

Pastoral Counseling Versus Pastoral Care: The Role of the Black Pastor

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Introduction

The creation and separation of the Black Church gave rise to a cultural cauldron that Black people created to combat a system that was seemingly designed to crush their spirit, their drive, and individuality. Collectively and with enormous effort, they refused to allow that to happen and thus created an opportunity for their people to gather and interpret the Scriptures in light of who they were as a people. The miracle of the survival of these people of color can be traced directly to the miraculous ways that their ancestors reinvented the religion that their “masters” thought would keep them subservient. Conversely, that religion enabled them and their descendants to learn, to grow, to develop, to interpret and reinvent the world in which they were trapped; it enabled them to bide their time. Ultimately, this brought about time for them to fight for their freedom, and for us to continue the fight for ours. It also gave them the moral authority to turn the mirror of religion back on their masters and to indict the nation for its original sin of allowing their enslavement to build up that “city upon a hill.” In exposing that hypocrisy at the heart of their “Christian” country, they exhorted succeeding generations to close the yawning gap between America’s founding ideals and the reality they had been

forced to endure.¹

From its emergence in the late 18th century to its present-day relevance, the black church has and will always serve as a safe haven for black people, a place to worship God together, and a place where we are motivated, directed, encouraged, validated, and corrected. Though primarily places of worship, black churches have long played prominent roles in black communities, offering more than just spiritual gratification, but has also been the originator of social services and programs specifically for the black experience.

The 21st century church

Black churches have long acted as the social, political, and educational centers for many black communities. But that role is evolving amid what some historians and sociologists have labeled the “Third Reconstruction.” The terminology of a Third Reconstruction has been coined and represented by some historians and sociologists from the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America. Of which also covers the rise of racial and social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and its ensuing backlash.²

The 21st century church also has a look and feel much different than its predecessor. In the past church, because of its correlation to its relevance to the black experience, the church was the center of all walks of life. When politicians were to get elected or wanted to get the community behind a bill or issue, they went to the church. If there was a problem in the community, it was taken to the church. When an answer was needed to any of life’s family or individual problems, it was taken to the church. But in the 21st century church, many churches are nothing more than an inspirational and

¹ The Harvard Gazette (2021, March 9) “How The Black Church Saved Black America”

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/03/the-history-and-importance-of-the-black-church/>

² Ibid.

motivational gathering. It is the place where man goes to reinforce his spirituality but more about satisfying his need to emotional and psychological support.

The role of the pastor

Because of the position of prominence for the black church, the pastor in the black church

wields much influence in our community. They fill us up with wisdom, knowledge, and of the Word of God. Our pastors pray with and for us, provide resources and tools, even visit us when we are sick. Our pastors serve as our “elected” spiritual representatives. In most cases, the pastor is viewed as the closest connection we have to God, especially from a vessel that looks like us, and therefore carries the Scriptures and messages needed to face our every human situation.

With the change in perception of the role and activity of the church, the role of the pastor has also taken a change with the passing of time. In what we can call “grandma’s church,” the pastor was unequivocally seen as the closest thing to God himself. So, in many instances, the pastor had the final word and so people entrusted their very lives to his input and advice. All of life’s major decisions were brought to the black

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church for the pastor to speak over, pray for, and direct. But, in today’s Christian view, the pastor is viewed more as the spiritual advisor rather than grandma’s “Mister Everything.” The pastor is still revered as a Man of God, but his role in the intimate details on one’s life has been greatly reduced. For many of today’s Christians focus on the humanness of the pastor rather than his spiritual representation.

Pastor’s Role

The role of the black church’s pastor includes preaching sermons to their congregation, leadership, organizing charitable activities, church events and meeting with members of their congregation to help them strengthen their faith or overcome significant life changes. In most instances, the parishioners expect the pastor to educate, motivate, and stimulate them spiritually as a methodology of positioning them for success in their everyday lives. In many instances, the pastor is seen as more of a motivational speaker than the spiritual guide for which they have been called. But this is not how the black pastors were viewed in previous times. For then, the pastor was the advisor, director, and confidant for all areas of life’s journey. They would have input for all of life’s expectations from cradle to grave, including personal struggles, emotional deficiencies, and emotional and psychological obstacles.

When it comes to mental stability, mental health, and psychological soundness, many black Americans distrust the institutional mental health system because of institutionalized racism and the belief that they would be misdiagnosed and mistreated.³ This belief contributed to black Americans turning to their churches for help with their mental health, personal struggles, and personal development problems outside of the normal spirituality of the proverbial Heaven or

³ The Harvard Gazette, “How The Black Church Saved Black America” March 9, 2021

Hell conversations. Because of the faith and belief in the application of the Scriptures to everyday life, it seemed only natural that the same vessel that provides for spiritual growth can use the same Scriptures to help other struggles as well. Therefore, since congregants have always relied on the pastor as their voice for everything spiritual, it seems only natural that the pastor should be able to provide counseling as regularly as his sermon preparation. Although, most pastors have no or very little formal training in the area of counseling or psychology, most are being asked to walk in an area that they are really unprepared to assist. This has caused the role of the black pastor to have been expanded from only a spiritual focus to being able to speak to, on, and about personal issues, social issues, and individual struggles.

Definition

The expansion of the black pastor's role into the area of pastoral counselor has not been well documented. In many cases, this oversight may be because it has been "assumed" that this facet of the pastor's role is not any different than the already accepted foundation of what is expected. For in both situations and circumstances, pastoral care and pastoral counseling are in many ways viewed as synonymous because both have the same overall target of "curing," easing, and healing the injured souls.

It is admirable that the black church has placed such a high priority on the application of Scripture for the healing of psychological ills. This means that much of this healing would take place within worship rituals through which participants identify specific psychological symptoms that are eased or replaced by positive feelings initiated by the application of the Word of God. Since the Scriptures are being utilized to

form these replacements, very little has been documented regarding the healing ministry of pastoral counseling work conducted by black clergy. Therefore, the role of the black pastor is simply measured according to their overall preaching performance and church leadership as a whole rather than itemizing and separating pastoral care from pastoral counseling. Therefore, we must understand the difference between these two aspects of the pastoral responsibilities.

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Pastoral care

Pastoral care is ministering to the entire congregation's needs while pastoral counseling is attending to individual or group therapy among members. Pastoral care is synonymous with shepherding the flock in which the pastor provides leadership in spiritual and religious matters. Pastoral care is obviously and simply just that...care. It is the walking out of the pastoral responsibility of caring for the needs of the church, its members, and its community.

The 23rd division of Psalms presents a formidable list of benefits and caring acts of a good shepherd. Pastoral care, in owning these characteristics, provides them a relationship for the sheep's needs for rest, refreshment, renewal, and restoration, guidance in righteousness, courage, companionship, protection and comfort, food, acceptance and healing, blessings, unconditional love, and hope now and in the eternal future.⁴

⁴ Aaron J. Rummage, "A Model for Pastoral Care and Shepherding of a Large and Growing Church", Liberty University, (2005), 20.

Pastoral counseling

Pastoral counseling is the branch of counseling in which ordained ministers, rabbis, priests and other religious persons provide therapy services to members of the congregation as well as to anyone in need of religious direction. The therapists integrate modern psychological thought and methods with traditional religious training and ministry. It is the marriage of the mind, soul, and body wrapped in a nice, neat package, presented from the standpoint of pastoral care and concern.

Pastoral counseling is a responsibility of the pastor that requires the highest level of confidentiality. Like secular counselors, pastors are responsible for providing advice on private matters, but unlike secular counselors, they are expected to give answers and opinions from a biblical foundation, perspective, and application.

This type of counseling is geared more towards information rather than pure “counseling.” In most situations, counseling is viewed as dealing with corrective actions resulting from situations, relationships, or traumatic experiences. But the educative angle focuses on providing needed information for the counselee to make an intelligent and preferably a corrective decision. Therefore, educative pastoral counseling blends inductive and educative methods of guidance in varying proportions. It is the marriage of knowledge with experience, all wrapped around the concept of spiritualism.

The concept of “educative counseling” helps to resolve the unnecessary conflict, in some minister’s minds, between their roles as counselors and as proclaimers of the gospel. This conflict is the result of the client-centered image of the counselor as relatively passive and of the false dichotomy between knowledge and feelings in the therapeutic approach based on Carl Roger’s belief that every human being strives for and has the capacity to fulfill his or her own potential. The conflict is resolved when transmitting knowledge and dealing with

feelings are seen as complementary, interacting factors in the counseling process, and when the image of the minister as educative is understood and accepted as an appropriate image.

Ideally, the teaching aspects of counseling should be focused as sharply on the person’s particular needs as is the medicine which a competent physician gives for a specific illness. This indicates that the information being provided must be truth and delivered in a caring manner. The Bible illustrates this as being “seasoned with salt.” That does not give any minister a license to use the Word of God (or any other material) as a weapon of mass destruction, simply because it is truth, simply that truth should provide the foundation for the information to ensure non-biasness and consistency. For if a minister utilizes the Scripture as the authority on truth, then opinions, interpretations, and application become minimized.

Most pastors face two categories of counseling: (a) *those in which people come at the minister’s request* – premarital, pre-baptismal, church membership preparation, and (b) *those in which the counselee takes the initiative*, seeking guidance on vocational, theological, and other problems. The counselor’s rule of thumb is that minister-initiated types ordinarily require a greater proportion of direct *instruction* than do the counselee-initiated types. Many premarital sessions are actually *individualized education* rather than counseling, in that the couples are not motivated by a desire for help with particular problems. But individualized education can be highly valuable in its own right, particularly if counseling skills and sensitivities are integral to the process.

Differences between pastoral care and counseling

Pastoral care can be defined as the pastoral services, ceremonies, and commencements that are performed by a pastor.

In the black church, the pastor is viewed as a shepherd who guides the people through all walks and avenues of life. This implies a form of religious or spiritual leadership and care that assists people to maneuver difficult times. The care offered and provided by the pastor is not limited to the provision of sermons but extends to many other areas of the human experience. For instance, in addition to preaching uplifting and life-altering sermons that can be applied directly to the life and times of the congregants, black pastors are also expected to care for the sick, engage in social activities, provide administration for the church as a whole, and to lead the church and its members through life's journey.

Pastoral counseling is more of a one-on-one directive where the pastor is assisting an individual, couple, or family in addressing specific issues that doesn't have to be directly related to their spiritual positioning. In many cases, this can include such topics as marriage counseling, family counseling, and is starting to bleed over into psychological counseling as well as personal and possibly career development. Many congregants seem to feel that because of the pastor's knowledge and application of Scripture, that he is naturally qualified to address situational issues and struggles. But often times, the pastor is unprepared, unqualified, and unaware of the qualifications needed and necessary to properly address the needs of those needing and requiring attention.

Definitions of pastoral care and counseling

Pastoral care refers to the services that are performed by a pastor. The functions of the pastor mostly relate to the preservation, instruction, and direction of the congregants that have been assigned or located within a church. The care extended by the pastor will include but not be limited to the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures, administration, planning,

ministerial development, and guiding the church to grow and fulfill its purpose. The care that gets exhibited is similar to the protection of a shepherd to his sheep. The care is provided in order to help guide the membership in spiritual development as they work their way towards Christian maturity.

Pastoral counseling can be defined as a process in which the pastor acts as a personal counselor, guiding the counselee to find solutions to specific problem areas that they are facing. Pastoral counseling is seen more as a 1-on-1 relationship rather than the 1-to-many arrangement of pastoral functions. The concept of the pastoral counselor is often times seen as a natural progression without a second thought given to qualifications or experience.

Roots of pastoral care and counseling

With the black church, pastoral care has its roots specifically and completely in religion. All care falls in line with the expectations and requirements outlined within the Scriptures. All care is directed towards spiritual growth and application so that the membership develops into mature and biblically sound "Christian" believers.

The counseling aspect has its roots in counseling psychology, which is its own scientific discipline. When viewed through a pastoral lens, counseling will mostly include scripture and scriptural references, but in many cases, the goal is more natural and/or psychological than spiritual. The expectation is that any answer, recommendation, or instruction will not conflict with Scripture in any fashion, but at the same time allows for human level application to the issue at hand. For within the black church, most believe that all avenues lead through the spiritual realm and therefore has a direct spiritual impact.

Professional training

Most black pastors acquire professional and academic training in pastoral duties and responsibilities. Those that seek out seminary or theological training will find formal training in the administration of the pastoral care and functions although some pastorage positions do not require formal seminary training to be effective in their call or appointment.

Although most non-religious counselors are required and expected to complete professional training, many pastoral counselors have no formal training in this area. Many pastoral counselors use personal experiences and biblical application to address counseling opportunities. Although the application of scriptural foundations and applications have a place within the area of therapy, the lack of formal counseling techniques and processes limits the effectiveness of the pastor within this area. Without formal training, it does not guarantee that the pastor will be ineffective as a counselor, but it does handicap them around recognizing some mental issues as well as limiting their knowledge of the psychological that equips them to handle all types of difficult situations and dilemmas.

Openness

Within pastoral care, people are often open to conversing because in the black church, the pastor is considered well respected and trusted. And because of the perception of His closeness to God the creator, many have a high competency level in the pastor. This makes them more open to receiving direction, reproof, and instruction because the care that has been exhibited to them has helped them through births, deaths, marriages, divorce, and other milestones of life.

And because of the pastor being held in such high regard within the black community, many times the pastor will be faced with

assisting members of his congregations, friends and relatives of his congregants, and many others that “pass through” and reach out to them because of their role as pastor. This means that many times, pastors are called to counsel those to whom he has no history, which leans towards needing formal training in order to assist those for which previous experiences are non-existent.

Overview

When we focus on the fundamentals of this type of counseling, we ease concerns about how demanding and formidable pastoral counseling is; it also addresses the comprehension that pastoral counseling is subversive. To some, pastoral counseling seems to value, permissively, the individual's need and preferences in a way that severely contradicts the minister's commitment to building a community and to fostering responsible citizenship in the world and the kingdom. Pastoral counseling is offered here as a *means* toward such maturity of person and faith, not as a *model* for maturity of person and faith. The strategies and attitudes of pastoral counseling are not offered as end products separate from ministry but as one process or aspect of pastoral ministry.

Conclusion

Pastoral care is a general ministry much like the family physician in medicine. Pastoral counseling is a specialized ministry much like the specialists in medicine. This indicates that pastoral counseling can be defined as a specialty or extension of pastoral care. Which leads us to the conclusion that pastoral care and pastoral counseling are not synonymous, for one can (and in most cases will) exist without the other. All pastors are called to pastoral care, but for many, pastoral counseling is expected or insinuated but is not totally required.

Summation

Whether the counselor is a minister, psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker, certain principles make Christian counseling unique. Counseling outside of the pastorage can be subjective but all pastoral counseling must align with Scripture. And because pastoral counseling has its foundation and formation through the church, it makes pastoral counseling much different than its scientific counseling counterparts. Not in its application, but in its approach and formulation. So, what makes pastoral counseling so much different?

First, pastoral counseling accepts the Bible as the final standard of authority. Christians are not left to be “tossed back and forth” but can look to a final authority. Relying on the Holy Spirit to guide them through the Bible, Christians are not dependent in their own consciences to direct their behavior. If conscience agrees with the Word of God, it is valid; if not, conscience is invalid. The Bible not only gives insights into human behavior but also puts everything into proper perspective; it tells who we are, where we came from, and our nature and purpose.

Second, pastoral counseling is unique because it depends not only on human will to be responsible, but also on the enabling, indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to conquer human problems and emotions. Although all of us are responsible for our own actions, we still have the free will to make our own decisions, which then allows even the most devout Christians to choose to act irresponsibly. Through God’s power however, we no longer must live as slaves to our weak will, our past environment, or our social situations. Although all our problems do not automatically disappear when we accept Christ, we gain new power and foresight to be able to deal with them outside of a failed human mindset.

Third, pastoral counseling is unique because although by nature human beings are

selfish and tend to ignore or hate God (Romans 1:28-32), Christians through faith receive the Spirit who gives them victory in overpowering their sin nature. So, counseling allows us to not make excuses or become complacent with who and what we are; it encourages us to strive for what we can be and were created to be.

Fourth, pastoral counseling is unique because it effectively deals with the counselee’s past. Many traditional personality theories deal exclusively with the past. Because Christians find themselves forgiven for past life events, they can be guilt-free (1 John 1:9) and look forward to the future (Philippians 3:13-14). Pastoral counseling points out the fact that once we become part of the spiritual family of God, that we are a new creation, where old things are passed away and all things become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Fifth, pastoral counseling is unique because it is based on God’s love. God loves us (1 John 4:10) and as his love flows through us, we love others and care for them (Romans 12:9-21). A Christian counselor feels a spiritual relationship to other Christians and helps them to grow in Christ as they solve their problems. They don’t find explanations for our actions; we point out the fact that our actions are sinful and need to be cleansed through the Holy Spirit.

Sixth, pastoral counseling is unique because it deals with the whole person. The Christian counselor is aware that the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of human beings are intricately related and are intertwined and connected through man’s spirituality. Therefore, a spiritual “healing” will have physical, psychological, and social implications causing changes in behavior, personality, character, and thought processing.

Closing statement

Although there are multiple approaches to solving the issues presented to the pastor, we must never lose sight that the primary counselor

must always be the Holy Spirit. For balance between the spiritual, emotional, and natural elements of life are the keys to successful pastoral counseling. We must be able to emphasize spiritual aspects without neglecting the physical and psychological aspects. Pastors should not lose sight that although they may have received graduate training in both religion and behavioral science for a clinical practice that integrates psychological and theological disciplines, we are called first to be witnesses and proclaimers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. For we must always point the individual back to God, not religiosity or denominationalism, but to the basic and fundamental belief in God as the loving and caring Father. With this, it requires that each pastoral counselor believe that there is a God in whose image and likeness we are created. They believe that we yearn for a transforming connection with the divine, and that psychotherapy can mediate the loving and healing nature of being itself.

Pastoral counselors also make therapeutic use of traditional religious resources such as prayer, Scripture reading, and participation in the worship and community life of a congregation. They pay special attention to the religious history of the client and his or her family, noting how it may contribute to the suffering or resources needed for coping. This information would then be utilized to assist with establishing a base foundation of belief and moral standards. For it is the foundation upon which the counselor should begin to build correction, instruction, reproof, or doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16).

We believe that each person's emotional and spiritual journeys are closely intertwined. We provide counseling, psychotherapy, consultation and education that integrate

theological and psychological perspectives in our healing work. Which points to the fact that the overall purpose of pastoral counseling is to identify current life concerns, deal with feelings of anxiety and depression, manage sudden changes and loss, address academic and peer problems, grow in personal acceptance and self-esteem, face issues of substance abuse, and improve personal relationships.

Pastoral counseling is the marriage of order, understanding, and systematic process into the godly encounters between beleaguered people and the highly dedicated men and women called to the task of leading God's people. We must understand that there are several methodologies in addressing the "ministry" of counseling, but we should never lose sight of the fact that we are pastors first, meaning that we must never attempt to separate the spiritual from the natural when addressing issues.

We must realize as pastors, that preaching applicable, entertaining, and motivating sermons, praying, teaching, and performing the sacraments of the church is a needed and necessary aspect of a pastor's role. And as we continue to face the needs of the "church," we must realize that the black community expects and requires its pastors to minister in love. But as we deal more and more with the reality of life as it relates to the individual, the more we should come to the realization of the importance that we as pastors need to have some level of training in the area of counseling and/or psychology in order to be prepared to address, identify, and work with psychological issues. Yes, we need to be scripturally sound, but we need to ensure that we are properly prepared to the best of our abilities to put ourselves in a position to be successful in offering care and counseling.

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