

God's Providence and Human Agency in Counseling



by TODD STRYD

I will begin with a question. What if someone came up to you and asked, “How does counseling ministry work?” I’ll venture a guess on your behalf. I imagine you might say, “Counseling ministry is, at its core, a helping relationship.” Continuing to expand on this idea, you might add, “A helping relationship that is dependent on the counselor both pointing to Christ and emulating him.” That is a great answer, well done! But what if the person pressed further—a *lot* further and asked: “But does it really matter what a counselor says, if it’s God who changes people? And if it is some combination of both, how do you know if it’s God doing the work or the counselor?”

What would you say? Would you be stumped? Indeed, if a person’s anxiety diminishes after three months of counseling, how *do* you explain the outcome? Was it you? Was it God? A mysterious combination? I think most counselors would have a hard time answering, including me. In a way, I wrote this article because I wanted to know the answers, both for myself and for others who do similar work.

These types of questions are important. How we understand the relationship between God’s involvement and human involvement in the

Todd Stryd (MDiv, PsyD) is counseling coordinator at CCEF and also serves on the faculty. He is the author of the mini-book: Schizophrenia: A Compassionate Approach.

process of counseling will subtly and significantly impact how we counsel. While the implications will be made explicit at the end of this article, we need to start with the theological and biblical principles that govern our convictions.¹

Thankfully, much of the initial groundwork has already been done. We are fortunate to belong to a long, robust history of Christian thinkers

Does it really matter what a counselor says, if it's God who changes people?

and practitioners who valued the ability to explain how theological truths relate to what we observe in daily life. Their endeavors established a logical rationale for the belief that our actions *do* have a real effect on the lives of others, and that we should, indeed, pursue a distinctly Christian model for care and helping.

To establish a theological/biblical foundation to these questions, we must begin by considering the larger category of God's providence. *Divine providence* is the technical term for God's governance and active rule over his creatures, directing their actions and decisions to bring about his purposes.² By considering the overarching categories of God's involvement in the cosmos in general, and human change and flourishing in particular, we can begin to think fruitfully about the place and role of human activity. The progression of the article moves from God's *extraordinary* (unusual, infrequent, out of the ordinary) providential involvement in his creation, to his *ordinary* (day-to-day, usual) providential involvement. This will provide the foundation for us to discuss the place of human involvement in

¹ I am indebted to James Dolezal in considering this subject matter. His academic work and in-person conversations inspired and clarified my thinking.

² Proverbs 16:33; Acts 17:26–27a; Ephesians 1:11. See also *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.1: God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

providence, including counseling ministry. We'll start the conversation with God's extraordinary involvement in human affairs.

God's Extraordinary Involvement

God directly intervenes in our world from time to time. Classically, reformed theologians view this extraordinary providence (or special providence) as the miraculous. For the purposes of our discussion, let's break these extraordinary events into two categories: (1) miracles, and (2) answered prayer and surprising kindnesses.

Miracles. In everyday life, the word *miracle* is almost always used to describe something unexpected or unusual. But in the stricter sense of the word, miracles are the extraordinary work of God that bypass the natural operation of things. Simply put, miracles violate natural law. We believe in them because there are numerous examples throughout Scripture. The burning bush. Water flowing from rocks. A talking donkey. People raised from the dead. Bread appearing in the wilderness. The sun standing still. Water changing into wine. Five loaves and two fish feeding five thousand people. And the list goes on.

Miracles embody God's personal engagement and commitment to his creation as well as his freedom and power to transcend natural laws, expectations, and ordinary processes.³ While, for the most part, these types of public miracles have ceased to be a part of our modern world, God's extraordinary engagement has not.

Answered prayer and surprising kindnesses. In the post-apostolic age, much of God's extraordinary involvement in human affairs fits into the category of answered prayer and acts of surprising kindness. While these do not violate natural law or processes (like water flowing from rocks), the manner of their occurrence still makes them extraordinary. These experiences tend to be timely, unexpected, and personal. Often, they are answers to prayer, but sometimes they are simply a loving act of God in someone's life.

Here are a few examples:

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.3: God uses ordinary means to work out his providence day by day. But, as he pleases, he may work without, beyond, or contrary to these means.

To continue reading this article, visit ccef.org/jbc to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2019 CCEF

All rights reserved.