



Premarital Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Quest for an African Model

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HUMAN LIFE CENTERS IN THE FAMILY. THE EXTENDED FAMILY SYSTEM, FOR which Africa is known, forms the basis for social relations and behaviors in the entire kinship system. Without a clear knowledge and understanding of the social structure of the family system, the church will fail to provide proper pastoral counseling to the family in crisis—whether in Africa, North America, or other parts of the world.

Within the entire African continent, the family system is changing due to urbanization and industrialization. Nevertheless, old habits die hard. Thus, African family crises cannot be dealt with adequately within the framework of western fam-

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Christian family counseling in Africa, informed by missionary practice and western theories of family systems, must take into account traditional African concepts of family and practices of family instruction. African efforts to define an appropriate culturally based counseling model can be instructive to western Christians seeking to provide pastoral care in their own increasingly multicultural settings.

ily systems, especially those of Europe and North America. That does not mean Africa has nothing to learn from the way the western family operates, just as the west can no doubt learn from Africa. As an African and a pastoral counselor, educated in part in the west, the problem I encounter is how to integrate my Christian pastoral training with my African cultural identity in order to help in the family social context.

My overall attempt in this study is to rediscover potential resources in the traditional African family structure that can be utilized in the contemporary church's ministry of healing and counseling. The changes currently taking place in the continent do not accommodate the pure African family system. A new family model is required, one that retains traditional values while accommodating insights from other cultures and taking into account the rapid changes in family, politics, religion, and economy. A pastoral counseling model for contemporary Africa must combine the insights of traditional African life care and modern family counseling systems.

The church in its ministry of healing and counseling is in a good position to create a family counseling model based on an understanding of the African culture. Such a model will integrate the African concept of family care with western-oriented family care.

We in Africa inherited structures of church leadership and theological influences that were cultivated and engineered by the missionaries. And yet we remain the experts in regard to our own cultures; we have to do the work. Doing this work will require the contributions of all people: African traditionalists as well as religious leaders. This cross-cultural exercise might serve as a model for readers of this journal working outside of Africa as well, for cultural change and multicultural contact is now characteristic of every corner of the globe.

I. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY INSTRUCTIONS IN THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN FAMILY

Africans are community-oriented people. Particular situations have to be judged on the basis of their impact on the community. In order to avoid misunderstandings within the community, each family has the responsibility to instruct its members about the common goal of the entire community. Phrases like "It takes a village to raise a child" and "I am, because you are" reflect the African way of life.

These phrases also reflect the responsibility of the community to raise children together. A community as a social unit has common norms and boundaries that regulate communications, customs, and rituals. However, families also have norms and boundaries that regulate their own rules and behaviors.

Parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents form a group of responsible relatives, a family council, which instructs young folks in family affairs. These responsible relatives function as keepers of family boundaries, counselors, and peacemakers. These family boundaries ground the family as a social unit.

According to the African family system, parents and all adults in the family have a great responsibility to instruct youth in the kinds of work required for all purposes in life. Family formation begins with the process of finding a marriage partner, a process that includes parents and community members as well as the couple. The process begins like this:

He begins to ask her fellow-villagers all about her habits and any reasons that may have kept her from already being married off among her people. When he has heard all there is to hear, he goes home to tell his relatives. "I have," he says, "seen a girl at such-and-such a village, the child of So-and-so, and I would like you quickly to go and request her for me."¹

Africans believe that the family of origin has great influence on people, so in planning marriage they scrutinize the habits of the family of origin. A good relationship is needed not only between the two young people who are intending to marry but between their families as well. Marriage in the African family system is not only between two individuals (a man and woman), but also between the two families from which the couple comes. Such a relationship is clearly emphasized at the marriage ceremony. The responsible relatives have words of counsel for both the new family (couple) and their parents (family of origin). The words of counsel to the husband might be something like this:

Listen, oh husband: you have lived with your father and mother. They brought you to birth, they nourished and fed you, they clothed you and looked after you well until you matured, right up to the point when you desired and sought a wife. To-day here is the wife that Mulungu [God] has given you. She is also just as yourself: she has lived with her old folks who brought her to birth, fed and cared for her, as was the case with you. To-day, you note her beauty and, desiring her, have caused her to separate from those people of hers so that she may truly be yours. You ought to pay heed to my words; both to hear them and to act by them.²

The instructor then gives specific "laws of good living" to the husband and wife. After the couple is addressed, words of counsel are given to the parents of the newlywed couple. They are encouraged to continue their parental guidance to the new family. This does not mean that the parents should dominate the new family, but that they should respect it and assist the new couple so that their marriage might succeed.

These words of counsel to the husband, wife, and parents show, first, that a new family has been established. Yet, the new family remains part of the larger family, the community. Second, this counsel clearly defines the responsibilities of husband and wife to one another as a subsystem within the extended family. Third, the counsel defines the boundaries of the families of origin and the larger commu-

¹John Kambalame, "Our African Way of Life," in *Our African Way of Life*, by John Kambalame, E. P. Chidzalo, and J. W. M. Chadangalara (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1946) 52.

²Ibid., 53.

nity (extended family) and lists the responsibilities of the parents to continue caring for the new family. Fourth, the boundary of mutual respect and friendship between the two families of origin is mandated. All three parties—husband, wife, and parents—have been told to pursue the happiness and success of the new family. This feature of the traditional African family life system can serve as a rich resource for the African Christian church.

II. THE AFRICAN CHURCH AND FAMILY COUNSELING

1. *Traditional African family instructions*

African traditional family counselors believe that prevention is better than cure. Traditional African counseling begins with proper instruction before the marriage takes place. Such instruction will remain as lifelong guidance for the new family. Although instruction varies in different communities, the following summary is instructive:

In the evening, after dark, the maternal uncle calls all the members of the family that they may hear that such-and-such a lad of their family is to take a wife. Women and men are summoned to the assembly and when all have come they are informed of the marriage negotiations of the particular young man and the village at which they have found a home for him. Then the mother's brother says, "While I have yet to hand him over, I desire that all of you of his kin may advise and instruct him, this child of you all, that he may not bring disgrace upon us in the village of those others." The senior old men of the family then begin to lay out the rules [boundaries] and to advise, each one saying what he or she wishes in order to explain to the youth how not to shame their community.³

This traditional African family counsel provides what I call *marriage boundaries*. The family, as an institution within the community, gives instructions on marriage and family life. These marriage boundaries are a reminder to the new couple that they are about to enter an institution that is recognized in the community and approved by their relatives. Dishonoring such an institution brings shame to the family and community. The marriage boundaries, which might also be called institutional boundaries, urge the couple to behave and act appropriately within the marriage framework. After the marriage boundary or institutional boundary formation is finished, then the family counsel discusses what I call the *relational boundaries*. That instruction may sound like this:

The mother's brother says: "Take notice all of you, kin of this lad. Dismiss any idea of giving food in hospitality to this lad if he comes back here on a visit to you. If you do, your child will not get properly settled down in his married life, remembering the food that you were in the way of cooking for him. Cast him away, as it were, just as a hen forsakes her growing chicks. The person who is now to attend to this lad's need is his mother-in-law [this includes the sisters of the wife's mother and their female cousins on the mother's side] and not you."⁴

³E. P. Chidzalo, "The Choice of a Wife," in *Our African Way of Life*, 63.

⁴*Ibid.*, 64.

Relational boundaries build mutual caring within the new family and free the new couple from the boundaries of the family of origin. Members of the family of origin are warned not to interfere in the family relationship of the new couple. “Don’t remember our affairs here. I do not desire a child who causes disgrace, having gone into marriage.”⁵

Next the family counsel discusses what I call *behavioral boundaries*. In the model I have been citing, the mother’s brother continues, instructing the husband:

“Kindness is mutual giving. Do courteous things to people and they will do courteous things to you. Be kind to old and young alike, to those in humble position as to those in higher station. Show no partiality in your ways of kindness to the people of that community. Also when you find any young men who say things that make your heart sore, don’t show any anger to such. Be as if you had not heard any who are rude to you and you will be a man highly honoured in the village. People honour a man of kind heart. Note my words, my nephew, a man never gets a good name through anger.”⁶

The behavioral boundaries encourage generosity rather than anger and warn against short-tempered behavior. Compassion and humility are required for people to maintain peace and noble recognition.

African custom sets what I call *responsibility boundaries* as well. The husband is told:

“Rise early; cast away sleep; cast away thought of hunger; but seize on work eagerly, whether in the food-gardens or in village itself.”⁷

Responsibility boundaries clearly send the message that a man has to work hard for a living. Being a family man is being responsible for the survival of your family.

2. *Christian family counseling in Africa*

Having dealt with these boundaries from the traditional practice of African family instruction, I turn now to consider the African Christian practices of family formation that have been inherited from the missionaries.

As is well known, missionaries often held negative attitudes towards Africans. As a result, when missionaries established Christian marriage, they generally did not consider traditional resources for forming a family. Some missionaries looked on Africans as barbaric, savage, uncivilized, non-religious, and pagan people of a dark continent. Because of these negative attitudes towards Africans, premarital counseling served only to give instruction and information about Christian marriage. Its focus was narrow, limited to instruction against the African tradition of polygamy and offering monogamous marriage as the only system acceptable in the Christian church. As a result, the premarital counseling instituted by missionaries

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 65.

was incomplete. It failed to include other important marriage issues, such as marital relationships between the spouses and matters related to family boundaries.

Now it is time, in my opinion, to include traditional African family formation in the church's ministry of premarital counseling. This work, which should be called "family formation" rather than premarital counseling, would provide a place for the pastor as marriage counselor to instruct the young people in family boundaries.

Where does the African church stand today in family counseling? Some may respond that the church is at a crossroads and does not know which road to follow. The problem I have noted is that we are doing family counseling on foreign ground. We are using western theories and resources in family counseling, attempting to counsel black African families with a system geared to western ways of thinking. Western-educated Africans may well be the only ones who can benefit from this counseling system. Since the majority of church members are, of course, not the products of western education, they may well be more confused than helped as they seek to overcome their family conflicts.

The point I am trying to make here is that the church in Africa needs its own family counseling model in order for people to derive the important benefits of family counseling. An African family counseling model cannot be drawn from nothing. It cannot be invented from intellectual theory. Pure African family counseling should be rooted in traditional African family life care. The true African soul can be found in traditional African concepts of family. The deep African concept of humanity (*ubuntu* or *omuntu*) is rooted in the family (community).

The church in Africa cannot be the church of Africans if it does not practice the African soul in family relationships. African pastoral care must embrace African expressions of Christian theology and the African soul in a new model of family counseling. In doing so it can, at the same time, provide a model for the western church as it is faced with its own task of providing cross-cultural counseling in increasingly multicultural communities. ⊕