

**The Ministry of Biblical Counseling
to a People of Animistic Backgrounds:**

A Pastoral Perspective

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Abstract

Christian counseling for the cross-cultural pastorate differs from the practice of those in a licensed, professional setting. In general, pastors and other ministerial personnel have limited time and resources to provide a consistently organized counseling regimen with their counselee(s). Particularly for the pastor of people groups with an Animistic background such as the Mien (“Yao” – an ethnic minority from the Hilltribes of S.E. Asia), interventions of a shorter duration are the norm. An emphasis on the counselee’s spiritual growth and understanding biblical concepts is usually the focus of the pastor as opposed to the more holistic view of the individual’s mental and emotional health typically seen of a licensed counselor. The efforts to establishing a therapeutic client-counselor relationship is rarely needed, as the individual(s) seeking pastoral help are *usually* from within the minister’s own congregation. The challenge to provide a sound biblical approach to counseling becomes the primary focus as counselees usually present with one or more issues associated with syncretistic beliefs and rituals.

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Christian counseling for the pastor of people groups with an Animistic background is distinctively different than that of not only the typical licensed professional setting, but that of the general Christian circle. In many cultures around the world, particularly that of the Mien people group, Christianity is still a relatively new/young religion (50+ years). For that matter, much of the minds of (particularly the older generation) are still inevitably embedded in the old ways and rituals of Animism (a religion encompassing the worship of ancestral spirits by means of appeasement through animal sacrifice). Syncretism (intermixing Christian/biblical truths with the “old” ways) becomes the well-tolerated norm in many of the Christian settings, which is contrary to the truth of God’s word, and therefore is unbiblical. This becomes a huge challenge for the Christian pastor-counselor as their counselees typically present with thoughts and practices that are consistent with a syncretistic mindset. In this case, the Mien pastor must not only examine his own life and thoughts so as to rid his life of any syncretism, but he would have to “extra”-prepare himself to give a biblically-based answer to the question(s), issues, or problems that are presented by the counselees.

The purpose of this paper is to present a proper view of biblical counseling in light of Dr. Hawkins’ Concentric Circles for diagramming the self (Hawkins, 2006). While McMinn’s model for obtaining psychological and spiritual health is based on an accurate sense of the self, an accurate understanding of the interrelated structures of the self is imperative to bring about the overarching goal of one’s spiritual transformation (Hawkins, 2006) into a new creation through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17, NIV). It (the paper) also seeks to take into consideration the cross-cultural differences for effective counseling. In particular, it will attempt to correct syncretistic thought processes commonly seen in other churches/parishes of similar background and offer biblical concepts for utilization by those of the pastoral ministry.

Human Spirit – The Core Self

Syncretistic belief: There is a human spirit, but it is a free-roaming agent in the after life offering perpetual interruptions to the spirits of the living.

When God chose to create mankind in his own likeness, he stated to the Triune Godhead, “Let us make man in *our* image...” (Gen. 1:26, NIV), he breathed into the man he had fashioned from dirt his *spirit* (Gen. 2:7, NIV). It is this spirit aspect of human that encompasses all other aspect of the individual, of which is the foundation of an individual. Being created in God’s image also means that man was endowed with the relational, intellectual, volitional, and emotional qualities as does his Creator (Anderson, 2000). Dr. Hawkins places the human spirit at the “core” of self (Hawkins, 2006). Unfortunately, since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, at the core of man is also the sin nature (Crabb, 1977). The inherited sin nature has then since been passed on from one generation to the next; and its presence has only been to mar the human spirit originally created by a holy, sinless God. The only hope of restoring this down-trodden, sin-loaded human spirit, then, is salvation through Jesus Christ. Frankly, Adams (1986) believes that this is the most fundamental issue, and that unless it is first dealt with, any other goals of the Christian counselor has little hope to be achieved.

For the pastor dealing with congregates from Animistic backgrounds, they must help the individual to understand the Creator of their spirits as well as the reality of where spirits go to in the after-life. Many Mien people in even the “Christian” circles hold to the notion that how the individual’s body is handled in the acute phase of death and burial will determine the well-being of the person who had just passed away. In Luke 16:19-31 (NIV), Jesus explained the destination of the human spirit in relation to their relationship with God before death. He specifically tells us in verse 26 that a “great chasm has been fixed” between heaven and hell as well as the living and the

dead (vs. 27-31). Therefore, any hope of the Mien counselee achieving an accurate biblical sense of self relies heavily on his or her perspective understanding of the human spirit.

Cognition – The Thinking Self

Syncretistic belief: Human cognition and its capacity is something you're "born with" as opposed to it maintaining the ability to be influenced and shaped by external factors.

Human cognition, or intellect, encompasses man's ability to think, rationalize, and reason about self, others, and the world around him. It is influenced by internal factors (such as one's IQ), as well as external factors (such as what one exposes his mind to). Thus, an accurate biblical view of "mental" health is the result of thinking in line with God's standards. A common denominator in the destruction of one's mind is misbeliefs. As Backus and Chapian (2000) tells us, misbeliefs are misconstrued truths that not only contradictory to God's word, but are often in fact not even a part of the present reality. Secular psychologists have redefined these unhealthy thought patterns as "defense mechanisms" (Anderson, 2000). However, Anderson (2000) explains it best through his utilization of 2 Corinthians 10:3-5:

Fortresses (or "strongholds") are fleshly thought patterns that were programmed into your mind when you learned to live your life independently of God. Your worldview was shaped by the environment you were raised in. But when you became a Christian, nobody pressed the "CLEAR" button. Your old fleshly habit patterns of thought weren't erased. What was learned has to be unlearned. (pp. 60-61)

One's beliefs can have astounding influence on one's behavior and lifestyle. On the same token, false beliefs and persistent negative self-talks are generally rooted in one's childhood experiences and can be extremely dangerous to an individual's cognitive health (Backus & Chapian, 2000; Wilson, 2001). Therefore, understanding the way people think and perceive their reality of the world around him is crucial in counseling. The Christian counselor must help their counselee to

replace faulty thoughts with accurate, biblical truths in order to gain mental balance and achieve healthy patterns of thinking (Crabb, 1977; Backus & Chapien, 2000). In addition, for the Mien pastor, this correction of thinking beckons the counselee to acknowledge the depth of their responsibility for their actions, as one must learn to submit his thought life to the Word of God.

Emotions – The Feeling Self

Syncretistic belief: Emotions are a byproduct of one's behavior, and though they may be present, they are insignificant in one's relationship and therefore can be disregarded.

In lieu of our discussion of the human cognition, an individual's emotions can provide a greater gauge to understanding a person's thoughts (Crabb, 1977). This is based on the reality that although a counselor may or may not be able to uproot with words what his or her counselee may be thinking, but often times the emotions expressed are reflective of deeper thoughts and wounds. Furthermore, feelings of anguish, despair, depression, fear and anxiety can be traced back to misbeliefs (Backus & Chapien, 2000; Hart, 1999). In fact, the power of the mind is such that Backus and Chapien reminds us that "if you continue to tell yourself distorted statements, you're going to have negative feelings and you're going to engage in negative behavior" (2000, p. 19). The behaviors or decisions one makes in life (Wilson, 2001) consequently take a toll on one's emotions. For example, poor choices in life might have profound negative results which in turn produce feelings of anxiety and depression for most people.

For this reason, Cloud and Townsend (1999) issued the idea of individuals placing "boundaries" on their emotions by assuming responsibility and setting limits on how one responds to others. These boundaries allow permeability and freedom in the relationship as it enables each individual to display healthy and appropriate emotional responses to those around them (Cloud & Townsend, 1999). However, other times, physiological (i.e. hormonal imbalance), psychological (i.e. mental stress), and medications (i.e. prescriptions) may also influence people's emotions in a

negative way (Hart, 1999). So when the root cause is obvious, the wiser thing might be to remove the cause of one's emotional turmoil.

In the Mien culture, it may surprise some people that not much has been said in regards to one's emotions. Rather, an individual's emotions are pushed aside so as if to dismiss its existence. In fact, verbal expressions of feelings of love are rarely heard. For example, in a situation where one spouse is hurt by the other's words or actions, he or still is to show no feelings or emotions towards the incident. This is how a "good" spouse responds. Therefore, the Christian counselor must help their counselees to understand that emotions are God-given. And that instead of ignoring one's own feelings or the feelings of others (particularly that of young children), it is important to deal with those feelings from a proper biblical perspective (Wilson, 2001).

Volition – The Choosing Self

Syncretistic belief – The choices one makes are most often the result of fate or are influenced by the spirits of those who've passed away.

Willpower. How true it is that underlying one's will or volition is the aspect of one possessing the power to execute or sustain change. In fact, Wilson (2001) developed an equation for her "Theory of Change", that: "New Choices + Consistent Practice = Change" (p. 87). It is this component of man that directed him to his inheritance of the sin nature; yet, by the grace of God, it is also by this *freewill* that a person makes a decision to choose salvation through Christ. Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6, NIV), but whether or not people possess the truth of Christ in their lives or other general truths and knowledge of life, it warrants no guarantee that the individual will exhibit correct behaviors.

However, as behaviors are reflective of one's cognitions and beliefs (Backus & Chapien, 2000), knowing the truth provides him with a better chance of emitting those right behaviors based on his choice(s) (Crabb, 1977). In their discussion of placing interpersonal boundaries, Cloud and

Townsend (1999) emphasize the fact that each individual has a choice in how he or she reacts to any given stimulus. These boundaries will also serve as protection of how one views his or her own value and self-worth (Cloud & Townsend, 1999). On the same token, there are some people whose conscious and behaviors may be influenced by physiological limitations; but even in these cases the individual maintains, to some degree, the capacity to choose their response (Hart, 1999). Therefore, as God's Word reminds us, "men will give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36, NIV), Christian counselors must help their counselees to see the potential detrimental results of their choices.

In light of this, the pastor among the Mien people must carefully but thoroughly teach the truth that one will be held accountable for his or her words and deeds. The fact that the syncretistic belief of fate and spirits of the dead being the reason why people make their choices in life nulls any personal responsibility of the act. Furthermore, the whole idea contradicts the purpose and function of one's will – to make choices.

Sin, Flesh, and Specific Approach to Sin – The Soulical Self

Syncretistic belief: Constant struggles in life must be due to some displeasure of the spirits. The "sinful" habit(s) one commits are really due to some recent "spiritual" event(s).

The Bible addresses the issue of "habitual" or "besetting" sins on more than one occasion. Each person struggles within himself in the area of what Hawkins (2006) calls a "specific approach to sin". Some habitual sins (i.e. alcoholism) are so prevalent that it becomes the driving force of one's existence and has negative impacts those closest to the counselee. Others commit sin that is not as obvious or commonly regarded as sin, but nonetheless is in direct disobedience to God's Word and his authority over their lives. For example, Jesus gave a lengthy command and explanation to Christians, saying, "Do not worry..." (Mat. 6:25-34, NIV). However, as Hart (1999) pointed out, worry is one of the most common sources of stress of the flesh that is sinful all around.

In fact, not only would worry disturb one's tranquility, it causes one to be miserable and emotionally troubled (Hart, 1999). Yet, worry and anxiety is one of the most frequently committed sins in the Christian life.

As the Bible speaks a lot of self-examination, the Christian counselor must help the counselee to critically examine his life to see what kind of besetting sins might be hindering his walk with the Lord. It is a vicious cycle of struggle, but the principle of feeding the flesh versus the spirit is heavily seen here – whichever is fed the most will consume one's life. This application of principle is often left unsaid from many churches among the Mien people. But the Mien pastor who understands the danger of syncretistic beliefs in his Christian counselee will not be afraid of addressing this issue.

Body – The Somatical Self

Syncretistic belief: The body is reincarnated in the after life so as to live again and make amends for the wrongs done in this present life, as well as to experience pleasures that which the first life failed to experience.

Although the physical body is a temporary condition of a man, it often is the cause of problems for much of the self. The body portion of the concentric circles encompasses everything that influences the physical body. Man is only dust (Ps. 103:14, NIV); his body is vulnerable and susceptible to a variety of variables which disrupts the body's homeostasis. In fact, most anyone can identify to some degree the issue of stress and anxiety in their lives – because every individual has experienced it at one time or another. In lower increments, stress can be a protective mechanism. But when it is not handled properly, it becomes detrimental to one's physical as well as mental and emotional health and affects one's relationship to others around him (Hart, 1999).

To help individuals maintain a healthy physical state, the Christian counselor must help the counselee to realize that prioritization of responsibilities must include time take to care of one's

own body. People in general nobly give up a lot of time to take care of everyone and everything else around them, while beating themselves to exhaustion. Others do so out of obligation or guilt. Regardless of the motivation, their own physical state is compromised by the demands placed on it.

For the Mien pastor/counselor, it is important that he understands where his counselee is coming from in regards to the issue of the physical self, for their concept of the function of the physical being of man is more involved. People with Animist backgrounds need to understand the role of the body within the framework of God's design. And as life is only given to each person in only one body at a time at any point of time, there is no such thing as being reincarnated in the "future life" to relive and make amends or do the things one thinks he'd like to do "this time around" but did not accomplish. This concept is merely man's futile attempt to right the wrong and fulfill carnal desires outside of God's plans.

Temporal Systems – Influences of Earthly Systems of the Self

Syncretistic belief: The spirits control what goes on in the temporal systems.

It is impossible for one to say that he lives independently of all other systems other than himself, for man is a dependent being. In the immediate sense, and perhaps it's the system which affects the person most inevitably is "family". As God designed that the family unit be the foundation to all units on earth, it should not surprise any one, especially the Christian counselor, that each person is shaped by this enterprise. Instead, childhood experiences play a great role in developing an individual's personality as well as achieving a healthy sense of self (Wilson, 2001). More importantly, parents have the great responsibility of teaching their children about their Creator. Parents are also the first teacher for their child of how he or she ought to behave, and the boundaries one must set in a relationship (Cloud & Townsend, 1999).

Beyond one's family, every individual is touched to some degree or other, by the economy, the government, educational systems, church, and society as a whole (Hawkins, 2006). In fact,

one's belief system is greatly challenged by all the different systems. That is why the Christian counselor has an incredible role in helping counselees of all backgrounds to understand that this is one area of life that they can exercise their God-given will. For example, although one cannot choose which family to be born into, one can choose to make a difference in one's future family and children's lives. When individuals realize what personal impact they can have in the world around them, they will also gain a greater sense of self-worth.

Supernatural Systems – Influences of Eternal Systems on the Self

Syncretistic belief: The spirits are the controlling force in the supernatural realm. There is a battle between good and evil.

As God is an eternal being, he created mankind with the capacity to experience eternity. Along with the concept of the eternal is the reality of good and evil, and God and the Devil. Unfortunately, as man in his abased state denies the existence of a Creator (Romans 1: 19-21, NIV), this aspect of the whole person is often ignored or dismissed as having any contribution to the makeup of a man. From a biblical perspective, however, each individual must choose whether to give his life to the Lord or to Satan. No one can serve both masters of both supernatural kingdoms (Matthew 6:24, NIV). For this reason, the ruler of one's spiritual life exerts power on his personality and behaviors. Anderson (2000) reminds us, though, that both Christians and non-Christians can succumb to the schemes of the devil and his angels. Satanic influence in one's life is most apparent at times when one strays in his relationship with God. In fact, sin is bondage; and as Satan is the Father of sin, it isn't a surprise that he commands his children to sin. But unbeknown to the spiritually blind, they are unaware of this truth and therefore, Satan is able to continually control him (Collins, 1988). Therefore, when counseling individuals struggling in their lives, it is important for the counselor to recognize that spiritual warfare could be the underlying cause of a person's personal or relational problems. As Adams (1986) stated, "there can be no change that is acceptable

to God, and in the long run, to the counselee, until fundamental, positive change toward God has occurred... problems must first be settled on the vertical. The two go together (pp. 3-4).

Therefore, it is imperative for the Christian to stay in the Word, which is the only offensive spiritual weapon (Ephesians 6:17, NIV) so he would not fall into the Devil's plots. And the wise counselor will teach those coming for help the truths, regardless of their backgrounds, from God's Word regarding the reality of spiritual warfare and how to overcome them. When individuals understand who they are in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14, NIV), they will begin to develop a healthier outlook in life and gain a healthier sense of self (Backus & Chapien, 2000).

Synergism of Personality

Although it is true that the personality of man is made up of various components, it is important that he is not viewed simply as that. Rather, these components of one's personality are interlinked in such a way that it has a profound synergistic effect from one area to another. And whether negative or positive, a person will reflect an image of what dwells within his heart (Hindson & Eyrich, 1997; Proverbs 23:7, NIV). For example, Backus and Chapien (2000) tells us how misbeliefs in one's cognition by way of self-talks will have a rebounding negative affect on every area of the temporal systems in one's life. Anderson (2000) reveals how the intellect engages with that of the supernatural systems as the mind is often thwarted by the Devil's schemes. Wilson (2001) pointed out how childhood (family = temporal systems) experiences of abuse and neglect could exacerbate one's emotional state and well-being in a negative way.

Therefore, when pastoral counselors understand the integration of how all these components relate to each other, he or she would be more effective in counseling. Otherwise, we see why licensed, professional counseling offers a more effective approach to their clients – it is because a holistic view must be taken into consideration. As Adams (1986) pointed out, a change of heart

towards God is essential for true change to occur, not merely an outward change, which is only temporary.

The Holy Spirit – Primary Change Agent

The general pastorate would agree with Adams that “if God has been ignored in the counseling process, there is not way that apparently good results can hold up in the long run” (Adams, 1986, p. 5). Typically, individuals revolve around a “center of value”, namely God, or other multiple centers (many gods) whereby the values of one’s God gives order and rules one’s life (Augsburger, 1986, 172). The presence of the Holy Spirit of God is the ultimate driving force enabling an individual to experience true change of heart (Crabb, 1977). Unfortunately, there are times when a pastor would look across at his counselee and wish, “can’t you see what’s happening?” “Why don’t you change?” But he must remember that he is just a mediator of the grace of God (Wise, 1951, p. 97); rather, it is the Holy Spirit performs the actual transformation as he is able to invade the spirit of the human self (Rice, 2006).

The Counseling Relationship – Effective Considerations

Regardless of one’s culture, religion or family background, every individual possess the need to feel important, that they matter to those with whom they have relationships with. This includes how one relates to his or her counselor and vice versa. Whether it is in a formal professional counseling environment or in a pastor’s office or the counselee’s home, there is a certain level of apprehension on the part of both parties as they meet for the first time (Oates, 1959). In fact, according to Dr. Collins, research shows that most pastors feel incompetent and “underprepared for their counseling responsibilities” and most are not as competent as their professional counterparts (Collins, 1988, p. 38). Open communication fosters trust on the part of the counselee and enables the pastor-counselor to gain insight to the issues being presented. However, it is important that the pastor is able to disengage himself from the problems of the

counselee and not allow them to become his own as there is danger in becoming overly burdened and distracted (Anderson, 1985).

However, as the pastor assumes the role of a counselor, he must emit empathy towards his counselee(s) so that they may know of his sincerity to help. Another matter to consider during counseling is the issue of authority. A pastor must be able to display control (of one's personal feelings and judgments) and keep the issues on hand in proper perspective. In addition, considerations for the time is important as both the counselor and counselee must allow time for adequate and effective counseling yet not allow the sessions to crowd out other responsibilities (Collins, 1988). This may reflect reflect a lack of control on the part of the counselor. Finally, the pastor must remember that the Holy Spirit indeed is the Change Agent.

Conclusion

Finally, the counselor must remember that over-arching goal of Christian counseling is to help individuals have a healthy relationship with Almighty God. Spiritual growth and maturity will only occur when the individual understands God's plan for justification and sanctification (Crabb, 1977). In addition, as the human personality is made up of many components that contain forces which contribute to the way a person behaves. Yet on the same note, each person is responsible for his own actions. Through counseling, the pastor-counselor guides his counselee to understand how these aspects of the self influence the way one views himself, the world around him and how he should relate to others. And as boundaries are set in relationships, individuals will have more of a definitive approach in how they are to respond to others. The pastor is a great resource to those who come to him for help, and as truth is found in God's Word, he could better expound the Word of God in a manner that his counselees could apply it to their lives. Counseling is an avenue whereby emotional, psychological and spiritual healing can occur. The pastor is wise to understand this and maximize the effectiveness of his role in the healing process.

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