Helping the Good Shepherd

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Howard Clinebell was the quintessential post–World War II pastoral counselor. Tracing his intellectual development and the changes in his life over four decades allows one to simultaneously trace both the history of pastoral counseling and the evolution of the liberal moral sensibility. In 1999, in response to a request from the editors of the American Journal of Pastoral Counseling, Clinebell recalled the greatest influences on his own understanding and practice of pastoral counseling, and the outlines of the liberal moral sensibility are illuminated in that account. Clinebell entered Union Theological Seminary in 1947, on the eve of the publication of some of pastoral counseling’s seminal works. Books by Dicks, Hiltner, Wise, Johnson, and Oates followed one another in quick succession during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Clinical pastoral education broadened and strengthened its base. A multitude of training possibilities in seminaries, institutes, and seminars became available simultaneously to clergy and other professionals interested in pastoral counseling. Clinebell rode that wave of professional development and, following founders of the pastoral counseling movement like Hiltner and Oates, helped shape the movement’s parameters in subsequent years.

Like so many other pastoral counselors, Clinebell had come of age in a midwestern, small town environment and was the grandchild of farmers. In the account of his life, he made explicit the connection between his early years on the farm and his later interest in “growth and process theory.” While the rest of his colleagues did not consciously make the same connection, it is remarkable the number of them who shared a midwestern, rural, or small town childhood. Clinebell saw a causal relationship between his rural past and the psychological theories he embraced, and it was probably true that a rural past contributed an impetus for many young ministers to “make good” and achieve professional sta-
tus. The early concern of clinical educators to protect the status of parish ministers makes even more sense when one realizes that the majority of these ministers were small town or farm boys in a rapidly urbanizing environment.

A tragic event early in his life shaped the rest of Clinebell’s career, and he read the event in an appropriately psychodynamic framework. When he was four years old, his younger sister died on her first birthday. In retrospect, Clinebell recalled a period of “inappropriate guilt” that lasted into his adulthood and prompted him to pursue a career in the ministry.² The psychodynamic framework that informed Clinebell’s interpretation of this early tragedy was particularly fashionable among counseling ministers at the time Clinebell took up the postgraduate study of pastoral psychology and counseling at seminary in New York City. His education, as Clinebell recalled, “began to challenge and expand the horizons of my Mid-Western provincialism.”³ While at Union Seminary, he studied with theologians David Roberts and Paul Tillich and with the neo-Freudians associated with the William A. White Institute. Clinebell took seminars at the institute in a certificate program in applied psychiatry for the ministry that was administered jointly by Columbia University and Union. He participated in seminars with Erich Fromm, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and Harry Stack Sullivan.⁴ Rollo May was also participating in the seminars, although at that point not teaching at the institute.⁵

As with many pastoral counselors, neo-Freudian theories profoundly shaped Clinebell’s thought but parish experience had an equally powerful influence. Clinebell worked his way through Union serving as pastor in a Long Island church and there discovered, as he phrased it, that the “long-term, uncovering, reconstructive, neo-Freudian approach, was not what most of my counselees wanted or needed.” Again like many fellow pastoral counselors, Clinebell continued to find the psychodynamic approach useful for understanding some behavior that was otherwise unexplainable but he began to look for alternative counseling methods. Influenced by Wise, Oates, Hiltner, and Johnson, he developed his own methods. By the late 1950s, having migrated west to California and spent some time as a minister of counseling for a large church and director of a pastoral counseling center, he accepted a full-time position on the faculty at the School of Theology at Claremont. From his position there, he

Clinebell’s career illustrates the ambivalent relationship between clinical pastoral education and pastoral counseling. Before going to New York for postgraduate studies, Clinebell studied at Garrett Biblical Institute, the Methodist seminary in Evanston, Illinois. Russell Dicks was working in the Chicago area at the time and teaching two courses in pastoral care and counseling at Garrett. Taking Dicks’s classes made Clinebell aware that he needed more training. Around the same time, he met Anton Boisen, who likewise much influenced his thinking, but Clinebell apparently did not enroll in CPE that year. So, while he acknowledged the importance of CPE in shaping some of his ideas and he later enrolled in clinical training while in New York (1947-48 and again in 1956-57), most of his practical training in counseling occurred in a much different milieu, one that was deeply embedded in the conversation pastoral counselors were having with major proponents of the humanistic psychology movement.

That observation brings us to a noticeable omission from Clinebell’s professional genealogy. In describing his intellectual roots, Clinebell did not even mention Carl Rogers, who figured so prominently in the thinking of many pastoral counselors and who is identified so absolutely with humanistic psychology. But this makes sense, too, if the basic narrative of the history of pastoral counseling and CPE is kept in mind. By the time Clinebell had accepted a position at Claremont and had turned to scholarly publication, pastoral counselors’ fascination with Rogers had faded. In fact, Clinebell’s *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* challenged Rogers’s method explicitly. Given Clinebell’s appreciation of psychodynamics, it is ironic that he did not recognize the extent to which his own ideas served as point and counterpoint to Rogers’s. Early in the book, Clinebell offered a “revised model for pastoral counseling,” one that he viewed as more suited to the parish ministry than was the older model, which he described aptly as “Rogers with a dash of Freud.” He claimed that he had no desire to dispense with the Rogerian method and intended to keep and incorporate its best attributes into the revised model, but he also intended to “recover the strengths of the pre-Rogerian period.”

Clinebell was just a bit younger than the founders of CPE or the very earliest pastoral counselors, and it was perhaps a combination of that age
difference and his personal psychology that made him much more willing to acknowledge the influence of women on his professional life. As a young adult, Clinebell had studied philosophy at DePauw University and then earned a bachelor of divinity degree at Garrett, where he was greatly influenced by Georgia Harkness. His decision to pursue graduate studies in pastoral psychology and counseling resulted not so much from studying CPE but from the influence of Regina Westcott Wieman, who had written an important book with her then-husband, Henry Nelson Wieman, called *Normative Psychology of Religion* as well as a book of her own called *Family and Church*. Clinebell mentioned, too, the importance of the work of Dorothy Walters Baruch, author of children’s books and popular books on childrearing for their parents, and Peggy Way’s influence on his thinking about psychotherapy, particularly the influence of “social context and justice issues on health and illness.”

In the tradition of his Progressive forebears, Clinebell saw the implications of counseling for social change. As he described it, he became “increasingly aware of the hyper-individualism of Western thought, including pastoral counseling” and moved toward a model of counseling that was more “holistic and more empowering of clients so that they could become agents who worked with others to lessen the social pathologies that were breeding sickness in themselves and others.” By his account, his counseling method moved from an individualistic, intrapsychic focus to a focus on relationships: couples, families, and healing social systems. Continuing, as did many of his colleagues in pastoral counseling, to both counsel and teach, his shift toward a focus on social systems moved him toward a focus on healing the environment. He expressed himself most passionately about this in his book *Ecotherapy, Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* (1996). His focus on environmental awareness moved Clinebell toward greater global awareness. He saw and participated in an increasingly international pastoral care and counseling movement, including conventions of the International Congress on Pastoral Care and Counseling, which, he remarked, went beyond the “Western, male, white, and middle-class origins” of the American pastoral care and counseling movement. He also joined the International Pastoral Care Network for Social Responsibility, which originated in the mid-1980s out of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. Clinebell described the Pastoral Care Network as made up of individuals committed
Clinebell’s progression from intrapsychic to international concerns reflects the expanding vision of religious liberals generally and pastoral counselors specifically and helps us to see why conversation between those of liberal and conservative moral sensibilities is so difficult. When we ask the fundamental questions, it appears at first as if liberals and conservatives live worlds apart: How do we know how to live? In the liberal moral sensibility, we know how to live by studying human experience and the experience of other Christians; in the conservative moral sensibility, we know how to live by studying the Bible. What are the most important values? In the liberal moral sensibility, the primary values are relieving suffering and achieving human potential, autonomy, relatedness, and community; in the conservative moral sensibility, the primary value is saving souls, in the belief that the best possible service to any individual is to secure his or her salvation. How are we to live a “good” life and achieve high moral standards? In the liberal moral sensibility, we achieve high moral standards through a kind of Christian pragmatism, testing each decision against a variety of standards, including scripture, community, and individual conscience; in the conservative moral sensibility, we achieve high moral standards by conforming to the image of God and through the working of the Holy Spirit. How do we decide the roles of men and women in society? In the liberal moral sensibility, gender roles are defined by human beings and through a pragmatic evaluation of human experience; in the conservative moral sensibility, gender roles are defined by the Bible and by the structure of authority articulated there. It appears to be a divide that cannot be crossed.

On the one hand, a study of moral sensibility seems to indicate that liberals and conservatives have nothing to say to one another—at least not anything civil. And yet, the historical record also suggests other possibilities. While this irreconcilability seems the case for the arguments of the likes of Joseph Fletcher and Jay Adams, who represented the far ends of the moral sensibility spectrum, in reality, most people live somewhere in the middle rather than on either end. When historian David Powlison tried to describe the response to Jay Adams’s nouthetic counseling and found himself creating an elaborate genealogy of “conservative conser-
vatives,” “liberal conservatives,” “conservative liberals,” and “liberal liberals,” he was illustrating this very phenomenon. Pastoral counselors and evangelical counselors, if they listen carefully when the other talks, hear the echoes of familiar ideas grounded not only in a shared religious heritage but also in a shared intellectual heritage. Both are trying to map the territory between faith and science. That common ground is the starting point for civil discourse, not only for counselors, but perhaps also for anyone trying to talk across a great divide of moral sensibility.
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