

Christian Counseling

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Christian counseling as defined by this counselor is *a culturally-oriented, religion-specific, faith-based form of counseling grounded in Christian spirituality*. Each of the terms used here are unpacked below. Please bear in mind that these formulations are mine and may differ from one Christian counselor to another.

Culturally Oriented Counseling. The church community is a culture within the larger American culture, complete with its own terminology, traditions and diversity across the spectrum of Christendom. By “terminology” what I really mean is “church-ese,” or “church speak.” Religious terminology by its nature is different from that of secular vernacular. Words that are used in religious and non-religious communities can have radically different meanings leading to potential misunderstandings. Many Christians have a lifetime of church acculturation and don’t think twice about the routines and practices involved in their modes of worship and fellowship. Christian counselors share this base of cultural knowledge with their clients which is a point of familiarity that helps to build the therapeutic relationship. Non-Christian counselors work from a deficit in this regard, as is the case in any cross-cultural situation. Allegiances to shared values are often assumed when a Christian seeks services from a Christian counselor. Those common allegiances may or may not be shared by non-Christian providers.

Religion-Specific Counseling. Christian counseling, like Christianity itself, is biblically-based. Not all practices applied within the therapeutic relationship will necessarily have a specific Bible verse referent, but the principles that guide a Christian practitioner will be principles consistent with those found and taught in the Bible. Theologically, the evangelical Christian counselor understands the tension that exists between the dignity of every person and the depravity found within all people, human beings made in the image of God but suffering from the consequences of the fall. The marks of sin perpetrated upon us, and by us, are a given reality in Christian counseling. Grace is extended to all people, as role-modeled for us by Jesus, as well as a call to take up the responsibility for our own actions. Divine grace is at the core of what works in the counseling process. It is God, after all and not the counselor, who makes the difference.

Faith-Based Counseling. Faith is central to Christian counseling but not “faith” as stereotypically formulated by some secular sources. Often in popular culture faith is negatively understood as a blind simplistic adherence to a prescribed list of beliefs, or dogma. For an alternative view, see “*Stages of Faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*,” by James W. Fowler (1981). He takes an interesting look at a challenging formulation of faith. Fowler describes the roots of the word, faith, and how it was historically understood—and how that has changed in recent times. To summarize some of the key points, faith is relational in nature, it is innate in us all and strives to find expression. Faith is expressed when the inner person places a deep heart-felt trust in or reliance upon the object of faith. This expression is holistic in that the core, and therefore the essential whole of the person, is involved in the placement of that trust. Faith in this sense is a verb. Beliefs and faith are not synonymous. Nor are beliefs the substance of faith. They are the products of an exercised faith. By way of an illustration, internal meaning is shared by words. The words are not the meaning but they help describe and convey the meaning. That is something like the relationship between beliefs and faith. Faith is the knowing. Beliefs give testimony to that knowing. Christian counseling is a relational

process to help heal and nurture, among other things, a wounded or troubled faith—and thereby empower the client to more fully live out their God-given purposes.

Christian Spirituality. Spirituality has come to mean so many different things in popular culture that it means almost anything and nothing. I have written in another place ([Body Soul Spirit Continuum](#)) in greater detail my specific thoughts regarding Christian counseling and spirituality. I will summarize some of those thoughts here. God has given the breath of life (spirit) to us, causing us to become “living beings” (Genesis 2:7). We are therefore beings of material and immaterial parts. Although there is controversy over what this means it is this counselor’s view that we are, as Millard Erickson puts it in “*Christen Theology*”, a “conditional unity.” Spirit is not meant to be constitutionally separated from the body in human beings. If spirit is separated from the body death ensues for the body, and the disembodied spirit is then “naked” and in an unnatural state—the only remedy being the resurrection. In my view (not necessarily Erickson’s) the soul is not so much an entity as it is an emergent quality or set of properties found along the spirit-body continuum. Christian counseling is geared toward the soul (the mind, the heart, the emotions, etc.) and how best to turn the soul toward the Spirit (of God) to meet its deepest and abiding needs. A desired outcome of Christian counseling is spiritual growth in the inner being and positives changes in the life we live now.

As stated above, Christian counseling as defined by this counselor is *a culturally-oriented, religion-specific, faith-based form of counseling grounded in Christian spirituality*. It is a committed relationship entered into by people looking for a common outcome of personal healing, change, and spiritual growth—and in doing so, honor and praise is given to the ultimate healer of our souls, Jesus.