

Pluriformous and Multi-Colored Christian Counseling – a variety of approaches and views –

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September 2001

last update: 2008-09-01 (some additions)

Throughout the last decades – in fact: since the rise of psychotherapy, a lot of christian counselors and other authors have struggled with the question:

What is Christian Counseling?

They have come up with a variety of answers. Some have adapted some existing – secular – form of psychotherapy, others have opposed all secular psychotherapy. Some have started in theology, others in their practice of helping people cope with trauma. Etcetera. The result is that there now exists a wide and colorful variety of approaches and views on christian or pastoral counseling. It's like the four Gospels: the Gospels of John and Matthew – as an example – both introduce the Messiah, they both tell us about the things Jesus did while He walked on earth in his human body. Yet, their emphases are totally different like their respective human authors differed in character and calling. Nevertheless, God used this variety to show us the broadness of His great design. Likewise, the emphases of various approaches to Christian counseling may be totally different, and yet God may use each and every one in its own right and place (cf. Ephesians 3 : 10). One carpenter may be better in nailing things together, another may be more skilled in making dovetail joints and still another be an expert in applying the screwdriver. Let us go for the best result, irrespective of the method used. Or rather even, let us see what God will have us use when we cooperate in His plan. After all, Christian counseling foremost is His endeavor and His ministry. So, let us listen to Him for instruction most of all and recognize and acknowledge the work God is doing in and through each other!

This brief paper is meant as a very brief introduction to at least part of that wide variety of approaches and views, in order to stimulate Christian counselors and trainees in this field to explore and expand their views. In that way, I hope this document will help them see which approaches and views best suit their calling.

In general, I'd like to add, that these are all only 'methods' and 'possible approaches'. The essential part is our willingness and growing ability to be vulnerable to, dependent on and guided by God, through Jesus Christ!

The diagram on the next page summarizes the main aspects of the approaches to be discussed here. Of course, this is an over-simplification. One should study each approach in more depth to see and value the strengths of each approach more precisely.

This is a living document. If you think I left out an approach that really should deserve to be included here, please write to me and I'll investigate it seriously.

Note: Not all approaches see themselves as *counseling* in the narrow sense. E.g. *Theophostic Prayer Ministry* is explicitly presented as something that is *not* counseling. Here, I have taken this approach into account since in practice it *is* an alternative to the other approaches. In stead of *counseling* one might read *helping* or *ministry* here.

Diagram: Various approaches to counseling and therapy: their 'main points'

<i>approach</i>	<i>main problem view</i>	<i>guiding principle</i>	<i>change in the coun- sellee expected from</i>	<i>view on the counselor</i>
Nouthetic Coun- seling Jay E. Adams	moral issue towards God = sin	repentance leads to wholeness	seeing their behaviour as sinful	expert – educates in Biblical principles and exhorts
Helping with the Bible Gary Collins, Jef De Vriese, Walter Barrett	ignorance and/or stub- bornness as to live ac- cording to what God says in the Bible	knowledge of 'God's ways' plus being trained to follow them leads to healthy be- haviour	discovering 'God's ways' (as revealed in the Bi- ble) & being trained in following them	expert – educates in what the Bible says, teaches discipline
Telling People the Truth William Backus	false beliefs; (mainly: conscious) ignorance of 'the truth'	'the truth shall set you free'	gaining insight in 'the truth', practicing truth in thoughts	expert – tells the truth (helps defy lies)
Theophostic Prayer Ministry Edward M. Smith	most pain & trouble is caused by (<i>subcon- sciously</i>) believed 'lies'	'the truth shall set you free' (specially in trauma mem- ory)	prayerfully finding peace and truth (light of God) in Jesus' presence	partner with God - help- ing find hidden lies & administer God's truth
Divine Plumblines Bruce Thompson	self-protective crooked walls build on rejection and rebellion	we need good walls (to God's design) to protect us	re-building the crooked walls aright – to God's 'plumb line'	expert – gives insight, helps breaking down and building
Schema Therapy J.E. Young	dysfunctional internal <i>schemata</i> or <i>schema's</i>	we live from internal <i>schema's</i>	correcting the dysfunc- tional <i>schema's</i>	expert – helps correct wrong <i>schema's</i>
Transactional Analysis Eric Berne, Thomas Harris	stances other than 'I'm O.K., you're O.K.'; rela- tional problems from acting from <i>inner child</i> or <i>inner parent</i>	acting from the rational adult and 'I'm O.K., you're O.K.'-stance improve com- municating and relating	gaining insight in their child, adult and parent styles of behaviour, communication and re- lating	expert – gives insight into the patterns & dy- namics
Systems, Con- textual Friedman, Nagy	linear as opposed to circular models of cau- sality; loyalty conflicts	see the whole social / inter- generational system and its dynamics	seeing the circular caus- al relationships, repair- ing give & take balance	expert – gives insight, helps uncover hidden dynamics
Encouraging / 'Individual' psy- chotherapy div. / Alfred Adler	feelings of powerless- ness en disconnected- ness	by encouragement we can stimulate feelings of com- munity and power uniqueness of individuals	encouragement and substituting the <i>missing developmental experi- ence</i> are key	expert, process guide and encourager
12 Steps / Cele- brate Recovery AA, Al-Anon, CodA, groups, Rick Warren	addiction (in loneliness & as a reaction to hid- den trauma)	' <i>in it together</i> ' in a 12-step group, people can 'let go & let God' and learn new behaviour	acknowledging power- lessness, mutual sup- port, 'letting go & letting God'	— (no counselor; or: guide in group work; only guiding the group process)
Narrative Michael White, David Epston et al	lack of control over own '(life hi)story', 'in- ternalization' of prob- lems	control over own '(life hi)story' is vital for health and defies 'learned help- lessness' & the like	re-editing one's own '(life hi)story' 'externalization' of prob- lems	process guide; assis- tant editor, help in re- editing process
Boundaries Henry Cloud, John Townsend	allowing violations of our boundaries by other people	good boundaries promote health	learning to have healthy boundaries	expert – educates & teaches healthy bound- ary-keeping
Self-respect Bruce Narramore	lack of self-respect	self-respect is vital for health	respecting oneself	encourager
Inner Child work Charles L. Whitefield a.o.	<i>inner child</i> (= hurt part of personality) takes over in a nasty way	heal the <i>inner child</i>	recognizing and nour- ishing the <i>inner child</i> ; and let it grow up	encourager, expert – helps uncover & nour- ish t. <i>inner child</i>
Spiritual Warfare / Exorcism Peter Horrobin et al	demon possession or oppression	exorcism (spiritual warfare)	having demons cast out or bound	spiritual expert (in deal- ing with the demonic) – exorcist
New Life Harold Hill a.o.	'old life', alienated from God	we need God's renewal of life	receive spiritual renewal	evangelist / spiritual minister of new life
Living by Grace Lewis Smedes	'toxic shame', grace- lessness, perfection- ism	grace defies shame	recognizing inner 'toxic shame' and replacing it by grace	partner with God – ad- ministering God's grace
Connecting Larry Crabb, (John Bowlby)	isolation and individu- alism / detachment (e.g. in the church)	by truly connecting, people will flourish and problems will be naturally dealt with	(heart level) connecting to others in an affirming and caring community	friend – gives affirma- tion, love, trust, and en- couragement
Helping by Bles- sing / Powerful Peace Téo van der Weele	severe emotional trauma (at the hands of others), like incest	Jesus' presence & peace provides safe place to deal with trauma & find healing	finding peace in Jesus' presence by being blessed with it	partner with God, ad- ministering His peace etc.
Life Model / Thriving E. James Wilder et al	A- and B- traumas block the road to ma- turity	living in relational joy is what we were made for	returning to relational joy and maturing	maturity strategist, source of advanced brain skills & "Godsight"
Healing Prayer Leanne Payne et al	trauma & sin (alien- ation from God, schism between head & heart, gender confusion, etc.)	Jesus forgives sin & heals trauma; daily dwelling in His presence brings heal- ing and re-unites head-hart	repentance, receiving forgiveness and forgiv- ing others, 'practicing the presence of God'	partner with God, ad- ministering His forgive- ness & healing

Richard: An illustrative case story

To illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches discussed in this paper, I present here a simple 'case story', though dramatised with a little wink of humor, actually derived from little pieces of true stories from the lives of people I met, somewhat adapted to secure privacy and abbreviated or changed in emphasis for brevity and clarity.

A man, let's name him Richard, has been born from a situation of date-rape. His mother has a deep-seated hate of men. She always had nasty associations to his conception, when she was pregnant. A few days after birth she decided not to keep the baby and he was adopted. For some reason, however, his adoptive mother wasn't able to bond emotionally to him either. Deep down, the little baby felt left alone, forsaken, etc. (a deep form of separation anxiety). Added to that was the physical abuse by his stepfather, and the bullying that had been going on for years at school, because he was in some way 'different' from the other kids. In reaction to this nagging feeling of not being loved and secure, it is not strange that he did his very best as a little boy to 'be a good boy' and deserve some love that way.

Growing up this way, after a lot of struggles during puberty and adolescence, he finally became a brilliant scientist. Until some dark November month, that is, when his wife left him without giving him a clue as to the reason why. A few days later, the company he worked for was suddenly overtaken by another company who instated new managers. They downsized the department where Richard worked – that very same month –, resulting in him losing his job. He felt empty, worthless, alone and forsaken. Had trouble with about everything: great difficulty finding the discipline to do normal daily chores in and around the house, he would easily dissociate and just 'feel nothing' – like a zombie – or terribly depressed, he had terrible nightmares, he faced fierce temptations in the sexual realm, in his relationships he faced all kinds of misunderstandings, his functioning in the church deteriorated and he was taken from his posts there, etc.

He looked for help and in the course of several years he found several counselors:

One of the first was counselor Telly the Truth. Telly had a long talk with him about all that was going on in his life and then said that he believed Richard's problems probably came from some lie he had started to believe about himself after his wife left him. Together they unearthed some negative thoughts about himself (not being lovable or attractive anymore, etc.) and replaced them with Biblical thoughts (like: Jesus loves me anyway). Richard got hope, found a new job and for a while everything looked to change for the better.

However hard he tried to keep to his new 'truths', the idea that he was sinking deeper and deeper in the mud kept nagging him. His tendency to flee from his depressive or non-feeling episodes into sexual promiscuity or workaholism grew unbearably strong. A friend who was doing a course in Helping with the Bible had told him to stick to the Bible that forbids promiscuity. For a time, he deferred to workaholism. Then, Andy A., a colleague who was also a christian noticed his long hours and they started to talk. This colleague had been an alcoholic and saw how Richard was gliding into workaholism. He took his 12-step book and helped Richard to see that he was on the flight for something, and that workaholism – like alcoholism – wasn't the answer. Richard joined a 12-steps group and learned to talk about his problems and his feelings of emptiness. He also started to release things to God. As a result, things went again a little better. The open talking in the group was new to Richard and made him feel more 'alive' again.

One day, Richard visited a vibrant Pentecostal church. At the end of the service, after a strong preaching about spiritual warfare, he went forward to be prayed for. The pastor 'saw' he was plagued by what he called 'a spirit of rejection' and exorcised it. Richard felt much lighter as he went home after that service.

In the meantime, he had read a book about self-respect, which had revealed to him that he was not treating himself with the dignity God intended. This was in line with what Telly the Truth and his friend Andy A. had said, so he took it seriously and took on himself the vow to treat himself better from now on. That gave him a new form of self-worth and provided some stability.

As he now regularly dared to buy some chocolate for himself – and eat it! –, he soon started to gain weight. Also, his old sexual temptations started to nag him again. Because he remembered what the Bible says about promiscuity and over-eating, his desires alarmed him and urged him to look for a counselor. Not long thereafter, a friend referred him to Tran Saction. She interviewed him – not only about himself but also about his family of origin, his grandparents, etc. – and then explained how she understood his puzzles. Many of his desires and troubles could be traced back to unfulfilled needs from the time he was a little boy, and other things determining his behaviour could be traced back to 'messages' he had adopted from his (step)mother and (step)father. The former she called his 'internal child', the latter his 'internal parent'. Now 'he finally saw the light' in some of his relationship troubles. So, he went home with new hope.

His hopes even went higher as a friend of him had read Crabb's book on connecting and was treating Richard with new warmth and empathy. He invited him over to have dinner with him regularly, chat and pray together, etc. For a time, Richard seemed to be in a good shape again. He experienced some form of connectedness he hadn't experienced ever since his divorce. It gave him new energy and he took on life with new vigor.

One day, he met Alfred on a long airplane flight. Alfred took him very serious and encouraged him till deep in his soul. That strengthened his sense of community and his sense of personal power even further. He really thought things were starting to 'go' now.

However, about a year later, he discovered that he still suffered from these nasty depressive, or non-feeling episodes. Even his boss at work had observed them and – as a result – was questioning his fitness for his job. Sometimes he was able to avoid them, by reciting his 'new biblical truths' again, but more and more it just overcame him again. He also felt an increasing heaviness and got the feeling he was running into a burn-out. So, Richard sought a counselor once more.

After some time, he found Tell Story. Tell sat him down comfortably and just asked him to tell his life's history. Soon, they came on the fact that Richard had always been trying to 'be a good boy'. Tell asked him if he liked this way of living up to the expectations of others. Richard actually was amazed about himself, that he had never asked that question to himself. After a while he said: "no, I don't think so", and again a little later: "no, I think I get terribly tired of it". Then, mister Story helped him to see where there had been moments in his life where he had behaved differently. Building on those positive experiences, Tell said, he could 're-author' his life.

All this overwhelmed Richard a little at first, but after a couple of months into therapy with therapist Story, he started to see more 'lines' running through his life, some he liked and others he didn't like. Some he saw were in line with what God wanted for him, others that seemed to block God's purpose. He also gained a new sense of control over the course of his life -- which he hadn't had since that black November month.

About this time, his church featured a 'boundaries group' where Richard learned to set better boundaries in his life and build better – straight, in stead of crooked – walls around his heart. That helped him to not be 'everyone's doormat', like he had been before, which made him function more healthily and gave him a better feeling about himself also.

So, his life seemed to have taken a turn for the better. Were it not for those episodes of emptiness that kept on returning into his life – especially when he could use them least. He felt trapped forever, but fortunately could re-edit this lie into the more Biblical: "I may feel bad, but God loves me". That helped him to function better at work and in his relationships. He even got interested again in doing some pastoral counseling work himself. Helping others with similar backgrounds gave him more sense of connectedness and dignity.

He applied for a course given in a nearby city. In the small-group work during one of the course-days, Bob – the small-group leader – asked who would like to be blessed that time. Richard's thoughts immediately jumped to the inner emptiness that still had remained... As two people started just to bless him with the peace of Jesus, Richard felt a warmth and quietness like he hadn't known before. In the week that followed, he got into contact with Bob. Bob Lessing was an experienced christian counselor, you know. They started to meet regularly, where Bob and his trainee would just bless Richard with the presence and peace of Jesus. In between they would ask him what he experienced God was doing. Soon, it emerged, that God was comforting the little Richard who hadn't felt loved, who allways had had the idea he had to earn his parents' love. He was glad about what Tran Saction had already told him about his 'little boy inside', as well as the many lessons he had learned from looking at the Biblical truth. Surrounded by the peace of Jesus, he started to feel the pain and the loneliness he always had fled from. He started to comfort that little boy inside, like he would do any other lonely boy. More painful memories surfaced. He remembered how his stepfather allways demanded the highest grades in

school, "otherwise you are a nobody, and you think we will like nobodies?" he used to yell. It was a long and painful process. But the peace of Jesus, the course and the support from Bob Lessing and his other friends – it all helped him to follow through – through the hard valleys of some deep grief-work. After a time his life started to show the change that was taking place deep in his soul.

Yet, somewhere, something still bothered Richard. Some part of the emptiness seemed to be deeper still. He couldn't name it, he had no idea where it came from. But sometimes, when a woman would be nice to him he would feel a deep kind of urge to lay himself on her lap and just cry – cry endlessly, as it seemed.

Then, one day a fellow in his church asked him to join him in a kind of conference. It would be an intense week of healing, he said. Richard went with him to this Pastoral Care week where some people would minister their form of 'healing prayer'. Already the first evening, Richard experienced God's love and holiness in a deep way. For the first time since that black November, he could let himself go completely in worship to God. In the course of that week loaded with sessions on forgiveness and re-dedication to God, there was a session on healing from separation anxiety. As Richard felt a deep burst of grief and anxiety well up inside him, an older lady sat down beside him and prayed over him – that Jesus would just come into his sorrowful situation in the same way as He came into our world, into our pit to save us from it. Richard now started to cry really loud as his head sank onto her arm. He experienced how he had felt totally left alone in those very first months of his life. But he experienced too, how Jesus came and took him on His arm (Jesus used the arm of this lady to communicate this to little Richard). For a while he laid there, sobbing. Then, slowly, he felt how his inner emptiness was filled like the belly of a baby drinking at the breast of his mother. It took some time before this all sank down and before he grasped a little bit of what God had done. Then he followed his way with great joy!

Upon returning home, he discovered many new things. His relationship with God had deepened considerably, after this very gentle encounter with Jesus. He had less trouble being or feeling vulnerable. His reverence for the Bible and for Biblical truth had increased too. He had a much more healthy sense of selfrespect. He could resist sexual temptations more easily, as they had no 'hook' on him in his inner feeling of emptiness anymore. Besides, an image of a woman's breast now brought memories and pictures of joy and fulfillment, in stead of frustrating memories of being left alone. He experienced he could start re-authoring his life and build healthier boundaries around his heart with Jesus in a new and more profound way now. He felt more connected than ever before. It was like Jesus had taken over his inner parent, and his inner, hurt little boy now knew a place where to go to when the going got rough...

Now, after all these experiences, the changes in his life really started to become clearly visible on the outside. His colleagues asked him: "what is happening to you, you seem to be so much more joyful lately?"

References (a selection)

(Since part of my audience is Dutch I include some references and translations in Dutch as well.)

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