

Theology and Pastoral Counseling

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to address your organization and express my appreciation for the significant personal and spiritual growth experienced by some of our students through your ministry to them in college. I am pleased that the name of your organization documents your identity as ministers.

You have asked that I address the subject "Theology and Pastoral Counseling." I approach this task tonight by raising some basic questions about the theological beliefs which motivate our interest in counseling in the first place. Why do we consider counseling to be an appropriate function of the minister? Why should we as ministers be interested in counseling? When we ask the question "Why?" we refer to both past and future possibilities. When I ask the question, "Why did thus and such happen?" or "Why are you going to do this?" my question may be an historical question, a causation question, or a motivation question, such as "Out of what ground or experience are you doing this?" At other times I ask "Why?" with a future reference. I want to know "What is out there pulling you?" "What do you hope to accomplish?" "What are your goals and objectives?" "What do you hope?" I want to ask both of those questions about counseling and try to speak theologically to both the basic causation question and the goals and objectives question.

God's Love Motivates Pastoral Counseling

I suggest to you that the ultimate motive in the Universe is God's love. In fact, John identifies God as being love (I John 4:8). We believe that the God who created and sustains the universe is a God-Who-Is-Love, to pick a phrase from the existentialists. If God is a God-Who-Is-Love, and if love is the most significant characteristic of the nature of God, then love would have to be our primary motive. This affirmation is, for me, a theological anchor and the major motivation for counseling. Let me mention to you three events which the Christian faith believes were motivated by God's love.

First of all, the Christian faith has believed that the reason there is a creation is because God is love. Without worrying about the "hows" of creation, Christian theology through the centuries has answered the question "Why is there a creation?" in many ways. At the heart of these answers is the perception that God's love created in order to have other creatures with whom to relate. Believing that the God who created is a God-Who-Is-Love, Christian theology has usually affirmed that creation was an act of God's freedom and an expression of God's loving nature. We refer to this same profound motivation when we speak of divine providence, meaning that God's love is always actively concerned for human kind. The author of Ephesians says that this caring has been going on since the foundations of the world.

Secondly, Christians have believed through the years that a most significant and concrete manifestation of God's agape is the Incarnation. God somehow indwelt Jesus of Nazareth. We believe that God's unconditional and unchanging love towards humanity motivated this gift. We have all believed that it was because "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). In Jesus we believe that God was revealed as a loving sustainer of the Universe, a loving parent. So, incarnation is another experience leading Christians to believe that the ultimate motive in the universe is God's love. There would not have been an incarnation without it.

Lastly, I suggest to you that God's love motivated the ministry of Jesus. When reading the gospel, it seems unbelievable that any other force could have motivated the ministry of Jesus other than God's love. This vital, dynamic, sacrificial love was evident in Jesus' concern for the diseased, the troubled, the mentally ill, and the "used." The agape type of caring and counseling was concretized in his patience with the demoniac at Gerasa, his willingness to break the law of the Sabbath in order to heal, his anger toward the legalism of pharisaic religion, his anguish over Jerusalem, and his willingness to take initiative toward prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, and other social outcasts. All of these expressions of ministry, each being contradictory to the major thrust of ministry in his day, had to be motivated by God's love. This love seems to accept and understand human beings whatever their life-style, whatever their life situation.

In short, I am suggesting to you that the ultimate motivation, the ultimate causation, is God's love, the same love that motivated creation, incarnation and the ministry of Jesus. I assume this love

should also underlie and undergird our ministry of counseling. Why? Because we are called to make a response to this God-Who-Is-Love. If our divine-human encounters seem to clearly reveal a God-Who-Is-Love, and now, if all the above is true, then how do we respond to this God-Who-Is-Love?

Jesus was asked this question by the scribes and pharisees when they said, "Look, Rabbi, what is the most important commandment of them all?" Now you remember enough about the Jewish community to know this question was an ultimate question for the Israelite in that day. They were saying in essence, "Rabbi, if you could say one thing you would like for us to remember, what would it be?" They were saying, "Teacher if you've got one truth to give us that goes beyond everything else and undergirds all these other teachings, what is it?" And Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." Now that is a significant commandment, a significant responsibility. Jesus says two things, but they are inseparable, they cannot be divided. Jesus called for us to respond to this God who loves us in two ways. One, we should strive to love him in return as completely and as fully as we know how, with all of our being. Secondly, we should strive to give of ourselves in caring, loving relationships to our fellow human beings. If we are looking for a model for obeying and actualizing, this commandment, the way that Jesus went about loving serves as an excellent model. For example, Jesus demonstrated that God's love is universal and unconditional. It also seems to me that God's loving activity has always considered the freedom of human beings and does not move with manipulation or force. When we recognize the ways in which we have experienced God's love, we then form the way in which we may go about loving other people.

I hope that my answer to the question is clear. "Why should we do counseling?" The answer for me lies in my belief that the God who created and sustains the universe is a God-Who-Is-Love, revealed to us through the creation, the incarnation and the ministry of Jesus. We have learned after experiencing this God who has loved us that our response is to love God in return and to love our neighbors in the ways that Jesus has taught us to love. Furthermore, we know that love involves active caring, and counseling is one such activity.

Reconciliation Is Our Goal

Now I move to my other agenda, talking about "Why?" with a future reference, why is it we should counsel with reference to our

hope for people? What are our goal and objectives, our hopes, for pastoral counseling? I want to suggest two responses, although they are not the only ones.

The first theological concept that would answer this question is the concept of reconciliation. You might prefer to use the word atonement or salvation. We have already indicated that God's love was behind the incarnation. With what purposes and what hopes? It is obvious to us that God wanted to breach the gap between God and human beings. The New Testament talks about reconciliation with at least three foci. Reconciliation needs to take place between a person and God, between a person and his/her neighbor, and between a person and his/her inner self. You are most familiar with the fact that the original relationship between God and humankind has been interrupted by disobedience and failure to recognize and worship the God who created and sustains the universe. We believe that divine love is working in Jesus Christ to bridge that gap. Pastoral counseling can establish a context for such an encounter.

Secondly, though, we believe the gospel is also concerned with the enmity, mistrust and manipulation which takes place between human beings. In Christ, says the author of Ephesians, God's love has "broken down the dividing walls of hostility." Now people of every race, creed, color, sex, age, and social class, can find reconciliation in Jesus Christ. That is a clear proclamation of the gospel and certainly the Church has always believed in reconciliation of humans with humans. We should all be brothers and sisters in Christ. Pastoral counseling can assist a person in breaking down these barriers.

Lastly, we find the New Testament is interested in reconciliation between the intrapsychic aspects of human selfhood. The classic description of this is probably found in Romans 7. Let me quote the Phillips translation.

I have the will to do good, but not the power, that is, I don't accomplish the good I set out to do and the evil I don't really want to do I find I am always doing. Yet if I do things that I don't really want to do then it is not, I repeat, I who do them. My conscious mind wholeheartedly endorses the law yet I observe an entirely different principle at work in my nature. This is in continual conflict with my conscious attitude and makes me an unwilling prisoner to the law of sin and death. It is an agonizing situation. And who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature? I thank God there is a way out in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is in God's love that the conflict which humans experience internally can be stilled and a more peaceful and integrated existence begin. Pastoral counseling can facilitate this intrinsic reconciliation.

Why should we be counseling people? Because we seek to open doors through which reconciliation can occur in human lives. Paul challenges us to this task in II Corinthians 5:18-19,

"All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

A second reason why we counsel that reflects our hope, is to help people find abundant life. Again you may want to use a different word, such as wholeness or sanctification. Some would use the term Christlikeness, and that word is very appropriate as long as your Christology is traditional Christian doctrine; that is if it takes seriously the humanity of Jesus as well as His divinity. Most Christians have always believed Jesus was a fully human as he was fully divine. And there are those in our day and time that would question this affirmation and would make Jesus only divine or only human, but if you use the word Christlikeness it needs to hold these two things in tension. If we believe Christ was only human, and try to help people become Christlike, then we minimize the potential people have for experiencing the transcendent. If we use the term Christlike, and made Jesus only divine, then we put human beings under the tremendous strain of trying to be like God instead of trying to help them become fully human.

I do not pretend to understand all of what God has in mind for humans, but I'm committed to believe that one part of God's will for all humans is that we have opportunity to fulfill our humanity. That is, humans should strive toward fulfilling what God has made potential within our existence.

I, for one, choose to take the Genesis story seriously and I believe God was pleased when he created humans. I believe he knew what he was doing. I disagree with those who imply that somehow God stumbled over the words at creation and, like a stuttering magician, created humans instead of what he wanted. Furthermore, they make it seem that God has regretted it ever since. I disagree. I believe God purposely, knowingly created human beings like he

wanted and that is why he loves us. We are, of course, sinful, but our sinfulness, as far as I'm concerned, has not destroyed in any way, shape, or form the humanness that is potential within us. God wanted what he created.

Now I suggest two ways in which popular theology and popular Christian living lead away from this goal. I am dependent on Reinhold Niebuhr, who pointed out that one way Christians miss becoming fully human is through pride and self-righteousness. That is, many human beings make an attempt to become more than human. They seek to become superhuman. They want to transcend humanity. As Niebuhr points out, this is a denial of finitude. When a human being makes an attempt to deny finitude and become like God, Christians have called that the sin of pride. Our responsibility in life is not to become superhuman, not to deny our finitude and pretend we are infinite, but to accept our limitations and our potential as humans. We've often thought the original sin might have been the desire to be like God. It is very difficult for human beings to reach an abundant life when they are trying to become superhuman and deny their finitude.

A second way in which humans fail to be fully human is through what Niebuhr called the sin of sensualness. That is, some humans fail to become fully human by being satisfied with being an extension of the animal world. They are willing to become subhuman, not superhuman. Or to use the other phrase, instead of denying finitude, they deny transcendence. They deny the spiritual personhood which enables us to relate to the Transcendent. They deny their spiritual self. They cannot be Christlike because they deny their transcendence. And again, it is impossible for a person, a human being, to reach the abundant life when they are living a subhuman life, when they are denying transcendence. So to deny our finitude, or to deny our transcendence, blocks humans from becoming fully human.

In summary then, why do you campus ministers involve yourselves in pastoral counseling? We are motivated by the love of God and our response to this love. One purpose is to bring about reconciliation between those persons to whom you minister and their God, their neighbors, and their inner selves. Secondly, like the Good Shepherd said, we would hope our counseling would lead them to experience life more abundantly. To counsel toward these purposes means to help individuals know everything they can about being Christlike, about being fully human.