Brief History of Pastoral Care

The Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) stands in a long tradition of pastoral care that dates back to the 1st century church and the New Testament. This tradition has found expression throughout church history.

Through the centuries there have been high points and low points in the church’s understanding and practice of good pastoral care. High points include the early church fathers, the Reformation, the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards. In principle, for the first 1900 years of the church’s existence, the Scriptures formed the basis for diagnosing both psychological-spiritual maladies and interpersonal problems. And Scripture offered a consistent basis for addressing people’s problems by rooting our lives in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So, in many ways, CCEF’s ministry is not new, because its theology expresses this heritage of a God-centered understanding of people and a Christ-centered understanding of how God redeems people. But CCEF is doing something new in terms of its application of these time-tested truths to modern problems.

Whether or not the church was doing a good job of pastoral care, for the first 1900 years all Christians agreed that Scripture was the basis for restoring human lives. But a fundamental shift came with the advent of the modern secular psychologies, pioneered by Sigmund Freud in the late
1800’s. In a short amount of time, historic biblical categories of creation, fall and redemption were replaced by secular categories of mental health and mental illness.

The main effect of that shift meant that secular psychological thinking excised the personal God from the world he made. In the new theories and psychotherapeutic practices, there was no mention of sin, no God, no necessity of a Savior, and no promise of eternal life. The solution to our “personal and interpersonal problems” lay within us and counseling involved drawing it out.

Though these were secular theories, they greatly impacted the church. From the turn of the 20th century, a shift took place in pastoral care instruction in seminaries. While many seminaries continued to make the Scriptures primary in the preaching of God’s word, they no longer made the Scriptures primary in pastoral care and counseling. This vacuum was filled by a host of alternatives that tended to minimize, change or overshadow the redemptive message of the Scriptures.

Responding to this trend, David Powlison writes:

> But as we look more closely at life, it becomes clearer and clearer that Scripture is about counseling: diagnostic categories, causal explanations of behavior and emotion, interpretation of external sufferings and influences, definitions of workable solutions, character of the counselor, goals for the counseling process…These are all matters to which God speaks directly, specifically, and frequently. He calls us to listen attentively, to think hard and well, and to develop our practical theology of conversational ministry. 

Mainline pastoral theologians, Thomas Oden and Andrew Purves, speak similarly and call the church back to biblical categories. Oden writes:

> Pastoral theology as a unifying discipline was flourishing a century ago and remained robust until the beginning of this century, yet it has largely faded into such hazy memory that none of its best representatives is still in print.

Purves speaks in a similar manner:

> My conviction is that the basic reconstitutive task for pastoral theology today is to establish once again the fundamental connection between the Christian doctrines of God, redemption, and hope, and the pastoral ministry of the church.

Though CCEF’s founding vision did not arise from mainline pastoral theologians such as Oden and Purves, it did come from a similar vision among evangelical, reformed pastoral theologians.
that the Scriptures were the foundation for any right thinking, diagnosis and care for people and their problems.

**The Advent of CCEF and Biblical Counseling**

In response to these trends in the church and pastoral training, a “biblical counseling” movement emerged in the late 1960’s. The initial spokesman for this approach to pastoral care and counseling was Jay Adams. In 1968, Jay Adams and John Bettler started the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation just outside of Philadelphia. For the past four decades, CCEF has been growing and contributing to the biblical counseling movement as that movement has grown in both influence and maturity.

CCEF’s early history was largely prophetic and therefore polemic. The church was challenged to rethink its beliefs about why people struggle and how to help them when they do. CCEF called pastors and seminaries back to the primacy of Scripture as the basis for thoughtful and effective pastoral care and counseling. From the beginning, there was always a concern to define what could legitimately be learned from modern psychology, but Scripture provided the orienting “generalizations”: a God-centered view of people and problems and solutions. What was at stake was which source would be primary.

As CCEF entered the 1980’s and 90’s, it was apparent that the second and third generation of leaders benefited from the strengths of their predecessors as well as learned from their weaknesses. They moved CCEF in a direction of increased sensitivity to human suffering, to the dynamics of motivation, to the centrality of the Gospel in the daily life of the believer, the importance of the body of Christ and to a more articulate engagement with secular culture.

As CCEF enters the 21st century, it continues this positive trajectory with a commitment to work out the implications of biblical counseling in many areas of counseling methodology. CCEF continues to emphasize the centrality of the body of Christ as the primary context for care and counseling while recognizing the legitimate place of broader resources within the body of Christ. The relationship between biblical counselors and fellow evangelicals involved in professional, clinical counseling continues to be worked out in the pursuit of cordial relationships in which differences can be constructively discussed. Biblical counseling IS and always has been a ‘psychology’. It offers a distinctively Christian understanding of people, problems, influences, suffering, motives, and change processes. Out of this synergy of intergenerational collegiality, a rich Christian “psychology” is continuing to be developed and applied at CCEF.

CCEF’s view and practice of counseling ministry is committed to identifiable distinctives. The following statement of theological foundations and core values about counseling expresses where we stand today. We believe they form the basis for a true pastoral theology that is consistent with those believers in Christ and faithful ministers of Christ who have preceded us.
CCEF’s Theological Foundations
CCEF’s core commitments are predicated on the triune, saving, speaking and acting God of the Bible, who calls us to do ministry by equipping his people for ministry.

We are Protestant; affirming the unique authority of Scripture, and subscribe to the historic creeds of the early church and Reformation (i.e. Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Westminster Confession of Faith, London Baptist Confession, Heidelberg Catechism). And though we are grounded in the Protestant reformed tradition, we are also ecumenical and seek to minister to and with Christians from a range of theological perspectives.

We seek to apply these core commitments of historic orthodoxy in ways that are humble and winsome.

1. Because God teaches us to see the world the way he sees it, and to see all things as they exist in relationship to him, we are committed to the complete trustworthiness and primacy of the Scriptures.

2. Because the working of God in human life unfolds historically, we are committed to the narrative perspective provided by redemptive-historical theology, the story-line that frames our understanding of systematic theology, practical theology, and church history.

3. Because God’s saving work in Christ Jesus creates a people for his own possession, we are committed to serve the visible church.

4. Because there is one Body and one Spirit, we are committed to serve Christians of many different denominational associations.

5. Because God’s ways and words are relevant across time, in all places, and to all peoples; and because the church is called to move towards the world redemptively, rather than existing in defensive or hostile isolation; we are committed to the importance of cultural sensitivity and cultural engagement.

CCEF’s Pastoral Care and Counseling Model
CCEF’s distinctives regarding counseling grow out of the previous theological emphases. The points listed below express some of the counseling implications of our theological convictions.

1. We are Christ-Centered. Therefore, we point people to a person, Christ, and not a program. He is wisdom from God, the inexpressible gift who delivers us from our sins and
sufferings. He is the faith-nourishing foundation in whom the call to obedience finds its inner principle and power. People need the Savior, not a system of self-salvation.

2. We believe in God's common grace to all humanity and therefore we can learn from those who do not espouse a Christian or even a theistic worldview. For example, while the fundamental worldview of secular psychology runs counter to Christianity, there are descriptive riches to be found in the writings and teachings of those who have gained case wisdom through their research and care. These materials can enrich our care of those in need and can be useful to us as we continue to develop our biblically-based counseling method.

3. We are aware that human behavior is inextricably tied to deeper motivational drives. Therefore, we emphasize the primacy of the heart, because all human acts arise from a worship core, either disordered or rightly ordered.

4. We believe that we best image the triune God as we live and grow in community. Therefore, we embed personal change within God's community—the church, with all its rich resources of corporate and interpersonal means of grace.

5. We believe the Scriptures are rich in their understanding of who we are as human beings. Therefore, we use Scripture with a full commitment to its authority and sufficiency, convinced that from beginning to end, it reveals Christ and his powerful redeeming grace addressing the needs and struggles of the human condition.

6. We believe that human beings are both spiritual and physical beings. Therefore, we recognize that people are physically-embodied by God's design. A variety of bodily influences impact moral response. We take the whole person seriously, granting that there are ambiguities at the interface of soul and body. We seek to remain sensitive to physiological factors, as the context within which God calls a person to faith and obedience.

7. We believe that people are socially-embedded by God's design. Therefore, we recognize that a variety of socio-cultural influences and sufferings influence moral response. We take the person's whole context seriously, granting that there are ambiguities at the interface between an individual and their environment. We seek to remain sensitive to social factors, as the context within which God calls a person to faith and obedience.

8. We believe that the Incarnation of Jesus is not just the basis for care but also the model for how care is to be administered. Therefore, we seek to enter into a person's story, listening well, expressing thoughtful love. Such incarnational patience recognizes that a
particular season of intentional counseling plays one part within a life-long process of Christian growth.

9. We believe that Jesus is our faithful Redeemer who enables us to persevere in the midst of our problems. Therefore, we understand that change is often slow and hard. Jesus promises no instant panacea. He abides in us as we abide in him. He gives grace to walk a long obedience in the same direction, learning wisdom.

10. We believe that we at CCEF have not “arrived.” We have not fully and clearly expressed all that the Bible has to say about counseling ministry. Therefore, because Jesus tarries and we are not yet what we shall be, we humbly admit that we struggle to consistently apply all that we say we believe. We want to learn and grow in wisdom. We who counsel and teach counseling live in process, just like those we counsel and teach.

Additional Resources
For further information about these subjects, we have listed several resources that you might find helpful.

**Concerning Biblical Counseling:**

**Books**


**Articles**


**Concerning the History of Pastoral Care:**


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2 It is worth noting that these writers come from traditional, mainline ecclesiastical contexts, not fundamentalist or evangelical Protestantism. Oden is an ordained Methodist Minister and a professor of theology at Drew University. Purves is a professor of pastoral theology at Pittsburg Theological Seminary.


5 For a personal account of the early days of CCEF, see John Bettler’s “CCEF: The Beginning”, published in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, Volume IX, Number 3, pp. 45-51.

6 For a more detailed history of the biblical counseling movement, see *Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* by David Powlison, published by New Growth Press.

7 David Powlison’s “Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling,” Appendix 2 in *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Originally published in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice, 9:3*, 1988, pp. 53-78) assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the first 20 years of the biblical counseling movement, and called for growth and development to remedy areas of weakness.