Four Words that Unify Christian Counseling and Coaching: Surrender, Motives, Courage, and Purpose

KATHERINE BRAZELTON
Much has been made of the differences between two types of Christian people-helpers: licensed mental health professionals with their wide range of clinical specialties and Professional Certified Life Coaches (PCLC).

Some erroneously think that licensed clinicians only see patients in their darkest hours of grief, addiction, and/or severely dysfunctional behavior. Because of the providers’ education, supervised training, expertise, spiritual giftedness, and (for Christian clinicians) an unwavering belief in the grace and supernatural power of God, treatment success can be measured as relief, acceptance, continued recovery, greater faith, emotional wellness, reconciled relationships, and even the joy of a fruitful ministry. Without a doubt, accurate DSM diagnoses and effectively implemented treatment plans can bring resolution and healing.

To that point, Reggie McNeal, a highly-respected life coach and mentor to thousands of Christian leaders, writes in Practicing Greatness, “Without appropriate self-awareness, hidden addictions or compulsions may guide leaders to behaviors that create huge problems…” (2006, p. 11). He has seen too many people blindsided by psychopathology and destructive impulses.
Savvy, well-trained coaches mindfully hear Dr. McNeal and deliberately avoid attempting to help people with such severe issues as clinical depression, ADHD, personality disorders, abusive relationships, and other mental illnesses. They are taught to honor the caregiving competence and professional excellence in the clinical counseling realm.

German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), believed that listening to someone was an act of service, because many people crave nothing more. He felt that if one can’t listen to another person in need, how can he listen to God? But if people fall in love with God by listening to His Word, so too by listening to others, they can learn to love them (Bonhoeffer, 2015).

From studying the life of Jesus, we know that He told stories, asked pointed questions, listened, quoted Scripture, prayed, and shared wisdom. Birthed out of this early Christian heritage, clinical and lay counselors, as well as professional and church-volunteer coaches, can all explore these topics with those in need:

- Spiritual gifts and habits
- Being in Christ
- Motives
- Prioritizing
- Fears
- Boundaries
- Work of the Holy Spirit
- Surrender
- God’s plan

Obviously, people-helpers in both coaching and counseling offer emotional wellness support and know when to discuss additional topics, such as self-care, uncluttered living, motivation, godly values that are the bedrock to faith-in-action, and character issues (e.g., humility, patience, God-confidence, perseverance, contentment, courage, forgiveness, and generosity). These opportunities to talk with an objective, active listener offer the counselee/coachee, respectively, substantial spiritual integration to become unstuck and move forward.

What Exactly is Life Coaching?
The English word coach has its earliest etymology in Hungary, where a lightweight, fully-enclosed carriage may have been designed, and it coached—transported—people from one location to another. Hungarian villagers revel in their folklore, retelling the tale of The Clever Coachman (Balassa & Ortutay, 1984). He appears in the hero’s life to transport him where he needs to go. In today’s vernacular, astute coaches move people to where they need to be, albeit no wagons are usually involved!

Some say that Christian life coaching is a discerning partnership or a confidential team, wherein coaches walk alongside highly-motivated clients and church members to hold them accountable. Licensed clinical psychologist, Gary Collins, reputed to be the father of Christian counseling and also today’s best champion of Christian coaching globally, describes coaching as “guiding a person or group from where they are toward the greater competence and fulfillment they desire. Coaching helps people expand their vision, build their confidence, unlock their potential, increase their skills, and take practical steps toward their goals” (2001, p. 16).

Now, quite profoundly, many Christian colleges and seminaries are offering master’s and doctoral degrees...
in life coaching. What an incredible turn of events as the Church recognizes that coaches can help Christ-followers obey God. In coach certification training, students are consistently reminded to refer out those potential clients who need counseling and keep only those who are healed enough to focus on God’s calling.

Like mental health professionals, coaches study the concepts of Hebrews 13:20, which defines one’s call as *producing in us all that is pleasing to him*, and they understand that God actually calls us to please Him in three specific ways (Brazelton, 2009).

1. The Call to Christ. We are called to be holy, worship and praise Christ, and glorify His name. We allow Him to mold our character to be more like His. That includes loving and forgiving one another, having integrity, checking our motives for all we do, and seeking peace. It means that we surrender to Him as Savior and Lord in an intimate relationship; that we are sold out unabashedly for Him.

2. The Call to Today’s Commitments and Challenges. Today, we do what matters. We do what He assigns us on a daily basis—with love and kindness. We enjoy our role as a spouse, parent, sibling, boss, employee, or student. This is a call to pay our bills on time, help our children with their homework, choose to eat healthy meals, or turn in excellent projects at work. It’s the nitty-gritty of life, in which we serve meals to fire victims, face cancer with God by our side, hug our pregnant teen, and say no to an affair.

3. The Call to a Unique Contribution. This is the call everyone wants to talk about. It is a call to leave a legacy; to do the “One Big Thing” that God had in mind for us to do before we were even born. It’s to fulfill our Life Mission and share our scripturally based Life Message. It’s our Divine Urge, the Passionate Ache of our Hearts, the Fascination in our Souls, our Destiny. About this calling, we say: “This I must do!”

People are eager to know and fulfill their God-given life purpose, so great Christian therapists and coaches boldly offer emotionally healthy souls a plan to live the life they only dreamed they could live.

What are the modern variations of niche coaching? Well, today, coaching for non and post-therapeutic issues has increased into the areas of career, relationships (friendships, family, dating, marriage, birthing, parenting, etc.), life transitions, balance, health and wellness, weight loss, court mediation, personal finance, professional speaking and writing, media and public relations, acting and voice, leadership, pastoring, church planting, character, etc.

All mental health professionals and professionally certified life coaches ask questions, listen, provide accountability, problem-solve, encourage emotional wellness, and offer resources that move the hurting person forward (Holmes, 2016). Not surprisingly, both sing out of the same hymnal on many topics because they come from the same historical, psychological, and biblical foundations.

Today, countless Christian peoplehelpers (including pastors, clinical social workers, school psychologists, psychiatric nurses, counselors, coaches) have been trained professionally to listen—through the power of God’s Spirit—to what is being said and what is
not being said by their patients/clients. What a career: listening to life stories and ascertaining healthy and unhealthy behaviors. Those dedicated servants stretch their counselees/coachees to discover who they are in Christ and unleash their God-granted ministry and mission longings. Together, they discuss strongholds and incremental steps to answer God's call.

**Biblical Basis for Counseling and Coaching**

We counsel and coach to the glory of our Maker. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), a psychologically-trained theologian and professor at the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard, was a prolific writer about the life of Jesus, the love of God, and service to others. In *The Spiritual Life: Eight Essential Titles*, he reflected on the modern age and its worrying people. He wrote, “Having looked critically at my own life and the lives of those around me, two words emerge as descriptive of our situation: filled and unfilled” (2016, pp. 7-8). He had discovered that being filled with the world’s busyness brings about a gnawing sense of feeling unfilled. The shorter version is this: *filled yet so unfilled*. Now more than ever, does it seem that God is calling people—helpers who counsel and coach those with a vague, foggy feeling of discontentment and purposelessness? If only people realized how the extremely busy Jesus avoided a fragmented life of worry, depression, and loneliness by making His highest priority the time He spent with His Father.

**The P.U.R.P.O.S.E. Plan**

To express the biblical beliefs of faith-based helpers a little differently, consider this list of seven principles from “The P.U.R.P.O.S.E. Plan” (Brazelton, 2013). The premise of the P.U.R.P.O.S.E. Plan is that everyone is in recovery from something and that pulling through with the help of a clinical counselor, recovery coach, or an accountability partner is often based...
on the realization of who God is and the fact that He took great pleasure in specifically designing an adventure for each person.

- **Principle I: Put God First**
  My primary purpose is to worship God with my life.

- **Principle II: Understand Biblical Truths about God’s Will**
  I understand my recovery in the bigger picture of how God is redeeming the world.

- **Principle III: Rightly Tell My Recovery Story**
  I turn my past and present over to God to complete my future life’s work.

- **Principle IV: Pursue Positive Practices to Maintain My Sobriety**
  I’m fully cooperating with God regarding His unique plan for my life.

- **Principle V: Opt Out of Self-sabotaging Methods**
  I choose to live a life of recovery and purpose now.

- **Principle VI: Surrender All to Christ My King**
  When I empty myself of self, I’m able to be and do all God wants.

- **Principle VII: Experience Heart-pounding Life Purpose**
  I’m living in the center of God’s will.

The Bible is packed with many hundreds of passages in this regard; here are but a few:

“So she got up, and at once she left the house and came away to her mother-in-law, saying to her, ‘Please let me go to my father’s house.’” (Luke 2:41).

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

“Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13b-14).

What about the future of counselors (with all their clinical peers) and coaches working together to help our protégés learn and grow into the men and women God created them to be? We can start by remembering that we have critical, shared objectives that are tied to these four words, which many Christians think are cryptic text from a foreign dictionary: **Surrender, Motives, Courage, and Purpose**. If we stick together on these basic concepts, counselors will know when a patient has progressed enough to be referred to a coach and, likewise, coaches will know when a client must be referred for counseling.

**Surrender All**
Surrender, which is defined as “the act of giving up one’s person or possessions into the authority of another... of relinquishing one’s power, aims, or goals (Morris, 1981),” is a moment-by-moment response to the promptings of God’s Spirit. It is acknowledging
that Christ the King has authority over all, including our loved ones, ministry, possessions, and hobbies.

Surrender is one of the greatest challenges of faith, but as counselees/coachees walk more closely with God, their trust in Him becomes totally sufficient for them. Philippians 2:9-11 teaches, “At the name of Jesus every knee will bow... and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord....”

Clinical counselors and coaches, alike, often discuss questions like these with those in their care:

1. What have you surrendered (a person, place or thing) into God’s care?
2. How can surrender ignite your God-given vision?
3. What are you thinking about surrendering soon? What keeps you from doing it today?
4. What do you believe you will never be able to surrender and why?

Many of those with whom we work want to want to leave everything in God’s hands, but the reality is they need a compass to guide them—specifically one that a pastoral care worker would use. They cannot be healthy beings, let alone fulfill God’s bold commission, without surrendering their will to His.

**Pure and Impure Motives**

Jesus lived without pretense, but many Christians are deceitful. Clinical counselors and coaches desire to see them live authentically by urging them to analyze their motives about why they do or do not do things. After all, we have it on good evidence that one of God’s pet peeves is wrong motives: Proverbs 16:2 reads, “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives.”

All experienced, intuitive professionals have designed ways to discuss motives with those God has sent them to serve, but the following is one additional, discerning exercise that makes for a great discussion.
Motive Check
Choose one answer for each emboldened phrase to form a complete sentence. Repeat!

I sometimes:
- ask for prayer
- attend an event
- cheat
- counsel a friend
- do a kind deed
- embarrass someone
- encourage someone
- fast
- give an expensive gift
- give a speech
- gossip

in order to:
- be famous, powerful or wealthy
- be in the in-crowd
- be puffed up with knowledge
- build a reputation
- cause a thrill
- cause someone’s indebtedness
- control someone
- gossip
- impress someone
- increase status
- manipulate a response
- make people like me
- mask pain, boredom, jealousy or loneliness
- reduce embarrassment
- relieve anger
- ease shame or guilt
- judge someone
- lie
- make a donation
- make amends
- pray
- seek forgiveness
- send a card
- serve on a committee
- steal
- tithe...
- feel good about what I did
- feel some drama, theatrics or passion
- get recognition, attention, affirmation or reward
- get pity or sympathy
- get revenge
- rub shoulders with someone famous
- satisfy curiosity
- secure bragging rights
- show off a talent, beauty or knowledge
- stir up trouble
- take advantage of people’s emotions or wallets (Brazelton, 2005, pp. 51-53).

Truly, it is challenging to engage in such a conversation, but what a privilege and responsibility to help someone realize that God abhors wrong motives; that impure motives sabotage their remarkable life mission.

Courage
It is common knowledge among caring professionals that courage gives people the strength to take risks, face danger, endure difficulty, and even withstand their worst fears, such as ridicule, abandonment, attention, failure or “being found out.” So people helpers keep passages like this top-of-mind: “Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

We ask our patients/clients these types of questions:
1. When has God come through for you in the past—in any regard, not just with a good dose of courage? Do you think He will keep showing up?

2. What has fear stolen from you (e.g., an opportunity for God to bless you or for you to bless others, peace, truth, compassionate aid, resolution)?

3. How does fear keep you focused on yourself? And speaking about those who “assist others,” what about Mordecai, who was Esther’s cousin and lay counselor/coach? He was a courageous Jew whose providential words challenged Esther to face her fears in spite of imminent danger. Are we not, as therapists or coaches, intended by God to be somebody’s Mordecai every working day… and on our days off, too?

Purpose
How can people helpers share a glimpse with their captive audiences of what their Abba/Papa wants them to become and what He wants to do in and through them? Certainly, the Father’s primary vision for all Christians is clearly revealed in the Bible: We are to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves (Luke 10:27), and go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19).

But what about God’s distinctive vision for an individual? That’s the desire that steals their heart and shouts, “This is your sacred commission—not better than, but more far-reaching than, your everyday purposes. It is the exclusive, soul-engaging work God prearranged for you eons ago. Christ wants to be made manifest in you!” Do many tend to follow His trustworthy direction, asking, “Lord, what is my next step of obedient cooperation?”

No, they do not. So, like Barnabas, professional listeners and encouragers rally their spiritual brothers and sisters toward the glorious burden God gave them for His use. The modern-day Barnabas holds them accountable for their behaviors that cloud their godly daydreams and reminds them that the change-process must start in their ordinary moments. And by all means, they do forewarn them that, when delays, distractions, disappointments, and dead ends haunt them, God is still God.

As you know, it’s intriguing to discuss these types of questions:

1. What three, supposedly random occurrences in your life might be sneak peeks at part of your fascinating purpose?

2. How are you managing your Do-Be-Do life assignments?
   - Do today what God wants you to do today.
   - Be holy.
   - Do the broad-reach, kingdom-building thing God created you to do.

3. Who is your accountability and/or prayer partner?

Dedicated, licensed mental health professionals and professionally-certified life coaches must rely on one another to help people lean into, and cherish, their growth in the areas of Surrender, Courage, Pure Motives, and Purpose. Our job and our joy is to close the gap between their timeworn themes of regrets, shamefulness, egocentricity, etc. and need to lead spiritually-integrated lives. The more we work in unison to guide them to stand at the crossroads, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, the more they will find rest for their souls (from Jeremiah 6:16). Together, we can foster a desire in patients/clients to make solid choices that support the magnificent legacy they were each created to leave.
KATHERINE BRAZELTON, Ph.D., M.Div., M.A., P.C.L.C., has authored eight “life purpose” coaching books translated in as many as 12 languages. Some titles include the Pathway to Purpose four-book series, The Way I’m Wired two-book series with a DVD for youth pastors/students, and The One Year Recovery Prayer Devotional: 365 Daily Meditations toward Discovering Your True Purpose. Dr. Brazelton is founder of the Board-certified Coach Training Provider, Life Purpose Coaching Centers International®. The school trains Christians internationally to become Professional Certified Life Coaches (PCLC). She is a Board Member for both Rockbridge Seminary and the International Christian Coaching Association (ICCA), and on the teaching team of AACC’s DVD-training series: Life Coaching 101+201. For more information, visit KatieBrazelton.com and LifePurposeCoachingCenters.com.