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Pastoral Counseling and the Black Perspective

INTRODUCTION

The contents of this article are an attempt to lift up the unique aspect of pastoral care in the black church. The unique emphasis in black pastoral care is a perspective which has been shaped by the existential, cultural, and historical conditions which are peculiar to black people. This perspective reflects the cultural heritage of black people, its history as a people in a land of injustice, racism and segregation, and its struggle as a Christian people to make sense out of their existence in a hostile environment.

What, then, is this distinct emphasis that makes a black perspective in pastoral care and counseling unique? This distinctive emphasis is the corporate nature of pastoral care and counseling in the black church. Of course, there are white churches in Protestantism that have had a corporate emphasis in pastoral care and counseling, but the emphasis in white Protestantism has almost been exclusively individual, not corporate. It must also be added that many of the white Protestant seminaries are attempting now to bring the corporate emphasis into pastoral care, because the biblical emphasis is upon the corporate dimensions of human growth. It is also important to acknowledge that the history of American psychiatry shows a pendulum swing between the individual and corporate emphasis in the 19th century.¹ However, the emphasis upon the individual and his self sufficiency has been the dominant theme for most Americans including the psychological and religious communities. On the other hand, the corporate emphasis among black Protestants has remained constant in their behavior, if not in attitude, due to the nature of black society and its cultural heritage from Africa.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the corporate nature of pastoral care and counseling in black Protestantism, which has its roots not only in African soil and racial discrimination in this country, but also in the biblical conception of the nature of man and God's attempt to bring salvation to him. However, there is no attempt in this paper to give a systematic explanation of the biblical contribution to pastoral care and counseling in the black church. First, one goal is to establish the corporate function of pastoral care in the black church, and, secondly, to discuss pastoral counseling in the light of the historical-social conditions of the black Christian.

¹Ruth Caplan, *Psychiatry and the Community in the 19th Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

CORPORATENESS

The nature of pastoral care and counseling in the black church is corporate for several reasons. We mean by the term "Corporate" that the care of the individual is the function of the total community rather than the function of the pastor or any other specially designated person who possesses specialized skills. The two outstanding influences that have historically contributed to the corporate nature of pastoral care and counseling are segregation and unconscious African survivals.

Segregation, which is the direct result of a rational attempt to justify slavery upon the innate inferiority of black people, excluded the black person from participation in the total life of the community. It excluded him from the social life, the religious life, the economic life (except to the extent that he was allowed to be on the producing end of the economy rather than the consumer end), the educational life, and the political life. He was systematically excluded from normal access to participation in the community which would lead to the fulfillment of his potential as a total person. The consequence of all of this is the fact that many of the political, social, educational, recreational, economic, and social needs of the black person had to be fulfilled within the black church, his only institution. This was also true for the medical and mental health needs of the black person. Often it was the black church that took care of the needs of the neglected sick and mentally ill. Because the hospitals and mental institutions were segregated, it was the black church that had to fulfill this function. These persons were cared for by a caring community, because they could not be isolated from the community like the white sick and mentally ill. In fact, it was through the efforts of the black church that the hospitals were established in the black community.

Also, segregation forced the black community to see mental health as a problem related to their external condition. Beginning with slavery, the main concern of the black Christian was his own freedom, but not only his own freedom, but the freedom for his friends and his people. Yes, for some freedom was in the world to come, but for others, freedom was something that would come sooner or later here on earth. The point is, much of their psychic energy went into thinking about freedom, freedom from injustice and slavery. As a result, the black person never saw mental illness or health as an individual matter, but he saw the context in which a person lived out his life.

The second influence that contributes to the corporate nature of the black church is the unconscious survivals of Africanisms. Indeed, there are many African survivals which are present in the life of the black community today. The writer relies heavy on the theory of the hereditary collective unconscious outlined by the imminent psychologists Carl Jung for his theoretical support for African survivals.² Moreover, Melville

² Carl Jung, *Psychology of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938).

Herskovits, a noted American anthropologist, has spent his career developing the theory of the survival of Africanisms while doing comparative field research.³ The Africanisms for prime consideration in this paper, then, are the African philosophical concept of unity with nature, and the ritualistic symbolic ceremonies that support the person in the crises of life.

The Africans believe that man exists in harmony with Nature.⁴ In this context man is not the manipulator nor controller of the forces of nature, but man is to cooperate with nature.⁵ The result of this philosophy is that the African sees himself and his community as an integral part of nature and both have a mutual influence upon the other. Thus, a person recognizes that his own identity is the result of the interaction with nature and his environment.

To the African, not only is man's identity based upon the interaction with his physical environment, but it is also developed in relationship to the community. Mbiti points out that a child must be born, named, initiated, married — which are all the function of the community — before he can be thought as a complete person.⁶

The implication of the concept of unity with nature and with the community is obvious. The collective unconscious of black people lends itself to the corporate concept of pastoral care and counseling. The corporate concept emerges from the background of the African emphasis upon unity with nature which forms the basis for an open systems approach to black psychology. Black psychology sees man's identity developing in interaction with his environment, as opposed to a closed system equilibrium model, which forms the basis of some individualistic adjustment model of psychology.

Another important factor in African religion that is of interest is the corporate nature of the symbolic ritualistic ceremonies through which the African adjusted and coped with life crises in the past and survives in some of Africa today. Through the ritualistic ceremonies surrounding birth, child rearing, initiation at adolescence, harvesting time, and death the African found himself in an ethos of ideological and emotional supports that helped him overcome the crises of life. The same kinds of support surrounding the life crises of black people, which became part of the black church, is an inheritance from the collective unconscious reaching back to Africa. This support system is evidenced in the way the black church has been a real value in helping the black person deal with the insanity of racism and injustice. Along with an ideological support system based upon the experience of black people with God and

³ See Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Gloucester, Ma.: Peter Smith, 1970).

⁴ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Co., 1970), p. 20.

⁵ Cedrick Clark, "Black Studies or the Study of Black People" in *Black Psychology*, ed. Reginald Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 11.

⁶ Mbiti, p. 154.

Jesus Christ — a support system reflected in the Negro spiritual — the African past has helped the black person and his community deal with the crises of life.

PASTORAL COUNSELING AND THE BLACK PERSON

From the preceding section one would perhaps conclude that pastoral counseling, a specialized area of pastoral care focusing on the individual, is irrelevant to the work of the pastor in the black church. But it is conceivable that along with the corporate dimensions and methods of black pastoral care, pastoral counseling can be used by the black pastor. In fact, there is increasing evidence supporting the need for more training of black pastors in the specialty of pastoral counseling to meet the needs of his parishioners.

One source of evidence concerning the aforementioned need of black pastors to be tooled in counseling skills is a study done by Thomas Pugh and Emily Mudd. The study focuses upon the attitudes of black women and men toward using community services.⁷ One of the conclusions of the study is that many black people turned to the family, kinfolk, and friends for help with their marriage problems, but most of the respondents felt this did not help them, and they said they would seek out professional help if it were available at a reasonable fee. One of the largest deterrents in seeking out professional help for the respondents was the cost factor, and perhaps a trained clergymen could help bring this needed service at low cost.

Another source of evidence was a study done on the black middle class in Philadelphia.⁸ The study reported the high degree of use by black people of medical caretakers as opposed to non-medical caretakers as well as a sophisticated knowledge of mental illness. Although the study reports the extensive use of medical personnel rather than non-medical personnel, it does appear to me that a pastoral counselor with skills and reputation could utilize this mental health sophistication to great advantage.

However, the evidence is not just limited to the black middle class. Perhaps the most convincing evidence concerning the viability of pastoral counseling in the black community comes from a study published in book form by Barbara Lerner called *Therapy in the Ghetto*. Her basic thesis is that individual psychotherapy, under appropriate conditions, is an effective method of helping not only the classical middle class, highly verbal, intellectual client, but it also is a value to the so-called "non-classical untreatable" clients, such as the poor, the black, and the severely emotionally disturbed. These "untreatables" were thought to be poor prognostic risks because of class distinctions. The treatables were

⁷Thomas J. Pugh and Emily Mudd, "Attitudes of Black Women and Men Toward Using Community Service," *Journal Of Religion and Health* 10 (July 1971), pp. 256-277.

⁸Stephen Ring, "Attitude Toward Mental Illness and Use of Caretakers in the Black Community," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 40 (July 1970), p. 711.

the young and attractive who possessed a high degree of ego-strength, who were well educated members of the upper class with the absence of deep characterological distortions and a willingness to communicate, and who had a value system congruent with the therapist. Lerner's whole study was to find out if psychotherapy — an attempt by one human being specialized training to establish a genuinely meaningful, democratic and collaborative relationship with another person in order to put his special knowledge and skills at the second person's disposal for such use as he chooses to make of it — had any results with the so-called "non-treatables."⁹

The first conclusion of the study is that measurable results of the treatment of non-treatable clients, when compared to the same changes in the classical clients, have been achieved in less than 30 hours of treatment, or less than 9 weeks.¹⁰ It was found that 10-25 sessions were the normal length for improvement to take place.¹¹ Not only had improvement been accomplished, but it was done in a short enough period of time to warrant the use of psychotherapy in the local church where the pastor has time only for short term and crisis intervention counseling.

The counselor variables were measured to ascertain what effect the counselor had upon the outcome of therapy. The four variables measured were counselor empathy, experience, expectation, and counselor's use of democratic values or respect. The conclusions were that all these variables were significant factors in the improvement of the clients.¹² However, the empathy variable failed to show any results, because of the inadequacy of the measurement instrument according to the author of the study.

It can be concluded from the study that the obstacles hindering the use of individual psychotherapy on the so-called "non-treatables" are neither unchangeable nor inherent in the client. A trained counselor, pastoral or otherwise, with empathy, respect, and the expectation that the client can grow as the result of his intervention, is a person who can help the so-called "untreatable" person.

Goals of pastoral counseling with blacks. The pervasive influence of racism, segregation, and injustice upon the black personality cannot be underestimated. These sinister forces have left their unmistakable imprint. The impact of these forces on the black personality has been evidenced in the black person's belief that he does not possess the power to effect change in his own life and in the lives of others — indeed, that he is powerless. In fact, it is only the rare black person who can escape this feeling of powerlessness. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement as well as the black power movement that the black person has begun to assess his real power. It is nonetheless

⁹ Barbara Lerner, *Therapy in the Ghetto* (Baltimore: The Hopking University Press, 1972), p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

clearly evident that the powerlessness the black person feels as well as the current black power movement have significant implications for pastoral counseling with blacks by the black pastor.

The first implication is that pastoral counseling with blacks must focus upon the liberation of the black personality from any belief in his own powerlessness as a person to determine the direction of his own life according to his own internal frame of reference rather than helping the person adjust to an oppressive society.¹³ The adjustment equilibrium model of dynamic psychology is an inadequate goal of pastoral counseling with blacks, because it means adjusting to a society which must be changed to allow the black personality to grow to fulfillment of its potential.

Secondly, the goal of pastoral counseling with blacks must be action-oriented based upon an analysis of each individual's powerlessness. Often the goals of psychotherapy have been intrapsychic insight into the client's past, but there has been little emphasis upon the steps that a client could take to correct his own difficulties in the present. Pastoral counseling with blacks cannot afford the luxury of inaction and backward looking by itself. It must focus not only upon the past, but also upon the present. Its focus must be upon the black person's ability to act on his own behalf and in concert with others in order to change his own condition. It must help him to see that he is not totally powerless; there are some things that he can change. Consequently, the goal of pastoral counseling with black is action, insight, and growth, in the present rather than intrapsychic insight into the past.

Process and pastoral counseling with blacks. As pointed out, by Barbara Lerner in her study, there are certain core conditions that must be met for therapy to be effective. In reviewing these conditions, four elements will be considered. The first element is counselor empathy. A pastoral counselor, black or white, must be able to enter into the experience of his client and be tuned in on the wave length of the client. This has often proved difficult for white therapists.¹⁴ Secondly, the counselor must have the expectation that the person can grow as the result of his intervention if therapy is to be successful. Certainly, the counselor's expectation, whether positive or negative with regard to the client's ability to grow, will be communicated to the client through his attitude toward the client. This is particularly crucial if the counselor is white, because lack of expectation of growth toward the black client is historically related to white racism.¹⁵ Thirdly, it is emphasized that the counselor must have respect for the client's potential to be a responsible person who makes responsible decisions. This means helping the client to be convinced himself of his own ability to make decisions based upon

¹³Edward J. Barns, "Counseling the Black student: The Need for a New View," in *Black Psychology*, ed. Reginald Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 215.

¹⁴William Banks, "The Black Client and the Helping Professionals," in *Black Psychology*, ed. Reginald Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 205-212.

¹⁵Kenneth Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 85f.

his own internal frame of reference. Finally, counselor experience and training are important in the outcome of therapy. All four of these core conditions must be present at the same time if therapy is going to be useful for blacks.

It is the latter concept of experience that will occupy the remainder to this paper. Beyond satisfying the core conditions of establishing a relationship based upon empathy, positive expectation, and respect, the counselor needs adequate experience in order to appropriately assess the problem of the client and to select the approach which will best help the client. For example, in the case of those clients who feel powerless, the pastoral counselor needs to be able to touch the motivational source of change that exists in the black client's psychic; that is, black rage. Black rage is the deep anger resultant from a realization that the control of one's life rests in the hands of others.¹⁶ The counselor's experience with and his ability to reach this affect is crucial in helping the black person move toward growth. But more than this, he has to move back and forth between the existential and behavioral modalities of therapy so that the client can not only experience his own anger, but also use this anger to do what he can to change the circumstances of his own existence. On the one hand, the existential approach to affect helps the client to experience himself as an angry person while at the same time helping him to discover his own internal meaning and value system. On the other hand, the behavioral approach will help him act upon his value system discovered through the expression and exploration of anger. To accomplish this, the counselor clearly needs training and experience.

This paper is primarily addressed to the black pastor. Through my contacts with whites it is clear to me that black rage is the single factor with which many whites have a great deal of difficulty. This would be true for the white counselor also, especially, because the rage would be directed toward the white counselor. It would be hard not to take it personally. Thus dealing with black rage may be an area that should be left to the black counselor.

There are specific implications for the preparation of the black pastoral counselor, which deal with his own anger and value system. The black pastoral counselor's ability to deal with the anger of the black client depends upon the extent to which he has dealt with his own anger. If the pastoral counselor has not dealt with his own anger, chances are that he will not be able to facilitate the discovery and exploration of his client's anger. A black pastoral counselor must necessarily be aware of his own rage toward white society, because, if he denies his own rage, he will not let it come up in the therapy with his client. Secondly, the black pastoral counselor must have explored the implications of his own rage for his own meaning and value system and for his own behavior in the world. Finally, the black pastoral counselor must feel sufficiently at

¹⁶William Grier and Price Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968), p. 27.

home with his life style based upon his own internal value system. When the black pastoral counselor has achieved some degree of success in these personal areas, then he might be effective in helping the black client or parishioner to move toward growth.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to explore the corporate dimensions of pastoral care in the black church from a historical vantage point. Also, there has been an attempt to explore the relevancy of pastoral counseling as an additional method of the black pastor alongside the corporate methods of pastoral care. The conclusion is that pastoral counseling can be a viable method for the black pastor's work with black parishioners, especially when the core elements of empathy, experience, expectation, and respect are present and when the pastor has faced the implications of his own anger for his existence.

