

Christian Counseling

Lance Echo-Hawk, MA, LPC, LMHC, NCAC-II

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. 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. Christian counselors recognize and respect this base of cultural knowledge within their clients, which helps to build the therapeutic relationship. Allegiances to shared values are often sought by Christian clients when seeking services from a counselor.

RELIGION-SPECIFIC COUNSELING. Biblical principles, as personally understood by the Christian practitioner, guide the practitioner. Theologically, the evangelical Christian counselor acknowledges the tensions that exist between the dignity residing within all human beings and the personal and interpersonal consequences of *the fall* of humankind (i.e., the introduction of sin into the human race as is recounted in the opening chapters of the Book Of Genesis). As role-modeled for us by Jesus, grace is necessarily extended to all people as well as a call to take responsibility for our own actions. Christian counselors operate on the premise that divine grace is at the core of what works in the counseling process.

FAITH-BASED COUNSELING. Faith is central to Christian counseling but not “faith” as stereotypically formulated. 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)¹. 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 self places a deep heart-felt trust in or reliance upon the object of faith. 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 live out their God-given purposes more fully.

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 in greater detail my specific thoughts regarding Christian counseling and spirituality ([Body Soul Spirit Continuum: A Frame for Christian Counseling](#))². Best practices Christian counseling holistically includes the needs of the soul—the mind, the heart, the emotions, and their interactions with our physical selves (the body which provides a physical and neurological substrate for the functioning of the spirit-soul-body continuum). A desired outcome of Christian counseling is spiritual growth in the inner being and positives changes in our lives.

SUMMARY. 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 is given to the ultimate healer of our souls, Jesus.

¹ J. Fowler 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 self 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. Beliefs are the products of an exercised faith. Faith is the knowing. Beliefs give testimony to that knowing.

² To summarize some of those thoughts, God has given the “breath of life” (spirit) to us, causing us to become “living beings” (or a *living soul*, Genesis 2:7). We are 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 his book, *“Christian Theology,”* a conditional unity of material and immaterial parts. “Soul” is more an emergent set of human qualities at the nexus of spirit and body than it is an entity. Furthermore, spirit is not meant to be constitutionally separated from the human body. If spirit is separated from the body death ensues breaking apart the unified being, and the disembodied spirit is then “naked” and in an unintended and unnatural state—the only remedy being the resurrection of the body. (http://www.ehcounseling.com/topics_xtn_counseling1.html)