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Pastoral Counseling

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Introduction

The last few months of re-entering the local culture has challenged me to address the issue of the growing interest in counseling in Sarawak. Counseling and psychologies have suddenly becomes the buzz words in the local context. Some Christians yield to the psychological theories that “work perfect for them” while there are others who react to the unthinking assimilation and/or taking an exclusive stance toward psychologies. There are many questions that come to mind but one of which I believe is crucial for the practice of counseling, particularly pastoral counseling, in our local Methodist context is: What could be a guiding theology for one to practice pastoral counseling? It is the interest of this short paper to propose a Wesleyan theological approach in accordance to the Sarawak Methodist faith tradition for the practice of pastoral counseling. It will include a brief survey of the faith tradition while selecting two distinctive Wesleyan theological ideas for a certain theological understanding in the practice of pastoral counseling.

¹ Materials are drawn from my dissertation, Khoo, Ho Peng, *Making meaning, Empowering Life: Pastoral Guidance As the Practice of pastoral Counseling in Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference*, Evanston, Illinois: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Unpublished dissertation, 2007

Wesleyan Faith Tradition

For the first half of the twentieth century, Sarawak Methodists have been led mainly by the Methodist missionaries from the United States. Their emphasis on “practical divinity” of the Wesleyan tradition has impacted the spirituality of the local Methodists. In the legacy of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the missionaries continued the vision of promoting social holiness. They set up churches and simultaneously provided formal education through the setting up of schools. Many of them introduced advanced knowledge and technologies of agriculture, medicine, transportation and machinery which brought a better living standard.

For the Sarawak Methodists, the term “pastoral counseling” might differ from the contemporary Western understanding where the counselor and counselee engage in a formal setting of dealing with problems. Pastoral counseling in Sarawak Methodist context is more likely to be informal and in the form of pastoral conversations. In this sense, it is more like guidance provided by the caregiver to the carereceiver in the ecclesiastical context. The more-than-half a century of pastoral care (and therefore some form of counseling) provided by the predominantly American missionaries have definitely also contributed to this pattern of pastoral counseling. Moreover, Wesleyan theology, the guiding theology of these missionaries, has also provided the theological understanding for the practice of pastoral counseling.

Theologians Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White pointed out that

although there are divisions of theological opinions among Methodists, there are three broad major distinctive emphases in the Methodist understanding of the nature of Christian faith, most of which have their roots in the teaching of John and Charles Wesley.² The first set of emphases relates to the importance of “heart religion” where relationship between faith and experience were given prominence. The second group of emphases centered on “Armenian Evangelicalism” which focus on human agency. Another group of “Methodist distinctive” is centered upon the doctrines variously known as “Christian Perfection,” “entire sanctification,” “scriptural holiness” and “perfect love.”³ From these emphases a somewhat chronological sequence of salvation such as repentance, justification and sanctification, and the holiness of Christian living became the key theological themes.⁴

These key themes have become a communal narrative which shapes the individual faith narratives for the local Methodists. Their Christian testimonies often reflect such theological descriptions and with the structure echoing the chronological sequence of the Wesleyan

² Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92 – 93.

³ Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *op. cit.*, 93. Other works of Wesleyan theologians suggested the same. Cf. Walter Klaiber & Manfred Marquardt, *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Book, 1994), Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997).

⁴ Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *op. cit.*, 100–111. Cracknell and White both agreed that these are the key theological themes in Wesleyan theology.

theological description of the way of salvation. It thus suggests the way of salvation as described in Wesleyan theology provides a metanarrative for the shaping of the individual narratives of the local Methodists.⁵

Having said so, it will be a challenging and an unjustifiable task to simply describe these theological themes in such limited space and words. For the purpose of describing the faith tradition of the local Methodists, I shall describe two distinctive Wesleyan Theology which are related to the practice of pastoral care and counseling, namely, (1) Christian Perfection and (2) The means of grace.

Christian Perfection

John Wesley believed humanity is in need of God's salvation. This involves a process and it works co-operantly.⁶ For Wesley, the repentance prior to justification was not a human initiative but a response to God's gracious prevenience in awakening.⁷ This awakening brings a possibility of the change of a person's heart and life. Wesley also believed that such a rejuvenated life has "Christian perfection" as its goal. Wesleyan theologian Philip Meadow posits Christian perfection as "a *telos* in the sense that it characterizes a whole way of life and salvation, and not

⁵ There are many testimonies written which reflected such salvific chronological sequence in each issue of *The Chinese Methodist Message*. Cf. Testimonies under the section "彩虹见证" (Great cloud of Witness) in each issue of *The Chinese Methodist Message* (卫理报)。

⁶ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 160.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

merely the conclusion or consummation of it.”⁸ In this way, Christian perfection is like a growing process that can never be static, because the truth of this rejuvenated life is continuously worked out in all the details of life. The freedom of human will, as Wesley has posited, lies not so much in choosing good or evil, but the response or rejection of the initiatives of the Holy Spirit toward this *telos*. This has profound implication for the practice of pastoral counseling to work with persons troubled by life circumstances and seeking to faithfully connect to God. Pastoral counselors need to work co-operantly with persons seeking help to move toward this *telos*.

Contemporary practice of counseling without a guiding theology would likely be tempted to encourage the person-in-need to exercise personal agency with reference to one’s own self and to gear toward the individual taste without taking into consideration the depraved human condition Wesley has described. It presumes individuals taking center stage, which is an overly optimistic view of human nature. It precludes human ability, on his/her own, to lead an individualistic preferred life which presumably is “satisfying” and “fulfilling” but without considering the possible fallacy of humanity. In a way, this is a promotion of self which might not grow toward maturity but in fact, a preferred self controlled by a version of the contemporary consumer culture.

In contrast, Wesleyan Theology was pessimistic about what human beings can do apart from God’s grace, but he was optimistic about what

⁸ Philip R. Meadows, “Wesleyan Theology In a Technological Culture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 41:1 (Spring, 2006): 35.

can happen by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us.⁹ Wesleyan theology affirms personal agency as a way of human response toward the *telos* of mature discipleship. This agency must be discussed in the context of the metanarrative of God's salvation, without which the employment of pastoral counseling has the risk of colluding with individualism.

The Means of Grace

The means of grace is another distinctive of Wesleyan Theology. Wesley defines means of grace as “outward signs, words or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end — to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”¹⁰ In the light of his idea of perfection, Meadow argues that Wesley would include not only works of piety (such as prayer, scripture reading, etc.) and works of mercy (such as feeding the poor, caring for the widow, etc.) as means of grace; he would consider everything we do as means of grace in the broadest sense. Meadow also pointed out that as long as the practice is “situated in way of life that takes up with reality according to the *telos* of Christian perfection,”¹¹ it becomes a means for the promotion of Christian perfection. In this theological discourse, pastoral counseling

⁹ Michael G. Cartwright, *Watching Over One Another in Love: A commentary on the General Rules of the United Societies (Version 2)* (Photocopies material used by participants in the Resident in Ministry Program of the South Indiana Conference UMC), 9.

¹⁰ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” in Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermon: An Anthology*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 160.

¹¹ See variety of Wesley's argument in his sermon “The Means of Grace.” *Ibid*, 158 – 171.

with the *telos* of a mature discipleship as its goal is a means of grace. As mentioned earlier, maturity is not a stagnated-staged condition but it implies multifaceted growth. It is “growth in grace” or in Wesleyan terms, sanctification. Each person is healed from a sin-sick life to a life free to respond to God’s grace and to seek a life preferring to love God and neighbor.

Having said so, Wesleyan theology also affirms one’s freewill to choose to respond to God’s prevenient grace. This freewill to choose therefore also assumes the possibility of regression. It precludes human brokenness and pain as part of systemic failure, not just personal failure. In this sense, Entire Sanctification does not assure immunization from sin. Wesley said,

Christian perfection [...] does not imply [...] an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed it is only another term for holiness, [...] Yet we may, lastly, observe that [...] is there any absolute perfection on earth.¹²

In the light of such theological discourse, John Wesley was made aware of the possibility of backsliding along the path of salvation from a life of loving God and neighbor. Wesley therefore also saw the need for intentional and purposeful pastoral counseling in order that one may continue to grow in grace. The caregiver is to wrestle between his or her purposeful guidance and the freewill on the part of carereceiver to choose preferred ways of responding to a life of loving God and neighbor. In fact Wesley has a certain model of providing guidance (thus a form of

¹² John Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” Albert C. Outler, Ed., *The Bicentennial*, II: 104 – 105.

pastoral counseling): Describe (the problem), Delineate (find options to handle situations), Develop (develop resources), Delegate (delegating responsibility to strive to grow in God's grace).¹³ Wesley thus set a "model" which calls for co-authorship of caregiver and carereceiver in the context of God's grace to promote growth toward loving God and neighbor, the *telos* in the life of a person.

From the implication of such a theological setting, pastoral counseling is thus seen as a "means of grace." It claims that prevenient grace is available to all and in particular, the sanctifying grace available to the community of faith for the shaping of life after the image of God. Wesleyan heritage approach of pastoral counseling also emphasizes the agency of the individual. This agency does not seek the fulfillment of individual preferred way of living, as most secular counseling would. Instead, Wesleyan theology provides an undergirding ultimate goal of seeking fulfillment of a life preferring the goal of loving God and neighbor. It seeks to live the responsible freedom of choice that is human in the context of God's grace. This saves the practice of pastoral counseling from being a subscriber of the individualistic self-fashioned consumer culture, seeking a mere fulfillment of self desire. This is idolatrous and it hinders discipleship in Christ.

¹³ Space does not permit me to elaborate. Cf. Two term papers I have written for Wesleyan Study "Θεραπεία Ψυχῆς: John Wesley and the therapeutic-perfection oriented pastoral care" and "Free Grace Versus Free Will: John Wesley's Understanding of Humanity and His practice of pastoral guidance."

Conclusion

Wesleyan theology denounces the practice of pastoral counseling as a mere humanistic endeavor. Instead, it challenges the practice of pastoral counseling to provide space for the grace of God. The exclusion of God's grace in the process of pastoral counseling is the denial of the presence of God in the healing process of pastoral counseling. In addition, Wesleyan theology allows a person to gain personal agency through pastoral counseling. This volition or personal agency is the giftedness of every human, rather than to be victims of circumstances. It also cautioned the pastoral counselor the possible limitation and failure of human agency. In this way, pastoral counseling must also give room for the mystery of suffering, which needs to be "followed and discovered" rather than "defeated or captured."¹⁴ This will save the practice of pastoral counseling from being idolatrous, creating false hopes and expectations.

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¹⁴ John Foskett, *Meaning in Madness: The Pastor and the Mentally Ill*, (London: SPCK, 1984), 165.

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