

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Bridging the Counselor/Church Divide

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I was, by all external measures, a successful senior pastor of a large, numerically growing, multi-ethnic church in Queens, New York. I was also emotionally immature, a “workaholic” for God, and failing at home as a husband and father. Counseling and therapy was for weak, broken people -- not me.

God had been trying to get my attention for a few years. Finally, He sent an earthquake.

“Pete, I’m leaving the church,” my wife Geri had muttered quietly.

I sat still, too stunned to respond.

“I can’t take any more of this stress—the constant crisis,” she continued.

Geri had been more than patient. I had brought home constant pressure and tension from church, year after year. Now the woman I had promised to love just as Christ loved the church was exhausted.

We had experienced eight unrelenting years of stress.

“I’m not doing it anymore,” she concluded. “This church is no longer life for me. It is death.”

When a church member says, “I’m leaving the church,” most pastors don’t feel very good. But when your wife of nine years says it, your world is turned upside down.

We were in our bedroom. I remember the day well.

“Pete, I love you, but I’m leaving the church,” she summarized very calmly. “I no longer respect your leadership.”

I was visibly shaken, and didn’t know what to say or do. I felt shamed, alone, and angry.

I tried raising my voice to intimidate her: “That is out of the question,” I bellowed. “All right, so I’ve made a few mistakes.”

But she calmly continued, “It’s not that simple. You don’t have the guts to lead—to confront the people who need to be confronted. You don’t lead. You’re too afraid that people will leave the church. You’re too afraid of what they’ll think about you.”

I was outraged.

“I’m getting to it!” I yelled defensively. “I’m working on it.” (For the last two years, I really had been trying, but somehow still wasn’t up to it.)

“Good for you, but I can’t wait any more,” she replied.

There was a long pause of silence. Then she uttered the words that changed the power balance in our marriage permanently: “Pete, I quit.”

She was calm and resolute in her decision. I was enraged. A good Christian wife, married to a Christian (and a pastor I may add), does not do this.

I understood at that moment why a husband could fly into a rage and kill the wife he loves.

This led me, finally, to a Christian counselor’s office. My initial hope was that he would straighten Geri out. I was dead wrong.

What actually happened was that my life, marriage, and leadership, were radically transformed by Jesus Christ! (Go to www.emotionallyhealthy.org for a brief video on Pete and Geri’s journey).

It soon became apparent why so many Christians, like me, make such lousy human beings. Entire areas of my life were untouched by the Lord Jesus by my first seventeen years as a devoted follower of Him. – e.g. the ability and permission to feel deeply, the skills to process anger and conflict maturely, the inability to process loss in a way that enlarges the soul, speaking honestly, clearly and respectfully, and the enormous power of our family of origin to impact our present.

I finally admitted that *emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable. Biblically, it is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.*

It is now sixteen years later. Thanks to the gift of God that came through Christian counselors like you, I continue my work as a pastor in New York. Moreover, I continue to experience the best years of my life as a human being, a Christian, a husband, a father and a leader in God’s church.

As a result I have invested years sorting out the role of professional counseling as part of the larger mentoring and discipleship process. Emotional health is now central to our leadership development, staff and elders, small groups, and building of a mature community that models a different kind of life in the new family of Jesus.

Although churches are generally open to Christian counseling, it continues to be separated and compartmentalized from the whole of Christian formation/discipleship. In other words: “You (counselors) do your thing and we (the church) will do ours.” My passion is that we build a powerful bridge between the two.

The church needs well-trained Christian counselors. You have a unique, prophetic contribution to what God is seeking to do in the church around the world today. The following are a few practical suggestions that I trust will help you bridge this divide and more effectively impact your ministry:

1. Be Patient. Many of us are defensive and afraid of where you might take us with all this talk of emotions and our interior lives. You are asking us to open up and expand into unknown territory. Like most seminary and Bible school graduates, my

discipleship/spiritual paradigm was very narrow. My Christian training taught me that, if I were faithful to spiritual disciplines (e.g. prayer, the Word, fellowship, giving, confession, solitude, giving, etc.) and obey Jesus, I would be fine. Yet I was in pain, struggling internally and in my marriage. The notion that spiritual maturity can be achieved apart from integration of emotional aspects of who we are goes back goes back to Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and Augustine. Offer to serve, teach classes or seminars, and lead small groups. These provide wonderful opportunities to expose a congregation to the riches of what God has given you. God took someone like me who was opposed to Christian counseling and turned me into one of her greatest advocates. God will honor your patient love and service to your churches' leadership.

2. Develop a Well-Balanced Biblical Framework. I needed a biblical theology and language to frame what I was experiencing as I was learning about my interior as a Christian counselor took me to new frontiers in my soul. A theology for breaking the power of the past, brokenness and vulnerability, grief and loss, limits and emotions, for example, will go a long way to help people drop their defenses. More importantly, it grounds your work as you continue to grow as a counselor. Absorb books and authors that do this kind of integrative work. I recommend counselors use the language of discipleship and spiritual formation in their work with clients to enable a more seamless relationship with the church. Remember, your calling, like mine, is to make disciples and help Christ be formed in people (Gal. 4:19).

3. Embrace Your Gift and Your Limits. I see myself as a pastor as a “family doctor” engaged in spiritual formation with our people. That is a particular role, with unique authority, before God and our people. I distinguish professional counselors and therapists as specialists (akin to heart or kidney doctors) to whom I refer people who are beyond my training and expertise to serve. God has led you to specialize your training in a specific way that enables you take people into deep, ongoing transformation in their following of Christ that I can never do in a sermon or class. Your relationship with clients has distinct boundaries that enable you to explore unique, hidden, areas of their lives over a sustained period of time.

4. Seek the Love of Christ above All Else. Our churches have people who are emotionally healthy but do not have a walk with Christ. At the same time, we have people deeply committed to spiritual disciplines, Scripture and the church yet remain emotionally unaware and socially maladjusted. Both emotional health and spiritual disciplines, when engaged in separately, are powerful. Together, they unleash a spiritual revolution, transforming the hidden places deep beneath the surface of our lives. Nurture and monitor your own emotional/spiritual growth. We preach, teach and counsel out of who we are and what we have internalized. We cannot give what we do not possess. That applies to both church leaders and Christian counselors.

Pastors and leaders in North America, as well as from Mongolia, Cuba, Russia, Latin America, Indonesia, Korea, and Africa, sense something is desperately wrong in our churches. They recognize the gap between emotional health and spirituality damages our ability to fulfill our mission for Christ. You can make an invaluable contribution, for such as time as this, if you too would help build a bridge from our inadequate spiritual paradigms to one that includes emotional health.

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