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A Learning-Theory Approach to Pastoral Counseling

POETS and philosophers as well as theologians have assured us that the highest human goal is the understanding of human personality. And it has become increasingly apparent that ministers are more and more drawing counseling into their compass of activities. If this enlargement of scope is to be something more than a trading of one's theological birthright for a share of psychiatric pottage, it would seem imperative that the counseling functions of the pastor be regarded from the point of view of research as well as from that of practice. Therefore, we pastors would do well to know more of the sixty-year-old "scientific art" of psychotherapy and how it applies to pastoral counseling.

Some pastoral counselors are psychoanalytically oriented in their approach to counseling; many are Rogerian, using client-centered therapy. There are a number who would simply refer to themselves as eclectic in their counseling theory, choosing that particular method and technique of counseling that seems to be most helpful in each situation. In this paper a learning theory approach to pastoral counseling is presented. This is not a teacher-pupil situation, although the counselor is looked upon as a learner and learning theory terms are used to describe what happens during counseling.

For more than a decade a number of psychologists have been attempting to apply learning theory to the therapeutic situation in order to better understand what happens in the counseling relationship. These men disagree with Alexander and French, who say in their book *Psychoanalytic Therapy*¹ that psychotherapy is an art rather than a science. According to learning theory, each time a counselor responds to a client he implicitly predicts that his response will produce or contribute to some kind of behavioral change in that patient. Of course these predictions have large margins for error but there are three reasons for their importance. First, it eliminates art in favor of experience, controlled observation, and logical inference. And with counseling tentatively formulated as a learning situation, the psychology of learning, motivation, and perception

should be levied upon more profitably, thereby sharpening both understanding and technique. Third, attempting to conceptualize the kinds of predictions made in pastoral counseling in terms of the psychology of learning may permit the formulation of a much more adequate theory of counseling than any yet devised.

Two of the promulgators of counseling as a learning situation have collaborated on a book that is dedicated "to Freud and Pavlov." The theory advanced by Dollard and Miller in their book, *Personality and Psychotherapy* is a blend of learning theory and psychoanalysis, with Freud, so to say, providing the power, and Pavlov, or learning theory, the precision. Their aim seems to be that of translating Freudian psychoanalysis into the more understandable and testable terms of learning theory.

If counseling is learning, then their rules for selecting clients who can learn under the conditions of therapy would be helpful for the pastoral counselor to know. The time that the pastor can give to formal counseling is limited and perhaps a knowledge of these rules would better enable him to select those counselees that he could help most. There are eight of these rules for selecting counselees. (1) In order for the disorder to be unlearned it must be one that is the product of learning; that is, it must be a functional and not an organic disorder. (2) People must be strongly motivated for treatment and cure because counseling inevitably arouses fear. (3) The more strongly the symptoms are reinforced the harder it will be to get rid of them, and hence the poorer the prognosis. (4) The more rewards the client will receive for improvement the greater the prognosis for counseling. Good physical health, youth, beauty, intelligence, education or special skills, a good social-class position, wealth, and a good marital partner or prospect are favorable. Younger people are better to work with because they are less committed and have fewer crucial decisions behind them. Married people are better because if it is a sex problem, they can practice sex responses with the full approval of the community. People with a demanding occupation are preferred because they are seriously engaged in life. (5) The counselee must have a certain minimum ability to use and respond to language since the treatments are carried on by talking. (6) Counseling is more feasible if the client has had considerable free periods of good adjustment rather than a long history of neurosis. (7) Some habits, such as suspiciousness, pride, and passiveness interfere with therapy. (8) Factors such as the need for hospital care or restraint, and for protection from the danger of suicide are important and should be considered in the selection of counselees.

**The Business of Counseling**

The business of counseling is to correct the unacceptable mental and emotional habits the neurotic has learned. Since new habits can be learned only under new conditions, a new situation must be created. This the counselor begins to do. He sets up a warm, permissive atmosphere, different from that to which the client had been exposed. The counselor encourages free expression on the part of the client and does not judge or condemn. Rather, by expressing doubt, the counselor produces the motive that impels the client to challenge his own story. The counselor is more of a prompter than an interpreter; he is trying to find and lend to the coun-

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