

Curtis Chang

The Transformation of the Inner Man

John and Paula Sandford, Victory House, Tulsa OK, 1982

The Sandfords' book offers several helpful insights in the area of Christian counseling. The following is a sampling of three of their perspectives and how they may shape our understanding of our work with students or intersect with our current perspectives on ministry.

Critique of Secular Counseling: The Sandfords critique secular counseling on some fairly fundamental grounds. They draw a sharp contrast between the secular counseling agenda and the Biblical one. The former, they argue, seeks to rebuild the counselee to functional ability while the Biblical should seek the death of a "functioning self" in order that one may truly rest in Jesus' work on the cross. Christian counselors should not ultimately be aiming to make a broken aspect of one's self work again but rather to deliver the person from the power of the broken aspect and be able to trust God in one's brokenness and thus minister to others with similar brokenness. Their critique should at the least give us second thoughts about the ultimate effectiveness of sending our students to many (even ostensibly Christian) counselors. Moreover, we need to question our own tendencies to simply "patch up" our students' various problems rather than leading them to the death of self and life in Jesus.

Counselor as Evangelist: The authors argue that the primary task of a counselor is to speak the Gospel to the counselee in three primary ways. First, the counselor must speak the word of the Lord to the unbelieving heart. What Dan Fuller points to as the root of sin, they also point to as the source of all emotional problems as well. The primary issue in all counseling, they argue, is the heart's inability to believe God and His promises and words. Secondly, the lack of faith generally centers on the heart's refusal to see God's love for him/her. Thirdly, the counselor/evangelist must call to repentance from "performance orientation," which is simply the Galatian heresy worked out in emotional terms. In our minds, their description of the "performer" who equates behaving or doing well with being loved was painfully on target for many of our students and ourselves as staff.

The Base of the Law: Central to the Sandford's diagnostic method is the conviction that God has set up human life to operate by certain immutable laws. So, for instance, if you sow judgment, you will reap judgment. The issue is not God's punishment; it is simply God's impersonal law. In particular, they argue, "the fundamental, simple and single key to all Christian counseling is found in the fifth commandment... that single principle, that life will go well with those who honor their parents, and that life will not go well with those who do not, is sufficient to explain the root of every problem (p. 88)." While that is, in my mind, an overstatement and oversimplification, the way they develop this theme is helpful on several fronts. First, they emphasize that regardless of how our parents abused or failed us, we still have a choice of how we can respond, to honor or dishonor. This perspective restores responsibility and the need for repentance to even the most victimized student. Secondly, they give potential counselors at least one widely helpful (if not as universal as they claim) example of digging beyond "the bad fruit." Because of the "base of the law," the counselor should never deal primarily with particular behaviors or symptoms, but always look to Biblical laws that predict such a consequence, and identify the underlying sin. This perspective, I believe, makes knowledge of Scripture more paramount in our counseling than we are used to. Other

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Scriptural laws that they point to include: inner vows, possessiveness, bitter root judgment and expectancy. Almost all of them are variations on dishonoring one's parents.