

THE PASTORAL APPLICABILITY OF PERSON-CENTRED THERAPY

Pastoral counseling, has been defined as the use of a one-to-one or small group relationship to help people handle their problems in living more adequately.

In contrast to psychotherapy, Pastoral Counseling is usually short term (10 sessions or less) and does not aim at radical changes in personality.¹ Rather, it is an instrument for implementing the basic purpose of the church – to increase love for God and neighbour – by helping release the ability to love in those in whom this ability has been blocked or crippled.² It deals mostly with contemporary relationships and problems; aiming to help the client mobilize inner resources to handle a crisis, make difficult decisions, adjust constructively to unalterable problems, and improve relationships, including the relationship with God.

It is widely recognized that the pastoral counseling movement of the 50's and 60's was heavily influenced by the Client-Centred or Rogerian approach to psychotherapy.³ This is not surprising given the dominance of Rogers in the field. Indeed, some pastors and theologians were so taken with Rogerian therapy that they have argued it is a rediscovery of the essential dynamic of Christian ministry and spiritual transformation.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to consider whether or not Rogerian therapy continues to be well-suited to pastoral care and counseling some forty years

¹ Howard J. Clinebell Jr., *Mental Health through Christian Community: The Local Church's Ministry of Growth and Healing*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 213

² *ibid*, 214

³ Donald Capps, *Pastoral counseling for Middle Adults: A Levinsonian Perspective*, in Robert J. Wicks et al eds., *Clinical handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 213

⁴ Robert C. Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Other in an Age of Therapies*, (Grand Rapids: William C. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 30

later. As a starting point, let us consider just what the role of clergy is seen to be in the field.

Howard Clinebell has remarked, “Ministers are on the front lines in the efforts to help the burdened and the troubled.”⁵ In small communities the only professionals available for counseling may be ministers, physicians and lawyers; and of the three the minister usually has more counseling training than the others. He goes on to say that troubled people are more apt to seek help from a clergyman (sic) than from any other professional group. Moreover, he notes, even more people are helped through a minister’s general pastoring than through formal counseling.⁶

The predominant position of the minister in the field of counseling should not be surprising given the unique position he or she occupies in the community as leader of a local congregation. The minister has often had continuing contact with parishioners, and their families, over many years. Therefore, many seek help from clergy first because a bridge relationship already exists. Due to regular contact with parishioners, clergy can often detect problems when they are still in their early stages, and help before they become destructive. Moreover, they can be consulted informally without calling the process “counseling”.⁷ Although clergy may be called upon to do a variety of types of counseling, a high degree of expertise is expected in marriage counseling, where the clergy’s natural entrée to families confers a major advantage; crisis counseling, especially bereavement; and counseling on religious-existential problems.⁸

Crisis counseling not only includes bereavement, but also such things as supporting a client on the waiting list for clinical care; sustaining those with low ego strength, or who are irreversibly crippled emotionally, to allow them to continue to function; supporting certain people with an interpersonal environment in which they can grow in their ability to handle life constructively; assisting with decision-making; particularly when a person’s own decision-

⁵ *ibid*, 211

⁶ *ibid*, 212

⁷ *ibid*, 215

⁸ Clinebell, 218

making ability is temporarily crippled – ie: when making funeral arrangements; or to block a precipitous, impulsive action with serious irreversible consequences.⁹

In performing his or her role, it must be kept in mind that the minister is a religious authority figure, on whom people spontaneously project a variety of associations about God, heaven, hell, sex, parents, Sunday School, death, sin and guilt. As a result he or she has a superb opportunity to help people mature in these emotionally charged attitudes. In addition, because the minister represents the value structure of the community, his or her symbolic role provides a tremendous counseling advantage.¹⁰

Applicability of Rogerian Therapy

Person-centred, or client-centred therapy is probably the most widely adapted approach to people-helping that has ever been developed.¹¹ The longevity of the Rogerian approach is due, in part, to the fact that its tenets are so fundamental to pastoral counseling.¹²

Clinebell has noted that the heart of counseling – whatever the context – is establishing a warm, accepting, honest relationship between pastor and parishioner.¹³ It is here that Rogerian therapy is acknowledged to excel, with its emphasis on the therapeutic triad – the three essential, demonstrable qualities of the counselor - congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding.

Robert C. Roberts has said, “If you go to a Rogerian for ‘counseling’, you won’t get much counseling, not in the sense of advice on how to solve your problems. But you will probably come away feeling more self-confident, liking yourself better. You’ll be more aware of your feelings about what’s bothering you, and more relaxed about them, and some of the negative feelings will go away.”¹⁴

⁹ Clinebell, 225-229

¹⁰ *ibid*, 233

¹¹ Stanton L. Jones & Richard E. Butman, Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 272

¹² Capps, 213

¹³ *ibid*, 213

¹⁴ Roberts, 17

This will happen because the therapist will bathe you with empathy – there is no condemnation in the therapist's presence, and you will be totally free to be yourself. The result is emotional liberation; which translates – or so the theory goes – into healthier, happier relationships.

In supportive counseling, as Carl Rogers emphasizes, the acceptance of a person's burdensome feelings is one of the most supportive things a counselor can do. It drains the poison from the wounds of the spirit, and helps to reduce anxieties that inhibit use of judgment and problem-solving abilities.¹⁵ To sense another person knows and cares about one's inner pain gives troubled persons strength.

To experience non-possessive warmth (what Rogers calls unconditional positive regard) has been described as experiencing the human equivalent of grace in a relationship.

From a Christian point of view, Rogerian therapy has obvious appeal. However, although congruence, empathy and positive regard are essential building blocks for effective change - the question is are they sufficient conditions for change in and of themselves. Furthermore, Rogers was a humanist, not a Christian. We must inquire, therefore, whether his approach should be accepted without careful examination for "congruence" with the basic tenets of our faith.

Limitations of Rogerian Psychotherapy

According to Stanton and Butman, the philosophical presuppositions underlying Person-Centred therapy ought to raise a number of concerns for the Christian. First of all, it is assumed we are the ultimate force and sole masters of our own destiny – all authority is within. They emphasize that according to our faith, the "Self" is not all there is and should not be the center of what is. "In the Christian tradition," they say, "to proclaim oneself to be in control of one's own existence is the ultimate act of rebellion."¹⁶

¹⁵ Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1987), 172

¹⁶ Stanton and Butman, 262

They go on to note that Person-Centred Therapy is also implicitly a system of ethics – humanist ethics - in which personal wholeness assumes primacy and becomes a moral imperative, often at the expense of our responsibilities to others.¹⁷ In their view, it reduces human growth to the process of pursuing self-actualization by following the direction of one's instinctual organismistic valuing process. Moreover, morality risks becoming a matter of following the instinctual compass rather than being a rigorous and demanding response of the whole person.

The Rogerian self, they note, has no center or anchor, and if taken to an extreme, can turn into a formless entity defined only by its urges and sensing.”¹⁸ The true self in the Christian tradition, on the other hand, is defined by relationship – with God, neighbour, others and God's absolutes. It is meant to be shaped by both organismistic needs and by a strong sense of belonging, shaped by the Christian story and our place in the Christian community.¹⁹

They feel it is a serious error for the Christian to equate unconditional positive regard or even the whole therapeutic triad with Christian love. Christian love warmly embraces sinners, is gracious and unconditionally accepting but does not cease to be firm and hold the self and others accountable. They note, “Certainly we need to be “fed” by deep affirmation and acceptance, but we also need to be “pruned” in the process of our growth by God's discipline and to be forgiven.”²⁰ In Person-Centred Therapy there is no discipline or firmness. Because of this one-sided embrace of love without discipline, they feel it may support clients without challenging them to do what is right.

Robert Roberts cautions that while the psychologists offer insights and practices that can be helpfully adapted for Christian use, each has a very real potential to lead us astray.”²¹ The psychologies of Rogers, and others, are really alternative spiritualities. Like Christianity, they conceptualize what it is to be a person, along with sets of disciplines by which to arrive at a better “health”. The

¹⁷ *ibid*, 263

¹⁸ *ibid*, 264-265

¹⁹ *ibid*, 267

²⁰ Stanton and Butman, 270

²¹ Roberts, 3

danger is that these psychologies may to one degree or another *replace* Christianity without most people even noticing that any substitution has taken place.²²

To be the self that one truly is in the Christian view is always to be in communion with others. This is not something optional or coincidental to Christian life - to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as oneself is what it *is* to be a fully functioning, fully formed, healthy person. An important difference between Christianity and Rogers (and other psychotherapies) is that the latter construes our relationship to other persons as more or less incidental to our selfhood.²³ For 'reality' the Rogerian looks NOT to God and community but to himself as an individual and organism. In fact, he maintains, "Rogerian congruence amounts to a narcissistic concentration on oneself and one's own needs in which other people get out of focus, becoming a sort of peripheral reality."²⁴

Aside from philosophical considerations, there are some significant concerns with process. One pastor said "The Rogerian notion (of not imposing one's belief on others but simply reflecting their feelings back to them) got me off the hook early in my ministry...It clouded over the necessity to clarify my own belief system and apply it to life." He noted that after a few years this type of ministry began to seem empty and he began to think he was wasting his time and the client's if all he did was read back people's feelings all day."²⁵

Roberts notes that the Christian emphasis is very different. Christians are called to bear one another's burdens, to stand by marriage partners in plenty and want, joy and sorrow, health and sickness. Living through one's trials with God's help makes one into a mature person and builds Christian character.²⁶

According to Howard Clinebell, the Client-Centred approach is ONE valuable aspect of a minister's training; in that it helps master the art of disciplined listening, and helps lessen the occupational tendency towards facile

²² *ibid*, 4

²³ *ibid*, 12

²⁴ *ibid*, 30-31

²⁵ *ibid*, 37

²⁶ *ibid*

verbalizing. He goes on to say that a minister with only a Client-Centred string on his counseling fiddle often feels guilty or blocked in counseling situations requiring the constructive exercise of authority, functioning as a teacher-counselor, or serving a parishioner emotionally in a feeding role.”²⁷ Furthermore, he notes, Carl Rogers himself states clearly that many troubled people cannot benefit from an insight-oriented, Client-Centred approach because of excessive instability, aging, or an unfavourable environment (Carl R. Rogers, Counseling and Psychotherapy, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), pp. 61-80).²⁸

In Clinebell’s experience a majority of those who seek a pastor’s help cannot respond to a pure Rogerian approach; however he notes that it does appear to be sometimes effective with reasonably intelligent, highly verbal, young or middle-aged neurotics who are strongly motivated to obtain help. He goes on to say, “Attempting to use it with troubled persons who lack these characteristics usually results in ...an adventure in passivity – a rambling relationship that becomes an exercise in mutual frustration.”²⁹ Many people’s capacity for insight and self-directedness is so limited or crippled that they cannot respond to an insight-oriented approach. But they can be helped to a greater adequacy in living by varied counseling approaches involving the selective use of guidance, authority, instruction, along with a focus on improving interpersonal relationships.

Clinebell’s point of view is reinforced by Donald Capps, who wrote that Rogerian therapy is recognized as being especially attractive to adults in their 20’s and 30’s; experiencing the usual difficulties of young adulthood. This emphasis, together with Rogers’ ‘non-directive’ style fit well with suburban churches of the time. However, as Church membership became more middle-aged, Client-Centred pastoral counseling lost much of its influence and prestige.

In Capps’ opinion, the personality theory that underlies Client-Centred therapy is clearly oriented towards the aspirations and concerns of young adults;

²⁷ Howard J. Clinebell Jr., Mental Health through Christian Community: The Local Church’s Ministry of Growth and Healing, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 217

²⁸ *ibid*, 217

²⁹ Howard J. Clinebell Jr., Mental Health through Christian Community: The Local Church’s Ministry of Growth and Healing, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 217

and does NOT provide an adequate theoretical basis for pastoral counseling sensitive to needs and aspirations of those in middle age.³⁰

A further apparent limitation is found in the use of Rogers approach among youth. Clinebell notes that a pastoral psychotherapist who worked mainly with disturbed adolescents reported that problems of weak consciences predominated among his counselees and that Rogerian and psychoanalytic methods proved *strikingly ineffective* with most of them.³¹

Observations and Conclusions

The writer was initially somewhat skeptical when first introduced to the Rogerian approach; and, in fact, shared many of the opinions that have been expressed above. In particular the video of Rogers therapy session with “Gloria” raised some serious concerns about the lack of direction and moral witness provided to the client. In the opinion of the writer, she was clearly expecting support to “do the right thing”; and became somewhat more outrageous in her story each time that Rogers did not provide the guidance she clearly was expecting.

However, with experience of the “working” relationships as counselor and client – both on an individual basis and in class – the value of Rogers approach in a Therapy session has been seen and appreciated; particularly in the early stages of a counseling relationship when the establishment of trust is so necessary to create an environment in which the client can feel free to openly share his or her deepest concerns. However, one is left with the question of whether congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding are enough, in and of themselves, to constitute the complete Pastoral answer to a counseling situation. Given the somewhat different expectations placed on the clergy, and in particular, with regard to their role as a religious authority figure representing the value structure of the community, it would not appear so. In such circumstances, it would appear that the tools of Person-Centred Therapy

³⁰ Capps, 214

³¹ Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1987), 156

provide the means of establishing a trust relationship with the client that will permit the use of other tools and methodologies to satisfactorily address the pastoral concerns presented by the client.

The writer offers these observations as simply that; recognizing that 12 one-on-one counseling sessions, and a number of class role plays, do not provide sufficient experience to draw any definitive conclusions.

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