

TRANSFERENTIAL DISTORTIONS IN PASTORAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Much has been written on transference phenomena; yet, even from this writer's limited perspective, a significant number of pastors are seen who find themselves involved in transferential distortions in pastoral relationships without recognizing the significance of their involvement, sometimes with consequent misfortune. Not atypical is the experience one pastor reported:

As we started the counseling session on this particular morning it was hard for Mrs. X to express herself. She was obviously experiencing a great deal of internal resistance. This was pointed out to her; then, after a period of silence, with obvious evidence of pain and in a spirit of hopelessness, she said, "I think I'm falling in love with you."

Her pain was no more severe than my fear, and I could only hope the anxiety I felt inside was not outwardly visible. Quickly thoughts went through my mind about the inappropriateness of the situation; yet, this woman was obviously very serious. The situation became even more serious when I reminded myself that she had already made one very earnest attempt to destroy herself, failing only because of God's grace. I remember vaguely praying for the presence of that grace again that this woman might be helped in what seemed to be another impossible situation.

The phenomenon of transference was first defined because of similar incidents in the experiences of both Breuer and Freud. Breuer was so threatened by the situation—and understandably so—that

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he severed his counseling relationship with the particular patient involved and vowed such circumstances would never again arise. Freud was no less taken aback, but his scientific bent overrode his anxiety and he began to explore this unexpected phenomenon. He subsequently defined "transference" and later came to see it as an important therapeutic aid.

It is unfortunate that transference was first recognized in the field of psychoanalysis and became its major therapeutic tool. The consequence has been that discussion of transference distortions has been rather limited to the field of psychoanalysis. In time, however, it was recognized that transference reactions and distortions may take place in almost any dimension of person to person(s), person to institutions, person to animal, and person to thing relationship.

Only in recent years has attention been given to transference in pastoral relationships. Apparently the thinking has been that the pastor should not be involved in the kind of intimate relationship where intense transference distortions might occur, so there was no need to discuss the matter.

Nevertheless, the fact is that transference distortions do occur in pastoral relationships, even the more casual, and they deserve attention. Pattison warns:

We can observe in everyday life that people misinterpret each other and distort ordinary communications in seemingly absurd fashions. But these distortions are no laughing matter when a wife misinterprets why her husband came home late, or when the soprano takes the choir director's suggestions as a personal insult. Such distortions are omnipresent in the personal encounter of pastoral care, particularly so because the pastor is dealing with acute crises and emotionally charged situations.¹

There is no question but what the more intense states of transference, bordering on what Freud termed "transference neurosis" (as opposed to the milder "transference reaction"), also take place in pastoral relationships. The case cited at the beginning approached that intensity.

In time another phenomenon known as "countertransference" was recognized. Freud began to observe feelings within the analyst which arose as a result of the patient's influence on the analyst's unconscious feelings. The term "countertransference" is a bit ambiguous, for the prefix "counter" infers a reaction to the transference feelings of

the counselee when in fact the term means a reaction to the whole person, not just a response to his transference feelings.

Considering all these factors, it becomes apparent that the pastor needs a comprehensive definition of the phenomena. Bellwood's definition seems most appropriate:

Transference is a psychological bond between people in which one person's reaction in a current relationship is influenced by his former relationship patterns to significant persons rather than by the stimuli present in the context of the current relationship. The situation is reversed in the case of counter-transference. That is, when the second person's reaction to the first person in the same relationship is also influenced by his former relationship patterns to significant persons rather than by the stimuli in the present context, he is involved in counter-transference. Both phenomena may occur wherever interpersonal relationships are present, and they are always irrational or inappropriate responses. They may be either positive or negative, or carry both positive and negative implications at the same time.²

It should be noted that not all writers agree with the significance of transference distortions implied in this definition. Rollo May, for example, sees the contemporary relationship and its existential factors as equally or even more important than past relationships. Others, such as O. Hobart Mowrer and Jay Adams, suggest that transference will not exist under proper circumstances, and if it does it should be quickly nipped in the bud. Nevertheless, transference is seen in a variety of circumstances with varying intensity, and every pastor should be able to identify transference distortions and deal with them appropriately.

Concerning dynamics and identification, transference distortions arise out of some former relationship between the person experiencing those feelings and a former significant person in his life. That significant person is often a parent or sibling, but may be any important person. The former relationship is important because of some connected conflictual factor. The conflict may involve an unmet need, hypergratification, or loss. Whatever the nature of the archaic activity, it is repeated as a defense, a solution, or as a later effort to fulfill an unmet need in a different situation involving a different object. The process may include a series of displacements involving several object relations; in this case patterns of behavior are established which often significantly determine how that person reacts toward others. Such would be a factor

in Eric Berne's understanding of a life script.

Pastoral relationships are especially significant when we begin to consider the object upon which the transference affect is displaced. The new object may be a new significant person, an animal, an institution, or even indeed an inanimate object. However, some objects are more susceptible recipients of transference affect than others. Physicians, dentists, lawyers, teachers, and similar professional persons are recognized as likely candidates. Churches, brotherhood and fellowship organizations, one's alma mater, and the armed services are examples of institutions that serve as new objects.

The pastor, though, is a unique candidate. Consider the way he is addressed: "Father," "Reverend," "Pastor,"—all paternal associations. Leading in worship he sometimes wears a robe, a feminine-type garb which suggests a maternal image. Add to these images his role as judge, moralist, and authority figure. Yet, there are still other considerations. In the course of his ministry he is often involved in very close interpersonal relationships, often highly emotionally charged, which certainly contribute to his potential as a powerful transference object. And, the opportunities for these relationships are broad. They may occur between the pastor and a parishioner individually, with a parishioner in a group, with two or more parishioners in a group, between the minister's wife and parishioner(s), between fellow ministers, and most certainly in the structured counseling situation.

These factors can be a boon to the pastor. As Clinebell suggests, "Because of the richness of his transference image as a clergyman, and the depth symbols of religion, he has unique assets as a depth therapist."³ On the other hand, the richness of the image can be Satan's snare for the pastor who finds himself trapped in a neurotic love affair or who finds himself reacting without understanding and inappropriately to negative transference feelings.

Greenson suggests general characteristics about transference distortions which are helpful in identification: inappropriate; by and large intense; ambivalent; capricious, that is inconstant, erratic and whimsical, and yet tenacious along with their capricious nature. In terms of affect, the positive transference distortions are characterized by feelings of love, fondness, trust, amorousness, liking, concern, devotion, admiration, infatuation, passion, hunger, yearning, tenderness, or respect. As these terms suggest, they may or may not be of an erotic nature. The feelings of negative transference may be those of hatred, anger, hostility, mistrust, abhorrence, aversion, loathing, resentment, bitterness, envy, dislike, contempt, annoyance.

These various feelings may be manifested by the parishioner, particularly the counselee, in frequent requests for individual attention or for counseling outside the time or place of the regularly structured counseling situation; inappropriate response, positive or negative, to routine pastoral work; demands that the pastor resolve the parishioner's personal problems or make his personal decisions; failure to keep appointments or fulfill obligations, or, overzealous efforts to perform tasks likely to please the pastor; and, repeated instances when the parishioner dreams about the pastor.⁵

Godin lists indicators by which the pastor may suspect he is experiencing transference distortions toward the parishioner.

I should suspect myself of displaying a tendency toward the transference aspect of a counselor-counselee relationship if I:

- feel uneasy, sad, or depressed, or, on the contrary, elated, enthusiastic, or excited about the counselee;
- experience sudden waves of enthusiasm or boredom during our meetings;
- have long, impassioned arguments with him;
- feel worried by his reproaches or his criticism;
- derive enormous conscious pleasure from his congratulations, his signs of satisfaction, gratitude, or affection;
- am incapable of refusing to adopt the expected attitude (e.g., reassurance, praise, encouragement, friendship);
- steer the conversation away from certain subjects which he brings up (e.g., death, sexual experience, money);
- maintain a continuous dependence in the counseling relationship, especially by the constant use of reassuring words and phrases;
- encourage the counselee in his aggressive self-release from a relationship against which he is rebelling (e.g., against his family, his wife, or his employer);
- feel obliged to help him by interfering in the details of his daily life, by taking the initiative in his place (e.g., telephoning the doctor) or by easily resolving problems by the use of personal influence;
- am careless about the practical details of our meetings or take unusual pains over them (e.g., punctuality, choice of room, arrangements for the next meeting);
- make a point of discussing his case with my colleagues, emphasizing his importance, his merits, or his personality;

talk about him in an ironic or cynical manner;
worry continually about the successful outcome of his case, about whether he is following my advice, and about keeping in contact contact with him;
dream about the counselee.⁶

The importance of handling transference distortions appropriately becomes apparent when one considers some of the stakes: perhaps the well-being of one or more persons, the security of a marriage, the life of a church, maybe even a life itself.

The psychoanalyst has traditionally seen transference as a therapeutic aid, and his extensive supervised training and personal psychotherapy have prepared him to deal with the phenomena. But, even if the pastor ascribed to the therapeutic value of the development of the transference phenomena in counseling, most have not had personal psychotherapy or extensive supervised training. Thus, though he may be a rich transference figure, he is less likely to be apt at recognizing and handling transference. This suggests that the average pastor needs to be trained to deal more constructively with transference. Because the average pastor lacks this training, many, including Clinebell,⁷ warn against getting involved in those kinds of counseling situations where intense transference distortions are likely to develop.

However, even though he complies with the foregoing warnings, the average active pastor, and particularly the counseling pastor, will inevitably find himself involved in an intense transference relationship. Little has been written to guide him in handling the situation.

How he deals with transference phenomena will be determined by his own experience and his theoretical stance. Some options and guidelines have been suggested:

1. It is highly questionable that the pastor should ever consciously try to promote transference. This is not to discount his concern for rapport and mutual regard necessary to any helping relationship.

2. However, if transference develops and the pastor is aware of its existence, one option is to focus on the conscious feelings of the present and not attempt to interpret the meaning of the transference distortion to the counselee.⁸ Or, if he does attempt interpretation, he may do so as Jay Adams would suggest, within a contemporary context which sees most transference phenomena as inappropriate because they are sinful.⁹ (This writer views the latter as reflecting a very constricted view of transference distortions.)

3. If transference persists, or counter-transference develops and

cannot be dealt with objectively, the pastor may have to take steps to check the distortions. This can be accomplished by shortening meeting times and making them less frequent, refusing special favors, confining counseling contacts to scheduled sessions, refusing to counsel by telephone or correspondence, and letting the counselee know the counselor is aware of the transference aspect of their relationship. If the transference or counter-transference still persists, referral may be in order.

4. Assuming that the pastor sees the interpretation of transference distortions as a possible aid to the counseling process and the ability to do so is within the realm of his experience, he still may determine not to deal with less intense transference distortions by interpreting them to the counselee. On the other hand, if they are intense and persist he may conclude that an interpretation of their existence and meaning could be helpful. The premise is that through the process of interpretation the parishioner may gain some insight into the archaic nature of his behavior, the inappropriateness of his behavior, and perhaps even clues as to the unmet need or conflict which has influenced his pattern of reaction. It is anticipated that these insights will then enable the parishioner to deal with his feelings in a manner appropriate to his present life circumstances. This is the pre-supposition behind all insight therapy.

5. Godin suggests that in addition to an explicit reference and interpretation of the transference distortions, the pastor may put them to "religious use."¹⁰ By this he infers that there is an ambiguity about many of the feelings we have as we grow toward maturity, and it is natural for us to feel dependent, insecure, guilty, or child-like in our relationships both toward God and toward important persons in our lives. However, we often do not sort out our objects appropriately. Consequently, there may be opportunity for the pastor to help the parishioner resolve some of the ambiguity and transfer appropriate feelings to God. There is merit in this idea and there may be opportunity for the counselee to discover ultimate meaning in relating to the One who invited us to cast all our care upon Him—the One whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light.

6. Finally, it is important that the pastor and his wife be well adjusted themselves so they can recognize transference phenomena; they would not react inappropriately, but rather could identify the transferred nature of the circumstances. It also follows that well adjusted pastors and their wives will be less likely to introduce their own un-

conscious needs into their interpersonal relationships and get involved in the so-called "counter-transference."

The threats of transference distortions are not to be denied. They are complex, powerful, and seemingly ubiquitous. Every pastor is obligated to learn to understand them, to recognize them in his parishioners and himself, and to decide according to his theoretical position and experience what he will do about them. To ignore transference distortions may at the least make him less effective as a minister, and at the most may mean a wrecked life, a wrecked family, or maybe a wrecked church.

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1. E. Mansell Pattison, "Transference and Countertransference in Pastoral Care," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* (Winter, 1965), XIX, 194.
 2. Lester Raymond Bellwood, "Transference Phenomena in Pastoral Work" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1962), p. 7.
 3. Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 278.
 4. Ralph R. Greenson, *The Technique and Practice of Psychoanalysis* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc. 1967), Vol. I, 155-62, 225, 233.
 5. List of manifestations adapted from that of Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 198. (For a more extensive list of such indications, see Wolstein, *Transference*, pp. 135-37.)
 6. Andre Godin, *The Pastor as Counselor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), pp. 93-94.
 7. Clinebell, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.
 8. Suggested by Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
 9. Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 100-104.
 10. Godin, *op. cit.*, p. 79.