

6-1-1969

The Gospel Approach to Counseling

Kenneth Siess

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Siess, Kenneth (1969) "The Gospel Approach to Counseling," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 40, Article 44.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol40/iss1/44>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Gospel Approach to Counseling

KENNETH SIESS

Pastors are discovering today that the issue of pastoral counseling comes up repeatedly, both in their pastoral practice and in their study. A survey conducted several years ago revealed that of the people interviewed 42 percent indicated that they sought out a clergyman as their first source for help in an emotional crisis in their lives. Most pastors can attest readily to the reality of such a statistic. Day after day they are being sought out by people who find themselves in some kind of stress and are looking for help. In response to this demand pastors are becoming increasingly involved in seminars, workshops, and graduate courses in counseling. They are reading a rapidly expanding volume of literature in the area, some of it helpful and some misleading.

In the light of this situation one feels both compelled and reluctant to enter still another piece of thought into an already complex picture. Much has been written and said about this topic—perhaps too much. At the same time, however, the Lutheran theologian and pastor can't help but feel dissatisfied with much of the writing that has appeared in this area. The urge is great therefore to try to restate the case for counseling from an "evangelical" point of view.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In this article the term "counseling" is understood as a particular relationship be-

Kenneth Siess is supervisor of clinical pastoral education at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

tween a person (parishioner) who is seeking help for a problem from another person (pastor) who is felt to be capable of providing such help under conditions which are mutually contracted. By this we are delineating counseling from other kinds of relationships which a pastor might establish with his parishioner. We are designating it as a rather formal situation in which the counselee knows he has some kind of need, seeks out the pastor and asks for his help, and agrees to talk his problem over with the pastor at prearranged times and under controlled circumstances (usually in the pastor's office).

Counseling has been defined more broadly by some to include hospital visits and informal conversations after church or even over the phone. These are certainly legitimate pastoral functions and often prove very helpful. This author prefers to designate these functions as "pastoral care" reserving the term "counseling" for the more narrowly defined service, as stated above.

Counseling in this article is modified by the word "pastoral." That term will be used to designate the context of the relationship and also something about the goal of that relationship.

The context referred to is that of the Christian congregation, in which the pastor is given responsibility for the care of those persons who are members of the congregation. That is to say that we will be thinking mainly of the kind of counseling which the pastor does with his own parishioners. It implies both the advantages and the cer-

tain limitations which that ongoing relationship provides.

Though the pastor is concerned about and dedicated to the total welfare of the members of the congregation, he is also charged with a specific concern, namely, the *faith* of his fellow Christians. His main function is to communicate the gospel to the believers through every possible means so that the relationship of faith created at baptism is nurtured and maintained. In his counseling, then, the pastor's ultimate goal is to communicate the gospel as he helps the parishioner with his problem.

The need for pastoral counseling arises not out of fadish fascination with psychology, as some have charged, but rather out of the very nature of man himself. By virtue of his predicament man faces a continual conflict with himself, his fellowman, and with God. It is to this conflict that the gospel speaks, and it is in this area of conflict that the pastor ministers. His purpose is to bring to bear the means of grace to provide strength so that the Christian can face his conflicts more openly and fight against them more productively.

MAN'S CONFLICT

The Christian pastor will do well to take seriously man's state of conflict. This is fundamental to understanding man's nature and condition. It is part of man's plight that he lives in a state of tension which involves every aspect of his existence. He is pulled and pushed by a number of opposing forces over which he has only partial control at best. The people who come to seek counseling are usually individuals who have become particularly aware of their state of conflict and their inability to handle this by themselves.

Man's condition arose first from his revolt against God. This resulted in his conflict with himself and his fellowman. This is the historical sequence recorded in Scripture. However, in the life-history of an individual the sequence is different. Here the awareness of conflict first arises out of a relationship with other human beings (normally with one's parents). This interpersonal conflict produces an awareness of intrapersonal conflict. Only later does a person realize the basic conflict with God. It is this sequence which will be followed here, because it is this course of events that a counselor is more likely to sense.

The human infant is a totally dependent creature. Unless he is cared for over an extended period he cannot live. He is also a very sensitive creature. Having been thrust forth from the secure and nurturing environment of the womb, he becomes sharply aware of a disturbing and threatening world. So he needs and demands protection, comfort, and nurture. If his demands are not totally met, he is in a state of tension. This is first centered on his mother or mother-substitute. Later he experiences this same kind of conflict in relationships with other people.

From the outset, then, life is a series of conflicts and struggles with others, as each individual attempts to have his own needs met. Maturity, and especially Christian maturity, helps people to curb their demands, even to sublimate them. So the conflict can be reduced. However, the tension is never eliminated completely.

This interpersonal conflict is the predecessor of intrapersonal conflict. The child whose needs go unmet experiences discomfort and sometimes pain. He may

attempt to find relief for himself if it is not forthcoming. An example of this would be the hungry child sucking his fist. He soon experiences his own inability to produce what he needs and wants.

Later, when the child is able to conceptualize, he conceives of himself, at least on one level of consciousness, as one who is unable to satisfy his own desires. Such a realization can be frightening, however, since that leaves him at the mercy of others. So on another level he may try to cover up by imagining himself to be more powerful than he is. Yet underneath he knows the real truth which he finds hard to admit. So he is in conflict with himself.

Furthermore, having experienced his inability to get others to satisfy his needs, he begins to wonder if there is something wrong with him which causes this. He experiences himself as being unacceptable in some way. This is a concept which is later reinforced by other developments in his history. But again this puts him in conflict with himself. He wants and needs to feel he is acceptable. Yet he has discovered evidence that he is not. So he must struggle within over the truth about himself.

This, too, is a conflict which stays with him in some degree throughout his life. Though God's Word answers the questions of a man's ability and acceptability, the question will continue to arise. It may occur only on an unconscious, or a "feeling," level, but it will occur repeatedly. This is a tension with which men must live.

It is not until later in a person's development that the fundamental conflict with God can be realized. Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions are clear that this is the root of all other conflicts. However,

conscious realization of that fact comes only when a person is old enough mentally to have that concept interpreted to him. Furthermore, this truth can be accepted only as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit.

A man's experience of suffering and tension within himself and in his relations with other people can serve as prelude to his realization of his conflict with God. It is natural that this should be so, since the other conflicts are a direct result of the original conflict. When the original relationship of trust between God and His first creatures was broken, human beings were doomed to live at odds with themselves and their fellow creatures.

From that point mankind was doomed to exist in conflict with its Creator as well. The original act of revolt was to be repeated over and over again. Even though God resolved the conflict in Jesus Christ, unbelief continues to plague also the Christian and keeps him from relying totally on God's declaration of peace. Disharmony and tension is the result.

The Christian who comes to the pastor for counseling is indeed a redeemed man. But he is also very much a sinner at the same time. It is not that he is half one and half the other, but the two states are intertwined and in continual conflict with each other. Furthermore, it is this tension existing at the root of man's being that causes him pain and conflict in all the other aspects of his existence. Consequently, the Christian person needs to hear the good news of God's grace applied to his conflicts again and again. This is especially true when a person comes to the pastor for help in a particular situation of distress.

GOD'S SOLUTION

The solution God effected is one which not only solves the problem but also shapes the lives and work of those who lay claim to that solution for themselves. The nature of that solution has direct bearing on the nature of the church and ministry, and therefore on pastoral counseling as a part of that ministry. We need therefore to examine the cure which God holds out to man.

Essential to the nature of the solution is the fact that God began by becoming one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He did not stand outside the problem with a superior attitude, simply berating and condemning man. He did not shout out advice from on high telling man to change himself and come back to Him. Rather He took on the form of the "fallen ones" Himself and thrust Himself into the very midst of the problem.

The forces of evil that held sway in God's world were the enemies He encountered in battle. Sickness, alienation, corruption—the evidences of the power of the enemy—moved Him deeply. He responded to these by fully identifying Himself with man in his terrible plight. He groaned, sighed, and wept as He encountered these conditions. Finally He took on the last and greatest sign of man's fallen condition: death. Once again He met this evil personally, feeling its full weight in Himself.

At the same time, however, He encountered these problems as one who was God. He knew His Father's mind, so He was fully aware of His attitude and will toward man. He was in full harmony with that will. So He acted on behalf of God, moving against that which was evil and

on behalf of that which was good for the whole creation. He made available His power as the Son of God to men in their own struggle against the Evil One.

His activity was victorious. One by one the signs of the reign of the Evil One in the midst of God's creation were put down. Sickness of all forms was cured. Deformities were straightened. The hungry were fed. Even death was defeated. God was at work in His world, and the enemies fell one by one. But it must be emphasized that this was not just to show God's supremacy. It was to show God's will to handle man's problem with him and for him.

However, the main obstacle was yet to be overcome. The root of man's problem lay in his separation from God. The solution to that was in God's hands. Since it was God's order which had been destroyed, it was God who had to set things straight. At the same time God's own relation to that order had to be set straight. That is, God had to be reconciled as well as to reconcile. This is where Christ became the ultimate and only solution. Only He could accomplish both. In the final great clash between the power of God and the power of evil, Christ laid down His own life only to take it up again. By that one act He defeated the Evil One, appeased the wrath of an offended God, and reconciled a separated creation to its Creator.

God's solution was complete. The obstacles were removed; the enemies defeated. The way was open for God to establish a reign of harmony and peace in His world once again. With the possibility of peace with his Creator now open to man, there came also the possibility for

him to move toward unity within himself and the love of his neighbor.

The victory did not end with this historical triumph of Christ. It continues in the church. The decisive battle was won, but the "mopping up" still goes on. That task has been given by Christ to His church. The church is the agency by which the victory of Christ continues to be made real in the lives of men. People still come under the influence of evil; they still get sick; they still are tempted and fall into temptation; they are inwardly torn by their own conflicting desires. But in and through the church the saving and healing power of Christ is made available to defeat these enemies.

The church's mission and ministry is to do just that. The function of the church is to bring men into contact with the power of God so that they might participate in Christ's victory campaign over the powers of evil in their own lives and in the world around them.

Christ has given His church various means as "aids and resources against sin." The Smalcald Articles lists them in Part III, Article IV. I will note only one because of its particular bearing on the topic of counseling, namely, the "mutual conversation and consolation of brethren."

Luther seems to have had the mutual burden bearing between Christian persons in mind. This is not a reference to the sacramental function of confession and absolution carried on by the pastor. It is just for this reason that application can be made to pastoral counseling. For the pastor in performing a ministry of counseling is actually carrying out a function which is given to every Christian, namely, of sharing in the burdens of his brother in Christ.

This is not the same as private confession and absolution, as some recent authors seem to say. The two are distinct functions and should be kept separate. Counseling, in the sense of burden-bearing, is a function of a Christian ministry. When it is performed by a pastor, the authority of his office is associated with it for the counselee and in that sense has a pastoral cast.

Through the ages the church has known the value of one Christian being able to discuss his problems, faults, and temptations with another and to receive from that other person the word of comfort, assurance, and forgiveness. The power is threefold. First, the problem is brought into the open. It need no longer be hidden or denied. It can be faced as real. Second, the listener is made a partner in bearing the burden of the problem. Third, the two of them together bring to bear on this situation the power of God over all problems. In this way the power of darkness is exposed to the light of God and the victory of Christ over evil is made real in the life of the individuals involved.

Anyone who has experienced this event can attest to the joy and peace which results. The process of exposure can be painful, but the new sense of freedom and the renewed faith in God's forgiving love is far greater. In what more real and concrete way can God's solution be applied to the problems of men?

COUNSELING AS A PASTORAL FUNCTION

A word of reminder about the context of pastoral counseling is necessary as we begin to look at the process more directly. Pastoral counseling, as it is usually practiced, takes place within the context of the Christian congregation. This means that

the pastor is counseling people with whom he has usually had prior relationships and with whom he will continue to have a relationship outside of and different from that which exists in the counseling relationship. He is preacher, teacher, administrator, and friend as well as counselor.

That is not to say, however, that the primary concern and the major goal which the pastor maintains is different in counseling from that which he holds in his other relationships with his people. In fact quite to the contrary. It is this one overarching goal of applying the gospel to the needs of people that makes pastoral counseling *pastoral*. It is this which integrates counseling with everything else that the pastor does in his pastoral office.

This context of pastoral counseling does have direct bearing on the counseling process which the pastor should realize. He needs to be aware of both the disadvantages and the advantages which are his as a pastoral counselor. Furthermore, there may be instances where these will need to be discussed openly with the person coming for the counseling.

The fact that the pastor has usually had prior contact with the counselee will frequently provide a much quicker establishment of the counseling relationship. The counselee will feel he knows the pastor and will have some trust in him prior to his coming. Often the pastor will have some idea of the kind of person the counselee is also. So the beginning phase of the counseling does not take as long as it would if the two people were complete strangers to each other.

On the other side of the same coin, however, is the fact that the counselee will know that he will have to continue to see

the pastor in other relationships subsequent to the counseling. This often means that the counselee is reluctant to talk about those things over which he is most embarrassed. It is often easier to tell those things to a stranger whom we will never have to face again.

A particular aspect of this prior acquaintance is the fact that the counselee will know something about the pastor's values, moral standards, and ultimate goals. He will know for instance that the pastor is concerned with more than just "mental health" principles and goals. He will normally expect and want to hear about those things which he knows are the pastor's primary concern.

At the same time there can be, and often is, tension in the counseling relationship for this same reason. People don't always like to hear what they know they need to hear. The man who is sick and in need of surgery suspects that fact himself. Consequently, he will often delay going to the doctor. When he does go and hears the doctor confirm his suspicion, it does not make the news any easier to take. At the same time he would have no respect for the competence of the doctor who did not fulfill his professional duty. The same holds true of the counseling relationship between pastor and parishioner.

The first thing the pastor owes the troubled parishioner who comes to him is a thorough and fair "hearing." Prejudgments, diagnoses, and solutions are to be put aside until the pastor can hear exactly what the counselee needs to say. This does not mean that the pastor just sits there passively. Rather it means that in every possible way he will communicate an attitude which says, "I'm concerned about you,

and I want to hear everything you want to say about yourself and your problem."

What the pastor listens for is not just words or facts. He listens for feelings and attitudes as well. To do that requires more than just a set of ears. It requires a total "presence." It means that the pastor puts his whole "being" to work in an effort to get in touch with this other human being in his totality. The pastor must try to get inside the world of his parishioner before he can hope to help set that troubled world straight again.

Here is the first point where the pastor's counseling is informed and shaped by Christ. In Christ we find God becoming one with us as the first step toward His solution to man's conflict. He fully identified Himself with us and our plight before He did anything to try to help us. The pastor, as a faithful servant of God, can ill afford to do less. He must throw himself into his task of standing beside the counselee psychologically. This is one way of conveying the conditions in which God meets man. Thus he begins to set the stage for that ultimate encounter between the counselee and God which, as a pastor, he is called to facilitate.

To be met with this kind of attitude means a great deal to the parishioner. In the first place it allows him to open up and unleash some of the pent-up emotion which his conflict has created. Psychologically this is very necessary and helpful. When feelings stay bottled up inside they can cause great discomfort, and sometimes even physical damage. To be able to release these feelings in an atmosphere of trust and protection is very beneficial in itself. Every pastor has had counselees

say to him, "It's so good just to be able to talk to someone about this."

As the parishioner talks and the pastor begins to enter into the counselee's world, a second step of the process is begun. Now the pastor and, one hopes, also the parishioner begin to get a clearer picture of the difficulty which brought the counselee in.

Often the very process of talking out the problem in itself will help the counselee see it more clearly. There is something about the experience of revealing a conflict that helps a person to be more objective about it. It is as if he were able to place it out in front of himself and examine it more carefully. This is why a counselee will sometimes say, "I can see more clearly now what the difficulty is, since we've talked about it."

This does not imply that just by talking about a problem the parishioner will come to his own insights. The more deeply involved a person is in the problem, the more difficult it will be for him to be objective about it. However, getting the matter out in the open is a step in that direction.

The pastor should be able to be more objective about the problem than the counselee. He does indeed try to get inside the counselee's world as fully as he can. At the same time he comes to that world with different eyes. So he will see things which the counselee presents from different perspectives.

The pastor can then begin to make his own assessment of the counselee and his situation. This is the next step. In doing this it is of the utmost importance that he be careful not to see things which are not there. Nor should he jump to conclusions about what he is told. Rather, using all the

data which he has available, he begins to arrive at some understanding of the nature and degree of the problem. The pastor will find that at this point it is useful, and sometimes essential, for him to seek consultation with someone specially trained in understanding human behavior.

The pastor's assessment should include such factors as the nature of the problem, the counselor's particular strengths and weaknesses, and the counselee's motivation for counseling. The pastor should also give careful thought to his own ability to deal with this particular problem. He should assess his own strengths and weaknesses in counseling with this particular type of problem, the extent of his own training, and the amount of time available for the problem.

It is only on the basis of a careful assessment that the pastor will know how to proceed. He will decide if he is capable at this time to help with the problem, or if wisdom and concern for the counselee dictate a referral. If he feels he can be of help himself, he will decide in what way he can best provide that aid.

Pastors too often feel that their calling dictates that they try to give counsel to every person who comes to them. This is true only in the sense that he must be willing to listen with care to all people who come to him and do his best to understand them. After that he owes it to them to be fair in stating so if he feels someone else can help them better than he.

In the instances when he feels he can do the counseling, he owes it to the counselee to make some specific agreements with him. They should agree on the type of help to be offered, the frequency and time of meetings, and, if possible, the

number of sessions. All counseling cases are not the same. Both the pastor and parishioner need to be clearly aware of that.

Once these basic decisions and agreements have been made, the counseling can proceed to the next stage. In counseling, the next step is for the pastor to help the counselee see more clearly the nature of the problem.

This can be done in several ways. The pastor at times will only reflect to the counselee what he hears the counselee saying. Often, when the counselee hears his own words coming back to him, the real meaning of his statements will strike him in a new way. From this he can gain a clearer idea of his own conflict, and thus can make some judgments about himself.

At other times the pastor will need to be more active in holding out to the counselee some interpretations of the meaning and cause of the conflict. This is not meant to be done in such a way that the counselee cannot correct or reject the interpretation. It is a matter of holding up factors which the counselee might want to consider.

On other occasions the pastor may need to confront the counselee with aspects of the situation which he is refusing to see. It is important to note that this kind of confrontation is not an opportunity for the pastor to vent his anger. Nor is it a time to pronounce a verdict. It is a matter of firmly showing the counselee important factors which he has failed to consider.

One side of a problem which the pastor will be most concerned to bring out will be the spiritual factors. That is, he will want to be sure that his parishioner understands in what ways his problem is

connected to his relationship with God. It is at this point where the declaration of God's law may be made. At times the counselee will make such a judgment on himself. At other times the pastor will need to do it.

Such a declaration in pastoral counseling however is always done in the context of the relationship of love and faith. According to Lutheran theology the law is never intended to be spoken in such a way as to drive men to absolute despair. Rather it is intended to be used as a means to help people see their condition more clearly and thus realize their need for forgiveness.

Furthermore, the pastor is to be reminded that he too stands under the same judgment of God. He is no more righteous than the counselee. At this point he is very much in the same predicament with every other man. If he remembers that, his declaration of the law will be spoken as one sinner to another. In this way the parishioner's willingness to hear it will likely be increased.

The Christian pastor as a representative of Christ has an ultimate concern to defeat evil. Even when he confronts a man with the law, this is his purpose. As a servant of Christ he knows, however, that Christ did not defeat the evil powers simply by observing the law. He did it by throwing Himself into the battle to defeat the Evil One.

So the pastor must also give himself to his counselee as one who can help bring power—God's power—to bear on the struggle at hand. This is the next step in the counseling process.

Before discussing the ways in which this might happen, let us remind ourselves of the reality of the struggle which is always

present in a counseling situation. We must remember that the nature of man's condition means that he is in conflict with himself and other people, as well as with God. He is torn by the forces pulling on him. That means that even if he is well motivated to conquer his problem there is still another part of him which makes him want to hold on to the problem. To overcome it would mean an admission of guilt over things for which he does not want to plead guilty. More important, it would mean changing things which have become a part of him. That is never easy! To accomplish the goal will require additional strength which the counselee has not been able to lay hold of before.

It is part of the pastor's function to help the counselee find that strength. He may do this in several ways. One important avenue is through the relationship which he establishes with the counselee. By bringing about a relationship of trust with the counselee, the pastor holds out to the counselee a part of himself. He makes available to the counselee that part of himself which is on the side of goodness and growth in the Spirit. The counselee can take hold of the pastor's own confidence in God's power and begin to integrate that strength into himself. Gradually the pastor's strength becomes his own to use in his struggle with his problem.

Another way in which the pastor helps is by shedding new light on the counselee and his predicament. There is strength in being able to see a dilemma in a different light. Especially, there is strength in being able to see a previously confused and unsolvable dilemma as a solvable one. As pastor and parishioner look at the problem from different points of view, they

can together search their way through the maze and begin to plot a course leading out of it.

The pastor also has some sources for strengthening the counselee in his battle which are peculiar to *Christian* counseling. Resources like prayer and Scripture reading, if used appropriately, can be of real help. It is important that they be used properly, however. Scripture readings which do not have meaning to the counselee will not help. Prayers are most helpful when they arise directly out of the struggle which the counselee is experiencing at the moment. Applied in this way, these "tools" can be of great value to the counselee.

Through these means, then, the pastor and counselee together come to grips with the conflict and begin to bring about a victory. As they meet together under the leading of God's Spirit and apply the power of God to the situation, gradually the counselee can put behind him his old way and develop a new way. This is the victory of Christ over evil again being made real in the life of a man.

When the pastor is convinced that the counselee has come to the point where he is strong enough to deal successfully with his problem on his own, the final stage of counseling is introduced. At this point they will begin to draw the counseling relationship to a conclusion. This is a time for both review and future planning.

During the termination process they will once more go over the course they have traveled. The purpose of this is to help the counselee fix in his mind the nature of his problem and the course which was plotted to change it. This helps the counselee increase his grip on himself and his

situation, so he can be increasingly successful in working on it.

They will also want to try to anticipate the future a little and plan for it. In the light of the past, the counselee should be able to predict some of the critical situations he will face. These should be discussed and ongoing plans made to meet them. The pastor will want to encourage the counselee to work out his problems on his own in the future. At the same time he will let the counselee know that he is there to help if and when he is needed.

During the termination process the pastor will want to be sure that the counselee has heard the gospel and felt its effects for himself. He will also want to see that the counselee makes his future plans in the light of the gospel. So this will be a time to proclaim once again the good news of Christ's victory for all men in all situations. Hopefully the counselee will have integrated this message by this time so that he can make the proclamation himself. If not, then the pastor will want to say it again, perhaps in different terms, so that it is integrated by the counselee.

These things having been done, the particular relationship between the pastor and his parishioner, called the counseling relationship, can be concluded.

Conclusion

Counseling offers to the pastor some unique opportunities to convey the gospel to his people in both word and action. To do this properly, however, the pastor must see his counseling ministry within the context of his total ministry. He must be sure that his counseling is both informed and shaped by the atoning work of Christ. Throughout the process he will take seri-

ously the nature of man's dilemma as well as the solution to that dilemma which God has effected for us. He will then try to live out with the counselee the dynamics

of that solution, to the end that the counselee might be able to lay hold of God more firmly in faith and put the power of God to work in reshaping his life.