

Position Paper 3

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Introduction

Facilitating change through counseling and facilitating change through a relationship with the Holy Spirit can indeed overlap, but they are not one in the same. “Change” is an essential aspect of the Christian life and clinical services. It is important for the Christian counselor to understand how spiritual maturity differs from clinical skills that facilitate change.

Bird (2016) writes, “All men and women, if they are to live to God, need the Spirit’s regenerating work to bring them from darkness to light, to change their heart of stone to a heart of flesh, and to open their eyes to see the God who is there.”

As stated so eloquently above, the Holy Spirit also works to open eyes to the kingdom of God. Similarly, Christian counselors help clients change by opening their eyes to their realities - the marks of their childhoods, the scars from their traumas, the survival skills and coping mechanisms that their life stories have forged. A Christian counselor can partner with the Holy Spirit in the pursuit of increasing awareness and facilitating change.

Sanctification and Spiritual Maturity of Christians

In the book “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,” Eugene Peterson (2000) describes the life of a “servant” as depicted in Psalm 123. Peterson outlines how Christians are being formed by the potter’s hand as if clay. A life led by the Holy Spirit is a life being reshaped and molded.

“The basic conviction of a Christian is that God intends good for us and that he will get his way in us. He does not treat us according to our deserts, but according to his plan. He is not a police officer on patrol, watching over the universe, ready to club us if we get out of hand or put

us in jail if we get obstreperous. He is a potter working with the clay of our lives, forming and reforming until, finally, he has shaped a redeemed life, a vessel fit for the kingdom.”

Spiritual maturity and sanctification come through spiritual disciplines, submission to the Lord, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Richard Hays (1996) looks at the Gospel of Matthew and describes how behavioral change occurs in accordance with character development. This is a key aspect to sanctification and spiritual maturity.

“While rules and commandments provide an orderly structure for the moral life, Matthew also thinks of actions as growing organically out of character...Action flows from character, but character is not so much a matter of innate disposition as of training in the ways of righteousness. Those who respond to Jesus’ preaching and submit to his instruction will find themselves formed in a new way so that their actions will, as it were, “naturally” be wise and righteous. They will learn the skills and discernment requisite to living faithfully.”

Change is a result of following Jesus wholeheartedly. The Christian life is committed to changing every day as one submits to God and dares to be reshaped by the potter. The change is spiritual before it is practical. This is a key difference from clinical change facilitation.

How Clinical Skills and Biblical Practices Can Intersect and Produce Change

The Christian counselor has an opportunity to use a spiritual perspective when working with clients to facilitate change. Holeman (2012) states, “God’s grace draws us to him. Those who put their faith in the resurrected Christ then receive the Holy Spirit. God’s grace lives in them. The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways in the lives of God’s children so that we may go on to maturity (Heb 6:1). These ways can include counseling—and all of the other serendipities (a.k.a. moments of prevenient grace) that help clients reach their counseling goals.”

There is an overlap in clinical work and spiritual disciplines as one's thoughts are reshaped and behaviors are modified to be more adaptive. Helping a client gain awareness (open their eyes) and facilitate change (mature) are beautiful acts of service in which the Christian counselor can engage.

Furthermore, there are spiritual disciplines that can be categorized as clinical methods of change. Prayer and meditation are concepts that have existed for thousands of years and have been utilized across a wide spectrum of religions and worldviews. Today, the word "mindfulness" is frequently used by mental health professionals when working with clients to facilitate change. Holeman (2012) summarizes this brilliantly.

"As counselors and clients collaborate around theological themes, counselors will recommend interventions that can help clients to address the theological issues that are associated with clinical goals. Ethical practice requires counselors to describe adequately the proposed interventions and to secure the clients' consent before implementation. Theologically reflective interventions may be aimed at changing clients' cognitions (e.g., Scripture reading), helping clients to regulate their affect (e.g., prayer or meditation), or challenging clients to adopt new patterns of behavior (e.g., forgiving, repenting, serving the poor)."

Conclusion

While the Christian counselor can seek wisdom from the Holy Spirit and implement biblical principles such as mindfulness (meditation) or forgiveness; however, the Christian counselor cannot incite spiritual development within clients. There must be humility in the Christian counselor to serve the client with all the skills and knowledge accessible to him and allow the Holy Spirit to do the "heavy-lifting," the soul-transformation.

Resources

Bird, M. F. (2016). *What Christians ought to believe : an introduction to Christian doctrine through the Apostles' Creed*. Zondervan.

Hays, R. B. (1996). *The moral vision of the New Testament : community, cross, new creation : a contemporary introduction to New Testament ethics*. Harper San Francisco.

Holeman, V.T. (2012). *Theology for better counseling : Trinitarian reflections for healing and formation*. Ivp Academic.

Peterson, E. H. (2000). *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction*. Intervarsity Press.