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Gospel and Christian Counseling

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Introduction: The Priority of Jesus

This paper emphasizes that important role of Christian counseling in spreading the Gospel. Gary Collins, a leading Christian psychologist, defined counseling as “a relationship between two or more persons in which one person (the counselor) seeks to advise, encourage and/or assist another person or persons (the counselee(s)) to deal more effectively with the problems of life.”¹ However, Christian counseling should rightly go beyond basic problem solving and generic growth to reveal the Gospel truths, promote faith development and foster spiritual maturity.² Yet, we see Christian counseling as commonly practiced today not much more than the application of secular psychology by Christians using some Scripture verses here and there for dressing-up. This is fundamentally inadequate and at least for our Asian context, we must seek to develop a form of Christian counseling that is more biblically integrated and better tailored for our local spiritual needs.

The Gospels tell us that when Jesus reached out to minister to others, He not only prayed, performed miracles and cast out demons from them but at times, He also counseled them, as with the Samaritan woman at the well (Joh 4:4-26) and with Peter after his three denials (Joh 21:15-19). Indeed, the Christ was proclaimed as the Wonderful Counselor (Isa 9:6)³ in the Old Testament. The passage on the road to Emmaus (Luk 24:13-35) also has telling implications for our approach to proclaim the Gospel to the lost. The day that Jesus resurrected signified the dawning of an entirely new era for humanity. It was the greatest paradigm shift of all mankind. The redeemed kingdom of God had already come on earth but it was not yet in its fullness. As king of this new kingdom, there was much for Jesus to organize and put in place. Instead of gathering all His confused and scattered disciples together for a strategic meeting, He chose to counsel two grieving individuals who had just lost someone whom they loved: their Lord and Master. Jesus’ counseling process involved not only the catharsis of their grief, a modern-day psychological technique of releasing emotional tension through talking about their loss experience (v. 17-24), but also an explanation (v. 25,26) why He had to die on the cross (the Gospel) and an account (v.27) of God’s story (on which all meaning, purpose and hope in life hinges). As Jesus journeyed alongside Cleopas and his companion in grief support, “they were kept from recognizing him” (v. 16) but at the end of the counseling, the risen Christ was revealed and they believed in Him (v. 31-35). Here, Jesus modeled to us a way of proclaiming

¹ Collins, *Effective counseling*, 13.

² See also Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 325-338.

³According to Bible Gateway, some bible versions translated the Hebrew words as Extraordinary Strategist (NET), Wonderful Adviser (CEV), Amazing Counselor (MSG) and Wonderful, Teacher (NLV). Of the 40 different bible versions, approximately one third of them separated the two words with a comma but has no effect on the noun “counselor” as to what is meant and what it means. Nevertheless, the verb “counsel” has been used in different context in the bible to mean advise, consult, conspire, determine or devise.

the Gospel that first addressed the social and psychological sufferings of the person before zeroing onto their spiritual needs. Above all, His priority to counsel the two grieving disciples even before He issued the Great Commission showed that care and counsel is an important avenue to open the door for evangelism and missions.

Counseling and Missions

One traditional way of doing missions is first gaining access and trust of the people through undertaking something to meet their physical or financial need. In our world of unprecedented sufferings and brokenness, most needs also have a psychosocial component and bio-spiritual health is not complete without psychological and communal health. So addressing, promoting and nurturing psychological and communal wellness should be a major part of our Christian faithful practice and mission to the world.

Recognizing the important contribution of counseling and psychoeducation in this area, the Care and Counsel as Mission Track of the Third International Lausanne Congress issued the Cape Town Declaration in 2010, calling for our greater engagement with the psychological and communal wellbeing of the people in our mission fields.⁴ The declaration emphasizes four dimensions of this new paradigm, namely,

1. **Christian:** that true healing includes reconciliation with God, oneself, one's neighbor, one's enemy, and creation through Christ, while an authentically Christian perspective on psychology will call us to compassion and the seeking of justice and reconciliation in our advocacy, practice, training, and research;
2. **Holistic and Systemic:** that God's creation reflects a design of interdependent systems and so we must be committed to a global understanding of the sufferings and wellbeing of the whole person and the community;
3. **Indigenous:** that the global community should have a perspective of relating and learning from local communities in order to develop culturally appropriate and biblically congruent psychological perspectives, theories, models and resources which utilize indigenous, Christian models of human functioning, wholeness and resiliency drawn selectively and sensitively from the insights of local psychologies;
4. **Collaborative:** that the journey towards wholeness is a collaborative relationship in which both the helpers and the person or community in need are transformed.

Let us examine the contextual basis to see if the call of the declaration is sound. An estimated 26.2 percent of adult Americans or one in four persons suffer

⁴To read the full version of the Cape Town Declaration 2010, see http://careandcounselasmission.org/ccm/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=11&lang=en

from a diagnosable mental health disorder in a given year.⁵ Depression is projected to be the world's leading cause of mental health disability by 2030.⁶ According to Stephen Greggo and Timothy Sisemore, most of these estimates do not even include those who are not diagnosed while two-thirds of them do not get the mental health services that they need.⁷ This is obviously more so in Asia where there are more sufferings and less mental health workers.⁸ As if corresponding to the degree of mental health needs and our response to such demand, the Global Survey on Theological Education designed to gather data and perspectives on all forms of theological education from every Christian tradition around the world, concluded in June 2013 that cross-cultural communication and practical skills related to ministry are the subjects the 1,650 seminary and church survey respondents most like to see added or strengthened in theological education.⁹ Christian counseling fits exactly into the most like category. Hence, it appears that the Care and Counsel declaration is both sound and strategic especially for Asia.

Brad Smith, who together with Gary Collins and Fred Gingrich initiated the Cape Town Declaration, argued that counseling as practiced by Christians is becoming more important in meeting the mental health needs of the world,¹⁰ and for resource-poor areas like Asia, he advocated the strategy of “task-shifting” (citing Buttorff, Hock, Weiss, Naik, Araya, Kirkwood Chisholm and Patel, 2012).¹¹ The approach involves training community and lay Christians for specific mental health interventions rather than using professional counselors, psychologists or other mental health workers. Before proceeding to build up the case to facilitate the way forward for us in Asia, let us first consider the theoretical underpinnings of interfacing the psychology of counseling with our Christian faith.

Psychology and Theology

Psychology is an applied discipline on understanding human character and

⁵“The Numbers Count: Mental Disorders in America”, statistics issued by the National Institute of Mental Health. Retrieved from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-America/index.shtml>

⁶“Global burden of mental disorders and the need for a comprehensive, coordinated response from health and social sector at the country level” issued by World Health Organization on 1 Dec 2011. Retrieved from http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB130/B130_9-en.pdf.

⁷Greggo and Sisemore, 16.

⁸ As a comparison, USA has 7.79 psychiatrists per 100,000 population in 2011 while China had 1.53 in the same year. Data provided by Global Health Observatory Data Repository of the World Health Organization. Retrieved from <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.MHHR?lang=en>.

⁹Global Survey on Theological Education, a project by Globethics.net and the World Council of Churches, 2011-2013: Summary of Main Findings. Retrieved from <http://www.globethics.net/web/gtl/research/global-survey>.

¹⁰Smith, Care and Counsel, 74.

¹¹Ibid, 86.

behavior. However, God as our creator understands our human nature more than anyone else and so the Old and New Testaments are full of psychological content. Jesus was very psychologically minded when He ministered to others while the apostle Paul was strongly proto-psychological in his writings.¹² The desert fathers like Tertullian, Cassian, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory the Great wrote much on the nature of the soul and soul healing, while Augustine and Thomas Aquinas provided us with much early church psychological reflection.¹³ Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation like Anselm, Duns Scotus, Richard Baxter, John Owen and Jonathan Edwards wrote much on pastoral care and spiritual direction. Clearly, soul healing, or what we call Christian counseling today, was central to the mission of the church long before modern psychology came about.¹⁴ Indeed for centuries, Christians have been practicing a kind of folk psychology that is not backed up by scientific methodology.

Against this backdrop, the last 150 years saw the rise of a new worldview called modernism where secularism and the application of science was the order of the day. Knowledge exploded through empirical research while the metaphysical nature of religion, which defies scientific verification, was sidelined. Understanding human nature also became the object of intense methodical investigation and secular psychology began to develop a respectable body of knowledge recognized today as modern psychology. Despite that some of its early thinkers even promoted that religion contributed to psychological pathology, there was a close connectedness between psychology and Christianity, but “it was only in the 1950s that we find evangelicals beginning to engage psychology in any concerted way.”¹⁵ This is partly due to the fact that in our postmodern era, it is now “more acceptable to acknowledge one’s own religious beliefs and perspective in psychological discourse”.¹⁶ While most Christians somewhat accept that modern psychology can inform theology and theology validates modern psychology where it is consistent with the Bible, we have been toying with several approaches on how best to combine the knowledge and techniques of modern psychology with our Christian worldview, with the Scriptures as the final authority.

There are currently five models of interfacing, namely, biblical counseling, the levels-of-explanation, integration, Christian psychology and the transformational approaches:

1. The **biblical counseling** approach (earlier proposed by Jay Adams (1970) as “nouthetic counseling”¹⁷) sees the Bible as a self-sufficient counseling manual and psychology as secular and therefore fundamentally opposed to Christianity.
2. The **levels-of-explanation** approach maintains that psychology and theology

¹²Brett, *History of psychology*.

¹³See Henry, *Saint Augustine on Personality*, 306-318.

¹⁴Oden, *Pastoral counsel*.

¹⁵Johnson and Jones, *Psychology & Christianity*, 34.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁷Adams, *Competent to Counsel*.

have separate levels of reality and understanding of one discipline offers a distinct perspective that is independent of the other.¹⁸ Both disciplines are affirmed and they can be correlated in counseling.

3. The **integration** approach seeks to fuse the domains of psychology and theology that are common to both disciplines, discarding whatever psychological content that is inconsistent with the Scriptures. Correlation retains the two systems in each while genuine integration assumes there is only one set of system in the two disciplines.¹⁹
4. The **Christian psychology** approach strives to develop a Christian theological framework that more radically sets the agenda of our understanding of psychology without entirely repudiating a psychological focus.²⁰ The objective is to have a psychology that is derived from the Christian view of the person rather than simply taking it from modern psychology's humanistic view.
5. The **transformational** approach focuses on spiritual formation, with each generation allowing the reality of faith and love to shape the endeavor of doing the work of psychology in the Spirit, and then as a secondary task, reintegrate its findings with those truths and traditions within which it finds itself.²¹

In view of these different models, we will now consider the Asian context in greater detail and see how best we can interact with them to meet the needs of our situation.

Counseling and Asia

In Asia, church leaders have been calling for a Christianity that is more uniquely Asian. For example, among the restraining factors in Asian church growth, Wong Kim Kong attributed the following:

The cultural overtones and 'westernism' and the lack of customization of the new religion into the local cultural and social context did not make Christianity appealing to the local population ... The fact that Asia is the stronghold of well-advanced classical religions - Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and that many came from tribal faiths and traditional religions needed strategies that would enable the Christian faith to permeate into the web of local societies ... Finally, there was the lack of understanding that Asians have a holistic view of religion, meaning there is no separation between the sacred and the secular. An example is Islam that brings all areas of life under the control of religion.²²

Through the centuries, the Church develops her theology under the influence of the local context and the Asian Church must undergo her own process to be more relevant to the needs of the Asian society. Whilst understanding the contributions and limitations of theology from the West, we also need a biblical interpretation that is more contextual to inform counseling, preaching and worship. Federico Villanueva, in echoing the call of many Asian theologians, reiterated that we who are in the majority world of Christians ought to be the ones doing biblical interpretation for our own

¹⁸Jeeves, *Psychology and Christianity*.

¹⁹Carter and Narramore, *Integration*, 92.

²⁰Evans, *Wisdom and humanness*, 132.

²¹Coe and Hall, *Transformational psychology view*, 202.

²²Wong, *Challenges and Responses*.

contexts.” Citing Parratt and Vanhoozer, he wrote:

There are no “voices in the margin.” There is no “One Rule to Rule them All.” This is because every “theology is ultimately ‘contextual’, that is it arises from a specific historical context and it addresses that context.” ... By “context” he means the context of the interpreters, which is “rooted in particular social, cultural, and geographical networks.” ... The question western scholars are asking is not wrong; it is simply that our questions differ, and thus the answers we seek, given our differing contextual realities.²³

Villanueva also emphasized that unlike modern Western Bible interpreters, Asians in general are holistic in their approach to the text.²⁴ Citing Yieh,²⁵ he added that our biblical studies are always existential, not simply academic, and the cultivation and transformation of personal character is the ultimate purpose of our Asian biblical interpretation. Moving a step further and again citing Parratt that “what brings much of the Third World together is a sense of pain,”²⁶ he empathetically stated in the same paper that the way to make the Bible relevant to Asia is through a theology of suffering that embraces the pain of Asia.

So in the light of all these factors, ministering to the pains and sufferings of the Asian individual and community from our local Christian mindset requires a category of Christian counseling that is premised upon an interface of psychology and theology which is spiritually and culturally-sensitive, holistic, existential and transformational.

Theoretical Foundation and Pragmatism

Since our emphasis is on the spiritual transformation of the individual and community, there may be some association with the transformational approach but I am not advocating a full allegiance with it. For one, each approach has its own contributions and limitations because no human perspective can capture all the complexities involved. Indeed, Johnson (2000) believed that clinging rigidly to one formal system would deny us the insights and benefits of the other approaches.²⁷ Gary Moon (2012) also noted that it is difficult to determine when a particular approach or multiple approaches serve our purpose, as “a variety of variables determine when approaches leaning on Scripture (biblical counseling), tradition (Christian psychology), reason (levels of explanation), spiritual experience (transformational psychology) or synthesis (integration) receive the most weight of emphasis.”²⁸

Notwithstanding, our Western thinkers can continue to argue for a theoretical winner for years to come and while this has its rightful place, I contend that for us in Asia, the kingdom task at hand is too urgent for us to indulge in the luxury of

²³Villanueva, *Contextual Biblical Interpretation*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵Yieh, Chinese biblical interpretation, 30.

²⁶Parratt, *Third World Theologies*, 11.

²⁷Johnson and Jones, *Psychology & Christianity*, 254.

²⁸Greggo and Sisemore, *Counseling and Christianity*, 134,135.

prolonged academic theorizing. Therefore let us adopt a more pragmatic approach like the “just do it” slogan of Nike. The argument is similar to saying that in theology, we have different approaches like biblical, systematic, historical, dogmatic and contemporary theology, and we just go ahead to exegete the Bible using the approach best suited for the task at hand. In counseling too, we have the psychodynamic, cognitive behavioral, Adlerian, existential, person-centered and other approaches, and when we do counselling, we just use the approach that is best suited to the context.

Indeed, all we need in Asia is a practical, spiritually and culturally sensitive transformational counseling approach that reclaims the Christian tradition of viewing the person theologically and philosophically from God’s perspective and using it rather than modern psychology as the foundation, while not forsaking past or future empirical research in modern psychology. This pragmatism cuts across the five systemic approaches. This is in line with Johnson’s basic conclusion of the five approaches that “In our search for God’s understanding, we all simply aim to do the best we can wherever we’re at.”²⁹

With the focus on spiritual transformation, such counseling may be better termed as *transformational counseling*. This will set it apart from Christian counseling that sometimes does not go beyond symptom relief, behavioral change and improved functioning. We want to emphasize on addressing the whole person, particularly with regards to character and spiritual change. The counseling approach modeled to us by Jesus as described above points to such emphasis. The *transformational counselor* then becomes the transforming agent that God uses to change many lives, sometimes in group settings but more often, one person at a time. The distinction made is also good because Christian counseling seems to be having an identity confusion as to whether it is the same or different from pastoral counseling, biblical counseling, “nouthetic counseling”, or Christian psychology counseling.

Psychology and Hermeneutics

To promote and facilitate the Care and Counsel movement in Asia, transformational counselors as well as the lay Christians mobilized through “task-shifting” as caregivers will need a ready pool of biblical resources that are clear, distinctive and practical to the counseling process for faithful practice, ministry and service both in and outside the church. Such Asian interpretation of the Bible must be theologically and psychologically exegeted. This form of hermeneutics can be referred to as *Christian Transformology*, again to emphasize on its spiritual transformational focus. Giving this discipline a new name without the word “psychology” will hopefully make it more malleable to the biblical counselors and other Christians who still think that psychology is basically humanistic and hence not trustworthy.

Indeed, the Bible covers comprehensively all aspects of life, including our functioning and dysfunctioning but the Scriptures are not exhaustive or explicit in all

²⁹Johnson and Jones, *Psychology & Christianity*, 261.

situations. The knowledge and techniques of modern psychology can fill in the contextual gaps of behavior so that we can understand human nature better. All truth is God's truth and if we can integrate the facts of medicine or engineering in our Christian lifestyles, we can likewise apply the principles of psychology to seek a deeper understanding of human problems.³⁰ In this way, many portions of the Old and New Testaments that contains much of folk psychology presently left untapped by theological interpretations can be enhanced with modern psychological inputs for wider and more effective application of God's Word in transformational counseling. For the process, the following simple guidelines may be helpful:

1. Exegete the passage by the usual theological methodology.
2. Determine if the passage involves some aspects of the human nature.
3. If so, consider what local psychological knowledge can add dimension and depth to the biblical interpretation from an Asian perspective.
4. Apply this new insight to address common mental health issues in the Asian context.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

For a start, more seminaries in Asia should offer Christian Counseling or Transformational Counseling courses where 1) Multicultural and Community Psychologies, Evangelism and Missions are core subjects, and 2) field exposure trips are compulsory. This will increase the number of counselors both to serve and "task-shift" lay Christians for care and counsel in communities.

Secondly, the Asia Theological Association can facilitate the formation of a small team of theologians, psychologists and counselors to work together on producing a commentary of selected books of the Bible, starting with the four Gospels, exegeting them with contextual psychological input. For such enterprise, Gary Moon (2012) specified only three essential domains: "1) a professional sound and respected training in a mental health discipline (for the psychologists and counselors doing the interpretation work with the theologians), 2) classic models of spiritual direction, and 3) the best from a body of modern evangelical thought that presents a high and explicit Christology."³¹

³⁰Adapted from Ng, Christian Counseling in Malaysia Today.

³¹Moon, Transformational Approach, 140.

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