Profile — A Day in the Life of Hugh O’Connor

"His compassions never fail, they are new every morning…” Lamentations 3:22-23 (NIV)

I wish my first thought each day was of God. I must confess to my usual one being, “How much longer can I stay in bed?” This exemplifies the struggle that human beings have to enjoy more of God and to have less of self in our daily lives. Thank God for His new compassions each morning. They give me hope and strength for the day.

As a Biblical counsellor working in a church as a staff member, my main responsibility is to church members. In West London most of us live in the fast lane, and the 400 members of our church provide many and varied counselling needs. I work by appointment with four one-and-a-half-hour sessions a counselling day (but more than twenty hours a week), with time in the middle of the day for the phone calls and the administration (which is always with us!).

As each client arrives I am aware of the triangular dynamic which operates:

After seeing my son off to school and praying with my wife casually I walk for ten minutes to work. Listening to music on my personal stereo is soothing, but some excellent teaching tapes have been stimulating me recently. My first client arrives at 9 am, and I make a cup of tea/coffee in my office to welcome him. He and I discuss how to apply God’s principles in life concerning moral standards, relationships with a girl and a male flatmate, and financial management. That is full session! Handouts will be very helpful and a closing prayer is essential. With my client we make a tape recording for him to review what has been said later.

Waiting at 10:30 am is a long-term. Some clients require more talking and counselling which may extend over months and years. This is more likely if there has been childhood abuse and/or if they suffer from depression. There are tears, and sometimes long silences. God is faithful and we must be patient. After a breakfast time prayer meeting (and a lunch too) I deal with enquiries for example finding a suitable counsellor or training courses with the Association of Biblical Counsellors.

At 4 pm I am home. That was the last straw. It was time to talk. Her boyfriend has a turbulent past and has been divorced twice. Can they work it out together? At 5:30 pm I am joined by a lady member of our counselling team. We are helping someone who is two years into marriage. Their intimacy has been hard to establish. I am very grateful for the support of my female colleague.

Treach from 7:30 pm to catch up with my patients to get a quick understanding of what is going on and to unwind from a stretching day. Because God has called me if I am sure of that he marvelously equips. I may not change the world, but I am happy to change someone’s world and that is a precious privilege.

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TAKING A LOOK AT THE BASICS OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELLING

Living by Story — A Counsellor’s Creed

Don Hudson

"I don’t want to live anymore..."

The man slumped in his chair staring at me with vacant eyes. In the five years I have been counselling, a number of clients have threatened suicide. Naturally, my mind raced through past clients and their eyes. But this man was different. His eyes were different.

Most people who threaten suicide do so with great emotion, even to the point of melodrama. Strangely, the man sitting across from me had not only lost his passion to live but somehow his passion to die. He searched for the right thing to say to him but could offer to a man who had lost all hope?

"Has anything happened recently to make you feel this way?" was all I could muster.

"Yes," answered in a monotone. "Last Tuesday I failed a test. That was the last straw." A bizarre response, but I understand. I must have been back to many of my own rainy days — dark days that had sealed a series of heartbreaks. That rainy Tuesday symbolised the final injury to this man.

"I think I understand," I replied. "But this is our first time together, so, I don’t know you well. Tell me a little bit about yourself." I was asking him to tell his story. I had hesitated until now because I knew this man had a very sad story.

As I expected, for thirty-five minutes he told one of the worst stories I had ever heard. He had a father who exploded into rages and beat him violently from the age of six to seventeen. When he was thirteen, he confided to his pastor in sheer desperation. But the pastor did not believe him. Instead, he called the boy’s father and told him his son was spreading lies. His father brutally beat him for the indiscretion.

He told more stories that could hardly bear to hear. Thus he skipped to the past two months. Though he was now forty, he could not bring himself to marry the woman he had dated for years. He no longer attended church, because he could not believe in a God his father claimed to follow. To make matters worse, he was also failing in his job and friendships. "My life has fallen to pieces," he concluded. And with that he ended his story.

The man sitting across from me wanted to forget his tragic past. Indeed, it was because of his past suffering that he felt incapable of loving anyone now. And worse yet, he held no hope for the future. The bright glow of life had been snuffed out by a violent father. And now I saw before me a man who felt condemned to a meaningless life.

We live in a world of many odd-shaped pieces, a cosmic jigsaw puzzle that often seems to have been further complicated by cruel fate. Yet, no matter what our stories may be, each of us tries to make sense of life by seeing it as a whole. We want to know that we
are not alone and that our suffering has meaning. We yearn to live well in our relationships. We fret over our children, our jobs, death. Yet, most of us fail to see far enough beyond our day-to-day, fragmented lives to envision a bigger picture of reality.

The past, present and future are three ill-fitted fragments that appear to be hopelessly disconnected.

This is where story comes in. The philosopher tells us that humanity has consistently asked three questions: Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? In other words, we are intimately concerned with our past, present and future — with our story.

Story is the only medium that answers all three questions. Rules and laws can't, because they merely tell us what to do, not why we come from, Principles can't, because they also guide us in what to do, they never tell us why we are here, Platitudes can't, because they tell us how to act and bring only superficial closure to our existence. Indeed, rules, principles and platitudes, by themselves, have the unfortunate effect of replacing mystery with a deadening sense of security.

I want something in my life that changes me but does not restrain or control me — something that allows me to live out my own uniqueness. Story does that. Story gathers us into a chaotic shards of the past and gives us a future. And it whispers that we are not alone in our questions and pain.

When we are in the midst of suffering, we begin to look outside of ourselves for meaning, for a bigger picture. We look for a story that makes sense of our lives. So, what story do I invite people to? I encourage them to

**Selwyn Hughes**

*Many of the counsellors (all Christians) with whom I meet on a monthly basis for mutual support and prayer show a negative attitude to any remark I make which has in it the phrase “Biblical counselling”. Some, particularly those trained in psychology, seem to look down on those who base their counselling approach on Scripture. Is this a common problem in the field of Christian counselling?*

Yes, I'm afraid it is. In the main there are two reasons for this. One is that some have brought the issue of Biblical counselling into dispute by their misuse and misapplication of the Bible. Some time ago I heard of a man who went to see a “Biblical counsellor” for help and advice in controlling his anger. The counsellor, after discussing his problem, stepped over to his computer, hit one of the keys that opened up his Scripture concordance, and printed out for the man a list of Bible verses on the subject of anger. The person was then told to study the verses, memorise them and act on them. That was the full scope of the counsel given.

Another Biblical counsellor when approached by a young girl who had anxiety, nervously immediately confronted her with the text: “Do you not know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?” and told her she was violating spiritual issues by not eating properly.

No-one has more confidence in the Bible as a counselling tool than I, but I have to say I deplore such an approach. This is using the Bible as a hammer to browbeat people rather than a skilled sword to open up their inner motivations. (Look out for a future article in Career and Counsellor on “The Use of the Bible in Counselling.”)

A second reason for this is that there are many Christians who have a degree in psychology but only a Sunday School education in Scripture. Because of this they fail to see that the Bible, when rightly understood, provides us with categories of thought that lead us to the heart of what psychologists call “psychological problems”.

**Understanding**

In the early days of my counselling, I relied heavily on psychological insights because I did not understand how the Bible addressed problems like anxiety, or depression. When I became more versed in the way in which the Bible spoke to these deep issues, I saw how much more wonderfully and powerfully Scripture could help me in bringing about a cure for the soul.

I believe the term “Biblical counselling” will have to endure a rough ride in the future. However, there is a small army of good Christian men and women on the march (professionals and lay people alike) who, whilst they are appreciative of all they have learned from psychology, put their confidence for bringing about deep inner change not in psychological techniques but in the Word of God anointed by the Holy Spirit.