

Advanced Christian Counseling



Advanced Christian Counseling is an integrated approach to problem solving and healing that is built on three essential truths.

#1. There are certain life events and experiences that can bring us to a point where we feel like our life and efforts are unproductive or even pointless. Luke 5 records the story of the calling of the first disciples who felt exactly that way when Jesus approached them and challenged them to “put out into the deep water”. Sometimes life, whether by necessity or desire, challenges us to plumb the depths of possibilities. Advanced Christian Counseling is a process that can assist us in gaining the courage to leave the shallows, with its modicum of comfort and security, which have been depleted over time and deepen our search and faith thereby enabling us to wrest, out of life, all that God has for us.

#2. There are specific processes that must be undergone in order for us to resolve the issues we face and realize our greatest potential. Where human life and faith are concerned these processes must comprehensively address all potential human needs; body, mind, and spirit. It is only when we deal holistically with life and its’ challenges that can we can ever expect to come away with its’ greatest rewards. To have life and “have it more abundantly” it is necessary to address the whole self if we expect to “become like He is”. Those processes will not transpire accidentally. They must be undertaken purposefully, systematically, and delicately. Ultimately, the endeavor is transformational (Romans 12:2), renewing every part of who we are, challenging us at every moment to present our whole self to the one constant and ultimate source of power, Christ. It is only in the presence of His power that we can “be” who He meant us to be. Advanced Christian Counseling can become the vehicle that can successfully bring us to that transformational moment.

#3. There are certain people that God has called, prepared, and equipped to provide the kind of guidance, counsel, and companionship that is needed to reach the deep water of a life of faith. First of all, they must be called by God to do what they do. Additionally, they must be someone who knows the terrain, is fearless before the challenges, and aware of the hazards. They also need to have made the journey themselves, weathered the storms, and kept the joy of their call. They must also be filled with the Spirit, free of judgment, and abounding with compassion. They must be wise, but not of the flesh, rather soaked in the wisdom of God and His Word. Finally, they must be open; open to the uniqueness of your need, open to the slightest whispers of God, and open to the reality that form and tradition are not necessarily of God. Your journey will be unlike anyone else’s and they need to be ultimately aware that there is no “packaged” approach that will be right for everyone. Advanced Christian Counseling is done by someone who is uniquely qualified and ultimately sensitive to your individuality before God.

Who Can Benefit From Advanced Christian Counseling?

While anyone, regardless of spiritual orientation, can benefit from Advanced Christian Counseling there are a number of populations that can particularly benefit from the services of an Advanced Christian Counselor. There are three basic categories that most of these persons fit in.

One category would be persons in ministry. While this would certainly include pastors, it would also include their spouses, their children, their extended family, and their staff. It would also include those, paid or volunteer, full-time or part-time that are in roles of ecclesiastical leadership. It would also include workers and professionals in para-church organizations, Christian educational institutions, or any profession, helping or otherwise, that is organized around spiritual affiliations or principles.

A second category would be persons who have experienced trauma or crisis that has a spiritual element associated with it. This would include persons who have been abused by or affected by the actions of particular persons or organizations represented in category one. Other members of this category may be persons whose faith has been adversely affected by specific life events or tragedies, such as death, loss, illness, or phase of life issues. Essentially, any person of faith who experiences a significant life challenge could benefit From Advanced Christian Counseling, whether or not their faith is in question.

A third category would include any person who is interested in pursuing spiritual dialog for experiential reasons. Persons in this category could be interested in deepening their spiritual experience, intensively examining the dynamics of a spiritual walk, deepening their understanding of scripture, or exploring new and better ways of integrating their faith more completely in their life. Also in this category would be persons questioning faith itself or coming from other belief systems and simply wanting to learn more about the Christian faith. Such persons as these may find value in Advanced Christian Counseling.

What are the Qualifications of an Advanced Christian Counselor?

The ancient idiom, “everything that glitters, is not gold”, has no better appropriateness than in the area of “Christian Counseling”. The counseling consumer, especially those who are spiritually minded, needs to be aware that not all Christians who counsel necessarily have the qualifications, education, or experience to properly deliver psychologically sound counsel. Likewise, it should be understood that not all psychologically trained counselors who present or advertise themselves as “Christian counselors” are sufficiently qualified, educated or experienced in theological and biblical fields, to deliver sound spiritual counsel.

While most pastors and ministers are capable and qualified to give spiritual and biblical guidance they may not have the training or skills necessary to deliver services for mental health issues. Even those who have sought additional training, sometimes with the best intentions will seek out and invest in counseling training and wind up with a “degree” from one of the hundreds of “diploma mills” that are scattered around the U.S. There are at least three here in the Central Florida region systematically issuing hundreds of these “degrees”.

Unfortunately, these programs are not accredited by a nationally recognized accreditation body nor is the depth and breadth of their training sufficient to meet real needs from a real human services perspective. Therefore, much damage can be done by sincere and caring persons who attempt therapeutic work without proper training.

Likewise, just because a trained mental health counselor is a Christian does not mean they have the skills necessary to deliver sound biblical or theological counsel. It is naïve and dangerous to think that because a person has become qualified to do clinical counseling that they can represent themselves as a trained “Christian counselor”. They may be operating outside of their area of expertise, and that, according to state counseling statutes, is unethical behavior. Unfortunately, there is also the danger here that these counselors will take the same educational shortcuts, i.e. “diploma mill” degrees, which were described concerning pastoral counselors, in order to gain a theological degree. Earning a theological or biblical studies degree from an unaccredited “degree mill” carries the same risks for the trained counselor as it does for the pastor wanting to adorn their wall. What we need to remember here is that if something comes quick and easy then it probably is not of very high quality.

Though great care needs to be taken at any time one needs to seek outside guidance, when the issues are significant enough to warrant obtaining formal counsel, extra precaution should be taken to assure that the person providing those services are properly trained, qualified, and experienced. Would we let someone who read a medical textbook and took some online courses perform surgery on us? Or, would we let someone represent us in court just because they love the law and have been to a lot of trials? No, we expect the persons providing those services to be trained, qualified, and experienced. In the state of Florida, even the people who cut our hair have to have training and a license to operate legally.

Choosing someone to provide us with spiritually oriented counsel should be just as important to us as choosing a doctor or a lawyer, and at least as important as choosing who cuts our hair. A bad haircut will only affect us for a few weeks. Bad counsel may affect us for a lifetime. Asking a few questions about your perspective counselor may prove invaluable. Here are a few questions that are important to ask concerning a spiritual or Christian counselor.

1. What theological training do you have?
2. Where did you get your theological training?
3. Was the institution formally accredited?
4. What psychological or mental health training do you have?
5. Where did you get your psychological or mental health training?
6. Was the institution formally accredited?
7. Do you have any pastoral or ministerial credentialing?
8. What organization is your ministerial credentialing with?
9. Do you have any psychological or mental health credentialing?
10. With what jurisdiction is your psychological or mental health credentialing?
11. What kind of pastoral or ministerial experience do you have?
12. What kind of psychological or mental health counseling experience do you have?
13. How long have you been counseling?
14. What Christian *counseling model** do you operate from? (*see information below)
15. To whom are you professionally accountable to?
16. Do you carry professional liability insurance?

The answers to these questions will determine the quality of counsel that you receive. Your time is valuable. Your emotional stability is extremely valuable. Your eternity is ultimately valuable! Before trusting these valuable elements of life to anyone, be sure that you are entrusting your life, your peace of mind, and your eternity to compassionate, competent, and qualified hands.

What are the Four Basic Christian Counseling Models

1: The Against Model holds that there are core conflicts between psychology and religion or spirituality and that integration is impossible. Either you believe in the truth of science or you believe in the truth of religion. These two kids cannot be on the same playground.

There are several strengths to this position. 1. The secularist is correct: you can find truth through scientific study, and the sacred view is correct you can find truth through revelation. 2. The secularist is right, "religion" can bring about guilt, and the sacred side is right that removing and rationalizing guilt can be destructive. 3. It is true that some maladjustments (pathologies) are psychological or social, and it is true that some maladjustments (sins) are spiritual. There are also several weaknesses to this position. 1. A major problem is both that sides hold that there is only **one** way to find truth. 2. All religion does not have devastating effects and neither does all psychology. Christians can experience true freedom knowing their guilt has been forgiven by Christ. Therapy can be helpful when an individual is holding onto feelings of guilt and shame because they have not accepted the fact they are forgiven. 3. The problem with the argument is that there is assumption by the secularist that all problems are psychological and there is an assumption by the sacred side that all problems are because of sin. Both sides reduce sin/psychopathology to observable actions and specific behaviors. Reductionism carries with it the inherent risk of the exclusion of elements essential to the integrity of that which has been reduced, thereby invalidating the validity of the whole.

There is strong Biblical support against this model: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands". Psalm 19:1 shows that God created the world around us. We were created by God and for God with an ability and desire to explore and learn more about Him, ourselves and our world. We can do this through studying both general and special revelation, both theology and psychology. The two disciplines can be integrated to give us a better understanding and to help us discover truth.

Practitioners of this model would be "Biblical" counselors who are openly averse to utilizing any psychological principles whatsoever. This approach is essentially fundamentalist and can easily lead to legalism and fanaticism. Fear and guilt are sometimes unduly overemphasized which may eventually lead to unnecessary pathology (both theological and psychological). The danger of this approach is that it often leads to a life of fearful and blind subservience to God rather than a joyful and balanced enjoyment of life in the world and in Him.

2: The Of Model looks for good psychology in religion and vice versa in an attempt to find common ground. The humanistic assumption is that man is a spiritual, moral being. A foundational belief is that no religion is better or more correct than another. The end result is a spiritualized psychology. These two kids have become so enmeshed that they have morphed into something that neither of their parents would recognize.

There are some strengths, however, to this model. 1. The belief that scripture and religious experiences are both valid sources of truth. 2. There is a recognition of the spiritual-moral nature of man. 3. There is an acknowledgement of sin and its negative impacts. There are also some weaknesses to this model.

1. The experiences of truth are not seen in a supernatural way. The universal parts of the Bible are accepted, but the supernatural and redemptive elements of scripture are discarded. 2. Humanity is seen by the secularist as basically good and all redemptive elements are not taken literally, rendering the redemptive work of Christ moot. 3. This model provides a watered down concept

and definition of sin, so (as mentioned earlier) there is no need for salvation. The authority of science is placed above the authority of scripture. It is a cookie-cutter approach that presses the ideas of psychology into scripture in such a fashion that forces scripture into the subservience of the observed and commonly held principles of psychology. Essentially, the tail is wagging the dog.

There is strong Biblical support against this model: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." II Timothy 3:16. We cannot simply pick and choose the parts we like. **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.** (John 14:6) There is only one way that we can have a relationship with God and that is through Jesus Christ.

Practitioners within this approach have a tendency to be too permissive and lenient with their treatment of pathology. Those who operate from this model generally have only a casual or superficial knowledge of theology and/or scripture. These are the "trained counselors" who happen to be "Christian" and often offer those services due to their popularity or a felt allegiance to their personal spiritual affinity. The danger to this perspective is a universalistic attitude where everybody is eternally ok, no matter what kind of choices they make.

3: The Parallels Model sees psychology as a science, whereas religion is a personal experience or commitment. Both science and religion express truths that need to be translated. The truths parallel each other but cannot be fully integrated. They are essentially like the rails on a railroad track. They may appear to merge in the distance, but in reality they never do. The truths each have their own methods of investigation and data. Religion and science are each in their own sphere and therefore can be mutually admired in their own rights but never fully embraced by one another. Psychological problems are handled by psychologists; spiritual problems are handled by pastors. These two kids may be on the same playground but they do not share the same toys. However, there are some strengths to this model. 1. It is not antagonistic or oppositional. 2. It preserves the integrity of both disciplines and avoids superficial integration. 3. The correlations model moves towards true integration. Each area is seen as truth. There are also some weaknesses. 1. There is a false assumption that there are two separate entities that can only be lined up to find common meaning. 2. This model tends to force data from one discipline onto another. 3. Within this model there is a tendency to take a secular theory and Christianize it. If there is truth, then it is God's truth no matter what the discipline or type of revelation.

There is biblical support against this model: "God created the Heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1) It is all His, and He is actively involved with His creation. There is no separation between God and any part of His creation. God has revealed himself to humanity in both special and general ways. In other words, God is as much the author of psychology as He is theology.

Practitioners of this model are rarely truly balanced and often spend too much effort keeping the two separate, distinct, and therefore "safe" from each other. While they may have some knowledge of the two sides they are likely to fall into one of two traps, either they become lopsided in their utilization of the one over the other, or they continually vacillate between the two approaches creating an essentially schizophrenic, i.e. two separate and distinct realities, approach to therapy that can lead to confusion and instability. The danger here is that a client may wind up trusting neither psychology nor theology because of the perception that whatever cannot ultimately connect has to eventually conflict. In theory they may be right.

4: The Integrates Model seeks to bring together aspects of psychology and theology without violating their individual identity or ignoring areas of conflict. It is based on the assumption that God is the author of all truth. Reason, revelation and the scientific method are all utilized in the search for truth. Since God has revealed himself in a specialized way through scripture and a general way through Creation, then we can expect to find congruence between scripture and psychology. Those who follow this model must be committed to discovering truth - both Biblical and psychological. We can gain better understanding of

man when studying both psychology and scripture than studying either one in isolation. These two kids are on the same playground, playing with the same toys, and playing beautifully.

There are many strengths within this model: 1. This model sees humanity as fallen image bearers. It acknowledges that due to sin's effects, we make errors in our interpretations of psychology and scripture. 2. It acknowledges that all truth is God's truth. 3. It assumes that all pathology is traceable to sin. 4. It holds that as Christians we can choose to live free from guilt because of God's forgiveness. 5. It validates that we are all in need of redemption and true inner change. 6. It assumes that Biblical religion is not detrimental to mental health - instead it fundamentally promotes personal growth and wellness and vice-versa. 7. It accurately reflects that there is not only one way to practice counseling - Jesus himself used different approaches when working with people. However, there are some minor weaknesses to this approach. 1. Some individuals feel that their discipline (psychology or theology) will be watered down or forced into a mold. In order to deal with this potential weakness, one must continually make careful distinction between different levels of analysis and unique methodology as to faithfully preserve the validity and content of both. At times, it is like walking a tightrope with a wheelbarrow full of rocks. 2. It can only be truly and fully practiced by Christians who are skilled and trained theologically, biblically, and psychologically. This significantly limits the number of "qualified" practitioners. 3. There is a lack of truly integrated writings. There are some bright stars on the horizon but the amount of high quality volumes published to date is still rather sparse.

There is strong Biblical support for this model: 2 Peter 1:3 "His divine power has given us **everything we need** for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." God has given us general and special revelation. He also placed within us a desire to search for truth, and He equipped us with the intellect to make that possible. There should be a sign at the entrance of every church (and Christian counseling office) that says "Don't check your brain at the door." God is not afraid of our questions, even our scientific ones. The necessary balance between the sacred and the profane is found in the following phrase, "Therefore, do not be conformed to this world, but rather be transformed, by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2)

This verse constitutes a perfect marriage between the theological and the psychological, "and the two shall become one."

Qualified practitioners from this model are better equipped to help one achieve the often difficult balance in life when trying to be "in" the world, while avoiding the corruption experienced by being "of" the world.