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COVENANT AND COUNSELLING: SOME COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS OF A COVENANT THEOLOGY¹

David Atkinson

David's essay, which addresses itself to the biblical basis for counselling, seeks to describe the counselling process by using the biblical idea of a covenant relationship as a model for ours. He traces the view of God with which the Old and New Testaments present us — examining God's character and the way he deals with us — and demonstrates persuasively how the same concerns and qualities should form the foundation for our efforts to help others.

Introduction

My aim in this article is to offer a possible Christian theological approach to counselling. By 'theology' I mean our human attempt to think in an ordered and consistent way about God and about ourselves in God's world, in response to God's self-disclosure in history, in Christ, in the scriptures and in Christian experience. By 'counselling' I have in mind the sort of activity defined by the BAC Ethics and Standards Committee in these terms:

People are engaged in counselling when a person, occupying regularly or temporarily the role of 'counsellor' offers or agrees explicitly to give time, attention and respect, to another person temporarily in the role of 'client'. The task of counselling is to give the 'client' an opportunity to explore, define and discover ways of living more satisfyingly and resourcefully within the social grouping with which he identifies.²

In a Christian context, therefore, 'counselling' is about helping to remove obstacles which may hinder us fulfilling our calling to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. Obviously many different people with different religious or theological convictions, or with none, may be engaged in counselling so defined.

Some Christians are engaged in 'secular' counselling. Some Christian 'professional' pastors 'counsel' as part of their pastoring. Some are primarily spiritual directors, perhaps wondering how the counselling task meshes with the responsibility of giving 'direction'.

Every counselling system of whatever colour makes certain assumptions. It assumes a certain view of the nature of human being; it assumes a certain value system, such that it is meaningful to talk in terms of change from a less good to a better way of living; it assumes a process theory of how personal and behavioural change comes about. Specifically, therefore, our task is to think theologically about what it means to be human, about values, and about personal and behavioural change.

Theology and psychology

There is a great deal of literature seeking to apply the insights of counselling psychology to the practice of Christian caring. At the other end of the spectrum, there is literature warning Christian pastors against allowing their counselling practice to be based on unChristian humanistic psychological presuppositions. One important question, therefore, is the relationship between theological and psychological disciplines.

John Carter and Bruce Narramore offer four models by which the relationship between the disciplines may be understood.³

1. Firstly, the *'Against' model*. Theology and psychology are frequently set against each other, either by secular therapists,⁴ or by some Christian counsellors⁵ who believe that psychotherapy is an illegitimate discipline because all that is needed for personal and relational development is revealed in the scriptures.
2. Secondly, the *'Of' model*. This resolves either into the attempt to find 'good' psychology in religion⁶ by holding on to the useful 'human' elements of a religious faith as constructive in promoting psychological health, while denying the supernatural dimension, or it resolves into the psychology of religion which seeks to interpret religious phenomena through a psychological grid — important though that is within its own limited terms.
3. Thirdly, the *'Parallels' model*. The concepts of theology and psychology parallel each other, but rarely meet. Either they are viewed as complementary disciplines seeking to account for the same phenomena, in different language systems and conceptual frameworks,⁷ or, there is thought to be some mystical disjunction between emotional life and 'spiritual' life such that psychology can be concerned with one part and theology with another.
4. The fourth model which Carter and Narramore themselves support is what they call the *'Integrates' model: theology integrates psychology*. This model is rooted in the conviction that God is the author of all

truth; that there will be a congruence between the true insights of psychology and God's revelation; that scientific psychology has its own restricted methodological assumptions and interpretative techniques which are important and valid at their own level, but that these need to be placed within a larger conceptual framework in which all of life at all levels is viewed from a centre in God's self-disclosure.

Carter and Narramore's own conclusions seem to me to be rather simplistic and too tidy; almost as though they were seeking a new third discipline to be created out of the two. But I wish to affirm their fundamental conviction that we need first and foremost a theology of human life and relationships which integrates within it the important and proper place for the human sciences; that insofar as psychology is dealing with scientific 'truth' rather than meta-scientific theory, there can be no conflict with 'true' theology; that psychology can be used critically as part of that other human task of creating a consistent theology.

In working towards a theology of counselling, therefore, our task will not be that of taking our agenda from counselling psychology and trying to see how this fits with Christian belief. It will rather be that of taking our agenda from Christian theology — in particular our understanding of human being and relation — informed as that must be by psychological insights, and seeking to reflect on the counselling task from that perspective.

Counselling implications of covenant theology

I propose to take the concept of 'covenant' as one overarching category of biblical theology. From this I wish to sketch — and it can be no more than a sketch — some counselling implications of a covenant-based theological perspective, under the following headings:

- Covenant relationship
- Christ, the covenant mediator
- The life of the Spirit as a covenant resource
- Covenant promise and fulfilment.

Covenant relationship

My thesis here is that the counselling task is the establishment of a covenant relationship between counsellor and client which derives its meaning from and should be patterned on God's covenant relationship with his people.⁸

'I will be your God; you will be my people'. This is the refrain by which God established his purpose for his people from the beginnings of the Old Testament age, and through to Revelation at the end of the New.

'Covenant' refers to the relationship God has established with the world and with people — with people in general, not just believers. In it he discloses his nature and his will, both by acts and by the interpretation he gives of those acts; he invites his people to discover their true being by consciously responding to his self-disclosure, and he sets the conditions by which this covenant relationship is to be established and enjoyed. To be human is to be called by the word into covenant with God. In a derivative sense, 'covenant' refers to the interpersonal roles and relationships which by nature, choice or need we make with our fellow human beings. In biblical theology, our human covenants of life with life are intended to be patterned on, and so reflect, something of the divine covenant of God the life-giver with all people and with his people.

Calvin comments on the mutuality of our knowledge of God and our knowledge of ourselves at the very beginning of his *Institutes*:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.⁹

There is a correspondence between our relationship with and knowledge of God and our relationship with and knowledge of ourselves and of others. The key words of the divine covenant relationship are grace, love, promise, faithfulness, sacrifice, and obedience. These are intended, *mutatis mutandis*, to find meaning in our human covenant relations. Of course human covenants are very different in many ways from God's sovereign covenant. There is much about God's nature we do not share! But what the older theologies call his 'communicable attributes', we are called on to share and to express. The question for the counselling task is therefore: what is the meaning in the counselling relationship of covenant grace, love, promise, faithfulness, sacrifice and obedience?

Noah and grace

The opening word in this biblical story is that of grace. 'Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord' (Gen. 6:8). In the context of human misery, disorder and wrong described in the prologue to the flood narrative, God establishes a relationship for rescue and restoration. The possibility is created for human being to be preserved even in the midst

of conditions of estrangement. It does not depend on Noah's worthiness: it is an approach of unconditioned sovereign freedom. The basic theological conviction here is that God makes things new. On the basis of his gracious intervention, God then established after the flood a covenant with all living beings: human creatureliness and humanness are held in being by God's word, and the conditions for human living in a fallen world are spelled out.

Grace says 'God is for us'. Here is the essential theological base for the affirmation of the self. We are not 'alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe', asserts Monod: God turns to us in grace. *We matter!* The word 'favour' (*chen*) here denotes the 'stronger coming to help the weaker, who stands in need of help by reason of his circumstances or natural weakness'.¹⁰ It is the action of the sovereign God described later in these terms:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand
(Deut. 32:39).

God's initiative is wholly unconditioned. The *counselling covenant* will express something of this 'unconditional' regard, although it will leave us with decisions to take about the conditions which do have to be set in terms of accepting and refusing certain clients. Is there a difference at this point between 'pastoring' and 'counselling'?

Abraham and Moses: personal communion

As we move in the development of covenant history to Abraham, again we find a word of gracious initiative, and again we find the establishment of a certain pattern of appropriate living. But centrally here we find a personal relationship. God calls Abraham by name. God's covenant with him is concerned with the establishment and welfare of his family.

At the beginning of the exodus narrative, the personal relationship is deepened further: God tells Moses *his* name! Human personhood is determined by relation with another. The 'image of God' is about personal communion. We share creatureliness with others of 'the sixth day', but we are invited also to be creatures of the *seventh* day: in whom personal relationship is the meaning of their being. The basic theological conviction here is that God speaks, and invites a personal response. The way God makes his relationships is by speech, to which the response is faithful obedience. Commenting on the covenant with Abraham in Romans 4:16-17, St Paul writes:

Abraham . . . is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father

of many nations' — in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

God's promise, spoken through his word, creates life. The *counselling covenant* will be a personal relationship in which communication is central.

Torah and sacrifice

There are certain moral boundaries for human being and human welfare, both individual and social. Alongside the gift of torah, there is also established a sacrificial system which was to keep alive in the experience of the covenant people the nature of their covenant God who came to them in their misery and acted for them at the exodus, who spoke to them and called them back to life and gave them a way to live. It was also to provide a means through forgiveness of keeping the relationship healthy.

God, in other words, sustains his people's life and holds them in their need. Later, in the prophetic consciousness, more of the character of God's sustaining, forgiving, restoring covenant love comes to clarity. In the eighth century, Hosea wrote of *hesed* (covenant love-faithfulness = *agape* love) in terms of God's persistent care for a wayward and adulterous people. *Hesed* is the central word of covenant love. It is used of God's loyal and faithful commitment to his people; it becomes the foundation for the people's life and their interpersonal relationships. It is a combination of *chen* and *hesed* together that we need to hold on to when we use the word 'grace'. As H. R. Mackintosh put it: 'Grace is love in its princely and sovereign form, love to the indifferent and the disloyal, whose one claim is their need.'¹¹

It is *hesed* love which is the basis for the torah: that body of fatherly instruction which set moral boundaries to the people's behaviour which were appropriate to their well being, and which gave them guidance in loving. The motivation of the law is the welfare of the people: 'You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land which you shall possess' (Deut. 5:33); 'And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us' (Deut. 6:24f). The *counselling covenant* will require a moral framework within which human well-being can be sustained.

Individual responsibility

As the covenant family grew, the corporate solidarity of belonging to one another developed to the point where corporate personality seemed to override individual responsibility. Against this, some of the prophets of the exile were to proclaim again the strong strand of individual personal responsibility within the context of corporate social determinants. The *counsellor* will be alert to social and environmental conditioning without letting go of personal responsibility.

Wisdom is helping people to cope

Forged in the pain as well as the joy of being a covenant community, the wisdom traditions provided literature with the very practical aim of helping people to cope. It was the 'wise man' who helped people with their personal life-choices. Jeremiah tells us of three well established vocations within Israel, 'the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet' (Jer. 18:18). When, later, prophecy declined and the priesthood became impaired by political pressure, the major force in Israel's religion was the wise man who counselled. In the Old Testament, as in the New, ethics and religion are inseparable. The tasks of counselling and of spiritual direction were one task. The wise men give instruction — much of which is left to us in the book of Proverbs. Primarily they are teachers, but they are, in particular, teachers who discern that there is more to life than meets the eye. As another great book from the wisdom tradition — the book of Job — makes clear, humanistic wisdom can provide no resting place for personal life. 'If a man rigorously pursues that openness to facts which is the characteristic boast of humanism, he will find either that his confidence disintegrates, and he is thrown into despairing scepticism, such as we find in Ecclesiastes, or that he is brought to a faith in which his discernment of order in human existence is discovered to have its explanation in the being of a personal God.'¹²

The counselling task of the wise man within the covenant community was to enable a man who was trying to cope to discover a divine order to his life and circumstances which did provide a resting place for his personal quest. It was about the shape of his assumptive world and a person's significance within it. The *counselling covenant* today has to be set in the context of this divinely disclosed order.

Psalms: covenant responses

The covenant God, we are beginning to see, redefines human life around a centre in himself. Human persons in covenant relationship with God are set in a new context which is framed by God's faithful

love. It is God who initiates, provides, forgives, supports, confronts, gives the resources by which his people may learn to find him and in so doing find themselves. This is the world in which counselling — all counselling — takes place. Counselling intervenes at many different points in the processes of a person's life to help move the blocks in finding a way to love God and neighbour.

It is in the security of this covenant context that certain human responses become appropriate expressions of faithful obedience to God's self-disclosure. Among these Brueggemann refers to the appropriateness of rage and protest as an expression of trust in the covenant-making God. He points also to the appropriateness of expressions both of grief and of praise. The way the psalms become vehicles for personal response to God in the worship of the covenant people points us to these expressions of personal feeling as being appropriate expressions of covenant faith at different times. Examples would be the *protest* of Psalm 88:

But I, O Lord, cry to thee; in the morning my prayer comes before thee.
O Lord, why dost thou cast me off? Why dost thou hide thy face from me?
Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer thy terrors; I am helpless

and the *grief* of Psalm 137; the *guilt* of Psalm 51; the *misery* of Psalm 73; the *longing* of Psalm 42; the *joy* of Psalm 18; the *assurance* of Psalm 23; and the *praise* of Psalm 103, etc.

Summary

In the context of counselling we need to think out the relevance for our theory and practice of these dimensions of the divine covenant, for this is the God-given way for human relationships. What are the counselling implications of his initiative of grace, of coming into the point of pain and need, of the establishment of a personal relationship, of giving the boundaries within which such a relationship can be creative, of providing the resources of forgiveness, ritual and wisdom to keep the relationship going, and the opportunity for a safe expression of deepest feelings?

Is it not precisely because so much good counselling (whether overtly 'Christian' or not) actually mirrors to some degree something of 'God's way of relating', that it is effective in helping people discover more of themselves, and how to live more appropriately? Thomas Oden writes:

An adequate theory of therapy must not only understand therapeutic growth as a product of human self-disclosure, but authentic human self-disclosure as a response to the self-disclosure of God in being itself.¹³

However, we perhaps need to stress again that whereas the divine

covenant is between the sovereign Lord and needy people, the counselling covenant is between two people who both have needs. In the context of mutual needs what we have said about unconditional regard, personal relationship, a moral framework and social conditioning still has meaning. But our counselling is not a one way process. The counsellor — alongside the goal of helping to enhance the personhood of the other — has his or her own needs which are also part of the counselling process. The counsellor, too, is in search of completion.

Christ, the covenant mediator

In the Old Testament, much of the covenant material points beyond itself to a future deeper fulfilment. What in the Old Testament is often primarily promise, in the New Testament takes on the colour of fulfilment. Embodied in one person we find not only the fullness of God's promise that he is 'for us' and that he 'makes things new', that we hear his word, that we see his character, that we are offered his forgiveness, that we apprehend the divine wisdom; we *also* see *embodied* the full human response of faithful loving obedience. Christ in his own person is the embodiment of what the Old Testament covenant promise and community were but pointers towards. *He* makes things new.

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them (Luke 7:22).

My thesis in this section is that the counselling task is one part of the work of God to make new people within a new community of which Christ is the head. There are five headings:

Incarnation: God for us and with us

The grace of God which initiates the Old Testament covenants becomes event within our history in the person of Jesus Christ. In him we see true God and true man. He fully bears the divine image, and in his self-disclosure of God he fully makes the word of God known.

The incarnation vividly declares that God is *for us*. In Christ, God enters in person into our broken and painful human condition and makes it his own. As Oden puts it, *God 'assumes our frame of reference'*.¹⁴ In the counselling context, 'empathy' is the word used to describe the process of placing oneself in the frame of reference of another, sharing their world with them. The counselling implications of the incarnation centre on the 'divine empathy': God for us. Just as the incarnate God became 'vulnerable' for us in Christ, so the counsellor is made vulnerable to others.

Divine and human: empathy without loss of identity

Jesus is not only true God he is also true man. Oden makes a link between the congruence of the two natures of Christ, and the importance of the counsellor not ceasing to be himself even in the midst of sharing another's pain.¹⁵ 'Even as God participates in our estrangement without being estranged from himself, likewise the therapist participates in the estrangement of the client without losing his self-identity.'¹⁶

Cross: healing of the self

The mediatorial work of Christ is perhaps focused best in the word 'forgiveness'. Forgiveness does not minimize wrong, but rather *accepts* the person who is in the wrong, and refuses, through costly self-giving, to allow the wrong to destroy the relationship. 'Acceptance' has become a word with too many connotations to be helpful. Rogerian theory speaks of 'acceptance' in the sense of non-judgemental empathy and affirmation. Some Christian writers argue against this, saying that to 'accept' in this way is the equivalent to condoning wrong and sin. We should not 'accept', they say, we should rather 'exhort' and sometimes 'confront'. However the acceptance associated with forgiveness can sometimes imply confrontation. God 'accepts' us unconditionally and without requiring prior qualification for his interest in us, yet he does so without affirming all that we are or do. Indeed the parables makes clear that his invitation to the feast will require a change of clothes: we cannot stay as we are with the rags of the hedgerows. So we can use the word 'acceptance' of the counsellor's approach to the client to speak of no pre-conditions, of empathy, warmth and respect as the opening basis for the relationship, and also of the acknowledgment that some things will need to be changed as the counselling covenant develops. It is God's acceptance of us through Christ's forgiveness which serves as the model for our acceptance of ourselves and of others. It is not a blanket affirmation; there is a moral discrimination and the hope of change.

Christ the whole person

Christ the true man is not only the means by which God's gracious acceptance and welcome comes to us, he also displays what true humanity is. Christ is the head of a new humanity, and through his covenanted relationship with us God is building a new community 'in Christ'. It is at this point that the appropriateness of the approaches of Frank Lake and Jack Dominionian, for example, is clear. Lake chooses the 'Christ model', albeit based rather narrowly on a Johannine Christology, as the goal of the therapeutic encounter. The counsellor is to facilitate 'Christ-realization' within the client. Dominionian portrays Jesus as the whole

man, emotionally and psychologically as well as 'spiritually', who serves as a model of true humanness.¹⁷

One point of particular interest for our purposes is the emotional life of Jesus. Warfield opens his classic study 'On the Emotional Life of Our Lord' with the statement: 'It belongs to the truth of our Lord's humanity that he was subject to all sinless human emotions.'¹⁸ He then goes on to survey all the gospel references to Jesus' emotions, beginning with 'compassion' and 'love', moving on to the 'moral sense' which reacts to evil in terms of 'indignation' and 'anger', then the 'afflictions' of the 'Man of Sorrows' leading to the 'joy' that was set before him. His soul is 'troubled'; there is a repugnance to all that death meant; he is 'distressed and despondent' (Matt. 26:37), or as Mark has it 'appalled and despondent' (Mark 14:33); 'sorrowful unto death'. There is the 'agony' of Gethsemane; the anguish of the dereliction of the cross. Sometimes he experiences 'wonder' (Matt. 8:10, Luke 7:9); once 'desire' is attributed to him (Luke 22:15) — he had 'set his heart on' eating with his disciples and once he speaks of himself as conceivably the subject of 'shame' (Mark 8:38). Our Lord's emotions 'fulfilled themselves, as ours do' comments Warfield, 'in physical reactions'.¹⁹

He who hungered (Matt. 4:2), thirsted (John 19:20), was weary (John 4:6), who knew both physical pain and pleasure, expressed also in bodily affections the emotions that stirred his soul. . . . Not only do we read that he wept (John 11:35) and wailed (Luke 19:41), sighed (Mark 7:34) and groaned (Mark 8:12), but we read also of his angry glare (Mark 3:5), his annoyed speech (Mark 10:14), his chiding words (e.g. Mark 3:12), the outbursting ebullition of his rage (e.g. John 11:33, 38); of the agitation of his bearing when under strong feeling (John 11:35), the open exultation of his joy (Luke 10:21), the unrest of his movements in the face of anticipated evils (Matt. 26:37), the loud cry which was wrung from him in his moment of desolation (Matt. 27:46). Nothing is lacking to make the impression strong that we have before us in Jesus a human being like ourselves.²⁰

It is noteworthy that these are strong emotions, there is a full range of emotions, and yet throughout the expression of them Jesus is always in control: our Lord is always 'Master of himself'.

The value of this knowledge for us is not only to tell us that it is possible within a human life to find a way of expressing emotions appropriately and responsibly, and in a way that is pleasing to God, but also to encourage us that it is safe for us to try to learn the appropriate release of our emotions, because he has been there too. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it he is not untouched with 'the feeling of our infirmities' (Heb. 4:15).

The 'wonderful counsellor': guiding, consoling, delivering

Jesus, true God and true man, is mediator of the covenant between God and his people. He is the one to whom the prophet Isaiah pointed forward — the one who as well as being mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace — is the wonderful counsellor. Indeed his role as counsellor is to make available to the people knowledge of God as 'mighty', as 'father' and to bring 'peace'. As the picture of the coming one develops throughout the various writings of the book of Isaiah, we find him described first as the king on whom rests the 'Spirit of counsel and might' whose ministry of word and spirit is to guide and discipline. In later chapters the coming one is described as the suffering servant whose ministry of word and spirit is of consolation and comfort. In the closing chapters, he becomes the conqueror with a ministry of word and spirit of deliverance from evil. The total restoring work of the coming messiah, the wonderful counsellor, is guidance, consolation and deliverance. It is this which Jesus perfectly fulfils.

The life of the Spirit as a covenant resource

My thesis here is that it is the work of the Spirit which makes available to those in need the counselling work of Christ, and that the counselling task is to be understood in the context of the work of the Spirit.

Common grace

It is by the Holy Spirit that the response of covenant faithfulness to the divine initiative is made possible. It is a manifestation of the work of the Spirit whenever human faithful responses in personal relationships mirror God's covenant. What God requires, that in Christ — through the Spirit — he also gives.

Part of the Spirit's work is to restrain evil and disorder, and to promote a context in which humanness can be restored. This has often been referred to as God's 'common grace'; it is not restricted to the Christian community. Out there, apart from me, apart from church: God is at work — and God is *for* us! It is the secret work of the Spirit, healing wounds, establishing rationality, making peace, and furthering human harmony. The healing work of the doctor, the therapist, the counsellor can be seen as part of the workings of God's 'common grace'.

Paraklesis

There is a special work of the Spirit, however, which provides a close model for the task of counselling. In the Johannine writings the Spirit is described as *parakletos*, one who is sent to bring active help. He is an

intercessor and a facilitator.²¹ But he does more: he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgement (John 16:8). He will 'teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance' all that Jesus has said (14:26). Although the world will not know him the disciples 'know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you' (14:17). He will 'bear witness' to Jesus (15:26). In other words, 'his role is to continue the revealing work of Jesus'.²² The Spirit is given to continue the work of the historical Jesus. Jesus and the Spirit are both called *parakletos* (John 14:16; 1 John 2:1).

What is involved in *paraklesis* — this counselling work of the Spirit? The verb *parakaleo* is used 109 times in the New Testament, and covers a range of meanings: summon, invite, ask, implore, exhort, beseech, comfort, encourage. The most frequent words are 'beseech' (43x), 'comfort' (23x), and 'exhort' (19x). We have here, therefore, a range of pastoral responses by which the revealing and convincing work of the Spirit is expressed. They seem closely to parallel the work of the wonderful counsellor: guidance, consolation and deliverance.

Mutual ministry in the worshipping community

The New Testament picture of ministry stresses its mutuality: encouraging 'one another'. The work of one Spirit is expressed in a variety of gifts within the community of worship and service. The worshipping community is the healing community. Rituals of worship are part of the 'means of grace' of the Spirit. The underlying conviction is that it is the work of the Spirit in the new community to enable us to make good relationships with others, within the boundaries of the truth of Christ which he reveals, using his gifts — including our own temperament and personality — by making available the fruits of the Spirit. In the mutuality of the counselling covenant, especially in the worshipping community, God through his Spirit can work to 'make things new'.

Covenant promise and fulfilment

The eschatological dimension to covenant theology is vividly focused in the closing chapters of the Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be

mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.' And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev. 21:1-5a).

There are three counselling implications from this picture. *Firstly*, that the task of 'making new' is a process with a goal. We are not trapped in a changeless determinism; we are not held by our past. Re-creation is possible, is beginning, and will come to fulfilment. *Secondly*, fulfilment will be then rather than now. In the whole salvation drama, there is a 'now' and there is a 'not yet'. What God promises now, and can in some measure be experienced now, will not be experienced in its fullness until then. For now, we still live with the ambiguity and brokenness of tears and crying and mourning and death, even while being made new. This will caution us against a false optimism and proud perfectionism this side of heaven. T. F. Torrance refers to that pause between the two words spoken by Jesus to the paralytic (Mark 2:5f.) as 'eschatological reserve'.²³ There is an interval between the declaration of the word of forgiveness and the word of physical restoration. Before the word of wholeness is spoken, the paralytic is held fast by the word of forgiveness. This helps us to place present disorder in the context of an ultimate new order. Counselling takes place aware of this 'eschatological reserve'. But *thirdly*, the acting of re-creation is God's action and he is doing it and will bring it to completion. And that is a word of *hope* — which should characterize all our human relating and particularly our counselling. 'We do not know what we shall be, but we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2).

If God's gracious calling is the theological basis for affirmation of the self; if his covenant is the basis for the relatedness of the self, if the salvation through Jesus Christ is the basis for the healing of the self, then eschatology is the basis for the self's ultimate significance.

Towards a theological anthropology

Within the context of covenant relationship, counselling is about discovering and developing personhood. We will conclude first by going back to the Christian understanding of *creation* as the framework for covenant, and then go on to outline our understanding of *personhood* as the creator's gift and as our personal goal.

Creation as the framework for covenant

It was Karl Barth who expounded 'covenant fidelity' as the inner

meaning and purpose of our creation as human beings in the divine image, and the whole of the created order as the external framework for, and condition of the possibility of keeping covenant.²⁴ From the Christian understanding of creation, I wish to draw four implications:

Creation implies dependence

The whole created order depends on God for 'life and breath and all things'. True fulfilment of creatureliness is thus to be found in an appropriate expression of response to the fact that we are creatures. This means that we are not autonomous; that life is a loan; that we depend on God for the resources for living (whether we acknowledge that or not). We need, however, to distinguish an immature and childish dependence which tries to escape from personal responsibility, from a 'mature dependence'²⁵ characterized not by getting but by giving. In counselling terms, we need to avoid basing our practice on the view that we are autonomous and have sufficient resources in ourselves for living truly; we also need to avoid creating irresponsible infantile dependence. In terms of the human relationship of counsellor to client, the goal must be to create 'mature dependence', or perhaps 'mature interdependence', which mirrors our dependent yet responsible creaturely relationship with God. For surely the counsellor as wounded healer has to receive from the client as well as vice-versa.

Creation implies contingency

Humanness is not a necessary development from creatureliness. We are creatures alongside the rest of the animal world, creatures of the sixth day, but we are distinct within the creaturely realm as being also creatures of the seventh day. The distinction is not determined by our creatureliness, but by being called to be human by God. Our human calling cannot therefore be discovered or defined with reference only to our creatureliness (our biology, our psychology, our social and environmental determinants). It can be known only through the divine self-disclosure and the will of God for man as he reveals it. This is why a *theological* anthropology is the basis for the integration of all the other human sciences.

Humanness involves response to word

That which distinguished the human animal from other animals is the capacity to respond to the divine word. There is a human rationality which corresponds to the divine rationality, such that when the word of God comes to a man, he is addressed personally and invited to make a personal response. This sets man apart from other creatures. What makes human relationships essentially human is the capacity for verbal

communication. Therapeutic attempts to enhance humanness, therefore, will include attempts to facilitate verbal communication and rational understanding. This is also why we can understand distortion and pain and disease and death within the *creaturely* world without labelling them sinful — and yet affirm our accountability to the word of God which constitutes our personal and human being.

Creation implies responsible freedom

The calling of God to us to be human, and to express our humanness in covenant relationship with him and with our fellow men, involves the capacity to make an individual and personal responsible decision to do so. God's address is in terms of invitation. Within the constraints of our creatureliness (which limits our action, while at the same time creating opportunity for action) and within the determinants of our psychological and social environments (which also limit and enable us), we are invited to be free persons. Therapy will address those areas of personal and social need which inhibit the exercise of a responsible freedom which block our loving God or loving our neighbours as ourselves. It will seek to enhance responsible action, and the enjoyment of personal freedom, within God-given boundaries. For personal freedom is not irrational arbitrariness. It is a contingent freedom given and so bounded by the divine freedom, and the constraint of God's own nature.

Personhood as gift and as goal

The task of counselling we defined as helping a 'client' to discover ways of living 'more satisfyingly and resourcefully' with the implication of some dissatisfaction and incapacity. There is an assumption that counselling is about personal interaction between persons, and yet with a view to personal change. There is an assumption that in one sense the client is fully a person, and in another sense not yet fully a person. That ambiguity is present also in the way we use the word 'human'. As Macquarrie notes, we might describe a certain man as human — in contrast to merely animal — but yet 'inhuman' in the way he behaves.²⁶ That ambiguity is the truth of the human condition in all of us. In one sense we are fully human, in another sense anything but. It is to point up this ambiguity that I refer to human personhood as both gift and as goal.

Personhood as gift

To affirm that human beings are made 'in the image of God' — despite the fact that this side of the fall this is expressed — as Thieliicke puts it — 'in the negative mode', gives a reference point for personal worth and for the obligation that we treat one another as persons, as neighbours,

irrespective of our own capacities and achievements. The client is my neighbour because his personhood is derived; his is an 'alien dignity' (Barth) bestowed by God; he does not become my neighbour only when certain relational abilities are present. His personhood is a gift, or as Barth puts it a 'loan', to be affirmed and respected.

In counselling terms this will caution against any technique which fails to treat the other as person, but rather as the object of mere manipulation. It will also challenge the notion, at the root of much personal misery, that self-worth is somehow dependent on achievement.

Personhood as goal

To affirm personhood as a gift, however, is not to say that all is well with the world. On the contrary, the image of God is seen in fullness only in Christ. For the rest of us, the 'image' is a pale shadow of what is meant to be a shining reflection. Personhood is given its meaning in relation to another, and the human predicament is that all our relationships at all levels are disordered. The theological concept of sin as failure to keep covenant with God underlies the therapeutic language of 'estrangement', 'alienation', 'anxiety' and 'disorder'. Whether we speak of 'ego' as being 'split'²⁷ or as only 'weak'²⁸ there is an acknowledgment that full personhood is found in the growth of interpersonal relating, and that there is much that is disordered which hinders that growth.

The human story was meant to be one of development. Adam was to grow in knowledge of God on the basis of obedience. That development was stunted and distorted in the attempt to grow in knowledge on the basis of rebellion. The covenant of grace is the offer of God to make things new. Growth back to full personhood, the true image of God, is by way of faithful response to the covenant promise. Maturing, both psychological and spiritual, is thus a process of change and development. The phases of growth in personal identity are not irrelevant to the process of moving towards the goal of full personhood, and developmental psychology has valuable insights in terms of personal, moral and religious development.

But it is within the human covenants of life with life, of which the counsellor-client relationship is but one, that opportunities are made available for personal development, to understand and deal with some of the personal disorders which hinder growth, and facilitate the work of the Spirit in bringing us nearer to the divine image, and so nearer to our true humanity. Our confidence rests in the fact that while we struggle for ourselves and with others to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, God is at work in us to will and to work for his good pleasure. All our hopes and joys and failures are to be set in the context that this is his world, and *he* is the one who has no need of counselling help:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.

(Rom. 11:33-36 NIV)

Conclusion

We must try to develop our understanding of personhood within a theological anthropology. We must try to set our goals on the pattern of truly free and fulfilled humanity we see in Christ. We must try to understand the mechanisms of personal and behavioural change in the light of the work of the Spirit. These are the Christian assumptions about man, about values, about change which will undergird our theology of counselling. And we will try to understand our task as part of our covenant response to God's gracious initiative to us, and as seeking to be faithful (in the covenant sense) in our covenanted relationships with others. It is in this sort of framework that we shall try to integrate the insights of psychology and the human sciences to sharpen our understanding of personal relationship, and by which our theological formulations will be tested and modified.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally read at the Care and Counsel conference 'Towards a Theology of Counselling', September 1983 and subsequently published in the evangelical Anglican journal *Anvil* 1/2 (1984), which can be obtained from *Anvil* Subscription Secretary, c/o St John's College, Bramcote, Nottingham NG9 3DS at £8.40 (\$14.80) per annum. We gratefully acknowledge the permission of Peter Williams, the editor, and David Atkinson, the author, to use this article.
2. British Association of Counselling.
3. John Carter and Bruce Narramore, *The Integration of Psychology and Theology*, (Rosemead, 1982).
4. Cf. Albert Ellis, 'The Psychotherapist's Case against Religion.' A paper read at the New York Humanist Society, New York 1965.
5. Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, (Philadelphia, 1970).
6. Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, (New Haven, 1950).
7. M. Jeeves, *Christianity and Psychology: The View Both Ways*, (Leicester, 1976).
8. In much of this section I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann, 'Covenanting as Human Vocation', *Interpretation* 33 (1979), pp.115-129.
9. *Institutes*, 1.1.1.
10. C. Brown, (ed.), *International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols., (Exeter, 1975-78), 2, p.115 (article on 'Grace').

11. Quoted in T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, (Edinburgh, 1984), p.12.
12. E. W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms*, (Oxford, 1968), p.184.
13. T. Oden, *Kerygma and Counselling*, (New York, 1978).
14. *Ibid.*, p.50.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.56ff.
16. *Ibid.*, p.57.
17. J. Dominian, *Cycles of Affirmation*, (London, 1975).
18. B. B. Warfield, 'On the Emotional Life of Our Lord', in *The Person and Work of Christ*, (Philadelphia, 1956).
19. *Ibid.*, p.138.
20. *Ibid.*, pp.138f.
21. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, (eds), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Cambridge, 1957).
22. Brown, *op. cit.*, 1, p.89 (article on 'Advocate').
23. Quoted in Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, (Grand Rapids, 1982), p.129.
24. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, (ET Edinburgh, 1958), 3.1.
25. W. R. D. Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, (London, 1952).
26. John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity*, (London, 1982), pp.1ff.
27. M. Klein, 'Our Adult World and Its Roots in Infancy', in *Envy and Gratitude*, (London, 1975).
28. H. Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena: Object Relations and the Self*, (London, 1977).