

THERAPIST IDENTIFICATION AND ROLE IDENTITY AS A BARRIER TO INTEGRATIVE CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

BRUCE NARRAMORE

Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology

In spite of the increasing number of Christian therapists, we still have no truly integrative approach to Christian counseling. Most attempts at integration of biblical and psychological concepts that do exist tend to be on a "hit or miss" or "proof text" basis. The thesis proposed is that one of the major barriers to an integrative approach to Christian counseling is the subtle anxiety and hidden guilt over vocational role identification experienced by most Christian counselors. The developmental origin and possible resolution of this barrier is discussed.

During an evening meeting a young college student raised his hand and asked, "When should a Christian hang up prayer and try psychology?" His well-phrased question reflects a basic spirit of our age. As people look for solutions to their problems, they hear the claims of Christianity on the one hand and of psychology on the other. For many, this creates an immediate dichotomy. Is the problem "spiritual" or is it "psychological?"

Unfortunately, this dichotomy isn't limited only to the young or uninitiated. In fact, I believe this split is one of the greatest problems facing Christian therapists—be they psychiatrists, psychologists or pastoral counselors. As we survey the counseling philosophies and methods of Christians practicing some form of counseling or psychotherapy, we find them largely divided into two camps. Some, (usually those doing short-term, directive or supportive therapies) consider themselves to be practicing *spiritual* counseling. Others, (usually those practicing long-term, dynamic or phenomenological approaches) believe they are practicing *psychological* counseling.

To put it another way, the psycholog-

ically-oriented counselor, in emphasizing things like inner dynamics, childhood etiology and client autonomy, frequently avoids interjecting any specifically biblical concepts into therapy.

Across town in the minister's study there is no such hesitancy to utilize biblical concepts. The pastor believes he has been entrusted with God's truth and that he has a duty to proclaim it. He comfortably opens his Bible and leads his client to passages relating to his need.

So far this seems to be a very natural phenomenon. Due to their divergent training and role perceptions, the psychologist and minister assume a different counseling stance. But this doesn't seem to be the only reason for the difference. In recent years we have seen many people crossing over these roles. Hyder (1971) and Nelson (1967), for example, as psychiatrists, apparently freely utilize scriptural admonitions in their therapy. At the same time, many pastoral counselors (especially of the more liberal persuasions) have incorporated more and more psychological concepts into their counseling. In fact, like most of their psychological colleagues, they too now hesitate to bring the Bible into the

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counseling process. They have rejected their *pastoral* role and adopted a *psychological* model.

Unfortunately, such role reversals often make only limited contributions to the integration of psychology and Scripture. Rather than a merging of the biblical and psychological, we often have an exchange of the two. The pastor trades in his spiritual role for a psychological one while the psychologist does just the reverse.

As a result, we still have little truly integrative Christian counseling. We have some Christians who are practicing therapy about like their non-Christian counterparts (except for some occasional differences on moral issues) and we have others engaging in a pastoral type of supportive and/or admonishing therapy. It is the rare person who moves comfortably between the *spiritual* and the *psychological* and who actually gets beyond this dichotomous thinking to a truly holistic view of counseling.

Sources of Dichotomous Counseling

Certainly there are a large number of reasons for this dichotomous thinking. Not the least of these are differences in education and in vocational settings. The realities of time and the necessity to effectively master two disciplines are other very real problems. These and others are important. But I would like to suggest another. This one cuts to the heart of the problem—the attitude of the counselor toward himself and toward his counseling role.

The Role Identity of the Psychological Counselor

Let's begin with a look at the psychologically trained Christian therapist. Generally he has grown up within a Christian sub-culture. These sub-cultures, like all others, have both assets and liabilities. Many churches and Christian groups, for

example, place a strong emphasis on "full-time Christian service." At church worship services, young people's meetings, revivals, missionary conferences and summer camps, children are presented with the challenge of full-time service. While this emphasis is certainly a valid and perhaps even a central issue of effective Christian training, it also has its drawbacks. Nearly always this challenge is presented in terms of the ministry or the mission field.

During one of these meetings our young psychologist-to-be dedicates his life to full-time Christian work. This dedication usually involves a mixture of genuine spiritual commitment, emotion and identification with an idealized speaker or profession. Since his commitment comes in the context of a challenge to the ministry or mission field, he fixes this goal clearly in mind. As a matter of fact, he often tells others (particularly the adult authorities representing the church), "I'm going to be a missionary."

For the pre-adolescent, this commitment is exceedingly important. This is the age of hero worship. From five to thirteen is a crucial period for the development of identity. Boys, particularly worship their male teachers, their coaches, their fathers and particularly their athletic heroes! This process of identification is a normal part of growing up. It actually helps solidify the child's whole self-image and is preparation for both his masculine identity and his later vocational selection.

During this period the minister or missionary image holds several strong appeals. The missionary is pictured as a strong pioneer—an aggressive free spirit. Both ministry and mission field hold out a strong commitment to and identification with the work of God—a big challenge sufficient to grab the aspir-

ations of this age child. In addition to this, these roles hold out the ever-present challenge of participating in the conflict between good and evil. In short, this age child may feel, "I can be a strong person helping others and fighting for a good cause." This identification is rarely quite this clear, of course, and the maternal identity also enters the picture. But as a rule, at least on a conscious level, the active, aggressive, idealized role is primarily in focus.

As he grows older, however, his perceptions change. He finds that among his peer group being a missionary isn't the "in thing." Even in Christian circles he finds that many think the formal ministry is out-moded. Whereas the pastorate used to be one of the most prestigious positions in the community, friends have a slight ridicule for the that's no longer true. Even his Christian friends have a slight ridicule for the minister or missionary. When he enters college, most of his friends are going into secular professions like business, teaching, medicine or law. With a somewhat superior attitude toward the ministry they say, "I'll be a better witness in my profession."

In addition, he may have a lot of rebellious attitudes toward his parents and their Christian culture. He resents the legalism he was exposed to and considers the church (especially the fundamental or evangelical ones) as narrow-minded and rigid if not actually anti-intellectual.

Along with all of the above, our budding psychologist has some frustrating spiritual experiences. He grapples with some sinful habit or conflict only to repeatedly come out on the losing side. He asks forgiveness, has a mountain top rededication and starts all over only to have the glow wear off and fall right

back into his religious rut. Pretty soon he starts to question the reality of spiritual experiences. He has been taught that some sort of crisis experience (be it salvation, dedication, rededication or sanctification) should resolve all his problems. When it doesn't, his faith is jarred.

By now he has started to convince himself that he, too, might not belong in the ministry. He isn't too "gun ho" on going to a foreign country, he's outgrown his desire for personal evangelism and he has begun to see the church as a place for dependent, conforming personalities. Not wanting to throw away his Christian faith and still having his humanitarian interests, he finally changes his major to psychology and starts preparing for graduate school. He may also gain new insight into his feelings and reactions. This reinforces his changing role selection and the thought that perhaps the solutions to man's needs are psychological, not spiritual.

This process, of course, varies greatly from person to person and can happen at any age or educational or vocational level. Some men are several years into the pulpit ministry before they make the switch. Many Christian psychologists have neither gone through a specific commitment to full-time Christian service, nor intended to adopt that role. But even in the absence of this type of commitment the cultural pressure of their Christian group influences their role selection and identity.

Now let's say our hypothetical student is about to receive his Ph.D. During his several years of graduate study he has learned several important truths—all of which can fit nicely into Christian thinking but which he probably hasn't had the time to think through clearly. He has learned that (a) most problems have their

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origins in early life; (b) personality growth takes time and seldom comes totally (or even largely) through a crisis experience; (c) many people have problems not because they are consciously rebellious but because they don't seem to be able to do what they know they should. He has also seen that some Christian experiences have as much emotion in them as they do reality and that some forms of Christian teaching seem to promote increased fear and guilt. In short, he sees all of the causes and effects of people's individual neuroses reflected in the corporate body of the church. At the same time he may find that some of his non-Christian professors are more sensitive, loving and empathic than the Christian leaders he has known.

As each of these truths has dawned, our student faces a conflict. How can he reconcile these with his Christian training and experience? Generally, some reconciliation does take place. At the same time, however, a certain resentment or attitude of superiority begins to surface. His psychological insight makes him even more sensitive to the weaknesses of the church. He begins to value its ministry even less. While he retains his faith in salvation (and perhaps even keeps his bibliology, ecclesiology and eschatology straight) he seriously questions the efficacy of the church as a growth producing force.

At this point, let's stop for a moment of reflection. There may be some truth in all of our psychologist's evaluations. The church does have its weaknesses and some churches do reinforce negative self-evaluations and narrow judgmental attitudes. But let's see what he does with it. Remember his earlier identification with the ministry? As a child he found a source of strength, power and compas-

sion in aspiring toward this role. But what has happened? Now that same role is seen as weak, naive and ineffectual. It may also be seen as narrow-minded and as actually promoting or reinforcing neurotic patterns.

This gives our psychologist a real problem. At crucial periods of his life he has identified with two different vocational models. In his emotional life, these seem to be at odds. One stresses an other-worldly salvation based on a fear and guilt motive while the other offers a present day "psychological sanctification" based on a loving sensitivity between counselor and counselee. As I write this, I feel a bit uncomfortable with the great contrast drawn between the role images because we all know many loving, sensitive pastors as well as many narrow-minded, insensitive psychologists. But my point is this—in the unconscious (and sometimes conscious) minds of many psychologists, these contrasts do exist!

Graduating with these conflicting role models in his psyche, what does our psychologist do? Frequently he rejects the pastoral role and tries to play the psychologist to the hilt. Anytime he is tempted to assume a portion of the pastoral role he feels a tinge of anxiety. Usually this anxiety is hidden but its effects can still be seen. He rationalizes by saying things like, "I don't want my client to feel condemned," "I don't want to impose my values on him," "I want to encourage his autonomy" or "It's basically a psychological problem." Fortunately, all of these things are often true. But that is not the point I wish to make here. Our focus is on barriers to the effective integration of biblical and psychological concepts. When a psychologist has not fully integrated both his spiritual and his psychological identifica-

tions, he tends to dichotomize his practice. In fact, the guilt over rejecting his pastoral identification may even breed a defensive hostility that degrades the value of that role. If he can successfully minimize the importance or effectiveness of the pastoral role, he will no longer need to feel guilty for abandoning it. In this way his role identification and his guilt and anxiety over them serve as ongoing barriers to the fruitful integration of the spiritual and emotional.

Perhaps we should add a broadening word at this point. The role identifications and guilt feelings discussed here in relationship to the Christian counselor are not unique. Probably every Christian experiences some tensions between his involvement in the secular and the sacred. What Christian businessman, teacher or laborer hasn't at one time or another wondered if he shouldn't be more actively involved in a spiritual ministry? It may be, however, because of the sanctifying nature of the counseling role that even more tension exists for the typical Christian therapist.

The Role Identity of the Pastoral Counselor

Now let's take the opposite extreme. The traditional, evangelical pastoral counselor is firmly tied to a rather directive, instructive approach that is heavily built upon scriptural admonitions and support. He tends to shy away from longer term, in-depth approaches, sometimes fearing these lead to blame fixing excursions into the distant past. He may also see the reflective-acceptant stance of the Rogerians as implicitly condoning sinful attitudes or actions and the probing of the past and unconscious motivation as time wasting attempts to support this patient's irresponsibility. To avoid this he operates on a reality therapy approach that con-

sists largely of trying to motivate clients to assume immediate responsibility and alter their sinful (or neurotic) behavior.

Without delving into the childhood past of a hypothetical therapist of this persuasion (he would probably deny the relevance of that anyway), let's look at the role conflict he faces as a counselor. Trained as a seminarian with the vocational goal of a full-time Christian worker, this person feels at home within the prophetic, instructive role. Most of his training has been directed toward a cognitive understanding of biblical truth. His Greek and Hebrew exegesis, while preparing him for scriptural exposition, did not train him to be sensitive to people's feelings. Instead, he was taught that people have problems because of stubborn wills, sinful actions or scriptural ignorance. He was taught that his role is to impart the truth and urge men to repentance. If they fail to respond, he need not worry. He has discharged his responsibility.

Now let this man sit in a counselor's chair opposite an upset client. As the client starts to delve into his problems and his sins the pastoral counselor has mixed feelings. On the one hand, he is sympathetic and wants to understand. On the other hand, he has been taught, "The answers are in the Bible." He experiences a natural compulsion to supply an answer, to give advice, to impart a scriptural truth or to urge men to repentance. To sit and listen makes him feel a bit uneasy. What if the counselee thinks he is condoning his sin? If he encourages expression of hitherto repressed resentments of sexual fantasies, is he encouraging sinful thoughts and actions? If he leads the counselee to explore the causes of his behavior, will the client use this knowledge to rationalize away his responsibility? All of these

stir up a subtle sense of disloyalty or guilt. He has been trained to combat sin, not listen to it!

For some this tension becomes quite strong. When this happens, they feel they must make a choice. Will they opt for psychology or for the Bible? If they go the *psychology* route, they end up with their psychological counterparts. They more and more immerse themselves in psychology and try to carve out a new role and discard their ministerial garb. If they go the *spiritual* route, they begin to reject all psychology that does not fit with a directive-repressive stance.

Now we have two counselors, both Christians, doing very different things in counseling. We might say, "So what? That's natural. Each has his role to fulfill." Certainly this has some truth. The problem is counselors of each persuasion generally believe they are doing something better than the other. The spiritual counselor claims he is teaching responsibility. The psychological counselor claims he works in-depth. Neither is content to do much more than concede some inferior place of necessity for his rival. If you think back to the childhood identification again, you might even sense the hidden accusation, "My dad (i.e., my therapy) can lick your dad (i.e., your therapy)!" In each party there is a concern to validate the superiority of his method. In fact, this concern over the status of one's professional identity often overshadows the real issue obtaining a total view of man and his need.

The Emerging Identity of the Integrative Counselor

To restate the problem briefly, the role conflicts of both the pastoral counselor and the psychological therapist can create a defensive stance that works against effective integration.

One portion of the solution to this dichotomous problem is a social and educational one. As *spiritual* and *psychological* counselors interact on both personal and professional levels, the present dichotomous position will decrease. This social and educational interaction must include both underlying philosophical presuppositions and specific therapeutic approaches. Underlying many conflicts between advocates of spiritual versus psychological counseling are some basic issues regarding the nature of man, the cause and cure of sin, the reality of the unconscious and the nature of responsibility.

Take the issue of responsibility as an example. The short-term spiritual counselor typically sees himself as an advocate of personal responsibility while viewing the long-term depth-oriented therapist as somehow promoting irresponsibility. The mature depth therapist knows, however, that this is not so. The difference is not whether responsibility is or is not promoted. Instead, the difference lies in the approach to leading people to responsibility. Does it come through directive, confrontative and supportive means or does it come through a longer range probing of past and present influences? The truth may well be that both approaches can achieve similar end results. Many other conflicts between the spiritual and psychological counselor can be traced to similar misunderstandings. Only continuous dialogue and effective interaction will overcome these misunderstandings.

The other portion of the resolution of dichotomous counseling is an intrapsychic one. None of us is entirely free of basing our personal identity on our professional role. While some of this is quite normal and constructive, it causes problems when we use our vocational role

as a defense against our own anxiety and lack of personal identity. When a psychologist lacks personal security or is confronted with hidden guilt emotions, he is apt to defend against these conflicts through a reassertion of the superiority of his psychological role. Similarly, the minister, under the impact of feelings of personal inadequacy, bolsters his threatened ego by reasserting the primacy of the spiritual while minimizing the importance of the psychological. When his role is elevated, of course, his own personal identity is temporarily strengthened. Unfortunately, however, this process clearly works against successful integration and promotes a dichotomous approach to Christian counseling.

The solution to this personal dilemma lies, of course, in the developing inner security of both the individual psychologist and pastor. Just as the adolescent gradually frees himself from rigid adherence to his parental identifications as he develops his own secure identity, both the psychologist and the minister need to find a strong sense of identity apart from their traditional roles.

Just as the healthy adolescent main-

tains a love and respect for his childhood identifications, the minister and psychologist hoping to integrate their Christian faith with the discipline of psychology must not reject or defend their earlier identities. Instead, they must gratefully accept the contributions these roles have made while not being bound by them. The mature adult or the person with a healthy ego does not find it necessary to set up false dichotomies. He has sufficient personal identity to carve out a new model that is neither spiritual nor psychological. It is a flexible new model incorporating truth from whatever sources are relevant to the holistic view of man.

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AUTHOR

NARRAMORE, BRUCE. *Address*: Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology, 1409 North Walnut Grove Avenue, Rosemead, California 91770. *Title*: Academic Vice President. *Degrees*: B.A. Westmont College, M.A. Pepperdine University, Ph.D. University of Kentucky. *Specialization*: Psychopathology; psychotherapy.



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