

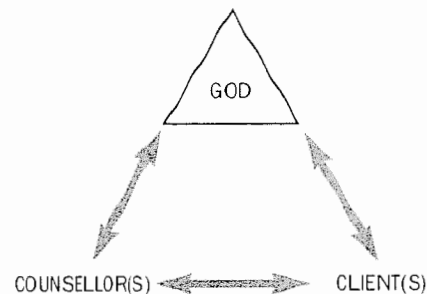
Profile — *a Day in the Life of Hugh O'Connor*

"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 are living life 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 in a counselling day (but never 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:



If God the Holy Spirit is not there, then my counselling goes dead and it is time to finish appointments with that client.

Selecting a typical day in my diary is hard, because each day is different — there is no chance to become bored.

Hugh O'Connor is Chairman of the Association of Biblical Counsellors, as well as being responsible for counselling in a West London church. Prior to full-time counselling work he was a dental practitioner.

After seeing my son off to school and praying with my wife (usually!) 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 a full session! Handouts with Biblical principles are very useful and a closing prayer is essential. With this client we make a tape recording for him to review what has been said later.

Waiting at 10.30 am is a long-termer. Some clients require pastoring and counselling which may extend over months and years. This is more likely if there has been childhood abuse and/or they suffer from depression. There are tears, and sometimes long silences. God is faithful and we must be faithful. After a lunchtime weekly prayer meeting (and some lunch too) I deal with enquiries, for example finding a suitable counsellor or training courses with the Association of Biblical Counsellors.

At 4 pm a teenager in love comes to talk. Her boyfriend has a turbulent background with divorced parents. Can they work it all out together? At 5.30 pm I am joined by a lady member of our counselling team. We are helping some newlyweds who are two years into marriage. The intimacy has been hard to establish. I am very grateful for the support of my female colleague.

I reach home about 7.30 pm to catch up with my patient wife, to greet my children (most of them are independent now) and to unwind from a stretching day. Because God has called me (I am sure of that) he marvellously equips. I may not change the world, but I can be a tool to change a person's world, and that is a precious privilege.

A NEW SERIES

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. I searched for the right thing to say to him. What words could I 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," he answered in a monotone. "Last Tuesday it rained. That was the last straw." A bizarre response, but I understood. My mind slipped 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, of course, 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 bad story.

Don Hudson is a graduate school Professor and licensed Counsellor in Morrison, Colorado. He conducts a popular seminar called *Living by Story: Romancing the Heart*.

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 I could hardly bear to hear. Then 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 also was 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 philosophers tell 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 law can't, because they merely tell us what to do, not where we come from. Principles can't, because though 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 up the chaotic shards of the past and gives them 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

refamiliarise themselves with their own story, where they came from and why they are here. And I believe we all must see our stories through the veil of the story of God.

I find it interesting that 75% of the Bible is a beautiful romance that tells us where we are from, how we should live and where we are going. I say we must remember, and not forget, the faith of Abraham, the duplicity of Jacob, the jealousy of Saul, the depression of Elijah, the friendship of Jonathan, the kindness of God to Hagar. These stories help bring meaning to our lives by showing that there is a greater order to — and even within — the chaos we see in life.

Gertrude Mueller Nelson, the author of *Here All Dwell Free*, gives us a pertinent warning: "Know your story or your story will live you." The man of whom I wrote in the beginning eventually found hope by realising that he was living a myth. His tragic story had become more real to him than God was; and though his story was truly awful, he had let the suffering of his life dictate his actions and beliefs. He wanted to forget his story — but, in his trying to do so, his story was living him instead.

Counselling did not "fix" this man. The illusion of counselling is that we can be fixed in this life. No, I called this man to much more than that. I offered him story — and story does not remove suffering but *redeems* it. Story pillages suffering's most seductive illusion — that the present moment is the only moment that matters.

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Questions *I have been asked...*

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 disrepute 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 listening to 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 *anorexia nervosa* 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 skilful sword to open up their inner motivations. (Look out for a future article in *Carer 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 anorexia, or depression. But 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.