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CHRISTIAN COUNSELING: THE CARE OF SOULS

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1. To encourage *reformation* in local Christian churches worldwide.
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

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The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

John H. Armstrong

In Christian thought the soul (*psyche*) is that part of the human person which gives life; e.g. in biblical terms *the breath*. Sometimes the human soul is seen as that part of the person which survives death. What is far more self evident in the biblical view is this—a mind (or soul)-body dualism is a Greek and Cartesian metaphysical idea, not a Christian doctrine.

Eastern mystics have looked at this and concluded that mind and body belong to an *indivisible continuum*. The Hebrew Scriptures actually use the term more than nine hundred times in the Old Testament and Apocrypha. It is represented by several Hebrew words that are translated as heart, inner person or living thing. Of the 101 New Testament uses, 37 occur in the Synoptic Gospels. Here the term refers to the *inner life*, the *seat of life*, or *life itself*. It was this meaning that the Church understood for centuries when it spoke about care for the soul. Counseling, as we now use the term, is a more recent idea. The commitment of the Christian Church to nurture, feed, correct and direct the soul has always had a revered place in practice. If counseling connects with this tradition, much good could come from the marriage.

Sadly, with the rise of twentieth-century counseling therapies, concern for the soul has been all but lost, at least in the

secular West. William James influenced the Church more than we often realize. James saw the soul (which he did not believe really existed) as a collection of psychic phenomena. The result of James' influence upon Christians, especially in evangelical settings where his pragmatism is still so prominent, is theological chaos and pastoral confusion.

On one hand we have Christians embracing secular theories of counseling with abandon, failing to see the denials of biblical truth that are inherent in the systems they embrace. On the other hand, we have Christian reactions to this trend that treat the Bible as if it were a *textbook* on psychology and counseling. Reductionism abounds in such conservative circles. One could list dozens of competing "biblical" systems developed by these proponents of "biblical counseling." (Even this term, "biblical counseling," is challenged by Christians who fight one another over who, or what, is truly biblical.)

What is needed is a new reformation in pastoral practice. This can only happen when Christians cease to attack one another over arcane points of disagreement. We need an environment where we are encouraged to listen and respect differing ideas and creative insights. Both the research model of modern psychology and the insights of certain therapies should have their place. At the same time we must not surrender our deeply held Christian commitment to the care of the soul as the great priority of the Church's involvement in counseling. My hope is that this issue will prime the pump for serious reflection and growth in this area of ministry. Come, let us listen together. We still have much to learn.