because of this burgeoning "scientific" explanation for human suffering. The Church quickly developed an unhealthy and seemingly uninformed dependence on secular soul-care practitioners. As we now know, the birth of these relatively new *modernist* disciplines offered only a superficial explanation for analysis and cure of the human soul.

The Revolution

In the past 50 years, a counseling revolution has occurred. Christians have begun to counsel, to research and write about counseling, and we are now educating counselors in our seminaries and Christian universities. The Christian Integration movement was developed in part by Clyde Narramore, in the 1960's. This movement is characterized by carefully integrating Christian theology with the theories, therapeutic methods, and professional roles of the modern psychologies.

Another group developed from the passion and conviction of Jay Adams (Nouthetic Counseling). This approach is best described as a commitment to the Bible alone (a non-Reformation view of Sola Scriptura) as the sole source of counsel. Many who hold to this view reject science, medication, or any inclusion of modern psychology in the counseling process.

There are concerns with both approaches. The Integration Movement is still attempting to define itself. For some practitioners, modern psychology and the Bible are equally authoritative when diagnosing and

treating human suffering. Careful evaluation reveals the loose eclecticism associated with such an approach even if practitioners operate as if the Bible trumps psychology. This model can be confusing to the recipient when the counselor borrows a bit from the Bible and a bit from a psychology, based on secular, modern, or post-modern suppositions.

The Nouthetic approach, presents a different set of problems. Some followers of this methodology claim the sufficiency of Scripture and view psychology as heretical. Other Nouthetic counselors believe there is something that can be learned from psychology. They have the correct view that Scripture can transform us, but understand the Bible is not exhaustive. In other words, they realize that God's truth cannot be effectively communicated in proof-texts to a soul in agony. While generalizations are dangerous, many professional Christian counselors view this model as insensitive and leaning toward a dangerous form of Biblicism.

Fortunately, most pastors and conservative theologians realize psychological disciplines offer some valid observations about the human condition and various suitable practice methodologies. They understand that though the Bible may not offer exhaustive information as a proof-text for counseling, it should never be subordinated to secular psychologies. All application of Scripture demands that we engage in a theological, interpretive, and relational task.

Good, true faithful theology is closely grounded in the text, but often says a somewhat different thing than the text says, because it speaks to a different set of questions. Face to face ministry is not simply a matter of inserting proof-texts into conversation. All ministry demands sensitivity and flexibility to the varying conditions of those to whom one ministers. [\[2\]](#)

The Question of Education and Counseling

At this point in the revolution, we are beginning to see the development of sophisticated theological studies related to specific disorders of the soul. We are beginning to realize that systematic theological study is necessary to counsel Christianly. Seminaries and graduate programs are responding to this necessity and in the next decade, I believe we will see both the development and refinement of biblical counseling programs for the pastor and professional practitioner. We are currently witnessing the emergence of a society dedicated to the advancement of a true Christian Psychology for the professional.

Should we be concerned about those who engaged in formal psychological study initially without the benefit of formal theological training? It depends. Many evangelical leaders believe that psychological study submitted to critical biblical and theological scrutiny will lead to a true Christian psychology (study of the soul). By definition, a biblical or Christian psychology will support the local church and direct the hurting to her. The Holy Scriptures offer several examples.

Christians should not fear secular education if we take the Bible seriously. Moses was well educated in Egypt (Acts 7:22). Daniel and his friends studied every branch of Chaldean literature (Dan. 1:17). Paul was a man of great learning (Acts 22:3, 26:24). Moses, Daniel, and Paul interpreted their lives through God's redemptive truth in order to achieve His purpose. Paul could quote an "anthropologist" who studied life in Crete (Titus 1:12), and he used the words of Greek philosophy in his argument in Athens (Acts 17:28). Paul's familiarity with culture and knowledge from extra-biblical sources was invaluable during his missional ministry.

We could easily argue that our purpose should be the same as Paul's. Our mission field is a community of damaged souls whom God wishes to redeem and sanctify. This "people-group," (many of whom are lost) are searching for answers and they are not particular where they find them. Families are fragmented,

marriages are collapsing, and souls are aching to experience the love and acceptance of community. Their pain may drive them to a counselor, who will help them “feel” better about their sin, or a counselor who will communicate our Lord’s message of healing and redemption that is “lived out” in the local church.

The Independent Practice of Christian Counseling

Early on, Christians justified the use of professional psychotherapists based on a faulty view of mankind. The prevailing “trichotomist anthropology” based on two popular verses (1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12) saw humankind as having three separate parts – spirit, soul, and body. Some took this view and developed a compartmentalized methodology for soul-care. They wrongly assumed that we need a doctor to treat the body, the mental health professional to treat the soul (mind, emotion, and will), and the pastor to treat the spirit. Most current Bible scholars would rightly argue this approach was based on an incomplete “theoretical epistemology.”

Current medical science disproves this error of compartmentalization, not from a biblical perspective, but from an empirical one. It is conceptually naïve to treat any sphere of our being in isolation. We know that continued physical distress will result in emotional problems. Emotional problems do in fact affect our physical wellbeing. An accurate biblical anthropology clearly demonstrates there is an “essential unity” among these three “parts” of human beings (Bible scholars indicate that the *Trinity* functions with an “essential unity” even though they may not use this specific term). We cannot separate them, even though each has a distinct function according to God’s plan and design.

We need to address a few significant questions. How should the “social structure” of Christian counseling be organized if we are to follow the design of the Good Shepherd? How should the institution of the Church equip and oversee those who do face-to-face ministry? How should grass roots, or lay counseling/discipleship, fit into an overall model? What credentials and characteristics define leadership or professionalism? Finally, how should our faith and practice of Christian counseling be regulated so that it remains faithful to God?

What is the viability and validity of our current institutional arrangements? What are the implications for the church of Christ when its designated or presumed experts in the cure of souls are state-licensed, fee-for-service, mental health professionals without any organic linkage to ecclesiastical oversight? What are the implications for the Church of Christ or its current lack of many crucial institutional structures that are necessary for caring for souls?[\[3\]](#)

The answers to these questions are primarily structural. Most churches do not contain the “institutional structures” necessary to provide a “full orbed” approach for soul-care (discipleship, care for those in crisis, and pastoral counseling), while protecting it from an ever-increasing litigious culture. The local church is God ordained and should respond to the current “fragmented” approach to pastoral care with ecclesiastical oversight, and the correct implementation of structures for soul-care.

Our epistemological foundation, the Bible, addresses not only ideas and practices, but also social structure. Does the Holy Spirit intend that we develop a normative social institution for curing souls? The answer is yes. The church – as the Bible defines it – contains an exquisite blending of leadership roles and mutuality, of specialized roles and the general calling. It is the ideal and desirable institution to fix what ails us.[\[4\]](#)

Professional Christian Counselors have become a new category of Christian work – sort of. In most situations, the relationship between the local church and an autonomous, state-accredited, fee for service profession remains tenuous. This reality offers the local church an incredible opportunity for institutional

innovation in the church and parachurch structures. A true parachurch ministry supports and strengthens the local body. An independently functioning professional Christian, operating outside doctrinal and theological oversight, may well weaken the local church. A professional soul-care ministry operating autonomously from the local church is really an anomaly. God's designated soul-care institution is the local church.

The Lord whose gaze and will the Bible reveals lays claim to the cure of souls. If counseling is indeed about understanding and resolving the human condition, if it deals with the real problems of real people, if it ever mentions the name of Jesus Christ, then it traffics in theology and cure of souls; it ought to express and come under the church's authority and orthodoxy.[\[5\]](#)

The church must review professional soul-care. Are we outsourcing that which we have responsibility for? Are we exposing our family to secular psychologies because we have not been diligent and responsible to fully develop our pastoral ministries? The bottom line – we must accept that independent professional counselors (even Christians) have a defective professional and financial structure if they operate under a secular managed care paradigm, instead of collaborating with the governance of the local church. The Church must address the question of professionalism and its social structure for delivering soul-care. We must guide and constrain the content and theory of Christian counseling. A counselor's view of human nature will align the counseling endeavor toward truth or error. Again, the solution is primarily a structural one.

The Bible does locate care and cure in the Body of Christ. But the church in reality does not have institutional structures in place to deliver the goods. Functional autonomy and potential for confusion and error are not only problems of mental health professionalism. Within the church herself, cure of souls operates in almost identical autonomy, with almost identical potential for theological and practical trouble.[\[6\]](#)

I agree with Dr. Powlison as he admonishes the Church in his recent essay. He clearly and accurately states that we can no longer allow our views on counseling to be matters of opinion and conscience. The Christian who counsels must view man as God does, he must counsel as God directs, and the primary focus must be the identification with God's interests in the souls of the hurting. I will list three general categories the Church must address in order to bring about the realization and implementation of an effective soul-care ministry.

1. We must learn to apply and articulate biblical wisdom conceptually in soul-care efforts. We must be responsible to train those called into this ministry to utilize a biblical relational model of evangelism, discipleship, and progressive sanctification.
2. We must apply biblical wisdom methodologically so that group or face-to-face soul care fits within the Great Commission and overall mission of the local church.
3. We must embody biblical wisdom in the church to produce an institutional structure that provides hope and healing for its members – especially those with limited financial means.

The Bible offers a model of soul-care secular practitioners cannot begin to emulate. The Bible offers a Living Redeemer with total authority over life, death, fear, and bondage. The Bible directs the local church to develop a healthy community where suffering can be shared, acceptance is the norm, and truth is the standard. **The message of secular counseling is misinformation while the competent Christian counselor provides the Good News for transformation.** How can the Church continue to ignore the effects of “another gospel” being preached to her members by the secular psychological “priests of our

culture?” The Bible teaches that we should be disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Where did Jesus separate evangelism and discipleship? Ironically, many of our local churches focus on the “how many,” without due consideration being given to the “how much.”

Christian soul-care should operate within the same agenda for all Christian ministries. It should cohere spiritually, intellectually, and structurally with every other ministry in the church: worship, preaching, teaching, evangelism, discipleship, family ministry, age/stage division ministries, missions, and pastoral leadership. I raise a few points licensed Christian Counselors must answer in the affirmative in order to be considered for a biblical soul-care ministry.

1. Are you willing to submit your theories, methods, and structures to Biblical scrutiny?
2. Do you ascribe to a distinctly Christian model of persons and change?
3. Are you willing to submit yourself or practice to the local church’s ecclesiastical oversight since you are treating her members?
4. Will you “practice” in accordance with the clearly stated institutional methodologies of the church or parachurch organization?

The How and What Questions

I have attempted to answer some of the “why” questions. Why should the local church of our Lord Jesus do a better job of caring for and curing the souls of its members? Why should the local church be concerned with the epistemology of a Christian who counsels other Christians? Why should Christians be concerned with the training and education of Christians who counsel? Why should the local church have ecclesiastical oversight of a counseling ministry?

Let’s change our focus for a brief time and ask a few “how” and “what” questions for clarity. How should we view independent professional Christian counselors who function pastorally, but are not pastors? How do they fit into the Christian community and the local church? How deeply is the local church committed to a biblical approach for soul-care?

Some churches have approached these questions by attempting to avoid all independent counselors, keeping pastoral care in-house. While this appears to simplify the issue, a few major questions remain. What does the church do with someone suffering from a severe mental illness, a teen or adult addicted to drugs or alcohol, or a young mother suffering from post-partum depression. Are secular psychiatric hospitals examples of God’s “common grace” and what do we do with congregants after discharge? How do we minister to them when they reenter the body? What do we do with the fact that even in our larger churches, there are not enough pastoral staff to provide the necessary pastoral care to its members and perform their other functions?

I previously commented on the two extremes of the Christian counseling spectrum – the “Integration Model” and the “Nouthetic Model.” While there are positive attributes to both, is either the correct one? These models are often viewed as polemical. Soul-care in the modern church usually falls somewhere between the two (if not clearly in one or the other). It should be obvious that we cannot accurately integrate or blend theology with secular psychologies based on humanistic philosophy. Moreover, we should not wholly reject the psychological – especially that which supports biblical truth. Why do we continue to perpetuate a fractured approach to soul-care? What have pastors observed over the past few decades?

Pastors have gradually realized that a bad theology of soul-care has produced a bad result. A good theology of soul-care (a biblical theology) clearly demonstrates that a division between “spiritual” and “psychological” is artificial. We cannot deal with the most severe problems in the church and we cannot outsource our soul-care to the world without grave consequences.

Pastors have gradually noticed that those who receive care from secular mental health workers end up living in two different worlds – one secular or psychological, the other God-centered – and the psychological emphasis usually dominates. It is axiomatic that counselees, given enough time, adopt the worldview of their counselor. The result is that the gospel is relegated to a smaller and smaller sector of a person’s world.[\[7\]](#)

Counseling practice and theology must be rightly wedded for the result to strengthen faith and Christian fellowship. Therefore, the use of secular theories, or psychologies, to define causation for human suffering is confusing, unwise, and at odds with Scripture. Yet independent Christian counselors are serving a pastoral role with couples in crisis, people suffering from unrecognized sin, the depressed and anxious, and those seeking guidance amid complicated questions. They are doing the work of ministry – they do after all use the moniker “Christian.” While they do the work of “ministry,” they are not examined as thoroughly as a minister who joins a church staff.

Like any theological commitment, this comes replete with practical implications. First, Christian counseling is not a distinct entity, but is subsumed under the larger category of pastoral care. It is subject to the same criteria as that of the ordained ministry. Certainly, some are more gifted in personal ministry than others, and some have more experience with the unusual personal problems, but all personal ministry for Christians is ministry of the word of Scripture and the Word-Jesus Christ.[\[8\]](#)

To be true to the claim of counseling Christianly, the counselor must be vigilant in both his life and doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). The content and manner of their counseling should express the will of God. What is a counselor’s reputation within their family and the community? From the church’s perspective, Christian counselors should receive the same scrutiny applied to pastoral staff. Professional credentials are less relevant than an examination of their theology and life. When the local church collaborates with Christian counseling, it is entering an arena that has been functioning loosely for decades.

The Local Church

Many local churches engage in soul care and recognize the overwhelming need for counseling and specific pastoral interventions among members. Pastor and staff are often overwhelmed with “counseling” requests – many of them too complicated for their level of experience and training. Our mission is to help the local church minister to those in need. We are committed to train staff and laity to conduct intensive discipleship and support members when crises occur.

Some churches support a full-orbed soul-care ministry, while others need a safe place to refer. HeartLife Professional Soul Care currently works hand in hand with several church-based Biblical/Pastoral Counseling ministries. We address the practice, theological, ecclesiastical, methodological, and structural issues addressed in this paper. It is our hope that other churches will join us in reaching out to the community and into the congregation, caring for the souls our Lord Jesus Christ wants to save and sanctify.

For a more detailed discussion of the current evangelical debate about soul-care and the local church, I refer you to essays by Drs. David Powlison and Ed Welch, [The Journal of Biblical Counseling](#), Spring 2007.

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- [1] Powlison, David *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, p.6
- [2] Ibid, p. 8
- [3] Ibid, p.29
- [4] Ibid, p. 30
- [5] Ibid, p.31
- [6] Ibid, p. 32
- [7] Welch, Edward *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Spring 2007. p. 56
- [8] Ibid, p.58