***What Is a Christian Counselor?***

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A key question that keeps coming up in Christian circles concerns the integration of theology and psychology. Can they be integrated? There is a contingent in the Christian community that says there is no such thing as a Christian counselor. Among Christian counselors, I have discovered that many counsel much the same as our secular counterparts. Is Christian counseling unique, and if so, HOW? I believe there is a uniqueness to Christian counseling. Here is my attempt to clarify what separates us, as Christian counselors, from our secular counterparts.

Let’s consider three areas:

***First of all, Christian counseling is unique in its assumption or presuppositions.*** Every approach to counseling begins with a set of underlying presuppositions and values. These beliefs influence our counseling, whether the counselor is aware of them or not. What are the Christian counselor’s unique assumptions that separate us from secular counseling? I believe that there are at least five.

1. Christians believe in a Sovereign God who is not only infinitely powerful but intimately personal—one who cares about people and wants to have a relationship with them. Secular counseling says little about God. If it does, the tendency is that God is made in our image.
2. We believe that God created our universe and that he ultimately controls it and currently holds everything together (Hebrews 1: 1-3). The secular counselor usually assumes that human beings are valuable but ultimately exist in a universe that is indifferent to their fate.
3. We believe that as human beings we are created in God’s image, but fell into sin and therefore alienated ourselves from God. Because God placed such value on us he sent his Son to redeem us and reclaim us. A secular counselor says nothing definitive about salvation, ultimate human destiny or one’s relationship with God. The Christian counselor operates from an eternal perspective, not just from a temporal view.
4. We have an infallible and unchangeable data base—the Word of God. It is an absolute. We learn truth from general revelation through reading, interacting with others, logical reasoning, empirical research, and other means. We believe no conclusion can be accepted as true or valid unless it is consistent with the teachings of Scripture. The secular counselor would rank the Bible as just another piece of literature and proclaim that human reason and scientific findings are the basis for ultimate decisions.
5. We believe that all human problems, including psychopathology, are the ultimate result of sin in the human race, and a least sometimes from the counselee’s personal sin. We Christian counselors may differ in our views concerning the extent to which personal responsibility and environmental influences cause problems, but we would agree that sin is the root. A secular counselor would not accept the idea that sin, as rebellion against God, is an important cause of pathology.

***Not only do Christian counselors have different assumptions from their secular counterparts, but we also have differing GOALS.***  Many of our goals are similar to secular counseling, such as:

* Helping clients change their behavior, attitudes and perceptions, and
* Teaching skills (such as social skills) and appropriate expression of emotions.

But in addition, a Christian counselor seeks opportunities to:

1. Present the gospel message and encourage the counselee to know Jesus.
2. Stimulate spiritual growth.
3. Encourage confession of sin and experience divine forgiveness.
4. Model Christian standards, attitudes and lifestyle, and
5. Stimulate the client to develop values and lives based on biblical teaching, rather than relativistic human standards.

These goals are not pursued in rigid ways which are insensitive to the client’s values. The goals are not meant to “push” religion on clients or to manipulate them unethically. Nevertheless, the Christian counselor who ignores the spiritual dynamic of counseling also risks building a counseling relationship on limited secular approaches and compartmentalizing life into the sacred and secular.

***Finally, a third area in which we are different from our secular counterparts is the availability of additional counseling techniques.*** It has been suggested that all therapeutic techniques have at least four common features: to seek to arouse the belief that help is possible, to correct harmful thinking and confront irresponsible belief systems, to help others accept themselves as persons of worth, and to teach clients to get along better relationally.

Most counselors would have no problems with these four features. They are used routinely in both secular and Christian counseling practices. But what separates Christian counselors from our secular counterparts is that although we may accept and use many standard counseling techniques, we also refuse on moral, biblical, or theological grounds to use techniques we perceive as being basically “unchristian.” In addition, Christian counselors will use some resources or techniques the secular counselor avoids, namely:

* Praying with the counselee,
* Reading the Bible,
* Allowing Christian truths to gently confront, and
* Encouraging the counselee to become involved in a local church.

Christian counseling is unique in its assumptions, its goals, and its techniques.