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Teaching of Pastoral Care and Counselling in Theological Colleges

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In the past few decades, pastoral care and counselling were not recognised as proper disciplines to be included in the list of required courses for theological students. To some extent, pastoral care was included under the rubric of "Pastoralia," but pastoral counselling was excluded from it. This was the situation in the West as well as in Third World countries. Theological educators took it for granted that pastoral counselling could be learned in the field itself. The idea that pastoral counselling could have its own theory and a grounding in theology was absent from theological education. This state of affairs reflected the attitude of theological educators towards the interpersonal dimension of the pastoral ministry.

Now theological educators have become aware of the importance and need of teaching pastoral counselling in theological colleges. It is being acknowledged and recognised that pastoral counselling is one of the most important aspects of Christian ministry. In a recent survey, conducted by Dr Hunter Mabry of the United Theological College, Bangalore, it was clearly brought out that one of the most important needs of ministers was in the field of pastoral counselling. Most of these ministers felt that they were poorly equipped to deal with the interpersonal problems of their parishioners. It is now recognised that the interpersonal dimension of human existence is present in all areas of human life. Whether the parishioner is confused in his spiritual life or physical life, this dimension is present in all human problems. Even in societal issues, we cannot ignore the presence of this important dimension. As long as a minister is dealing with human beings and their problems, he will be confronted by this dimension.

Now it is recognised that pastoral counselling should be taught to all students enrolled for Christian ministry. Pastoral counselling is now a part of the core subjects of the B.D. curriculum. In this brief paper, I would like to mention some of my ideas regarding teaching of pastoral counselling in theological colleges.

Discovery of Self and its Potentialities and Limitations

We seem to think that the teaching of pastoral counselling means equipping students with theories and skills of counselling. Although

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they are necessary in any course on pastoral counselling, they are not by themselves sufficient preparation for students to practise counselling. The teaching of pastoral counselling is neither equipping the students with theories of counselling nor training them with skills. What is more important is to help the students to discover themselves. It is the discovery of self which is more important than the learning of theories and skills of counselling. Unless a student discovers his true self, he cannot make good use of theories and skills of counselling. A student who has not discovered his self cannot relate to people in therapeutic ways. He cannot be of any real help to others. In a real sense, the skill comes out of his self. A course in pastoral counselling must include helping a student to discover his self and to use the discovery effectively.

Discovery of self means becoming aware of one's potentialities as well as of one's limitations. It means knowing one's strengths as well as weaknesses. It is a process of knowing one's self and learning the direction of one's personality. It is a process of knowing one's identity. As far as the course in pastoral counselling is concerned, it should help him to develop the student's potentialities, to affirm his strengths. If proper guidance is provided by the teacher these strengths can be integrated in his style of counselling. If these positive qualities are integrated in his methods of counselling, he can become a very good counsellor.

However, in the process of discovering his self, the student may also become aware of certain limitations. He may become aware of some negative qualities in his personality. These may be in the area of prejudices he has against certain people, or in the area of his personality development. These limitations become hindrances in the practice of counselling. Although prejudices are present in all of us, a pastoral counsellor cannot afford to remain ignorant of them. If he cannot get rid of them, at least he should be able to manage them in such a manner that they do not interfere in the practice of counselling. In our society, we tend to have prejudices towards the other sex or those who differ from us in colour, creed and caste. Unless we manage some of these prejudices, we will be unable to develop therapeutic relationships with such people. As we know that prejudices are deep-seated in the psyche of the person, therefore mere lectures are not helpful in overcoming them. Only those methods which allow the person to examine his self in an atmosphere of love and care can help him to deal with these prejudices. Use of small growth groups are generally very helpful for this purpose.

If a teacher is trained in conducting small growth groups, he will be able to create a non-threatening environment in the group, which will enable students to work out their problems, those which result from their prejudices and also from their personality defects. Students seem to benefit a great deal from such an exercise. They become more and more independent and resourceful. They learn to depend upon their own strengths, as well as to seek the co-operation of others in dealing with problems. Discovery of self and its management

within the context of a growth group brings about an attitudinal change in the student. The student gains self-confidence and a sense of self-esteem which are very important for a pastoral counsellor. If a student is insecure and unsure of himself, this will be reflected in his self-esteem. Such a person will find it very difficult to relate to people. In other words, the self of the person is the most important tool in the practice of counselling. As teachers, it is our responsibility to help our students in this important area. By saying all this, I do not mean that methods and skills of counselling are not important, but that they become more effective when used by a person who has gained a sense of selfhood.

What I have said so far is that students should be helped to become aware of their potentialities and limitations, and that they should be helped to develop their potentialities and to overcome their limitations. Unless this takes place, they cannot become effective instruments of God's love. If we can help them to become channels of God's grace, we will accomplish the main task of teaching pastoral counselling; otherwise all our attempts at teaching theories and skills of counselling will result in utter failure.

Listening and Responding to Others

The second most important goal of teaching pastoral counselling is to help the students to learn the art of listening and responding to people. In a counselling situation, development and establishment of a therapeutic relationship with others is very important. It is the very foundation of counselling. Unless the student is sensitive and responsive to the needs of others, he cannot function as a counsellor. The ability to listen with empathy and to respond with sympathy constitutes the most important goal of counselling. If a person cannot listen to others, he cannot enter into the world of meanings and deep feelings of those who come to him for counselling.

A student has to be helped to listen not only to the words of people but also to their body language; he must be able to listen to the message which the other person is trying to communicate to him. Listening can be achieved only when we are able to enter into the world of the other. But if a student is not in touch with his own self, and if he has stopped listening to his own self, he will not be able to listen to others. His response will emerge more out of his own needs rather than through meeting the needs of others. It has been my experience that when we stop listening to others, we begin to give advice and tend to talk more than is necessary for a counsellor.

I have found that the best way to help a student to learn the art of listening is to expose him to some human situation, and then to require him to write a verbatim account of the total conversation with the other person. He should be encouraged to write an honest account of his conversation in a verbatim form, and not in a summary form. If he writes a verbatim report on the same day, or as soon as possible, he will be able to write an accurate account of his encounter. He should also be asked to mention the reactions and feelings which he

experienced while talking with the other person. I have found that students find it difficult to identify their feelings; but it is important that they be encouraged to make an effort to identify their feelings during the process of counselling. The teacher should go over the verbatim account and make his comments for the benefit of the student; however, these comments should remain confidential. The teacher should make not only negative comments but also positive comments about the student's performance. The purpose of making these comments is to help him to become aware of his strengths as well as his weaknesses. A good teacher is able to confront his student without threatening his self-esteem. As long as there is a rapport between the student and teacher, the teacher can make both positive and negative comments. However, these comments should be made either in personal interviews or in small growth groups: they should never be made openly in the classroom in the presence of all students. This will not help a student and may have a harmful effect on him. At times verbatim reports can be used in the classroom, but always with the prior permission of the student whose report is being used.

In the process of discussing a verbatim report with a student, the teacher should recognise that students who are insecure and unsure of themselves often react negatively to critical comments. With such students, the teacher should be more careful. He should confront them but always in the spirit of love and care.

Practicum for Students

Skills of counselling can be learned only when students are exposed to real situations outside the classroom. Knowledge of pastoral counselling is essential but alone it cannot equip the student for his task. He must learn the skills that will translate abstract knowledge into concrete action, and this can be done only in actual face to face relationship with people. Therefore we must send our students to meet people. Theological students must be brought face to face with individuals in their particular situations. And these face to face encounters must be supervised so that students learn both the dynamics of human conduct and the pastoral ways of relating. Meeting people and helping them in their situations is an act of doing theology. Theology remains irrelevant and useless unless it is tested through and in living experience. Practicum in counselling provides an opportunity to practise theology in actual situations.

Exposing students to people in crisis is certainly helpful; however, before exposing our students to sick people, we should expose them to ordinary people. Although we want our students to learn the art of counselling people in crisis, we do not want them to become mini-psychiatrists. We do not want them to think that counselling is only for people in crisis. Unfortunately, it has been a general practice to expose students to sick people in hospitals or mental hospitals. This gives our students a sickness-oriented approach to pastoral counselling. The danger of this approach is that pastors become experts in dealing with sick people but are unable to deal with ordinary people. A

minister is expected to deal with all kinds of people, and he should realise that people need help at various levels. If we keep this in mind, we will teach our students a growth-oriented approach to counselling. This means that methods of counselling should be so developed that both normal and sick people could benefit from them. In my own practice of teaching, I require my students to meet first with normal people, before meeting sick people in hospitals or in some other situation. In fact, I encourage my students to have conversations with other students in the college itself. Students are surprised to discover that everyone needs some help. I consider that pastoral counselling serves not only the healing aspect of pastoral care but also other aspects, such as guiding, sustaining and reconciling.

Counselling in the Context of Socio-Economic Systems

In the context of our socio-economic systems, pastoral counselling should be concerned not only with personal development of individuals, but also with the development of community. We should recognise that socio-economic systems are often the sources of mental ill-health and interpersonal disturbances in individuals and community. If our students are helped to know that the sources of mental ill-health are to be found not only in personalities but also in socio-economic systems, then they will appreciate the use of intervention in society. We have to help our students to learn the methods of intervention. But this can be done, if they know how to identify the issues in a given system which affect the well-being of people and groups.

Issues such as poverty, exploitation, caste and communalism should be taken into consideration in any course on pastoral counselling. If we ignore them and emphasise only personal development of people, we are doing injustice to our students as well as to our calling. Our students must learn the art of analysing the dynamics of society and its impact on individuals and groups. If we do not help them in this area then they will remain irrelevant to their situation.

Finally, the community in a given theological college also contributes to the growth of students. It is here that they learn how to forgive each other and to bring reconciliation between each other. It is here that they learn how to resolve conflicts among themselves. But if the community does not make these things possible, it is difficult to imagine that our students will benefit from their classroom learning. The responsibility of helping students to integrate their learning with actual living does not lie with the teacher of pastoral counselling alone. It is a corporate responsibility of the whole community. In some sense the whole community is the teacher of pastoral counselling to students. How we involve the community in the process of learning counselling is something which we need to explore.