

## *What is Christian Counseling?*

**by Bill Gillham**

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"...I heard you refer to obsessive/compulsive disorders on your radio program. That's a problem I have. I feel that I must spin around precisely three times and flip the light switch once before leaving the house, especially when I'm nervous about something. Do you think you can help me?"

Would you throw up your hands at how to help this woman? Would you send her to a "professional"? That's what I would have felt like doing, even after I'd completed my doctoral studies in counseling. I knew what the textbooks said, the techniques and procedures to use, but I also knew that the success rate for treating folks who were struggling with this behavior was far from encouraging. I would have felt helpless, hopeless, inadequate.

Her problem is not uncommon. Many of you know someone who is troubled by obsessive/compulsive behavior, though it may not be incapacitating. It could be as harmless as a baseball player who feels that he must step on second base, heading for his position. Should he fail to do so, it would interfere with his concentration. He would feel insecure, as though a piece were missing, and worrisome thoughts would plague him. Next inning, he'd make sure to step on that base.

So what would you do with the woman who wrote us the letter? Would you see her problem as light-years beyond the abilities of a pastor or plain-vanilla layman in the church? Okay, let's say that the therapist we refer her to is a believer. Since he knows Jesus, is even perhaps on the church staff, the therapy will be Christian...or will it? Tell me, does a Christian mechanic use Christian oil and grease? When we use the word Christian as an adjective, we imply that the skills and techniques---even the results---of the practitioner are Christian. Have you ever used a "Christian mechanic" who left a lot to be desired as a craftsman? It's better to describe him as a "mechanic who is a Christian."

I would have no problem using the services of an unsaved, skilled, orthopedic surgeon to set my fractured hip. When I submit myself to his knife, I'm more interested in his surgical skill than his theology. But submitting myself to a counselor who uses therapy developed by the minds of lost

mentors is dramatically different. Counseling that is Christian must counsel the soul with techniques generated by the Spirit of God; counseling which is not Christian counsels the soul with techniques generated by the spirit of this world. Attaching scripture to such therapy does not make it Christian in that the goals of these two therapies are diametrically opposed. Holy Spirit-led therapy seeks to lead the soul to abandon all hope in personal strength and thus to total reliance upon Christ's strength, while secular therapy seeks to lead the soul to greater autonomy (alas, even with "God's help")!

I don't question the sincerity or integrity of any counselor who is a committed Christian, assuming his desire is to help people overcome their problems in a Christ-honoring manner. But my concern is this: Does this counselor use Christian therapy or psychotherapy in his counseling? Let's face it, while both saved and lost plumbers may do an adequate job using identical wrenches, there is a world of difference between counseling with Biblically-based therapy and psychotherapy. While Biblical counseling seeks to lovingly cut the believer's fleshly water supply off and lead him to tap in to the rivers of living water" (Holy Spirit) within, psychotherapy seeks to prime the flesh's pump to get it "flowing" again.

Notice that I referred to counseling the soul. The word soul and the word psychology come from the same root, meaning personality. Your soul is your personality. Psychotherapy is a discipline which uses techniques developed by unregenerate minds to "treat" man's soul. The Christian who takes his soul to a psychotherapist for service is like the man who takes his car to the florist to be overhauled. Psychotherapy is not God's plan for ministering to the soul, especially the Christian's soul, regardless of whether the practitioner is saved or lost. To reiterate: I do not question this counselor's motive, I question his method.

I've taken my stand, now let me back it up by discussing how a Biblical counselor can lead our hurting sister into God's "rest" (Heb. 4:1). God hates self-reliance. This is the sin Adam and Eve committed; they were the first ones to hum the tune, I Did It My Way. That's what got our friend into the mess she's in. The instant she was born she began to hum that tune, to live to get her needs satisfied her way. She drew a circle around herself and set up her own private little kingdom, and she declared herself "lord of the ring." Her goal: to be in control. Her attitude: "This is my life and I have my rights."

We're no different. All of us entered the world striving to develop skills in ruling our kingdom. Our goal was control, our attitude "my way." If screaming and kicking got good results, we used that technique to control others; if uncomfortable or simply bored, we screamed until they made us content. We tried to control everything in every way: when we went to bed, when we got up, when we ate, when we played, how to keep from taking a bath, how to eat out of the dog's dish without Mom seeing, ad infinitum. In short, we tried to order our private world our way. We stuffed the ballot box, elected ourselves god and sat down in the King's chair. And most folks are still at it. Jack Taylor says, "If you want to get along with God, stay out of His chair."

Count on it: God opposes every independent work of man. He yearns to be intimately involved! Bizarre as it may seem, our friend is manifesting habitual behavior that makes her feel as though she were in better control, that her circle is in order. She's like the ball player who feels he has to

step on second base, only her behavior has become embarrassing, even incapacitating. On a scale of one to ten, her emotions are stuck on a 9.5! Her feelings are dictating her behavior, and though she can learn from world-system therapy how she developed this behavior pattern, the obsessive thoughts will persist and her stuck feeler will continue to demand that she "keep on dancin'."

Biblical counseling is simply a matter of discipleship. She must sell out, give up trying to be "in control" and "walk in [the] newness of life" which is hers in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:4); she must learn to experience her new identity, that she is a "new creature" in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). And who is best equipped to help her discover this? Who is competent to counsel her? The "professional" who seeks to help her "stand on her own two feet?" No, my friend.... This dear, hurting woman needs to discover the marvelous truth that Paul discovered: "...When I am weak, then I am strong" (II Cor. 12:10). God's strength through her weakness can be hers by appropriating the "life [that is] hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). A "discipler" with no world-system psychotherapeutic training, but who experiences and is able to disciple others into experiencing God's rest, is the therapist who can lead her, by God's grace, into this victory.

This dear sister in Christ needs to be disciplined. She does not need to learn self-help skills to overcome her compulsive behavior. Jesus will do it for her, through her. Biblical counseling (where the problem is not physical in nature) involves discipling this Christian woman to do the following:

- recognize that she has no right to sit in the chair which only God is to occupy
- claim her death in Christ at Calvary (Galatians 2:20) and that she has no right to be in control
- appropriate her identity in Christ, relaxing in the security of His unconditional acceptance of her
- begin to look to God, rather than to her feelings, as her barometer of truth; (this woman is allowing a part of her that can't even think to control her)
- recognize that Satan is controlling her by feeding obsessive thoughts to her mind, using first-person, singular pronouns
- appropriate Christ's indwelling life, trusting Him to express His Life through her to face Monday morning; (will Christ have to obey the obsessive thoughts from Satan's agent, the power of sin, to spin around three times and flip the light switch before "feeling secure" enough to leave the house?)
- begin setting her mind that she is resting in Christ's strength and ability, not in hers.

It grieves me that many young men and women, with a heart and a calling to serve the Lord in Christian counseling are instead being trained by well-meaning mentors in Christian institutions to use world-system, psychotherapeutic counseling techniques. Thus, as the Holy Spirit strives to conform believers to the image of Christ through the "fellowship of His sufferings." to the abandoning of all self-reliance for living life, these folks are learning techniques in how to strengthen a hurting believer's flesh.

Biblical counseling seeks to lead the believer to the end of his strength---regardless of how productive (or nonproductive) such "strength" may have proven to be---and into the certainty of Christ's strength through him! The Holy Spirit, often through the school of adversity, always works against the believer's dependency upon the flesh. Ultimately his flesh becomes nonproductive by Supernatural design at which time many seek counseling. The counselor who uses psychotherapy to help such a believer cut his losses is interrupting God's process of bringing that Christian to the end of his personal resources. The more "skilled" and "effective" the counselor, the more he sets God back to square one, having to begin the breaking process all over again.

While I take no pleasure in knowing this article will anger some, I rest in the knowledge that any Christian who understands how to lead such a woman as I've described to the end of herself can see her become an over comer. God has entrusted me with a life preserver; love compels me to cast it on the waters for all who will choose to rest upon it.

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