

# THE CHOICE OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELING, THE EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

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**Abstract:** Freedom of conscience is a fundamental right already etched deeply in the human being from creation. The Law of God and human freedom meet in the conscience of man, shaping it through the situations in which the conscience dictates to reason how to act. In a similar context, freedom of conscience is defining, reflecting at the individual level, the capacity of reacting and relating, based on rational impulses. The rational effects of freedom of conscience represent thoughts, actions, decisions, and judgments, expressed in the function of good that existed from creation in every person. This right can be restricted, can be taken, can be obstructed, but no one ever can eliminate the freedom of conscience from the human being. In the most natural way, liberty of conscience is expressed in the situations in which, because of different existential crises determined by certain circumstances, man seeks solutions. Christian counseling, the process which has as its purpose the emotional and spiritual healing of a person, can be considered as a choice based on freedom of conscience, from the point of view of resolving mental, emotional, and spiritual dilemmas.

**Keywords:** freedom, conscience, counseling, Christian, right, fundamental, human, healing, rehabilitation

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## **Introduction**

Counseling is the work which has as its special focus the person who, because of some existential crises, needs help. It implies the resources used in the process of counseling, as well as the time necessary for the

accomplishment of spiritual healing. Every person carries in himself the innate generational influences, experiences of his family of origin, and a whole life of choices. A great part of this life story is written into the habitual structure of his life. Tragedies, trauma, depressions, brokenness, and other similar situations are examples of moments in which a person can lose his spiritual, emotional, and relational balance, so that by instinct he will seek encouragement, assurance, recovery, and healing through counseling.

Observing the whole process of counseling, Clinebell perceives counseling to mean the use of many methods of therapeutic healing, for helping people to face or deal with problems and crises in a beneficial way and to experience healing from the destruction they have provoked.<sup>1</sup>

Hans Hoxter, honorary president of “International Association for Counseling”, considers the word counseling can be understood in many ways, but a single definition is not sufficient to include the complex nature of what it involves. “Counseling can be described as a method of relating and of responding to others, with the purpose offering opportunities of exploration and clarification of resources people have available, for a happier and more successful life”.<sup>2</sup>

The need for counseling is acute, man being more and more stressed at the mental, spiritual, and relational level, which increasingly manifests itself in a psychological imbalance and problems of the conscience. Every process of counseling agreed to by a person, must be based on the recovery of that person and the avoidance of the contexts that caused the respective situation. Included in this process for recovery, Christian counseling offers responses that are concrete, relevant, applicable, and verifiable so that, based on freedom of conscience, it becomes an option worthy to be taken into consideration.

This article proposes a foray into Christian counseling as an expression of freedom of conscience to choose the way to a solution of a crisis. The necessity of this paper is due to the need to understand the profundity of Christian counseling and to affirm the human personal freedoms in finding solutions through Christian counseling.

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1 CLINEBELL, Howard, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980, pp. 26.

2 HOXTER, Hans, *Technical and Vocational Education and Training in 21st Century*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2002, pp. 9-40.

## The basis of Christian counseling: Scripture and the Holy Spirit

Christian counseling is the work in which Biblical teaching is used in the process of counseling. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ya'ats* means to give advice, to counsel or to consult, but in the New Testament the Greek word *paraklesis* means to call on someone with reference to comforting, counseling, and encouragement of a person.<sup>3</sup> When Jesus was drawing near to the time he would leave His disciples, He assured them he would send “another” counselor just like Himself, who would remain with them and guide them just as He did. The translation of “Comforter” was introduced by Wycliffe, but we can translate the Greek word *parakletos* as it appears in John, as “advocate” or as a synonym that would be “counselor”, “helper”, or “mediator”. The words *noutheteo* and *nouthesia* are used only by Paul; it seems John prefers the term *parakletos*, putting the accent on the Person who counsels.<sup>4</sup>

Christian counseling offers guidance and the means by which a person enters into a process of conscious, intentional spiritual growth, where the love of Christ is above everything else. The effect of this program tends toward the spiritual formation of the counselee which, in time, will develop attitudes that resonate with the life of Christ.

Scripture is the primary and normative source that establishes the principles and lines of counseling<sup>5</sup> being sufficient to offer all the necessary resources of a counselor, in the process of counseling.<sup>6</sup> The integrity of Scripture, as the authoritative standard for spiritual Christian counseling must be kept and respected. Ideas about relativity must be abandoned, but spiritual counseling needs to be based only on biblical premises and these are strictly the same for every spiritual Christian counselor.<sup>7</sup>

3 VINE, W. E., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, T. Nelson, Ed., Nashville, 1996.

4 WESSEL, Walter, W., *Dictionary of Practical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960, pp. 30.

5 ADAMS, Jay, *The Christian's Counselor Manual*, USA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973, pp. 21.

6 CRABB, Larry, *Understanding people*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987, pp. 62.

7 ADAMS, Jay, *Competent to Counsel*, Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971, pp. 50-65.

The Holy Spirit is the one who produces the regeneration of man, is the one who makes the inaccessible accessible, much for the counselor and especially for the client. In the same way, David Seamands, in his book, *Leac pentru suflete vătămate*, speaks about the direct help of the Holy Spirit in the process of bringing up a past event.<sup>8</sup>

Freedom of conscience that is implied in the process of Christian counseling is manifested through the acceptance of biblical principles as potential solutions in a crisis that is experienced.

### **Relating human-to-human in Christian counseling**

As well as an inter-human relationship, Christian counseling implies interaction among two or more persons at the level of life needs and it means assistance, help, and hope that are offered to them by a person, prepared in this field, to any other person through advice, general guidance, comfort, or a personal encouragement.<sup>9</sup> The relational perspective of the process of Christian counseling is formed in part by the counselee who is open, sincere, and direct in presentation of the problem; on the part of the counselor who listens and points out certain aspects, as well as a common responsibility which includes confidentiality and making decisions.

Gary Collins, an authority in the field of Christian mental health, perceives Christian counseling to be effective based on the person who offers help, on the techniques and abilities used by him and the goal that he is trying to reach through counseling.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the Christian counselor is a person dedicated to God and guided by the Holy Spirit, who uses his abilities given by God to help others to arrive at their personal completeness, interpersonal competence, mental stability, and spiritual maturity. Bringing into the discussion, as well, the attitude of his clients, Gerard Egan affirms that people who counsel are effective as well, in the way their clients can better handle their problematic situations and better develop more effective resources and opportunities not used

8 SEAMANDS, David, *Leac pentru suflete vătămate*, Cluj Napoca: Logos, 2002, pp. 35.

9 HUNT, June, *Cheile Consilierii Biblice* (Vol. 1), Lugoj: Editura Cunoașterea Cuvântului, 2006, pp. 41.

10 COLLINS, Gary, R., *Baza biblică pentru consilierea creștină pentru cei care îi ajută pe oameni*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993, pp. 21.

until then.<sup>11</sup> Freedom of conscience, which is implied in the process of Christian counseling, consists of the counselee's desire to stay the whole course in the hope of healing.

### **The practical, scientific, and theological aspect for Christian counseling**

Christian counseling is a practical, scientific, and theological discipline that accompanies a person in the deepest spiritual problems with which he is confronted in view of conclusively resolving the situation in which he is found.<sup>12</sup>

The theological aspect is based on the idea that God desires a change in human nature, the reason why there was prepared a transformational solution in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Based on the sacrifice of Christ, Charles Solomon observes that the counselee must enter into a relationship with the cross of Jesus, the action that determines renewing and transforming of the mind.<sup>13</sup>

The scientific aspect is shown by the complex nature of man and the need to profoundly understand all the details connected with living and the feelings experienced by the person who is in crisis, but above all, deeply imprinted in the bone marrow, says Sproul, there is a need for significance.<sup>14</sup> Christian counseling can offer a pertinent response to this need of significance, helping the counselee to understand his entire condition. The practical component is shown in a certain measure, by solutions brought into the discussions, as well as the possible applications and evaluations of them and also by means of, and even more so, by testimonies of those who experienced freedom after calls for help on the basis of personal liberties in Christian counseling. Understanding these aspects, the person under consideration can demonstrate freedom to choose Christian counseling as an experiential way in view of overcoming some situations. The entire process can be, thus, evaluated and measured

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11 EGAN, Gerard, *Helper skills*, Pacific Grove California: Thomson Brooks / Cole, 2007, pp. 20-60.

12 DEKOVAN, Stan, *Despre ancorare - O introducere în psihologia consilierii*, București: Gnosis, 1997, pp. 16.

13 SOLOMON, Charls, *Îndrumător spre fericire*. Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 2000, pp. 23.

14 SPROUL, R. C., *The Hunger for Significance*. Ventura: Regal Books, 1991, pp. 20.

on the basis of personal experiences, a reality which confers a solid foundation for choosing Christian counseling.

### **Christian counseling and the religious dimension**

In relation to other kinds of counseling, the phenomenon of Christian counseling differs from them through the inclusion of the religious dimension. In this point is defined the purpose of Christian counseling, bringing man into a correct relationship in comparison to and with God, leading him thus toward a fulfilled life.<sup>15</sup> The process of Christian counseling follows Christian principles and a Christian ethic; the person being counseled and the relationship with him being more important than his problem or problems, thus that in this approach to counseling, he receives a relationship with the counselee. This interpersonal relationship created at the beginning for counseling only, is shaped into an excellent way through which the counselee can arrive at the understanding of his personal condition in relation to God, in relation to himself, and in relation to his fellow man. The advantage is increased by the fact that the counselor is found to be in a good relationship with God.

Christian counseling is a process, absolutely necessary of investigation and self-discovery through which man, in Scriptural and scientific regards, finds his place with himself, also with God and with others.<sup>16</sup> In this kind of approach, God becomes the point of reference, the ethics of Scripture become the channel through which man arrives at the knowledge of Truth, but the major premise is that the truth brings freedom when it is believed according to the affirmation of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John 8:32, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."<sup>17</sup> Looking at this picture of Christian counseling, in which the truth sets free, it can be affirmed that every person has absolute freedom to call on this process, not finding limits to this freedom to decide how one seeks solutions.

Here, actually begins the process of Christian counseling. Man is placed with the truth before him, the one unique truth that is Jesus Christ. This point of reference cannot be changed depending on the people offering counsel, but remains valid, bearing in itself the

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15 Hamilton, James, D., *Lucrarea consilierii pastorale*, Michigan: Baker House, 1997, pp. 20.

16 Săndulache, Sorin, *Consiliere și psihologie pastorală*, Oradea: Casa Cărții, 2009, pp.21.

17 McDowell, J., & și Hostlete, B., *Manual de consiliere a tinerilor*, Cluj Napoca: Noua Speranță, 2009, pp. 15.

potential of freedom of every individual. This is the difference between Christian counseling and the other psychotherapeutic processes which do not necessarily aspire toward truth, or they claim the truth from the perspective of what the burdened man feels.

Yet, beyond all the definitions formulated, spiritual counseling must be understood and developed as a spiritual battle, which implies not just physical problems, but a battle against the supernatural forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12). Because of this, counseling proposed by Minirth and Meier is something that maintains the fact that theology and psychology are two disciplines equal in seeking the truth, and one does not interfere with the other, but they complement each other.<sup>18</sup>

### **Crisis – the inevitable human experience**

The term *crisis* indicates painful experiences, moments of maximum tension or stress, and spiritual turmoil in someone's existence. This makes reference to periods of stress, of anxiety, of trials, in which, in an acute way in a person's life, appear contradictions and profound disruptions with a pronounced potential of moving toward violence, isolation, depression, or other unpleasant experiences.<sup>19</sup>

Crisis, as a complex process which makes a person to become desperate or unbearable, can have an acute dimension which can determine the breakdown of a person in an emotional, social, or even physical standpoint, arriving at the situation in which suicide is seen as a potential solution. The sufferings of people who are found seeking solutions can be adequately analyzed only if there is taken into consideration the human condition in the larger context of faith. The crisis is the condition of man fallen before God. Because of this, every crisis of life must be interpreted from a theological-religious orientation, not just from a psychological-social one. From the point of view of faith, the human crisis consists of man moving away from God, in cutting off communion between man and God. Thus, apart from God, the life of a

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18 Minirth, F., Hemfelt, R., & Meier, P., *Labirintul codependenței*, Cluj Napoca: Logos, 2001, pp. 280.

19 Pașca, Maria, D., & Tia, T., *Psihologie pastorală* (Vol. 2), Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2009, pp. 67.

person becomes an uninterrupted chain of threats, fear, and danger, at the bottom of which death has a more increased foreboding.<sup>20</sup>

### **Sin – the fundamental problem that must be resolved in the process of counseling**

In the perception of the Christian counselor, personal sin is the root and cause of many of the problems which become the focus of spiritual counseling. According to Adams, sin must be diagnosed in a correct way. This assumes strange behavior, a distorted mentality, wrong attitudes, conscious or unconscious actions, all put together to satisfy the human ego.<sup>21</sup> This assertion is especially true in an era deeply confused in Freudianism, a concept according to which it is legitimate to put the blame on others, in Rogerianism which encourages us to give our feelings priority, and more recently, Skinnerian thought which opposes even the concept of one's own responsibility.

Spiritual counseling is unmoving in this point and insists on human responsibility. All the common elements of sin result in a life oriented toward sinful desires. The great existential guilt of man consists in his not wanting to accept the gift, in light of his suffering, of the love of God.<sup>22</sup> It is about his refusal in relation to the saving sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Behind a wide range of kinds of sin, there is a common element. Sin, in all of its dimensions, is very clearly the problem with which a spiritual counselor struggles, but the secondary dimensions, those variations of the common elements, are what make spiritual counseling so difficult. Although all humans are born sinners and take part in the same sinful practices and methods, each of them develops his own way of sinning. The modes are specific to each individual, but at the foundation of these ways of sinning one finds common elements. The task of the spiritual counselor is to discover these common elements behind their individual manifestations.<sup>23</sup>

20 PAȘCA, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

21 ADAMS, Jay, *The Big Umbrella*, Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971, pp. 109.

22 PAȘCA, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

23 ADAMS, *Competent to Counsel*, pp. 110.



Spiritual counselors know the fundamental elements of sin, in relation to the first sin in Genesis 3. In essence, the cause of the first sin was “the desires of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and pride of life” (I John 2:16; Genesis 3:6), against this condition of man was the commandment of God, “Do not eat!” Options given to men living then are the same with which we are confronted today. They reflect two distinct moralities, two opposing ways of life. One lives according to his feelings, but the other in accordance with what God says. When Adam sinned, he abandoned a life of love, oriented toward obeying of the commandment, for a life of lust oriented toward feelings. Nothings exists except these two ways of living; a life of sin, motivated by feelings and oriented toward oneself, and the life of holiness, motivated by the commandments of God and oriented toward Him.<sup>24</sup>

Living oriented after feelings and not after the commandments of God, is a fundamental stumbling block on the way to holiness and is a factor with which every Christian spiritual counselor is confronted. To encourage the counselee to follow his own feelings, instead of obeying the Word of God means aggravating the original problem and its causes, and stirring up complications which result in the continuation of sinful behavior. It means encouraging the problem and its causes, instead of encouraging a solution. The spiritual counselor insists, as does Paul: “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires” (Romans 6:12).<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, in Christian counseling the focus hangs on the freedom of man from his own sin. There is no struggle that surpasses in intensity the struggles of the soul generated by sin and especially the impossibility of getting out from under the sphere of influence of sinful and negative things.

## Conclusion

The importance of spiritual counseling must not be ignored, in the process of helping, on the basis of personal liberty, called for in this process. The Holy Scripture represents the point of reference and final authority in working out solutions. Because it is the Word of God, it carries in Itself

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24 GOLDENSON, Robert, M., *The Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1970, pp. 39.

25 ADAMS, *The Big Umbrella*, pp. 117-118.

this capacity to offer sure solutions for every complicated situation borne by a respective person. The Bible needs to govern and guide that entire process of counseling, the action that will assure full transparency and certainty. The logic and advice of the counselor will need to be in line with the Scriptures and with the truths revealed through them. In this direction, at the same time with the clear affirmation of scriptural truth, there must be shown the dimension of divine love, as the essence of divine existence and, together with grace, as the basis of the forgiveness of man.

The intervention and power of the Holy Spirit, as well, must be accentuated in the process of counseling. As Comforter, the Holy Spirit fulfills this dimension of counseling through His presence in the life of the counselor and through the conviction brought about in the life of the counselee. As a result of the work of conviction of the Holy Spirit, the perspective of the counselee is tied to the future, of the sure possibility of freedom from the power of sin and its effects. Because of this, in counseling one keeps track of a balance in accenting the past in relation with the future perspective.

The approach of the process of counseling has in view the oneness and unity of the human being in all of his complexity. Therefore during the process of counseling one will have in view the spiritual dimension, as well as the material-physical aspect of man. In the unfolding of this process, things work toward relational rehabilitation with God and with those around him, the one in need and fallen in sin. Here we find the big difference between Christian counseling, which aims at the commitment of man to God, and secular psychotherapy that follows only a state of an increased comfort at the level of the human psyche.

Therefore, used with wisdom, Christian counseling consists of a resource put at our disposal by God, of which the final result is the return of man to a good relationship with God, which can free him and heal all the negative complexes experienced.

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