

Pastoral Interview and Position Paper on Counseling and Christianity

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This assignment was to interview two pastors who are currently serving a congregation, about their position on counseling, psychology, theology and Christianity and how they all come together in how they counsel their members or clients. I first interviewed Pastor Carl Day from Culture Changing Christians Worship Center based in Montclair, NJ and Philadelphia, PA. Pastor Day has been a pastor for eight years and has a membership of about 150 people. I also interviewed Pastor Ron Gonzalez, the Counseling pastor and head of the counseling ministry at Christ Church USA based in Montclair, NJ and Rockaway, NJ. Pastor Ron has been a pastor for 20 years and his church has 9,000 members. This paper summarizes their interviews, discusses their positions on the aforementioned topics, and examines their counseling approaches in relation to the five views of Christianity and psychology presented by Greggo & Seismore (2010) in their book *Counseling and Christianity*.

Summary of Pastor Carl Day's Interview

Pastor Carl believes that theology is a big part of counseling and he has difficulty imagining counseling someone without bringing in theology. He believes that "your counseling is only as strong as your theology." He feels that as a pastor people come to him mostly with questions for which they want a spiritual answer so theology has to be a the basis of his advice to the people he serves. He believes that he has to look at the person's problems in relation to cause, sin, motive, pain caused and felt, and the solution according to the Bible. He holds dearly to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 which states that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Pastor Carl does not have a background in psychology. He stated that "I've read some

books on psychology and have taken program courses in biblical counseling but not much in mental health courses, though I wish I had and I still wish I could pursue that.” His non-pastoral counseling took place in his old church where he was a deacon and provided counseling to church members as well as when he was in prison after he got saved. He was with First African Baptist Church for two years and he has now been with CCCWC for six years. Pastor Carl views psychology as a very important field and feels that more Christians need to get into the discipline. He feels this way because he has met many church members who have deep mental health issues and who need more help than they can receive in the church. He stated that we need Christian counselors to deal with real mental health issues. He reported that he refers his members who have “real mental health problems” to non-Christian mental health professional because they can still be effective within their area of expertise without having any theological perspective in relation to their patients.

Pastor Carl explained that he sometimes uses some of the insights he gleanes from the books he reads in his sermons and in his counseling sessions. He is currently reading “How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies” by Dr. Therese Rando so that he can get some concept of how to better work with the people who will come to him as a result of losing someone to the coronavirus or during the time of the coronavirus quarantine and was unable to say goodbye to them. In spite of this he does not have a theoretical orientation because he does not know enough about any of them. However, if he had more psychological knowledge he would definitely use it to help in counseling people because some problems need more than just prayer and spiritual disciplines. They need real concrete solutions and he would absolutely incorporate that into my counseling.

Pastor Carl believes that counseling, discipleship, and evangelism are married to each

other. When visitors (non-Christians) come into the church for help you help them, you share and demonstrate the good news to them and they may get saved and receive restoration. Then they need to be discipled but others may need real counseling and their problems should be dealt with by competent counselors. Counselors can help in spiritual formation and discipleship of new and old believers. Pastor Carl would study psychology if he could. He believes it has excellent principles that relate to the Bible and to Godly living. He also wants to have a more theoretically-based understanding of man and the mental health issues that affect us.

Summary of Pastor Ron's Interview

Pastor Ron believes that counseling and theology should be integrated in Christian counseling but even if it's not Christian counseling, as long as the person is a Christian, Christian principles and theology should be incorporated into the sessions. It can be done carefully with non-Christians also but spirituality has to be something that the client wants to explore. I would encourage every counselor who is Christian to incorporate it without using bible terminology. Use the client's own values to guide them and incorporate some biblical principles. Pastor Ron is a graduate of ATS, has a certificate in biblical counseling, took lots of counseling courses, took a course in psychology and one course in spirituality and psychology from the Association of American Christian Counselors. Pastor Ron has non-pastoral counseling experience from the crisis and emergency teams he works with outside of the church.

Pastor Ron believes that some biblical principles can be found in psychology. It has a few tools that can be helpful but for the most part it seems to be antithesis to biblical values so he really depends on the Bible for the work that he does. He feels that secular psychology does not look at the sin condition of man because of the fall and that it tends to put science and psychological training first but he puts the Bible and Christian principles first. In his crisis

intervention work he relies on the Holy Spirit even when he doesn't use Biblical teaching or principles. He stated that he does not incorporate any psychological findings and insights in his counseling or teaching because he truly depends on the Holy Spirit for guidance with every single person with whom he works. He has been counseling for 20 years fulltime and he does not have any knowledge of any theoretical approach. He stressed his reliance on the Holy Spirit to help him to make the person feel loved by God and by others/the church.

Pastor Ron explained that he would refer someone to a non-Christian mental health professional because they, in the church, are not trained to take care of every need. They have limitations and so they should have a referral service, as part of their care, to others who have expertise in their area of need. They must do no harm and if you are not trained in the area you should refer to preferably to a Christian expert but if not then to whoever is available to best help the person. He feels that all Christian counseling should include discipleship which always points them to scripture and to what the word of God says. He feels that you see more progress when you focus on the spiritual issues and this helps their other areas of need. You must be sensitive to people who are not saved, meet them where they are and if the chance presents itself, lead them to Christ. Pastor Ron ended by saying that he always needs to be learning, growing and increasing his ability to help people but he has no interest in further study in psychology or mental health issues. He considers himself to be a pastor first and counseling is one of the things he does under the title of "pastor." Dealing with deep mental health issues is not his calling so he will not step out in areas in which he is not called.

Identification of Pastors' Counseling Approach

I believe that Pastor Carl's approach to counseling is the Christian model. The Christian model places the utmost importance on the Scripture and on the ultimate authority of God's

Word while incorporating psychological theory and research as necessary elements of the theory and the process. It is evangelical in nature and here integration is an actual reworking of the relationship between psychology and Christianity, in that the outcome of the integration is a new discipline called Christian psychology. In this model psychology is a tool used to support Christian theology and biblical truth and psychological techniques and interventions such as strengths-based techniques and other evidence-based psychotherapies from within the realm of modern psychology can be used to successfully treat the client.

I believe that this model aligns with the beliefs of Pastor Carl because even though he has not been to seminary or to college he wants to have an understanding of psychology and mental illness so that he can integrate it with biblical principles to effectively work with the people he serves. He understands that getting this knowledge or training work allow him to better meet the needs of his members/clients. Even though he has no background in psychology he studies it on his own and uses some of its insights to teach and work with his members. He sees its value as well as the need of Christians who have deep underlying mental disorders to have pastoral counseling from someone who is familiar with their disorders and who can provide appropriate. He clearly stated that if he had no restraints he would study psychology so that he can integrate it with theology and Christians principles to provide clear and viable psychological and spiritual solutions to those seeking his counsel.

Pastor Ron's counseling approach is most similar to the biblical model of counseling. This approach is based solely on the belief that genuine Christian counseling focuses only on the Bible. God's word is deemed to be relevant to every aspect of man's life and is applicable to every possible problem or situation man may encounter. In this approach the counselor does entertain any psychological theory and little or no attention is paid to psychological research.

This model takes a biblical view of humanity as needing to be in deep relationship with the triune God in order to be whole spiritually, rationally, personally, and morally. The human soul was corrupted and our initial purpose was interrupted. The overall goal of this approach is to help the client to find his fundamental, spiritual and relational purpose for his life which can only be accomplished by helping the client to know and trust God, to increase his faith and begin to reflect God through his life. The counselor's role is to allow the counseling to flow out of his relationship with Christ as well as out of the bible and he addresses the fall, man's sin and his need for salvation and to rely on and glorify God. This biblical approach includes recognition of, submission to, and reliance on the Holy Spirit for revelation, teaching, and transformation and the presence of the Holy Spirit is an intricate part of the process.

Pastor Ron had formal education at Alliance Theological Seminary and also took courses at the AACC where he received a certificate in biblical counseling. His beliefs line up with many of the tenets of biblical counseling. His view of humanity, the exclusion of all psychological techniques or considerations, and the heavy reliance on the Holy Spirit are explicit aspect of the biblical approach. Pastor Ron in his role as the counselor listens to special revelation from the bible, reflects the character and love of Christ, and relies on the Holy Spirit to move in the session so that change can begin in the heart of the counselee. In biblical counseling, no formal mental health diagnoses are considered and outside of medical problems, the goals set are primarily spiritual with the intention that once those are met all other issues will be fixed as well. Unlike traditional biblical counseling Pastor Ron recognizes that some people may have more significant mental health issues but he does not attempt to address them because he is not called work in that area so he refers them to someone who can help them, preferably Christian.

Problems Associated with the Christian and Biblical Models

All five of the integration models of counseling and Christianity have their supporters and detractors. While Adams (2009), considered the father of modern biblical counseling, affirmed that science/psychology was a “useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture,” most critics of biblical counseling still see it as overly biased and simplistic as well as anti-psychology. Its disregard for psychiatric diagnoses and evidence-based treatments make it difficult to apply to mainstream settings. In fact, it most likely cannot be applied outside of a predominantly Christian setting with Non-Christians or with people who have no religion. Within the church or Christian arena it may work but there may be some persons with psychosis and severe forms of pathology who will need more than what is available to them in this model.

The Christian model’s main detractors are from secular psychology and from the school of biblical counseling. The latter criticizes this model as being too open to secular psychology because Christian counselors believe that secular counseling strategies are a necessary adjunct to the Bible to provide the best care for people’s soul (McMinn, 2007). This model’s Christian worldview is a distinctive identity within psychology. Its foundation in the Christian traditions, and its use of strengths-based techniques and other evidence-based psychotherapies make it a viable and positive option for Christian counseling. Unfortunately, this approach cannot be easily incorporated into mainstream practices because of its Christian orientation most clients do not identify as Christians. It might work with non-Christians who are open to or interested in spirituality or learning more about God. It will be most appropriate in a Christian-based counseling practice. It will work for a Christian with or without major psychopathology who wants God to be a part of their treatment.

While each approach has its critics and supporters, the fact is that both models are being

used successfully to treat clients and members all over the country (Greggo & Seismore, 2012). The treatments will range from extremely and strictly biblical teachings and spiritual disciplines to some strength-based and evidence-based strategies integrated with spiritual principles. With the prospect of working with a wide variety of clients, counselors need not totally commit to biblical, Christian or any other model but may choose to use a transtheoretical model that could be modified appropriately for each client.

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