

Christ-based Counseling

“Pneumatology” Not Psychology The Appropriate Field for Pastoral or Christian Counseling

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What is Pneumatology, and why is it important? In the writer’s view, there is an undermining principle at work when psychological approaches are used by “Christian counselors,” particularly if the counselee expects a Christian approach. Most Believers who seek counseling are not aware of the different theories and conceptual approaches. This brief discusses these issues and why you should be extremely cautious.

Accepting Terms and Terminology

As an example, the use of Ritlan by Children in Christian homes is alarming. I recently worked in a Christian school, and I was shocked by the number of students needing a daily “fix.” It was not uncommon to hear a student state, “I did not have my fix today,” explaining erratic behavior. A MSW (i.e., Masters of Social Work) school specialist was a guest speaker at the school, and she scoffed at a recent counseling advertisement on a local Christian radio station that bemoaned Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) findings. Subsequently, I questioned her rhetorically about the scientific bases for ADD and ADHD. After mentioning some advanced studies by a psychiatrist at University of California San Francisco, she admitted ADD and ADHD are not scientifically defensible.

Chemical imbalances, and similar pathological problems can be identified scientifically, but ADD and ADHD have no such basis. The teachers spoke of the remarkable results of children who began taking the drugs, but the writer submits that administering “drugs” for behavioral and attention issues could prove disastrous long term. In fact, this is the very point of the advertisement the speaker disputed.

Two years ago the writer was involved with a family whose sixth grade son was having behavioral and attention problems at school. His teachers along with the district psychologist recommended medication (e.g., Ritlan, Dexedrine, Cylert). The writer recommended that the parents provide their child with more time to mature, and accept that he will be behind in his class level. When the student graduated from the eighth grade he was given an award for not receiving one detention during the year, and being “respectful.” He is currently working below his grade level, but if his behavior remains consistent, the parents can expect academic progress. Moreover, the student does not have to depend on “medication” to improve his controllability. The parents clearly preferred this trade-off.

There are many other terms readily exchanged such as “self-esteem, positive thinking,” that are clearly questionable from a Biblical perspective when viewed seriously. It is not the objective here to sound sensational or reactionary. The writer perceives some serious issues.

The writer does not doubt that social scientists and persons in the psychological professions have every intention of being “Christian.” A number of them have done extremely well, and many of them are popular beyond belief. Many have contributed to Christian counseling in a major way, and what was once a field of a few has turned into a multi-billion dollar industry.

We openly accept many of these personalities and their practices without question. They have gained our confidence so we follow without question.

I have a basic thesis. If a psychological approach is appropriate for Believers, then the substance of that approach can be found in Scripture. In Christ-based Counseling, the writer provides an appropriate model for believers.¹

There is a fundamental premise underlying the acceptance of such views by these extremely popular “Christian” counselors. While they are well trained in the social and medical sciences, they are seriously deficient in “pneumatology.” Certainly, many of them are staffed with theological advisors and other resources, but they [themselves] are not trained in Pneumatology. Therefore, they rely, understandably on their psycho-socio training more readily than their pneumatological convictions. Therefore, as they instruct these views through their mediums so readily encouched in “Commercial Christianity,” we accept these concepts. The writer recognizes that the problem is cultural as much as anything else, and the problem is extremely insidious.

I’m reminded of a church that has as a slogan, “We Are Counter Culture for Christ.” Ironically, it is the same church where the students readily used Ritlan, and the teachers and speaker gave great reviews of the “drug.” I am not attempting to be harsh, but simply making a point. However, this is an excellent example of how the psychological processes and answers have been embraced in Christian circles.

Again, I must be clear. I do not have an issue with medicinal therapy where a pathological problem exists. However, prescribing depressants based on theory where discipline, diet or other factors may be the real issue calls for serious reconsideration. More specifically, this is an excellent example of the importance of this topic.

A Biblical View of Psychology

Most of us believe that all truth is from God. The writer accepts such a principle. However, the writer must differ at a point. All truth is not applicable to God’s people, particularly regarding personal decisions. Believers should not submit to a principle simply because it is true. Believers

¹ Steven B. Davidson, DMin., Introduction to Christ-centered Counseling I, (Tracy: AIIM2, 1993; Web publication, URL <ftp://members.aol.com/Aiim2/CTrain1.htm>, 1997).

are people who live by faith.² Incredibly, Believers are encouraged not to make decisions based on circumstances that are true to the “natural” man as you will see in a later section. Conversely, Faith, by its very nature requires decisions which appear to be foolish to the natural man.

What is Pneumatology

The writer has coined a field, “Pneumatology,” and is yet to provide a definition. As Psychology has its etymological origin in the ancient Greek language. Pneumatology has its origin in ancient Greek (commoners) language. Interestingly, origins for both words can be found in the New Testament.

Psuche [Psyche]

The root of the word psychology is psyche or psuche. Notably, this word [psuche] is found in the following New Testament verses:

1CO 15:44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual {body.}

1CO 15:46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual.

The writer typically uses a systematic, historic, and contextual approach to understanding strict interpretation of passages. In Chapter Fifteen of I Corinthians, Paul expounds the realization of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He uses the Hebraic or Hebrew poetic style of contrast to demonstrate the differences between the “natural” and “spiritual.” Paul begins the poetic form of contrast in verse 42 and ends with verse 44. Paul speaks of the resurrection of the dead as follows:

sown in corruption raised in incorruption
sown in dishonor raised in glory
sown in weakness raised in power
sown a natural body raised a spiritual body

Each of the comparisons is antithetical. That is, they are absolute opposites. The root word, for the word “natural” is psuche or psyche as in psychological man. Thus, the psychological body is the opposite of the spiritual body.

The writer has purposefully changed the sequence of the next passage. In the same book of Corinthians verse 2, Paul states the following:

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1Corinthian 2:14).

Again, [psuchikos] as in natural man, is the root word for the English word psychology. This passage clearly emphasizes that the psychological man does not accept the things of the Spirit of

² Habbakuk 2:4 and Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38

God. The verse continues by adding, “they [things of the Spirit of God] are foolishness to him, because they are spiritually appraised.” This verse along with the others discussed above demonstrate that human or psychological approaches cannot be integrated with spiritual principles.

James adds the conclusive comparison of the word psyche and its synonyms. James states the following:

This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic (James 3:15).

Here, James declares acts such as envy, strife, self glorification, and lying as wisdom that is not from above. However, he concludes that it is activity that is equal to being earthly, natural, and demonic. Again, the word natural is the root of the English word for psychology.

The New Testament does not instruct that the two [psychological and spiritual] are equals, compatible, or that they may co-exist in any manner.

What About Pneumatology?

In all the passages stated above the words Spirit, or spiritual have their origin in the word pneuma. In contrast to psuche which is found about 4 times in the New Testament. Pneuma is found more than 350 times referring to the spirit or spiritual nature. The most powerful verses Believers know include the root pneuma (John 3:5, 3:34, 6:63).

If you have read the writer’s article on “Christian Counselor or Counselor Who Happens to be Christian,” you know that a major “Christian” counseling firm, Minirth and Meier’s objective of counseling view spiritual and psychological approaches as being equals. How is it Biblically, and spiritually possible that both approaches could be united. The Biblical evidence is overwhelming that the psychological process cannot accept or agree with spiritual truths and visa versa. They are literally enemies (Galatians 3:3, 5:17).

The exception is when the psychological technique is, in fact, a spiritual principle. Nevertheless, when there is an attempt to use them together, the result is spiritual decay.

Pneumatology Defined

The appropriate and predominate field of a Christian or pastoral counselor must be spiritual or to coin a phrase “pneumatological.” A definition would be advisable at this point. Pneumatology is the specific field of identifying and determining Bible-based techniques and strategies for Believers encountering personal crisis.

Is Every Pastoral Leader a Pneumatologist by Definition?

Generally speaking, pastoral and ministry leaders might be considered specialists in the field. However, in the writer's experience many pastoral leaders and those similarly trained do not prefer on-going individual counseling. They also do not make the required investment to identify spiritual techniques and strategies. As director of the National Association of Certified Christ-based Counselors we contacted more than 6000 churches across the United States. Overwhelmingly, pastors were extremely uncomfortable with counseling. Generally, most viewed counseling as a session or two addressing a personal issue of a member. Rarely did counseling exceed one session. Churches with the financial wherewithal identified a local psychologist or designated a counselor within the congregation. The writer is not disparaging a congregational counselor. The writer adamantly supports such a ministry when the counselor is "pneumatological." The point is that in general pastoral leaders do not participate in short-term (i.e., 4 session,) or longer term counseling. While pastors would typically be most prepared with technical information they generally lack the time, desire or resources to "see" the hurting through their crisis.

This presents a major dilemma. Where the psychologist or counselor establishes the time and arranges for on-going sessions, their theories and ideas can seriously impair the Believer's spiritual walk. Ironically the pastoral leader with many responsibilities, may possess the principle knowledge but is not available in a consistent enough pattern to provide lasting results. In this sense the pastoral leader does not fulfill the standard of the pneumatologist as defined.

Concluding Thoughts

There seems to be a mistaken notion involving the need of the hurting, and the administration of the local church. Every church should have classes, courses, prayer service and similar activities involved in Christian development. However, these functions do not satisfy the varied and specific needs of persons desiring personal assistance. Certainly, classes and other services make-up the framework for "pneumatological" strategies. However, these functions may or may not address the specific need of an individual Believer. Therefore, local leadership is responsible to identify resources and specific strategies for typical problems in their congregations. Then and only then are they satisfying the pneumatological standard.

The writer would open his weekly radio program with the words, "Jesus recognized that speaking to the multitudes would draw listeners to Him, one on one." Those of us in leadership love to teach and preach to the masses. However, the question is, "are we ready to meet them when they come, one-on-one?"

The writer submits that Jesus is the consummate Pneumatologist, and we need to follow His example.

² Habbakuk 2:4 and Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38