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Counseling and the Search for Meaning

Alan C. Tjeltveit

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Fred Kaan, Jim Strathdee, Jim Manley and Ron Klusmeier, plus songs from differing faith backgrounds, an excellent offering of current hymnody is presented.

The Biblical Index, besides being of great assistance in worship preparation, reflects the faithfilled attention given to an authentic reflection of our Christian legacy. The texts of the hymns give particular attention to the current concerns for more extensive imagery for God, and for responses that are genuine in today's church. Heritage hymns such as "All people that on Earth Do Dwell" and "O For a Thousand Tongues" have gained a sensitive renewal.

The tunes are generally rendered in four-part harmony, with an easy melody line and the words between the staves. The musical needs of the small choirs and the limited resources of many small churches have been addressed. Family tunes and new words for old songs along with the generous inclusion of "old" favourites such as "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art", create a medium for enthusiastic singing.

There will be many reactions to the song book. Organists will miss a metrical index and a listing of sources. I anticipated more new hymns, but having reflected on the new renditions of many old hymns, I appreciate this resource and am grateful for its being published. It can be used extensively as an agent for integrating our worship, for allowing people of all persuasions to have a voice; the traditional and the liberated, the conservative and the feminist. I pray that it will be compassionately received and people will be drawn to the potential newness it presents.

Enid R. Powell
Cambridge, Ontario

Counseling and the Search for Meaning

Paul R. Welter
Waco, Texas: Word Books

I approached this volume with considerable anticipation. Questions of meaning are often present when a person seeks out a pastor or counselor. Society, including psychologists and psychiatrists, offers a variety of answers to questions of meaning: wealth, security, power, self-actualization, becoming more effectively and comfortably focused on meeting our own needs, and so forth. The Christian church also has a set of visions concerning meaning. Those visions often stand in some conflict with societal visions.

The pastor or other Christian counselor has the opportunity to play a special role in helping troubled persons work through issues of meaning. Indeed, pastors can talk about the Gospel and its implications for

meaning in ways in which secular counselors not only do not (because of a frequent failure to believe in the Gospel) but ought not, because the psychotherapist's role in a secular setting is appropriately limited to dealing with mental health issues, and does not include broader spiritual and moral issues. Issues of meaning, then, are central to questions about the nature of the relationship between psychology and Christian faith and about the distinctiveness of a Christian approach to counseling.

This book purports to address those issues squarely. It is the 9th volume of the Resources for Christian Counseling series, a series intended to deal with practical counseling topics in a way that uses Scripture carefully and relies on "accurate psychology".

Welter, a counseling psychologist at Kearney State College in Nebraska, first focuses on recognizing and understanding the problem of meaninglessness. The bulk of the book is then devoted to a pragmatic discussion of specific counseling approaches and methods, for example, those to be used in working with the elderly, the grieving, and cancer patients. He concludes with discussions about the counselor's use of the self and about preventing meaninglessness.

The primary strength of the book lies in its pragmatic orientation and in the ample clinical wisdom Welter provides. His is a warm, simple style. The result is a helpful, very readable book which more often than not avoids being simplistic.

Welter relies heavily, although not exclusively, on the work of Victor Frankl. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl discusses his observation that those who survived the concentration camps with him during World War II tended to be those who found some sort of meaning in their experience. Questions of meaning therefore occupy a central role in his approach to counseling.

Although he acknowledges that a Christian must go "beyond" Frankl, Welter is inconsistent in doing so. He often appears simply to echo Frankl. For instance, despite acknowledging at times that the spiritual life is, finally, the remedy for the meaningless life, at other times Welter fails to challenge and even appears to accept Frankl's position that people simply need to have some sort of meaning in life, *any* sort of meaning. That approach is certainly legitimate if enhancing mental health is one's only concern. But ought not the aspirations of a Christian counselor be higher than that? Unfortunately, this book does not discuss the fact that a vast array of alternative answers to the question of meaning, with varying degrees of legitimacy, exist in society today. The issue is not only meaning versus meaninglessness, but which meaning. Surely, part of the Christian counselor's role ought to be to help a counselee think through those options, giving particular attention to the offensive particularity of the Cross, to the Bible, to the Christian traditions of ethics and dealing with issues of meaning, to love of neighbor and the pursuit of justice, and to the relationship of ultimate matters to the penultimate matters which most of secular psychology assumes to provide *the* answers to meaning in life. Unfortunately, Welter fails to discuss how the Christian counselor can do so

in a way which does not violate the integrity and freedom of the counselee and which benefits from the legitimate wisdom to be found in psychology.

Equally problematic, in some passages Welter appears to accept Frankl's position that what is central is that *we* search for meaning. There is minimal appreciation of the fact that, finally, it is *not our* search for meaning which is central, but meaning's search for us, Christ's dying for us and reconciling us to himself.

Although I suspect Welter would agree with that last statement, his writing is inconsistent. Unfortunately, he evidences the most common flaw of writers in the area of pastoral and Christian counseling: a frequent uncritical acceptance of psychology's value-laden counseling theories, the absence of a critique of them in the light of the Gospel and Christian ethics, and a failure to articulate an approach to Christian counseling which incorporates consistently both the Christian tradition and appropriate non-value-laden aspects of psychology.

In summary, this is a book which needs to be read selectively, due to an occasional uncritical acceptance of Frankl and an overall failure to spell out how Christian counselors should address the competition between Christian and non-Christian approaches to meaning. Nevertheless, it addresses a very important set of issues and provides much practical wisdom for Christian counselors.

Alan C. Tjeltveit
St. Olaf College
Northfield, Minnesota