



The Pastoral Counselor As Person

GARY L. HARBAUGH

Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio

There is a lot of literature available to those who want to learn about pastoral counseling: its definition, principal concerns, and methods. There is still debate about what pastoral counseling really involves and whether or not it remains faithful to the Christian heritage. Some theologians decry the caretaking stance that pastoral counseling is said to represent and warn of the potential for losing the eschatological vision of the church by an uncritical capitulation to a psychological society. Others, with greater appreciation for the contribution pastoral counseling has made, believe that it is past time to move beyond the one-on-one focus of earlier counseling approaches to a more systemic and socially conscious counseling stance.

While I am committed to a deeper and broader understanding of pastoral counseling, I think that the discussion of such issues is more fruitful when attention is paid to another factor which affects pastoral counseling more than many realize. That often insufficiently attended factor is the impact made on counseling by the personality of the counselor. In *God's Gifted People*, I linked a biblical understanding of "differing gifts" with psychological insights into the different gifts that are represented by different personality types.¹ In this article, I would like to expand on those understandings as they relate to the way that pastoral counseling is defined and practiced.

I. PERSONALITY AND PERCEPTION

Personality science suggests that one of the key features of an individual's particular psychological organization is the way that personality organization causes a person to experience or "see" the world. This difference in perception that characterizes different people is of much greater significance than is commonly realized. As counselors we often are aware that those we counsel see things differently than we do, or perhaps different-

¹Gary L. Harbaugh, *God's Gifted People: Discovering and Using Your Spiritual and Personal Gifts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).

ly than most other people do. What we may not realize is that our own perception of a counselee or of a problem situation arises out of our own individual personality gifts; our personal way of seeing is only one of a number of ways that this counselee or problem situation can be helpfully and faithfully seen.

For example, during the summer of 1987 I participated in an international conference on counseling held in India. One of the cases discussed was of a middle-aged couple who were having major conflicts with their teenagers. It seemed that all the traditional values were being

discarded by the teens. The tension in the home had become unbearable, resulting in increasing aggression that threatened both the parents' relationship with their children and their marriage. Most of us from the eight nations represented could easily identify in one way or another with the situation. To be sure, each of us interpreted the case in light of our own sociocultural realities. In some cultures, the actual or potential abuse issues were either not a concern or not a central concern. The role, rights, and responsibilities of the parents and the appropriateness of certain kinds of controls were also viewed from the standpoint of different cultural norms and sanctions.

However, what impressed me equally as much was the way in which certain personality characteristics of the various counselors cut across the national and cultural boundaries. Whether Indian, Korean, or North American, some of us were more naturally drawn to the individual needs of the members of this family and to how they could work out their problems more constructively, with a lot of attention paid to feelings and to personal and interpersonal sensitivities. This counseling response was marked by empathy with the frustrated, angry, and hurt family members; the counseling goal was to find a way to reconcile the broken relationships and restore harmony. However, there were other counselors in our group who responded to this case in quite a different way. They were also very aware of the pain being experienced by the family members, but these counselors analyzed the problem with less focus on the emotional trauma and more on the behavior and the logical consequences of its continuation. Those who approached the case in this way were as likely to be Indian, Korean, or North American as those who responded in the first way.

While differences in cultural background and race must be taken seriously, and counseling needs to be done with such realities in mind, there was clearly something more than culture involved in the differing responses of the counselors to the case study. The fact that people from the same country with similar educational experiences approached the case situation differently made it impossible to say the differences were only due to different professional training. The same could be said about gender differences—each of the points of view was held by both females and males. Sometimes, it seems to me, we overlook the effect of different personality gifts and ascribe a person's perception only to differences in gender or personal/professional background. Again, the differences in perception that come from sociocultural, masculine/feminine, or other realities should not be dismissed or minimized. Part of the identity of a pastoral counselor has to do with his or her birth heritage, developmental history, and life experi-

ences. Our differences in any of those areas may also be understood as gifts that a counselor can bring into a counseling situation. On the other hand, much is to be gained by paying a little more attention than we usually do to the effect of the personality of the pastoral counselor on the counseling.

II. PERSONALITY AS A GIFT

Perhaps you are among those who think of the "personality" as nothing other than the sum total of a person's life experiences. This is an argument that many behaviorists make, and there is much to be said for those who underscore the way life is shaped by the nurturing and learning environments. However, personality may go beyond what can be explained simply by

the environment in which the person happens to have been born or raised. In the Bible, the psalms are one of the places that provide a basis for thinking that God may have gifted each of us in a special way right from our beginning:

For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. (Psalm 139:13)

Such biblical passages resonate with some strands of modern psychology. According to Carl Jung, a psychiatrist son of an evangelical pastor, some (not all) of the personality differences between people can be understood as innate predispositions toward different ways we take in information and different ways we come to a judgment about the information we perceive. What I experienced at the conference in India may be a reflection of those personality differences in ways of perceiving and deciding. If what you “see” first (and perhaps best) are persons and their feelings rather than issues and the possible outcomes of the behavior, would that not affect your counseling response? Could it not also affect how you would describe the counseling situation to a professional colleague?

My own pastoral counseling has been immeasurably enriched by learning more about how I have been gifted to “see” a situation and come to decisions. One of the most valuable learnings is my growing awareness that there are *other* gifted ways of seeing and deciding, ways that are not so natural for me. While these ways are not my gift, I can come to appreciate them and develop some degree of skill in them. As a result, when I am talking with my colleagues about a situation, I can contribute to that conversation out of my gifts while remaining less likely to dismiss as less important the point of view of those who approach the problem differently. With some skill development in the opposite gift, I may even have something to contribute from that perspective as well—although probably never as insightfully as one who has that perspective as their gift from God.

In addition to ways of perceiving and judging, Jung also noted different gifts in the way persons are oriented to the outer and inner worlds. He called those orientations (or attitudes) extraversion and introversion. Extraverts find their source of psychic energy in the outer world; introverts get charged by tapping into inner resources. It does not take much imagination to see how differently a counselor might direct a counselee who is highly stressed and in need of rejuvenation, depending on how the counselor's

own energy is renewed. Of course, a well-trained counselor will learn from experience and supervision; but what I am talking about is the way in which our pastoral counseling may in subtle yet significant ways be affected by our own predispositions. This is especially true if we are not aware of what these predispositions are and if we do not recognize the value of gifts that are opposite to our own!

Here is a list of statements that may highlight my point:

1. A grieving widow/widower will wisely deal with loss feelings before getting very involved in activities.
2. A person with little personal prayer life would grow spiritually by developing a discipline of private prayer.

3. A counselee who is having trouble with the boss would be seen as more effective if she or he got as organized as possible.
4. A husband who is having communication problems with his wife should reveal more of his feelings.
5. Sexual problems could be alleviated by bringing a little variety into a couple's intimate life.

Each of these statements may be true for persons with certain personality gifts, but not true for those with opposite gifts. Prior to my understanding of the way my own personality gifts played a role in my counseling, I tended to be concerned if I saw someone returning to a busy, active life prior to their experiencing some kind of catharsis after a loss. I was concerned that they were denying their feelings and that they would pay a heavy price later on for that denial. I still pay attention to whether or not a counselee is in touch with his or her feelings, but I no longer assume that the direct expression of feelings is the sign of whether or not they are being worked through; nor do I believe that those who do express their feelings directly will necessarily resolve their grief more satisfactorily than those who do not. Similarly, introverted spiritual disciplines are not necessarily the way for an extravert to be strengthened any more than an extraverted sharing of "the peace of the Lord" is a needed step toward spiritual growth for the introvert. For some employers, a very organized employee may lack the flexibility and adaptability that the boss needs for last minute assignments and changes. Population estimates in our society suggest that about 60% of women are feeling-oriented; that still leaves a sizable percentage for whom a husband's greater revelation of his feelings may not be the primary communication link that is desired. Finally, there are many people for whom variety only increases anxiety and for whom there is no incompatibility between routine and satisfaction in intimacy.

The Jungian framework is only one way to discuss differences in personality and their implications for counseling. There is a lot more to a person than Jung's categories embrace, although these are very helpful as far as they go. Another example of the discussion of the effects of the personhood of the pastor on pastoral activities is Robert Randall's *Pastor and Parish*.² Randall draws on the self psychology of Heinz Kohut to detail the ways in which unmet narcissistic needs affect the shape of a clergyperson's ministry.

²Robert L. Randall, *Pastor and Parish: The Psychological Core of Ecclesiastical Conflicts* (New York: Human Sciences, 1988).

III. THE PASTORAL COUNSELOR AS A PERSON OF FAITH

Of course, psychological perspectives have their limitations. If they are not absolutized, psychological insights can help us to understand some of what we do and why we do it. But pastoral counselors are not just persons, they are persons of faith. It is that faith—which underlies and permeates the pastoral counselor's work and witness—that distinguishes *pastoral* counseling from other kinds of counseling. A hardy faith makes it possible for the pastoral counselor, whatever her or his personality, to see that changed life circumstances bring a challenge for personal and spiritual growth, not only a threat to life as it has been. The conviction that Christ is truly present and caring in the midst of life's transitions makes it possible to walk with counselees even through very dark valleys in the confidence that the counselor and counselee do

not walk alone. And those who have heard God's call to choose life are aware of the many times in which the choices that arise in the counseling context can be characterized as choices for spiritual life or death. Whatever our personality gifts, those gifts are potentiated by a lively faith in a living Lord, who asks only that we use our gifts in ways that point to the source of all good gifts.

What is faithful pastoral counseling? Is a ministry of caring appropriately counterpoised to the commitment to mission that emerges from an eschatological vision? Is individual, feeling-oriented counseling fairly criticized as inadequate by systems-oriented therapists who reject the old "identified patient" way of thinking? Or, are different counseling emphases expressions of different ways of seeing, each of which is a gift from God, and each of which is helpful for some people in certain situations?

To be aware that God has gifted us differently is to know that every way of seeing is, at best, a partial perspective. There may have been even more wisdom than I realized in the training I received to listen carefully to those who come to me for help in order that I might, insofar as humanly possible, enter into the "world" of each of those people. What was not said to me was that my ability to enter into someone else's world would be directly related to how well I understood my own. When I realize that my way of looking at things is neither everyone else's way nor necessarily a more useful or faithful way, then I am more open to what someone else is thinking and feeling. As those who seek our help experience us moving toward them—as they see that we are as eager to listen as we are to speak—then pastoral dialogue can truly begin. I was once a person who wanted to be a pastoral counselor. Now a pastoral counselor, I realize that both effectiveness and faithfulness depend on my remembering that I am, first and primarily, a person.³

³For further reading, see Gary L. Harbaugh, *Pastor As Person* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) and *The Faith-hardy Christian* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), as well as Isabell Briggs Myers, with Peter Myers, *Gifts Differing* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists, 1980).