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Moving the Couch Into the Church

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When I finished my doctoral program in clinical psychology, I assumed that the techniques of psychology were well suited for helping people deal with personal problems. But because I was a Christian, I tacked on two disclaimers. First, although I believed the methods of psychology were useful to a Christian counselor, I insisted that the theories behind the methods were often opposed to Scripture and therefore had to be rejected. Second, I regarded the resources of Christianity as welcome additions to the Christian therapist’s little black bag of techniques. However, I clearly distinguished between psychological problems and spiritual problems. For solving psychological problems, I believed that Christianity was often helpful but rarely essential; for handling spiritual problems, however, I knew that only Christianity would suffice.

This line of thinking received a gradual jolt as I began to encounter something unexpected in my counseling. People came to me complaining of surface problems that I had to dig through to find the root difficulty. As I reached in to deal with this underlying disorder, I found myself touching something that I couldn’t classify as a diseased psyche curable by my professional methods. What I discovered beneath the complaints was simply a person—an uptight, insecure, confused person who felt lonely and empty. Probing more deeply, I noticed that this person had a lot of foolish ideas about life that took no real account of God, and that he or she had a stubborn inclination to do wrong and an equally stubborn unwillingness to admit being wrong.

It became clear to me that bringing about a transformation in this person (who beneath the surface differences bore a disturbing similarity to me) was a rather different sort of project than curing a mental disease; it required far more than psychology could offer. At that point I shifted from regarding Christianity as helpful but not essential in solving personal problems to insisting that a personal relationship with Christ is a necessary foundation for dealing with all problems, psychological or spiritual. Three years ago I resigned from secular employment as a psychologist to enter private practice, where I could operate from my new perspective without conflict. And since then I have experienced another shift in my thinking, not really a change but rather a natural progression in my belief that Christ is the indispensable core of effective personal adjustment.

I now see that to move toward becoming confident, self-accepting, giving, gentle, calm, mature people, all of us need three elements in a counseling experience. First, we need supportive encouragement from a community of others who are interested and involved in our lives. In biblical terms we need koinonia fellowship. Second, we require exhortation, which includes both clear directions on how to respond to every situation in biblical fashion and a regularly and lovingly applied kick in appropriate quarter to motivate us to do so. Third, we all need enlightenment to see how our thinking has been warped by a foolish culture that learned its ideas from its Prince. We believe nonsense like “money makes a man important,” or “sex is the route to personal fulfillment and joy,” or, worse still, “having things go as I want is essential to my happiness.” When we live according to such ideas, our lives become disordered: Anxiety, ulcers, broken marriages, and the like are the results of living these lies. We need to be enlightened to recognize where true worth and joy can be found.

I think that in the absence of organized malfunction, psychological problems stem from and are maintained by inaccurate ideas about life (which our sin nature warmly receives), ineffective behavior patterns (which our sin nature argues are effective), and a lack of the sense of community (which our sin nature seeks in all the wrong places). Therefore we need enlightenment to think right, exhortation to do right, and encouragement from a caring community of fellow believers as we go about the difficult business of living right.

Where can these three things best be obtained? Can I provide them in my private office? If so, for how long? Should people come to see me for the rest of their lives to be continually enlightened, exhorted, and encouraged? Do I really think I have all the spiritual gifts needed to provide people with all three of these elements? Is some form of group therapy the best way to create a caring community? These questions are a bit unsettling to a private practitioner, but they must be asked. And the answers I’ve come up with have impelled the most recent progression in my thinking.

Scripture says a great deal about these three elements and also tells us where God intends us to find

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them. The writer to the Hebrews tells Christians never to stop gathering together, to spend time encouraging one another (Heb. 10:24, 25). In other words, local Christian gatherings are supposed to provide opportunities for encouragement. Paul told Timothy to exhort and enlighten (teach) the believers in his local church (I Tim. 4:12). Many other passages suggest that encouragement, exhortation, and enlightenment are a primary responsibility of the local church.

The local church is a community of people who share a unique life and express their shared life in love for one another. Members of this group share their Spirit-granted abilities with the others. Some are called upon in a special way to exhort and stimulate others to godly living. A few are qualified to enlighten the others through the teaching of Scripture. All the ingredients of counseling are in the local church and are there by God’s design.

I have therefore arrived at the following view of counseling: Effective biblical counseling requires encouragement, exhortation, and enlightenment. God intends the local church to provide these elements. Counseling therefore belongs ideally in the local church and not in the private professional office.

Am I then hanging a “for rent” sign on my office door and moving into the pastor’s study? No. I don’t consider private counseling wrong. I rather see it as less than the best, something that exists and will probably continue to exist because churches are generally not doing a very good job of enlightening, exhorting, and encouraging. My concern is to help churches do a better job so counseling can move into the local church where I think it belongs. Counseling in a local church involves more than hiring a full-time minister of counseling or sending the pastor away on a three-week crash course. To become complete counseling communities, churches must develop and mobilize their resources to provide the three needed elements.

Let me sketch a proposal I have for moving in that direction. Suppose a handful of people were carefully selected by the governing body of the church to be trained in the skills of one-to-one exhortation. The course would be taught by an experienced Christian counselor. I think that a six-month course with one three-hour session each week would provide adequate training. Course content would include such matters as how to identify problem areas, what biblical principles apply to conflict areas like marital problems, and feelings of depression, and how best to communicate these principles and motivate people to follow them. Call these people Level II Counselors (Level II: Counseling by Exhortation). Make their names public to the congregations and encourage people to schedule time with them on their own or through the church office.

Draw upon these Level II Counselors to organize and direct a weekend workshop at the church dealing with the skills of encouragement: such matters as how to listen, how to convey compassion, how to recognize someone who is hurting, how to respond when someone shares a burden. Every member of the church would be invited to come because encouragement is the business of all Christians, not just the pastor or trained counselors. This workshop would be regarded as training in Level I counseling: Counseling by Encouragement.

During Level II training, the course instructor would be keeping an eye out for someone who displayed an unusual gift for counseling and seemed especially burdened for the needs of people. This person would be asked to pray about pursuing further training in counseling at church expense (not only for training but also for family financial needs), with the understanding that he or she would return to the church as a full-time Level III Counselor (Counseling by Enlightenment). This counselor would need to understand psychological functioning in some depth: how childhood experiences channel our thinking in wrong directions, where feelings come from, what controls behavior, how to unravel the tightly woven knots of foolish thinking, how to figure out the real causes behind surface problems, and so on.

Current opportunities for such training are, in my judgement, either unnecessarily long or too short to equip someone to counsel. One must either go through a long professional training program (two to three years for a master's degree or four to six years for a doctor's degree, after four years of undergraduate training) or be content with weekend workshops or courses in pastoral counseling varying in length from one week to several months.

I propose a one-year training program, requiring full-time residency and offering, in addition to classroom instruction, extensive opportunities for counseling under supervision. At the end of that year the trainee would be equipped to handle most nonorganic problems in the congregation. His role would include supervision of Level II counselors, organizing more training in Level I counseling, and serving as a back-up person for problems that Level II counselors felt they could not handle.

As a first step in moving this vision from the drawing board to reality, I am currently teaching a pilot course in Level II counseling at a local church in south Florida. Our goal is to develop this church into a model of a complete counseling community. It is my prayer that many churches will eventually take part in training and will help them provide:

- loving, supportive encouragement to their people who are struggling to live for God in a world opposed to him (Level I);
clear, practical *exhortation* to solve all conflicts in a manner consistent with Scripture (Level II);

- sensitive, skilled *enlightenment* to replace foolish ideas about life with wisdom from God (Level III).

As biblical counseling moves into the local church, perhaps we will come to understand better the absolute sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ for every personal need.

Let me sum up my thinking with a few general comments. The most critical dimension of life is our relationship to God. How well do we know him? Are we participating in his life? Do we experience his reality, his love, his wisdom? It is crucial to realize that our nonorganic personal problems decrease as our knowledge of God increases. Counseling should be thought of as one more way of helping people enter into a deeper, closer relationship with the Lord. If that is what counseling really amounts to, it clearly belongs within the framework of the local church. C. S. Lewis once expressed a similar thought:

"God can show Himself as He really is only to real men. And that means not simply to men who are individually good, but to men who are united together in a body, loving one another, helping one another, showing Him to one another. For that is what God meant humanity to be like; like players in one band, or organs in one body.

Consequently, the only really adequate instrument for learning about God is the whole Christian community, waiting for Him together. Christian brotherhood is, so to speak, the technical equipment for this science—the laboratory outfit." [Mere Christianity, Macmillan, 1968, p. 144].