

Pastoral View

Counselling And Biblical Psychology

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Historically, Protestantism has always insisted that the whole of Christian life must be regulated by Scripture. For the private Christian this meant biblical control of his beliefs, practices and emotions. For church leaders, it meant the submission of preaching, discipline and government to the authority of the Word.

Unfortunately, the phenomenon of pastoral counselling (in its modern forms) arose only after the Protestant ethos had been defined in the great creeds of the Reformation. As a result, biblical control has been much less evident here than in other areas of the church's work. Counselling has been largely non-theological, taking its principles and procedures from psychology and psychiatry, with scant references to the Word of God.

A moment's reflection is enough to convince us that this is unacceptable. If the church is commissioned to counsel, its counselling can only be derivative. It is a stewardship in terms of which we administer the counsel of Christ. This cannot mean that Scripture is our exclusive guide and that we consult no other sources. Every pastor's library should contain standard reference works on psychiatry as well as basic guides on common counselling problems (such as depression and marital breakdown). In any normal ministry today, these will be well used. But all must lie under the regime of Scripture.

Supposing this to be so, what guidance does Scripture give?

The most important thing, probably, is a biblical psychology. Several features of this are worth noting.

First, the fact that man bears the image of God. No matter how degraded the individual appears to be, his humanness means that he is "little lower than God," is capable of being "highly exalted" and possesses a nature which God himself was not ashamed to take. The rudiments of intelligence, conscience, affection and creativity are there indelibly.

Secondly, the emphasis that man is a psycho-somatic unity. He does not simply have a soul. He is "a living soul" (Genesis 2:7), composed of body and spirit. He can never be properly understood in terms of materiality alone. Neither, on the other hand, can he be understood apart from his materiality. He expresses himself through his body and the state of his body will often have a very direct effect on the state of his psyche. The proper management of the body thus becomes a primary Christian duty and the discovery that chemical therapy and physical therapy have benign effects on the mind causes no surprise.

Thirdly, the insistence that man is sinful. He is totally depraved. His whole nature is corrupt — his intellect, his emotions, his will, even his conscience. Sin affects his opinions, his moods, his priorities and his relationships. He suppresses revelation. He is hostile to God. He is blind to the gospel. He is self-centred and deceitful. He lives behind a facade, wearing a mask and frequently making real identification and diagnosis almost impossible.

Clearly allied with this is the fact that many of the "conditions" with which men come for counselling are not "conditions" at

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all but either acquired patterns of sinful behaviour or sinful emotional responses to particular situations. Here there is a wide divergence between biblical assessments and psychiatric assessments. The Bible challenges some (but by no means all) depressions with the question, *Why?* The same challenge might be put to other emotional conditions. It is by no means impossible to opt for a nervous break-down as a plea for sympathy or as a form of escapism and some of the instances of schizophrenia which one sees in the church amount to little more than egotistical persecution complexes. (This is not to deny that severe and deep-seated instances of these conditions do occur. It is only to plead for honesty with ourselves and alertness with others.) The bible is equally uncompromising with the problems of drunkenness and homosexuality. It sees these not as conditions but as sinful "works of the flesh". One suspects that it would take the same view of some other cases which we today speak of as "needing help" — notably wife and child-beating.

Another point which emerges from Scripture is that "a divided self" is a perfectly normal part of Christian experience "The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh" (Galatians 5:17). The conflict is divinely initiated and is a sign of healthy spiritual life, not of a morbid psychology. The ego, by the grace of God, is on the side of the right and the good, straining for conformity to Christ (Romans 8:29). But it has to contend with a harrasing series of spiritual problems, both endogenous and environmental. Within, there are remnant sinful impulses and aspirations; without, there are the pressures of obligations, temptations and sufferings.

In such a situation, self-satisfaction and self-confidence are impossible, to the bewilderment of the psychiatrist. The believer lives on terms of daily familiarity with the dark side of the human emotions — contrition, self-accusation and frustration (Romans 7:24). To the psychiatrist, this is neurotic. To Christianity it is normal and healthy — so long as we do not overlook the corresponding fact that the believer has a profound experience of joy and peace. Christ has given him SHALOM (Matthew 11:28) and the Spirit has given him joy (Galatians 5:22). These are deep and abiding. But they never in this life supersede or destroy the emotional pain of repentance. They only transcend it — or perhaps assimilate and sublimate it — gathering it up into the "new song" (Psalm 40:3) which "Rabbi" Duncan once described as "a song of joyous grief and of grievous joy".

Such a song would make no more sense to main-line psychologists than the doxologies of Pentecost did to the conventional religion of Jerusalem.