

Encouragement to Counsel

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When I graduated from the Seminary in 1977 and was assigned to do exploratory mission work in Lawrenceville, I felt that my routine would include sermon preparation, teaching, and lots of evangelism work. For the first few years, that's what happened. When God permitted our congregation to purchase land, we put a "future site" sign on the property. The day we did, my ministry took on an added slant—counseling. Christ said to the church in Philadelphia, "See, I placed before you an open door that no man can shut" (Rev. 3:8). The first years of evangelism calls did not bring hordes of people to our congregation, but the Lord seemed to be opening doors with people who needed Christian counseling. People called me because my phone number was on that "future site" sign. They had same Lutheran background. Some called just because they lived close by. By the grace of God, there were some successes. Some of the couples which came I feel are now very exemplary Christians. Others still struggle. Still others did not get far at all.

The paper originally assigned to me was "Counseling the Emotionally Troubled." That can be a very misunderstood term. Some might consider it a cop-out or a smokescreen for sin. A child who kicks his mother in the shins might be called "emotionally troubled" by some, and the word sin is avoided. We shouldn't be surprised. Some would rather call sin by another name—"doing his thing," "exercising his rights," or "letting off steam." Perhaps I'm changing the focus of the paper somewhat, but I would like to stress how we need to be involved in the counseling problem no matter at what level it might be. I feel there are some problems people have we are well equipped to handle and some problems where other professional help is needed. The major point and the bottom line is that we need to be and remain part of the counseling process. I want this paper to be "An Encouragement to Counsel."

First of all,

People Need to Come to Us with their Problems

This is no great revelation. In *The Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Dr. Dennis Morgan wrote an article entitled, "Needs Assessment in Churches: A Christian's Need for Professional Counseling Services." Dr. Morgan noted that surveys indicate that people will come to a pastor first for counsel before any other professional counselor like the family doctor, secular mental health worker, or professional Christian counselor. People definitely see the pastor as a servant who can help people turn around lives.¹

In the same article, he stated the kinds of problems people bring in descending order of frequency: matters of faith, family problems, premarital problems, depression, anxiety and fears, meaning of prayer, school, sexual problems, alcoholism, life-after-death, job problems, physical problems, aging and retirement. The problem least likely to be brought to the pastor are problems concerning military obligations, fear about suicide, illegal acts, fear of the unknown, and drug use.²

There's not a single crisis that doesn't have an answer or solution from the Scripture. The problem-bearer needs to know the God-pleasing solutions and the God-pleasing ways to find a solution. The problem-bearer also needs to come before the problem is irreparable.

How do we get people to come to us? First of all, I don't want to give the impression that our call is primarily to counsel. I have a feeling that many people, especially outside of the Christian congregation, feel that counseling is our main task instead of proclaiming the everlasting Gospel. It has bothered me greatly to see people look at Jesus as more of a problem-solver than Savior. Yet God does indeed call us also to counsel. I believe counseling is certainly part of being "apt to teach."

Nevertheless, I'd like to offer two bits of advice so that people will come to us so we can indeed counsel them. A couple in my congregation was having difficulty with their marriage. It went on for the longest time until, finally, I was asked to counsel. I asked why they didn't come sooner. I'm home in the daytime—most days. At night, if there isn't a class or meeting, I make evangelism calls. Maybe I let it be known, or maybe my wife said something to the effect that my nights are filled. They immediately assumed I was too busy to see them. My first bit of advice is this—don't let it be known that you are too busy. Secondly, since then I have also instituted a night called "Pastor-Member" night where I let it be known that the night is reserved for members of the congregation who want to talk about one thing or another. Ever since instituting this night, many people have called. It was a way to let people know I care and am concerned. They need to know that we are concerned because

People Need to Come to Us Since Alternatives for Counseling Often Despise Scripture and God

The norm for psychologists and psychiatrists is to be godless and Scriptureless. Most secular counselors frown on any type of counseling from Christian pastors because they believe Christianity lays guilt trips on the counselee—the last thing a problem-bearer really needs.

Sigmund Freud is the father of psychology, and his theories are still the basis for modern psychology. Freud saw the human being as torn within. He said that man has primitive wants, impulses or drives which seek expression. Freud called these wants the "Id." He also said that man also has a "Superego," which is roughly equivalent to the conscience. The Superego, or that which determines the norm of life, are determined by parents, the church and teachers and anything else that exerts a moral force on man. The Superego, according to Freud, is something man can do without. When the Superego becomes too sensitized, that's when people become mentally ill. The "Ego" is the third part of man. It is the arbiter. The Superego and the Id function on the subconscious level. The Ego functions on the conscious level. But what the Ego does is determined by the subconscious struggle between the Id and the Superego.

A conflict arises when the Id, desiring to express itself, is frustrated by the Superego. The primitive wants seek expression, but the overly severe Superego hinders the Id. The conflict which results are guilt feelings. The therapy, according to Freud, was to dispel guilt by softening the Superego. It was his desire to stop the Superego so that it wouldn't make so many demands. In essence, he was saying—get rid of your conscience or any sense of morality which conflicts with your primitive wants.

Freudian psychology would lead only to immorality and permissiveness. If the Id is man's sinful human nature, which it seems to be, and the Superego is the conscience, he advocated that the conscience allow the sinful nature of man to do what it wants. Doesn't this kind of thought remind us of the nation of Israel when they had no king and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6)? But isn't this happening even today? Freud is still a powerful force among psychologists and psychiatrists. For that reason, we certainly need to avoid counselors who are Freudian.

Another psychiatrist who has had a great deal of influence is Carl Rogers. He is very humanistic in thought. He rejects original sin and sees man as basically good. Although he recognizes that "individuals can and do behave in ways which are incredibly cruel,"³ he says he finds that man has "strongly positive directional tendencies."⁴ Rogers believes that man is autonomous and has no need for God. Man has all the solutions to his own problems.

Both Freud and Rogers are great influences on the world of psychology and psychiatry. Unfortunately, as Jay Adams warns, many "Christian psychologists" are taking their theories hook, line and sinker.

Dr. C. Markham Berry is a well-known psychiatrist in the city of Atlanta with a practice at the Atlanta Counseling Center. He is involved in Christian counseling centers all around the Metro-Atlanta area. If there are tough cases to deal with, Dr. Berry is often called upon by the branch centers. A man I was dealing with was referred to Dr. Berry. At the Atlanta Counseling Center, there is a statement of principle hanging on their wall which says that they are Christian and treat patients accordingly. When this man sought his counsel, Dr. Berry diagnosed him as suffering from narcissism, an exaggerated sense of self. Dr. Berry gave the wife of the

counselee a paper he wrote on the subject. I read the paper. It described all the symptoms, how narcissism manifests itself and its treatment. He called narcissism a “personality disorder.” After counseling with the man myself, he did indeed have an exaggerated sense of self. But I wouldn’t call it a “personality disorder.” I call it sin. Although this paper was lengthy, not once did Dr. Berry call it sin. The very first words of his paper on narcissism read like this, “Just as hysteria was the predominant psychological disorder of Europe at the turn of the century, so narcissism seems to be the disease of the West now.”⁵ Alcoholics often refer to alcoholism as a disease, which softens man’s responsibility for it.

The reason this section is included in this paper is to make us aware of the fact that if we pastors aren’t there to help counsel, look who is going to do it. Recently I interviewed a Christian psychologist who said there are very few Christian counselors around, and, as I hope I demonstrated, we can’t depend on them for basing their therapy and theories on God’s infallible Word. I hope these words are an encouragement to counsel. We need to take part in the therapy, or our people will hear a lot of things they shouldn’t be hearing. Besides,

God Equips us with a Very Important Tool with which to Counsel—His Word

When it comes to counseling, most of us might feel like we are those fragile clay jars that St. Paul once spoke about to the Corinthians. Yet the treasure inside the clay jars makes us effective. Psychiatrists often use mind-boggling and mind-changing drugs; they may use shock treatments to alter thoughts and change emotions; they make use of x-rays which can penetrate to the darkest recesses of the body. We have a more powerful tool—the very Word of God—which penetrates to the darkest recesses of the soul and enlightens those living in darkness. It makes the loveless loving, the selfish selfless. His Word wounds, but it also heals; it comforts and strengthens; it transforms by making sinful and selfish men into “new creatures” living for Christ. The Writer to the Hebrews calls the Word of God “living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the hearts” (Hebrews 4:12). His Word is living and active because God’s Spirit works through the Word in the hearts of people. That’s awfully nice to know when we counsel.

Jay Adams, although Reformed, writes a real encouragement for us to counsel, knowing the Holy Spirit works with us.

Counseling is the work of the Holy Spirit. Effective counseling cannot be done apart from him. He is called the paraclete, who in Christ’s place came to be another counselor. Because unsaved counselors (I wish he would have said ‘unbelieving counselors’) do not know the Holy Spirit, they ignore his counseling activity and fail to avail themselves of his direction and power... Counseling, to be Christian, must be carried on in harmony with the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit... All of the personality traits that might be held forth to counselees as fundamental goals for growth (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control), God declares to be the fruit of the Spirit. Not only is it futile to attempt to generate these qualities apart from him (as non-Christian and even some Christian counselors try to do), but such an approach is at bottom a rebellion against God grounded upon humanistic assumptions of man’s autonomy. Bypassing the Spirit amounts to the denial of human depravity and the affirmation of man’s innate goodness, The need for grace and the atoning work of Christ are both undercut, and the counselee is left instead with the husk of a legalistic works righteousness which will lead ultimately to despair since it divests itself of the life and power of the Spirit.⁶

What he has to say about human depravity and the Holy Spirit’s needed and promised presence are excellent, especially for a Reformed theologian. When we are counseling on the basis of the Word, the Spirit’s power is at our disposal. Because of Him we are equipped to counsel.

We are also equipped to counsel because the Lord has taught us and commanded us to pray. In *Shepherd Under Christ*, our wise and experienced professors wrote,

When the pastor is called upon to minister to a person in distress, it goes without saying that he will prepare himself by turning to the Lord for help. He needs the Lord's help if he is to help others. In his anxiety over what he will do or say, he may forget to go to Him from whom alone he can receive the strength and wisdom needed for his work.⁷

Prayer is needed not only prior to, but also after, the counseling session. I don't have to tell a group like this that prayer changes things, just as our dear Savior promised. I firmly believe the sleepless nights which we experience at times are the Lord's reminders to us to come to Him in prayer. Prayer equips us to counsel.

Although there aren't as many books as there might be, take advantage of writings of Christian counselors like Jay Adam, Larry Crabb, Howard Clinebell and others. There are a number of books published on the subject from a Christian point of view. Since I came into this conference seven years ago, there has been a real turnover in personnel. Several years ago, our conference studied the theology and methods of Jay Adams. Pastor Joel Schroeder wrote a paper entitled "Jay Adams' Counseling Techniques." It was a capsulization of Adams' methods. They are sound. If you have not read his books, do so. They will certainly benefit you.

The bottom line is this: God has equipped us with something very powerful—His Word and Sacrament and the promise of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does awesome things. He made you and me, sinful and undeserving, to be God's own through faith in Christ Jesus. Even more, we were called by Him into the ministry to shepherd and counsel God's people. He has supplied the tools to carry out that task. When it comes to counseling, let us never forget these tools that God has placed into our hands. The methods we use will never be as powerful as the Source on which we call.

We don't have to refer people to a counselor for every problem they face. I believe we, with God's Word and the patience and wisdom He supplies, can handle many, even most, of the problems people might have. Yet, I believe there are many problems we need to refer to other people, particularly to psychiatrists. It is my opinion that

Our People Need Help from other Professional Counselors from Time to Time Because we were not Trained to Counsel Every Problem

A couple once came to me with problems. I talked to them in their home. There was a terrible environment. Each had children from a previous marriage. The children(?) were all in their twenties, without jobs and very lazy. As with all people who come to me, I tell them I can help them spiritually if we can study the Word together. Immediately, they began a Bible Information Class. I noticed how the wife had problems concentrating. I had never seen a nervous breakdown, but I felt this might be one in the making. All the stress around the home convinced me of the possibility. She was hospitalized. The husband had suggested to me privately that he felt one of the children was trying to poison her.

She was then taken to a mental health center and stayed for a month. Finally a cat scan was done. She was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She was only forty-seven. She died of a massive stroke about a year later. We are not medical doctors. I had some opinions about the source of her problems. There were, indeed, problems at home, but her worst problem was out of my league and expertise.

I remember hearing from Sem professors and pastors in the field who said they wouldn't send their people to psychiatrists or psychologists because many are so anti-Christian. Many are. They need to be avoided. As pastors, we need to find out where we can, in good conscience, send our people. Call their offices and ask them questions. Call pastors in the community to find out who is good. I have had the experience of counselors calling me to set up appointments where I could interview them and see their point of view. One counseling center near us impresses me very much.

Let's face it. What do we know about schizophrenia, manic-depressives, etc.? Stress seems to have a great deal of influence on the body. Are we really expected to teach people how to deal with these influences? In articles I have read, there are churches that are making it their business. That's social gospel at the expense of the Gospel that gives eternal life. To me, the best avenue to follow is

Never Stop Being the Counselor, but Continue to Work with the Counselee and, if Possible, any other Counselor the Counselee Might Have

Not long ago, I was counseling with a man that had lots of problems. I found, after a while, that the sessions seemed to be bogging down. I wondered out loud whether he shouldn't see another professional counselor since we seemed to be spinning our wheels. He went to a public mental health clinic in our county. Before he left, I warned him about the anti-Christian nature of much of the therapy being used. He readily agreed. He told the people at the clinic he wanted help, but was also going to continue to see his pastor. He stated how he had gotten into the mess he was in by leaving God out of the picture. He told the counselors that wasn't going to happen again. One counselor declined to take his case because of these conditions. He was referred to another. This counselor was a woman. She respected his wishes and said she was glad to see his pastor take an interest. The counselor was a Christian. She even suggested that the counselee sign a "Release of Information" form which would allow a passing of information from her to me and me to her, all in his best interests. I continued to meet with the man two days after every session with her. She opened up avenues. Many needed direction found in the Scripture. The whole situation worked beautifully. We worked through a lot of problems. His other counselor called me several times seeking information, and we shared many vital points.

Ironically, as I was trying to draw some conclusions for this paper, a pastor from another district called, hoping that I could enlighten him on how to deal with a schizophrenic person in his congregation. Perhaps that's what you hoped that I would have here, too. I won't, I can't. Let the psychiatrist/psychologist get into that. I am just advising to stay involved with counseling the problem-bearer.

This pastor also said he had called a psychologist who was a member of one of our WELS churches in his district. The psychologist told him to do what I found out—work with the other counselor and the counselee. You may have to butter up the other counselor; you may also find it necessary to inform the counselee to insist on this course of treatment. If the counselor doesn't like it, then find another. There are counselors around whose ego will be suppressed by the desire to see the counselee get better. A good counselor will see the counselee's pastor as part of the therapy.

In conclusion, as Christian pastors whom God has called to guide his sheep and lambs—sometimes very troubled sheep and lambs—we must be sensitive to their needs. Don't shy away from that responsibility, but take the "courage to counsel" from the promise and power of the "Counselor."

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Endnotes

¹ Morgan, Dr. Dennis D., "Needs Assessment In Churches: A Christian Community's Need for Professional Counseling Services." *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 242 (1982).

² *Ibid.*, p. 246.

³ Rogers, Carl R., *On Becoming a Person*, p. 34 (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1982).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵ Berry, C. Markham, "Narcissism," p. 1.

⁶ Adams, Jay, *Competent to Counsel*, pp. 20, 21 (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1970).

⁷ Habeck and Schuetze, *Shepherd Under Christ*, pp. 206, 207 (Northwestern, Milwaukee, 1974).

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