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The Essentials of Effective Pastoral Counseling

By OTTO E. SOHN

PASTORAL counseling is an age-old art. When impenitent King David all but succumbed under the impact of a terrific sin, his divinely sent pastoral adviser, the prophet Nathan, deftly aided him to find a solution to his problem. By means of a well-chosen parable he first led him to recognize the enormity of his sin, and from there it was but a short step to confession, absolution, and a new lease on life. Scriptural examples of this blessed soul-healing function could be greatly multiplied, especially from the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. The story of Jesus' treatment of Nicodemus, of the Samaritan woman, of the adulteress in Simon's house; His dealings with the Apostles themselves, both individually and collectively; the ministrations of the Apostles to the many weary wayfarers along the highways of life — what are these blessed activities but examples of the counseling art at its best? To deal with the disturbed and distressed, to help men find solutions to their problems of conscience, of right and wrong, of sickness and suffering, and of the meaning and value of life will, next to preaching the Gospel of God's love, ever remain the foremost function also today of Christ's ambassadors. And where is there a better source book from which to learn this noble art than the sacred writings of Him who said of Himself: "I am the Lord that healeth thee"?

This is not to say, however, that the modern pastor may not use modern tools in applying the Word as each case requires. We must not indeed discard the Savior for mere tools, but, on the other hand, we must not reject the instruments which will aid us in doing a better job. And there are helpful tools at our disposal. Science has made tremendous forward strides in our day, also in the field of counseling. Psychology and psychiatry, with their keen analysis of the human mind and of the many ills and ailments to which sinful man is subject, are prepared to equip the eager student with fine insights and approaches to make this difficult task more effec-

tive. True, many of the experts are not at all interested in the Bible or in Christianity. Their outlook is frequently naturalistic and non-Christian, even antichristian. Christ and His redemption have no place in their thinking. Yet this does not compel a Christian counselor to discard their findings *a priori*. If he cannot use everything, he can prove all things and keep that which is good. The pastor who engages in diligent study of the chief works on pastoral counseling will not only be rewarded with a decided improvement in his own counseling program, but also with a greater measure of the joy and satisfaction which comes with the increased ability to help people.

PASTORAL COUNSELING DEFINED

Counseling as such has been defined as a personal, dynamic relationship between two people who approach a mutually defined problem with mutual consideration for each other, to the end that the weaker or less mature, or more troubled, of the two may be aided in solving his problem. Narrowing this down to our own subject, we may describe pastoral counseling as such a personal and dynamic relationship between two or more people, one of whom is a pastor, who approach a problem for the purpose of finding a solution to it on the proper basis. And that proper basis is none other than the basis of Holy Scripture. Pastoral counseling which is worthy of the name will always seek solutions to life's problems that are morally correct, Christian, and God-pleasing, solutions therefore that are Scriptural and Christ-centered.

This point is important to remember. Many of the experts who write on the subject of counseling are not Christian men, but men of this world or of a Christless religion whose sole tools for relieving the ills and woes of men are psychology and psychiatry. Not a few of them are thoroughly secularistic, unchristian, even antichristian in outlook, having no regard for the doctrine of Christ and proclaiming that our traditional principles of right and wrong as drawn from Holy Writ are outmoded and should be replaced by new standards; or also that man is inherently good and will always choose the morally good if the environment is right and he is unencumbered by outside pressure. Such extremists teach a type of counseling which is without any set standards of morality.

Their treatment of the mentally and spiritually afflicted does not concern itself about sin and grace. Everything is done on a coldly scientific basis; and even though some relief may be given, the patient is brought no nearer to his God than he was before.

Not much better are the efforts of those who purport to be Christians and to do Christian counseling, but who ignore the doctrine of Christ and are concerned merely with the ethical principles of Christianity. It is no doubt true and proper to say that even such counseling may exert a benign influence on the afflicted. It may be false comfort that is given, yet for the sufferer it may be said to be comfort. This is the point at which so many textbooks on counseling fail. They speak in glowing terms of religion and its beneficent influence, yet it is not Christianity which they have in mind, but simply the adoption and practice of approved ethics. Thus it is most unusual and refreshing to find a book on counseling that actually directs the seeker to Calvary's Cross as the ultimate source of comfort and strength in his affliction. As a rule, the atonement through Jesus Christ is completely ignored. Yet it is only when the counselee is led to, and confirmed in, faith in the sin-atoning Christ that counseling can be said to be proper and effective. Faith in the sacrificial atonement of Christ on Calvary's Cross is the only effective and permanent cure for a guilt complex, as it is the only true source of comfort and strength for him who is afflicted with an incurable ailment or burdened with a load that he finds so difficult to lay down, as, e. g., the drunkard or narcotic or habitual criminal. For only through faith in Jesus Christ does any sinner have the right to feel sure of his pardon and of God's upholding and sustaining love in the day of trial. Every other anchor is sure to give way when the inner conflict increases in fury.

Let it therefore be said once more, and that with all possible force and emphasis, that the only pastoral counseling worthy of the name is that which is Bible-centered and Christ-centered. Sociology, psychology, psychiatry, ethical principles, and common sense all have their place, but apart from Holy Scripture they are utterly valueless. As far as the individual is concerned, it is as true today as it was nineteen centuries ago, that "without faith it is impossible to please God." The faithful Christian pastor himself will there-

fore heed the mandate of St. Paul to Timothy: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). That is to say, the Christian pastoral counselor must operate with the Word. It is his task to divide, to apportion, and to apply it to the individual, to see that each and every soul gets the particular message from the Word which he needs in order to be and remain a penitent, believing, consecrated, and submissive child of God. The Word of God is the best, yea, the only true tool of soul healing. The Law prepares the way, convicts of sin, shows the true nature of sin and God's righteous wrath; the Gospel creates and strengthens faith, brings comfort and cheer, produces the will to do God's will as well as to submit to it in the day of adversity. The Word alone makes a man willing to avoid all that is contrary to Holy Scripture and therefore harmful to his soul. It alone can make him a conqueror through Christ by holding up to his view the glorious future that awaits those who believe in Him and remain faithful to God in every storm and stress of life. True Christian pastoral counseling, therefore, has but one real objective, namely, to proclaim the Word, publicly and privately, in season, out of season, for repentance and the salvation of souls.

TYPES OF COUNSELING

It is customary to distinguish between directive and non-directive counseling, the former having a narrower and a broader aspect. In the narrow sense, directive counseling is a procedure in which the counselor gives definite direction as to a resolution or decision which the counselee must adopt or follow, even if he does not understand the necessity for it. This is also referred to as imposition, the counselor imposing his will and solution of a problem on the counselee. In the broader sense, directive counseling includes any and every aid given to the client which will help him come to a decision in the solution of his problem. In this approach the counselor makes use of various devices, such as questions, suggestions, and instructions, so as to lead the individual to make the decision which is considered correct and desirable by the counselor.

Non-directive counseling on the other hand is an approach in which the counselor is merely a by-stander. He listens intently,

marks every word, studies the counselee carefully, asserts and demonstrates his interest in him, affords him ample opportunity to unburden himself freely, but gives no hint, no directive, no advice, no suggestion, no guidance whatever. The counselee is to engage in intense reflection and ultimately find the correct answer to his problem himself. This is the type of counseling frequently advocated by the experts, one of its chief exponents being Carl R. Rogers.

Can a Christian pastor operate in that way? It should be apparent at once that in spiritual matters such a course is utterly out of the question. True, it is a good procedure to let people talk freely. Steam is dangerous only when it is tightly contained, but harmless if there is a safety valve through which it may escape. If it is a guilt complex that is troubling the individual, let him unburden himself. Confession has a fine therapeutic value; it is good for the soul. The more fully an individual empties himself of his seething guilt, the more freely he talks and confesses, the more directly and effectively the pastor can apply the healing balm of the Word. If it is family trouble or some other problem that weighs heavily upon him, again there will be great relief if he is given the opportunity to pour out his soul to the counselor. And not only that, but people are thus trained to help themselves. They will endeavor to think things through themselves and thus gradually be able, without much guidance, to recognize where the solution to the problem lies, at least in the less difficult cases. For that reason we must never overlook to counsel and encourage our people, especially the members of our confirmation classes, to come to us with their spiritual problems rather than go to well-meaning friends and receive wrong advice instead of God's answer to the problem.

On the other hand, we must not forget that the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God and that also the regenerate, though they live in grace, may still be weak in understanding. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that it is one thing to know the Gospel and quite another thing to apply it wholeheartedly when an outraged conscience is smiting severely. Both our public and our private ministrations are based in part on this fact that sinful man, also the weak and halting Christian,

indeed even the strong Christian in moments of weakness, needs talking to, exhortation, persuasion, and repeated assurance from and with the consoling Gospel of God's grace. It is often the very nature of a Christian's affliction that though he has learned it, he finds it so hard to believe that God cares, that He forgives. To expect people to get such faith by proper reflection, without counsel or guidance, is nothing short of preposterous.

So it would seem imperative that we strike a happy medium between the directive and non-directive method and say: Let the client do as much as he can; let him empty himself freely of the thing which weighs so heavily upon his heart and mind, but let the Christian pastor always stand by ready to aid and assist so that a God-pleasing solution may speedily be found, if indeed such solution is attainable.

A pertinent statement by Russell Dicks in *Marriage and Family Living* (summer, 1950) will throw further light on this matter. Commenting on the Rogers method, he states that it is too wooden and lacks flexibility; furthermore, it is limited not only in establishing rapport or friendly relationship, especially when a minister is called to a sickbed, but also for purposes of exploration. How can we find out what is troubling our client if he does not talk and we are not supposed to ask? Then he points to his own system, which he calls "Creative Listening," the chief element of which is that of interest or the capacity of identifying one's self with the person who has the difficulty. This system consists of four parts:

1. *Directive listening*, characterized by the use of questions. The art of asking questions, he says, is the art of counseling, especially of the marital type. It is by asking questions that you explore, just as the surgeon uses a scalpel.

2. *Supportive listening*. This is the heart of the matter. We support the client with our interest, calmness, optimism, hope, and basic faith. We lend him our minds, interests, hopes, and belief that things can be worked out; also our affections. The counselor must be religious, furthermore, in order to succeed; otherwise he cannot work long with people and succeed. Supportive listening is characterized by "Yes, uh-huh, I understand," and aided by the use of the eyes, face, tone of voice, and attention. It includes

words of encouragement at difficult places, a nod of approval, a smile of understanding, and a look of sympathy.

3. *Interpretation*, by explaining the situation to the counselee. This is a short cut to the objective, but it is dangerous, since it is advice giving. It had best be done sparingly and by the use of questions rather than of interpretative statements.

4. *Reassurance*, by which support is thrown on the side of the counselee. The counselor lets him know that he has a friend who cares. This is especially helpful in marital cases where frustration is about to result in a suit for divorce.

A few remarks from the *Education Digest*, published at Ann Arbor, Mich., will also be in place:

Some of the old-timers did not think that there was a necessary wickedness inherent in helping someone; and it is not unethical to teach a student who comes for help. On the contrary, to withhold help and to merely reflect might in itself be said to be unethical, because it does not help the individual in the way he wishes or expects to be helped. To say that the individual is not to be imposed on from the outside is the same as saying he has potentiality in himself, which is a contradiction. The history of pedagogy and therapy shows that some type of direct assistance seems to be needed in order to achieve growth, though it is also true that in case of many other individuals certain kinds of external influences have disruptive, traumatic, and growth-repressing effects. The non-directive counseling method is often frustrating. Said one: "All I got was reflection, which was of little value." By way of example, one goes to an expert not to have him live your life for you, but for consultation. Responsibility dodging and authoritarian dominance must both be avoided. It is impossible for the counselor, like a teacher, to be neutral, else he would not care what becomes of the counselee. Unbridled growth (under non-directive counseling) is just as bad as imposed growth (by directive counseling). There is no moral advantage of the one over the other.*

To all of this we may add: The matter of counseling is tremendously important. People are in need of help, and we are

* Williamson, E. G., "Directive vs. Non-Directive Counseling," *Education Digest*, Ann Arbor, Mich., January, 1951, pp. 34-36.

prepared to give it. But we must always make sure that it is Christian counseling. People who come to the pastor with a problem expect the pastor to give them instruction, or point out the area in which they are out of harmony with God in faith or life, and the way and method of getting into harmony with Him. The pastor who fails to give instruction and guidance on the basis of the Word where that is needed—and where isn't it needed?—fails the counselee and also fails in his function as a Christian pastor.

USEFUL HINTS FOR EFFECTIVE COUNSELING

1. Always be at your best: physically, so as to make a good impression; socially, so as to attract and be accepted; mentally, so as to get and give good insights; spiritually, so as to give the proper, God-pleasing counsel.

2. Cultivate assurance, so as to make the counselee feel that you are able to help him.

3. Be sympathetic. The counselee must be convinced that you are deeply interested in him and want to help him. He must be put at ease. To that end you must study yourself. It is the pastor who knows his own reactions to trouble and has found the right remedies for them who can deal sympathetically with sufferers.

4. Be a good listener. It is difficult for a pastor to become a good listener. All through college and seminary he was trained to talk and get people to listen to him. But in counseling we must know how to listen, for, as said, even the mere unloading of a burden brings a measure of relief to the afflicted, which may then be enhanced by inspired Christian counsel.

5. Train people to come to you with confidence. To that end you must never speak of things which people have confided to you. Such matters must be kept confidential and inviolate. Begin early. Encourage children to share their joys with you. Then they will also come to you with their cares and sorrows when trouble comes.

6. Be systematic. It is well to make known that you are available in your office at certain hours. It is also advisable to limit the time of the interview and to arrange for another meeting

if necessary. This procedure will also give the counselor the opportunity to give more thought to a vexing problem or even to discuss it with a doctor, psychiatrist, or brother pastor. An hour should ordinarily suffice for one interview.

7. In case of protracted trouble it is a good plan to leave a written prescription. Select a comforting Scripture text for the individual, and write it on your name card. It will work for you and for him during your absence, especially during the long hours of the night.

8. Above all, be a good Bible student. This is the prime consideration for a Christian pastoral counselor. If we seek to counsel without the Word, we are neither Christian nor pastoral counselors. Yet we must also guard against becoming stereotyped or mechanical by using the same material over and over without change. As in preaching and teaching, so also in our pastoral counseling we must constantly strive after growth, better understanding, and new material so as to achieve ever new freshness and effectiveness. The key to that is diligent and attentive Bible study.

A few cautions or negative suggestions will also be in order:

1. Do not interrupt the counselee, but let him talk freely as long as he is in the mood.

2. Do not minimize his problems. Ridiculing, lecturing, scolding, or censuring tend to discourage a man from unburdening himself. By all means avoid the use of sarcasm when the individual has perhaps brought the situation upon himself by indiscretion or even willfulness. We should appreciate the fact that he came to us at all and therefore make the most of the opportunity.

3. Do not betray shock or anger over what is revealed to you. You must not be resentful, but treat the malady. Help him to overcome it.

4. Do not talk about yourself, nor recite your own experiences. In rare cases the latter may be done with profit, but let such references be rare and brief. Concentrate on the client's problems and the cure.

5. Do not press for an answer or decision. If the client does not respond voluntarily, it may be best to meet again. To insist upon a decision may create antagonism and loss of confidence.

6. Never leave a patient dangling. Who knows what may happen before you see him again? Therefore give him a Gospel text on which to meditate. Better still, as said before, write one on your name card, and leave it with him. He will probably read it over and over again in the dead of night and thus be helped through a trying ordeal.

But to conclude. We pastors occupy a unique position. We are representatives, orderlies of the Divine Physician, who alone can save and alone can heal. Ours is the task of helping and comforting those who are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. We are to assist the afflicted in conquering their trials and tribulations and achieving the end of their faith, even the salvation of their souls. Of this responsibility we must always be aware, regardless of the nature of their problems or the type of counseling which we are called upon to give. Such awareness will at all times be for us an incentive to greater faithfulness. We also enjoy the confidence of our people. They receive us in Christ's stead, as His ambassadors, unburden themselves to us for His sake, and accept our ministrations as though performed by Him. Certainly, we should do nothing that would in any way undermine and destroy their confidence in us, since it is that very confidence which moves them to reveal so much of their inmost selves to us in order that we may with considerable accuracy diagnose their spiritual condition and minister to them more confidently and effectively. And if at times the task becomes difficult and discouraging, then let us remember that there is no other profession on God's earth which offers opportunity for such splendid and lasting service as the Christian ministry with its public and private pastoral counseling. We are Heaven's guides who lead lost and troubled souls to peace and happiness here and hereafter. But let our counseling always be Bible-centered and Christ-centered.

St. Louis, Mo.

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