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THE PASTOR AND COUNSELING

THE BASICS OF SHEPHERDING MEMBERS IN NEED

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The Pastor and Counseling: The Basics of Shepherding Members in Need

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To pastors
who bear many troubles

not theirs
To honor the One
who took a world of trouble
not his

INTRODUCTION

The Pastor and Wednesday Morning

It's Tuesday afternoon, and you are waging war with your inbox when your secretary buzzes. A church member is asking to speak to you, and it's trouble. With a quick prayer that is more like a sigh, you pick up the phone and wade into a half-hour conversation that confuses you and, you're sure, confuses her too. You hang up, your mind racing with what to do with this sudden revelation of just how bad things are between her and her husband. You'll be seeing the two of them first thing the next day to iron some of this out. How do you begin to prepare for Wednesday morning?

Pastors and lay leaders alike are familiar with phone calls like this. Probably too familiar. Stubborn depression, heart-wrenching adultery, volcanic anger, chronic miscommunication, guilt-ridden pornography struggles, calorie-phobic eating disorders, recurrent cancer, hidden same-sex attraction, suicidal thinking—and that's the short list. Life in a fallen world is touched with misery. For some, it's submerged in it. That goes for folks inside the church as well as those outside.

This is why you are a pastor. God has called you to shepherd his sheep, and often those sheep are hurting, confused, or stubborn. But it's not always clear how to care for them, especially in the more complex situations that weigh them down. You may or may not think of yourself as a counseling pastor, but the bottom line is that you are called to labor for your people in these unsettling problems. And this is a worthy labor.

We offer this primer because in our line of work we frequently get last-minute phone calls from pastors who need help thinking carefully through tough situations at church.

In fifteen minutes, I am meeting with a couple who are about to get a divorce. Here's what I'm thinking of doing ...

A young man at our church just admitted to me that he has same-sex attraction. I need to follow up, but I don't know what to say ...

Some parents at my church recently put it together that their daughter is anorexic. Is there a place to refer them to?

Most pastors are short on time and burdened with many other responsibilities. Add to this a few common facts that plague the work of a pastor:

- Most seminary students take just one or two counseling classes in their degree programs. They often underestimate how much counseling they will do when they reach their first pastorate.
- Most pastors enter the pastorate to preach and teach, not to counsel. They counsel because it is an expected part of the job, not because they are excited to do it.
- Both smaller and larger churches have people who have made messes of their lives. Small churches, especially those in rural areas, often have very few resources in their community to draw on for help. A pastor and church are sometimes the only available resources.
- Church members expect their pastor to help them with their struggles. After all, the members fund the pastor's salary. They expect him to give them his time, often a lot of it. They may even assume the pastor has instant access to the Bible's answer for the troubles of life.
- Weak sheep tend to consume a disproportionate amount of the pastor's schedule with their problems, demands, and sometimes just general selfishness. Often this comes with very little gratitude to God for the Christlike care given through their pastor and the church.
- Most church members let their problems get far worse than they need to before they overcome pride and come in for help. Thoughts like "I don't want the pastor to think poorly of me" or "I can handle this on my own" deceive them. If they had sought help earlier, it would have saved everyone a whole lot of sweat and tears.

What should a pastor do with all this? He may have very little training in counseling. He may have weak sheep making exorbitant demands on his time. He may have precious little relational help to draw on in an unhealthy church. It doesn't sound all that promising, does it?

DEAR PASTOR, CAN WE HELP YOU?

We want to help by giving you a basic framework to approach your people's troubles. You may not have a lot of time. You may be fearful of messing someone up permanently. You may simply not want to deal with this stuff. So what you need is both a reminder that the gospel of [Jesus Christ](#) is powerful in these situations and some practical guidance for ministering in light of that power.

Here's what we would like to cover in this short book. In part 1, made up of the first three chapters, we cover the *concept* of counseling. In chapter 1, we set out a vision for what it means to labor for your people. Our point is simple: shepherds shepherd. Pastors are about the task of making disciples, and discipleship will often include counseling people through difficult situations. This fact should neither annoy nor overwhelm you. It doesn't necessarily need to thrill you either, but it should make you see caring for troubled people as part of the privilege of loving [Jesus](#). Feed his sheep. In chapter 2, we help you know how to prepare for counseling—how it starts, who starts it, and how to arrange things to run as smoothly as possible. Chapter 3 lays out the basic method of counseling. We explain a helpful technique to explore a person's trouble and have something redemptive to say to him or her. We discuss the types of questions to ask, the pertinent areas of a person's life to explore, and how to respond in biblically helpful ways.

The second part, chapters 4–6, traces out the *process* of counseling, from the initial meeting to the final conversation. We give tips for recognizing heart dynamics, understanding problems theologically, and employing redemptive strategies for change. We want these chapters to help you answer the question, what does the process of caring for this person look like?

The third and final part, chapters 7 and 8, explains the *context* of counseling. Pastoral counseling occurs within both the church community and a community of resources outside the church. Chapter 7 deals with the reality that you, the pastor, cannot labor alone. It's not possible for you to do everything and still stay sane yourself. So we'll help you think about what it means to develop a culture of discipleship in your church that will supplement and enrich whatever counseling occurs. What does it mean to develop a culture in which members help one another thrive in their faith? Chapter 8 then looks outside to the community to see what counselors, doctors, or other relational resources

are available. Is it ever wise to refer outside the church? If you do, how can you be confident a particular doctor is going to help and not hurt your church member? What if you can't find a like-minded counselor in your community, but only those who work from a naturalistic standpoint? Questions abound.

We close the book with a number of helpful practical resources, from a simple definition of biblical counseling to a method for taking notes. These are meant for your use, and we hope they aid you in this worthy labor.

THE REAL POWER IN COUNSELING—JESUS CHRIST

Honestly, no one expects one little book to change your world. Our goal is not to enable you to handle anything that comes your way. The goal, rather, is to give you confidence that in the gospel you have the categories you need to navigate the troubles of your people. Your confidence is not in some super-developed counseling technique, or even in yourself, but in God's power to change people.

Real confidence is rooted in the life-transforming power of the good news of [Jesus Christ](#). After all, [Jesus](#) is the model of how human beings function best. And he came to a malfunctioning world as a substitute for malfunctioning human beings like us. Sin estranges us from God. It estranges everything from God. This is why we suffer and this is why we sin. But [Jesus](#) reconciles what was estranged by making payment for sin by his death. And now [Jesus](#) lives again, transforming people to live according to his righteousness, according to a reestablished relationship with God. It is God, through his glorious Son, who changes people.

Here's what we mean more specifically: We human beings were created to display God's character in the way we think, in what we desire, and in how we act. When a hardened thought, a lustful desire, or a selfish intention emerges in the human heart, that heart is failing to display the character of its Creator, which is patient, pure, and generous to others. In short, everything inside and outside a person was designed to glorify God.

Jesus's heart was the only one that perfectly displayed the character of God—because he is God himself. But he is also human, like us. Therefore, he is fit to be our

representative, our example, our rescuer ([Heb. 4:14–16](#)). For counseling, we should therefore keep the following in mind:

- [Jesus Christ](#) is *the means of change*. Believing his gospel changes our hearts' responses. All theoretical wisdom and practical advice in counseling should most centrally promote a relationship with [Jesus Christ](#) through faith.
- [Jesus Christ](#) is *the goal of change*. Displaying his character is the model of maturity we strive for. Circumstances may not change and problems may not go away through counseling, but God promises the power to respond in ways that reflect the trusting obedience of his Son.

Counseling in its simplest form is one person seeking to walk alongside another person who has lost his or her way. Professional training or academic programs can be very helpful for honing skill, but even if you have not had these, you can counsel if you wholeheartedly embrace God's Word as that which shows people their greatest needs and their greatest hope.

This labor is worthy of your time, pastor. Our hope is to equip you with the basic tools to start. The framework we lay out here is our attempt to be bold with gospel truth toward the problems that unsettle our people. Frankly, it would be much easier to sweep them all away with generalized pulpit instruction or refer people off somewhere. But it's a worthy labor for a pastor to care skillfully for his people.

Part One
CONCEPT

ONE

Laboring for Your People

Shepherds do not smell good. At least, good shepherds do not smell good. A good shepherd identifies with stinking sheep, and the scent rubs off.

But shepherds stink not only because they smell like sheep. They stink because they smell like sweat. And blood, too. Like common laborers, their faces are streaked and their backs are bent. Like common soldiers, their eyes are strained and their arms are scarred. Like both, they often feel overspent and undersupplied. And they've made peace with the fact that this kind of work requires as much. You'll never meet a good shepherd who is still shower-fresh by the afternoon.

In the same way, you'll never meet a good pastor who has a breezy attitude toward his task. He does not bemoan the hard work required to care for the stubborn and the hurting while still feeding and protecting everyone else. Sure, every pastor has days when he is tempted to look heavenward and ask, why the constant problems from these people? But he finds the faith to accept that his task is hard. God made it that way to empty a pastor of himself, so that he may be filled with the power of Christ.

PUBLIC MINISTRY, PERSONAL PROBLEMS

We have never heard the explicit claim that ministry is easy. But we have seen many pastors try to arrange it to be. We've also seen plenty of men head into the pastorate for a pulpit ministry. What they mean by *pulpit ministry* is getting paid to preach and teach, with perhaps a pastoral visit here and there. They know personal ministry and counseling are important, so they usually plan to grow the church budget through their amazing pulpit skills, then hire an associate pastor to do everything else.

We do not mean to sound caustic. We were once young men with visions of leading a loyal people into the great unknown through eloquent exposition and piercing application, the power of the Word radiating from the pulpit like blazing light in the dusky culture. Husbands would take the hands of their wives during our sermons and

repent in bitter tears that afternoon. Addicts would decide then and there to never indulge again. Depressed people would come out of their fog under the sound of our voices. Our preaching ministry would be strong enough to make the counseling ministry unnecessary. Or at least mostly unnecessary. Sure, there would be a straggling nut-job here and there, but the church would be healthy because of the preaching ministry.

But two things kept us from persisting in this dream: experience and the Bible. Experience is a strict schoolmaster. It points out right away that we start out as pretty crummy preachers. Even as we become less crummy, we will find that improved preaching does not necessarily correlate with less trouble in the lives of our people. In fact, pick your favorite preacher, and you will see a church with a bigger budget but no less trouble in the life of its people. Experience won't permit the illusion that preaching is all there is to ministry.

Just to be crystal clear, preaching is *the* vital and central ministry of the Word in the mission of the church. It is a primary purpose of the body's gathering and is foundational to any personal ministry we do. So do not misunderstand our intention here. We are not calling into question the primacy of the preaching ministry. We are merely pointing out that it is not the only place that the ministry of the Word happens in the life of the church.

Experience alone would not be a sufficient teacher to establish this point. Better than simply learning from what doesn't work in the real world is learning what constitutes shepherding by looking to the Bible.

PERSONAL MINISTRY IN SCRIPTURE

Peter's eyes were probably weary as the morning sun was just starting to warm the beach. He probably studied Jesus's resurrected face closely as they ate breakfast in silence, all the disciples too timid to ask if it was really he. They were waiting for Jesus to start the conversation.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

You know the story. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he truly loved him. By the third time, Peter was grieved that Jesus would seem so unconvinced by his affirmative answers. But each time, Jesus was instructing Peter how to demonstrate genuine love for him:

“Feed my sheep” ([John 21:15–19](#)). Loving Jesus involves caring for those who are his. And caring for those who are his will involve death. For Peter, it was literal death. Jesus predicted “by what kind of death he was to glorify God” (v. 19).

Ministry Is Suffering

While we recognize that Peter’s calling as an apostle was unique to him, we also understand that the path of following Jesus in leading his church will include both labor in feeding sheep and suffering at the hands of others.

Many years later, the seasoned Peter would make this connection urgently clear:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ([1 Pet. 5:1–4](#))

Peter’s authority as an apostle was due, in part, to his witness of the sufferings of Christ. He focused on Christ’s suffering because it was necessary to the glory to be revealed. This is a major theme of Peter’s letter ([1 Pet. 1:6–7, 11; 2:21–25; 3:13–17, 18–22; 4:1, 7, 12–19](#)). Peter would one day participate in this glory, and so will every pastor who shepherds the flock of God until Christ’s return.

But to get there, shepherds will suffer. Why else would Peter have to instruct his readers to take on this task willingly, even eagerly, and not under obligation? We don’t naturally take on tasks that do not profit us (“not for shameful gain”) or that we cannot ensure will go our way (“not domineering over those in your charge”). We don’t naturally want to get close enough to model faithfulness in suffering. But the words of Jesus to Peter that morning on the beach probably echoed in the apostle’s mind as he penned this exhortation to his fellow pastors. “Shepherd the flock of God” sounds a lot like “Feed my lambs.”

Peter saw Jesus ascend into heaven, and it made whatever toil he had to face on behalf of his people well worth it. He knew that Jesus took his place in heaven to be the chief

Shepherd, one who would be ultimately responsible for watching over every sheep. This is indeed a worthy labor.

Ministry Is Personal

But so far, we have only shown that Scripture indicates shepherding God's flock to involve labor and suffering; we have not yet shown that the toil is not merely in public proclamation, but also in personal ministry. To do so, let's look to Paul as a prime example of a man who toiled in public proclamation while also engaging in the labor of personal ministry.

Paul was a public beacon of gospel preaching, and he was called by God to suffer in this labor ([Acts 9:15–16](#)). He proclaimed the gospel openly in the synagogues, and this brought threats of death ([9:20–25](#)). Paul proclaimed the good news publicly in Cyprus ([13:4](#)), Antioch ([13:14](#)), Iconium ([14:1](#)), various cities of Lycaonia ([14:6–7](#)), and countless other places. A major portion of Paul's ministry was the public proclamation of the gospel.

But if we were to conclude there, we would have to ignore significant portions of Paul's ministry. His letters to the churches displayed the heart of a man who had labored many long hours in caring for God's people. In fact, he refers to his suffering and labor amid people as the credentials that prove his calling by God in opposition to those who used earthly impressiveness to prove theirs. He underwent beatings, stonings, and shipwreck to labor personally for God's people ([2 Cor. 11:23–30](#)). Paul speaks of his own ministry as flowing from "affectionate desire" for those under his care, a desire so strong that he, Silvanus, and Timothy "were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" ([1 Thess. 2:8](#)). He underwent "labor and toil," earning a living so as not to be a burden on them, so that he could say, "Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" ([2:11–12](#)). There's a man who labored among his people for their good.

Paul's was not a pulpit-only ministry. His care for others didn't end with their participation in his public ministry, which is a temptation for all pastors. Pastors, if we are

viewing our job primarily in terms of our public influence, then we will lose the heart for personal ministry. Sometimes we are more bothered by the thought of people leaving our church than we are by the thought of them hurting. But this was not Paul's heart, and it wasn't the heart of the One he followed.

The rest of the New Testament expounds on the personal nature of pastoral ministry. Three of its teachings will prove helpful in our consideration of the task of counseling. Personal ministry involves (1) [identifying with the weakness and sin of people](#), (2) [speaking to God on behalf of people](#), and (3) [speaking to people on behalf of God](#).

Pastoral labor involves identifying with the weakness and sin of people. *Condescension.* We usually use this word negatively because it implies that a person thinks he is superior to others, yet resigns himself to coming down to their level. But the term *condescension* is perfectly appropriate to Jesus's association with sinners, since he *does* exist on a plane above ours. He existed in perfect joy and satisfaction with the Father, God of all, bright and majestic, served by the flaming angels of heaven, with no obligation to people below, wicked and sorrowful from sin. Yet the only being in all the universe who should be served by everyone instead served everyone. He considered the interests of others ([Phil. 2:4](#)) by not insisting on staying in the contented glory of heaven that was his divine possession ([2:6](#)). Instead, he served us by identifying with our troubles ([2:7](#)), particularly our main trouble: death ([2:8](#)). Death is a problem we could never have solved. We needed the help of another. And the One who helped tells us to follow his example: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" ([2:5](#)).

Death to ourselves for the good of others requires getting involved in their troubles. Jesus put himself in the position necessary to sympathize with weak people: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" ([Heb. 4:15](#)). Jesus can sympathize with us because he exposed himself to the actual experience of temptation ([v. 15b](#)). He entered as a participant in the danger of a sin-cursed world and now can deal gently with the weak and wayward since he understands their weakness ([5:2](#)). He who could rightfully exist for all eternity without ever experiencing pain or distress entered a reality where he was characterized by both. He was a "man of sorrows, and acquainted

with grief” (Isa. 53:3).

And so it is with pastors serving Jesus’s flock. Jesus stands in the muddy waters of his people’s weakness, waywardness, and suffering, and he beckons the pastor to come join him there. Pastors who want to follow have to trudge into unknown waters. The grimy surface keeps them from knowing how deep it gets, and the odor warns them of something unpleasant beneath the surface. But they trust the One who’s calling them into it.

Pastor, you are freed to imitate this pattern for the good of your people. Every pastor is a servant of Jesus, and a servant is not greater than his master (John 13:16). You are called to take on the risk and the toil of people’s problems. Like Jesus, you help people who, in a sense, have no business demanding help from you. If the chief Shepherd is dirty and cut up, so too those who follow him in this task. This does not necessarily mean that you become the primary counselor of your church, but it certainly means that you need to learn the skills necessary for serving your people in their trouble.

Pastoral labor involves speaking to God on behalf of people. Pastors ought to be eager and constant in prayer. There are at least two advantages to prayer that flow from close association with people in their troubles.

First, personally caring for your people will make your prayers more fervent. A pastor who labors lightly among his people often labors lightly before God. A pastor who agonizes with people will feel some agony in his prayers on their behalf. When pastors move away from personal ministry to almost exclusively public or administrative tasks, they can easily lose sight of the profound needs in their midst, and this will have a numbing effect on their prayers. Jesus taught us to pray to the Father with kingdom desperation (Matt. 6:7–13), and bearing the burdens of your people will drive you to desperate prayer.

When a pastor witnesses the miserable effects of anger in a home, sits with a discouraged widow who feels like she should be over her grief after two years, comes alongside a teenager who’s convinced he’s the worst pervert in the world, talks with a man who’s had it with his marriage—suddenly his desperate need for wisdom becomes more apparent. Witnessing the desperation that sin and its effects cause in people’s lives

will bring a holy desperation to a pastor's prayers. The misery of the world is often what prompts the prayers of God's people. And pastors must not insulate themselves from this prompting.

Second, personally caring for your people will make your prayers more dependent. Nothing feels more futile than talking a depressed person out of despondency or an anorexic girl out of her unrealistic self-assessment. One of the best ways to feel your inability to change anything is giving counsel to abuse victims or perpetrators, to people with stubborn attitudes or foggy minds, to those who despise you and the Bible you're opening. Coming alongside people in impossible circumstances will be a constant reminder to the pastor of his need for the God of the impossible.

Pastoral labor involves speaking to people on behalf of God. Pastoral labor—including personal ministry—is also closely associated with proclamation. It is outright toil to proclaim Christ to people. Once again, Paul is our pastoral example: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” ([Col. 1:28–29](#)).

In our pastoral labor, Christ is the message and Christlikeness is the goal. We want those in our care to be conformed to Christ, which happens as faith works through love. So the goal of a pastor in all his labor is to elicit faith in Christ through the proclamation of his gospel message. This is true in public as well as personal proclamation of the Word. Faith reframes the heart's functions so that a person once animated by sinful desire, darkened thinking, and earthly loyalties is ever-increasingly animated by righteous desire, enlightened thinking, and heavenly loyalties. And the only way faith emerges in the heart is through the ears hearing the message proclaimed: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” ([Rom. 10:17](#)).

Pastoral labor requires speaking to people on behalf of God in Christ. Paul was so committed to growing believers in Christ that if believers failed to persevere in faith, Paul said his labor would have been in vain ([Phil. 2:16](#); see also [Gal. 4:11](#)). Establishing faith was the central goal of all his labors.

Proclaiming Christ requires pastors to go to the dark places in people's lives—those off-

putting problems that are simply easier to ignore than to address. It could be marriages that are showing signs of fragmentation, alarming patterns in the life of a teen, disunity between two longtime members, the plaguing doubts of a church staffer, the mental volatility of a young man. Whatever the complexity of people's troubles, you can always ask yourself this orienting question: What does faith in Christ look like in this person's trouble?

Jesus needs to be proclaimed in those dark places. And the pastor must not be afraid to go there. It is true—many of the issues that will confront you in personal ministry are beyond your experience and your ability to handle adequately. But keep in mind two things.

First, as with everything in life, your skill in navigating the dark places is developed only *by practice*. A pastor will grow in his abilities only as he humbly takes on the task of caring closely for people. Sure, he will make plenty of mistakes along the way—from presuming to understand too much to failing to speak authoritatively out of fear of their response. But mistakes are a necessary part of improvement. The key to minimizing damage is humility. Serve people with the Word and recognize the limits of your perspective. Just how you serve people is what we'll unpack in the coming chapters. Our main point here is simply that fear of failure must not keep you from going into the dark places.

Be assured that you will grow along the way. You will pick up on the subtleties of interpersonal dynamics, assessing trouble, leading a person to recognize patterns of thought or desire, and processing situations in biblically helpful ways. As with a hardwood tree, your growth will be mostly imperceptible when it's happening. But when you look back over months and years, it will be undeniable.

Second, and even more important, your confidence for navigating the dark places is not in you in the first place, but in Christ. Remember the passage that opened our discussion; the goal of ministry is Christ. But remember: the *means* of ministry is also Christ. "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Col. 1:29). The source of Paul's energy is Christ, and his supply of it is powerful. This is the ground of our confidence and the only reason we would dare to wade into the dark

waters of human trouble.

Ultimately, your confidence does not rest on your skill set, no matter how developed. Instead, your confidence is in the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the proclamation of his Word. What goes for the pulpit goes for the counseling room. In one sense, it was easier to be Spirit-dependent in our early days of preaching since we were so aware of our weakness. As we grow in skill, both exegetically and homiletically, we more easily forget our dependence upon the Lord to speak through his Word. Of course, this could happen in counseling as well, but that might be hard for you to imagine right now. But any sense of inadequacy in counseling should not be reason to avoid it; rather, it should keep you dependent upon God to do what he alone can do.

So, pastor, there is no need to fear the unknown. If you've arranged your pastoral ministry to avoid regular missions into the jagged and rocky places in people's lives, then you are not shepherding like Jesus. The grimy, sweat-streaked face of a pastor is but an image of that blood-streaked face we all love.

TWO

Where Do We Begin?

“I need help,” is the sheepish admission that often starts the process of pastoral counseling. The pastor, standing at the back door after Sunday morning service, instinctively knows that the hushed tone means something. He pauses the conversation as he does a quick mental calculation of what to do. “I wonder what’s wrong? What should I do to help? Where do we begin?” He knows that every quiet confession can lead to a wide range of issues, from simple to complex.

INITIAL GOALS

Before we begin describing the process of counseling, it helps to keep a few overarching goals in mind. Remembering these throughout the process will also prevent you from going astray or lacking direction. To use a building metaphor, they are like the construction drawings that show what needs to be accomplished. There are three simple goals in offering pastoral counsel.

Address the Presenting Problem

First, and perhaps most obvious, we want to address the problem. Counseling is by nature problem-oriented. Like all other ministries, it is Christ-centered and Word-driven, but counseling typically comes about as a response to some area of trouble. The regular ministries of the Word are like gas stations and oil-change centers—they fuel and maintain your vehicle. But when the Ford breaks down, you take it to the shop. So also Christians who sit under the preaching of the Word week to week do not usually visit the pastor’s office until something is wrong in their lives.

Pastors get to help struggling people respond wisely to their problems: anger needs control ([Eph. 4:26](#)); sorrow needs comfort ([2 Corinthians 1](#)); fear needs rest ([Ps. 56:3–4](#)). Couples in debt need budget goals and financial restraint; teenagers who cut themselves need behavioral strategies to stop; professionals addicted to pain pills need medical

attention. Pastors have to tackle problems practically. People need thoughtful advice for real-life struggles.

But practical strategies by themselves are not enough. Counseling that is truly Christian will have much more: the person and work of Christ will be its theological and practical center. Christ and his gospel must be the foundation, means, and end of our counseling. If by the end of your time together you have not helped this person look more like Christ, then what you've done is not Christian counseling. This leads to our second goal.

Display the Relevance of the Gospel

Second, we want the person to see the relevance of the gospel. People live right only when they are made right through Christ. Their deepest values, their hidden longings, and their understanding of the world, when not aligned with God's, will result in continual frustration and dysfunction. Their perspective on the problem will likely be flat-out earthly.

But the gospel is relevant because it reframes all earthly trouble with an eternal perspective. The Word of God exposes the heart in ways nothing else can, surgically bringing to light what is unhealthy ([Heb. 4:12–13](#)) so that what is out of order may be put right ([Heb. 12:12–14](#)). Faith is the means by which a person receives the righteousness of Christ, such that the quality and character of one's heart and life are transformed ([Rom. 1:16–17; 6:22–23](#)). Even when faith in the word of Christ is difficult, a person will always find Christ more than trustworthy with his or her life ([Mark 9:24](#)).

We need to rely on the gospel like this throughout our lives. The gospel is always relevant, and one of your goals as a counselor is to make this fact as apparent as possible. You do this by exposing the self-reliant lies we all tell ourselves: “I can fix this on my own.” “Maybe this gospel stuff is helpful at church, but it won't make a real difference where I need it most in life.” “If Christ loved me, he'd make this problem go away.” “This is just too hard. I give up and don't care anymore.”

The pastor should toss a grenade into the middle of such thinking. He must insist that problems in life are occasions for troubled persons to hear the beckoning voice of Christ,

neither insisting on their own solutions nor giving up in hopelessness. None of these things will accomplish the greater gospel reliance that God desires in the hearts of those he loves.

Help People to Grow in Christlikeness

Third, and most important, we want to help people to grow to be more like Christ ([Eph. 4:22–24; 5:1](#)). Human beings were created to image God. The more we are conformed to his image, the closer we reflect God’s ideal for human life ([Rom. 8:29–30](#)). As a person is sanctified, he will put off soul-withering pursuits and put on those that aim at Christlikeness. Remember, Christ is both the means and the goal of counseling.

We realize that this third goal may not initially sound all that helpful to someone in the throes of depression or trying to recover from the death of her child. Your challenge as a pastor is to show others in compelling ways why this goal—a life conforming to Christ—is much better than their immediate desire for happiness or release from grief. While we certainly labor for the depressed to have lightened spirits and the grieved to find relief, we don’t stop there. We want them to see the glories of pursuing and becoming more like Christ. For believer and unbeliever alike, a pastor’s counsel is simple: to be like Christ is to be most alive ([John 10:10](#)).

Honestly, this makes the effectiveness of counseling harder to gauge. How do you precisely measure conformity to Christ? Certainly there are indicators in changed desires and behaviors, in different thought patterns and purified concerns. But it’s not like painting a fence, where you can see the color of your progress and know exactly how much further you have to go. The main confidence of the pastor is that if a person belongs to Christ, God has pledged himself to the task of renewing him or her. This was the apostle Paul’s reason for continuing his labors: “... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” ([Phil. 1:6](#)). It is our reason as well.

THE INITIAL ALERT

Now that the goals are laid out, let’s consider how counseling is normally initiated. Not

all situations start the same way. Counseling can certainly start with the struggling person seeking help, but it can also be initiated by a concerned friend or the pastor himself directly approaching someone who seems to need help.

Self-Initiated Counseling

Self-initiated counseling is usually the most natural way to start. When someone seeks a pastor for counsel, it is usually because he is aware of his need for help. The hesitant person contacts the pastor directly—a phone call on a Tuesday morning, a cryptic e-mail or text, a muted conversation at the rear door of the church. Whatever the issue, such conversations can usually be summarized in three words: “I need help.”

With the conversation started, the pastor can explore why the person needs help. We’ll consider this much more in later chapters. For now, it’s sufficient to say that a pastor should commend anyone who seeks help. Even if you later discover that the presenting trouble has little to do with the actual problem, you can celebrate the God-given humility the person is demonstrating in recognizing his or her need for help.

In self-initiated counseling, a sheep has cried out to his or her shepherd for help. And the shepherd should display a joyful eagerness to care for this hurting sheep (1 Pet. 5:2).

Friend-Initiated Counseling

Other counseling situations are initiated by friends or loved ones. A small-group leader alerts you to trouble in a member’s life; one roommate approaches you about another’s odd habits; a parent comes for help with a rebellious teenager. In our experience, the most frequent example of friend-initiated counseling is a wife seeking help for her husband. This is a great example to consider, since it displays both the advantages and potential disadvantages of initiating counseling for someone else.

The New Testament casts a positive vision for church members watching over one another’s lives (Gal. 6:1–2; Heb. 3:12–13; James 5:19–20), including making pastors aware of the needs of their people so as to shepherd them best. It is right for a wife to approach a pastor if she is concerned with the spiritual state of her husband.

But the potential disadvantages warrant caution on the counselor’s part. First, a

concerned spouse may approach the situation from a skewed or otherwise limited perspective. This spouse will likely have contributed to the trouble in areas she is blind to. So the pastor should be aware that the concerned spouse will also need help having a biblical perspective. [Proverbs 18:17](#) says,

The one who states his case first seems right,
until the other comes and examines him.

This bit of wisdom reminds the pastor that as he approaches the named partner, he has a lot of listening to do first. The pastor should initiate a genuine exploration with the spouse in question, not hand down foregone conclusions.

Second, the person approached will likely be less open to counsel than if he were the one initiating the conversation. The fact that he hasn't come forward might suggest he is not ready or willing to be helped, and any intrusion from the pastor based on a third-party tip-off will only make things worse. Very often, therefore, the best advice to the friend is that she encourage the potential counselee himself to initiate communication with the pastor, or at least ask the individual if the pastor could contact him.

When circumstances appear to warrant unsought intervention, you should approach the person patiently and resolved to point him to Christ. It is also usually best to be up front about who first approached you about the trouble. In most cases, you should simply make it clear to the concerned friend that you will be using her name and will defend her decision to intervene as the loving and biblical thing to do. Approaching someone on an anonymous tip does not treat the church as the church. Candor diffuses potential awkwardness early and gets things in the open more quickly.

In friend-initiated counseling, a fellow sheep has alerted the shepherd to the wanderings of another. And the shepherd should display wisdom in his approach to help.

Pastor-Initiated Counseling

Other counseling situations are initiated directly by pastors who see areas of trouble in their people's lives and seek them out. Though this is sometimes a little awkward, approaching someone to care for him is part of the pastoral mandate ([Titus 2:15](#); [Heb.](#)

13:17). Exercise of pastoral authority should never be an opportunity to bully, cajole, argue, or manipulate. We've seen pastors who, out of an apparent desire for both purity and efficiency, approach people with such brusqueness that they are all but sure to respond poorly.

The pastor should approach others with a candor that is founded upon patience and love (1 Thess. 5:14). This takes courage as well as skill. Both are developed in the doing. So, pastor, do not shy away from this task as if the Great Shepherd were not himself with you. As you clothe yourself with humility and patience, you will compel the hearts of your people to seek the grace they aren't aware they need.

In pastor-initiated counseling, a shepherd discerns the wanderings of his sheep and seeks him or her out. Especially here, the shepherd should display patience and persistence as he seeks to help.

THE INITIAL CONTACT

Having established a need for closer pastoral attention, how should a pastor begin the process of counseling? The initial contact can be thought of as involving three things: preview, prioritization, and pursuit.

Preview

We almost always request a preview of the problem. This can be done formally or informally. Requesting a formal preview may involve sending counselees a Personal Background Form as a framework for locating their problem and summarizing their perspectives of it. We've included an example of this in appendix C, where you will also find access to a digital version. A preview can also be informal, simply asking folks to write up a paragraph or two about their problem.

A preview offers a number of advantages. The pastor is given time to mobilize resources before the first session. Maybe he will pull the name of someone who has more expertise on the problem, grab a book that would be helpful for the person to read, or involve another Christian who has gone through a similar struggle.

A preview also lets you pray about the person and the problem before you meet for

counseling. We encourage pastors to develop a habit of praying during their morning quiet time for all the people they'll be meeting that day. It is a good way to avoid the danger of trying to help others in your own wisdom rather than depending on the wisdom the Lord provides ([James 1:5–8](#)).

An additional benefit of getting a preview is that it helps the counselee organize his or her thoughts before coming in. Often the person has put very little thinking into how to describe the problem; as he explains things in front of you, he is still sorting through the multitude of difficulties that plague him. Rarely have we had someone come in and summarize his life in a succinct, well-organized way. More often folks spew out verbiage for the pastor to clean up. “I struggle with this ... my wife hates that ... maybe I should think about this ... they're always telling me that ...” You don't notice the clock has ticked twenty minutes away before the flow tapers off. Having some grasp of the nature of the situation beforehand will help you organize what can be an onslaught of details.

Prioritization

As a pastor, you are already painfully aware of your finitude. You have only so much time and energy. We trust that God has burdened you to spend both for the good of his people. To do this most effectively, you have to prioritize what situations get greater portions of your time. Having previewed the situation, you'll be able to weigh a few factors.

Time required. Basic marital problems or behavioral issues may require less time than more complex troubles involving deeply rooted value systems or long-running patterns of behavior. We are not saying that a pastor should prioritize those situations that take the least amount of time. In fact, those that require more usually need the most attention. But a pastor should be aware of the likely time demands. Experience gives you a feel for timing.

Level of exploration required. Some troubles require a great deal of exploration of people's thinking and desiring, of their personal history or relational dynamics with others. Those that require more exploration should usually take priority. Those situations that are more straightforward can usually be handled by small-group leaders or other Christian friends who are willing and able to pursue them.

Level of urgency. Every situation is urgent to those making the request. But part of your job as pastor is helping people to see their troubles in the context of other people's needs. Some counseling requests are simply not all that urgent when compared with others. The wise pastor knows his time, that of his staff and fellow elders, and that of other skilled folks in his congregation. In less urgent situations, the pastor should not feel guilty spending only a single meeting in which he encourages counselees to pursue growth through the more regular ministries of the Word, at least until his counseling load lightens. We'll say more about utilizing the other ministries of the church in chapter 7.

Available gospel-oriented relationships. Another factor is the relationships available to the person in need of help. If there are few gospel-minded folks available to guide someone, then counseling should be a higher priority. A pastor should be eager to care for a person groping blindly with no guide. Sometimes, given circumstances beyond anyone's control, the person just doesn't have many faithful guides. The pastor should pursue this person not just for direct counseling, but also to connect him to the life of the body.

Pursuit

A final issue to consider in the initial meeting is how much you should continue to pursue someone in need. Admittedly, how much to pursue a person is one of the harder equations a pastor has to calculate. He has to weigh the urgency of the situation, the receptiveness of the person's heart, and the other needs in the congregation. This is especially difficult in friend- or pastor-initiated counseling, since few people are eager to be pursued. Yet, pursuit of uninterested people is often the call of the pastor. The skill lies in discerning how much to pursue, and different situations will warrant different styles of pursuit. Here are a few profiles to consider.

Those who are initially interested but bad at follow-through. Often in a tumult of conviction or desperation, people will reach out to a pastor for help. But then they'll be embarrassed and evasive when you follow up. You serve them by not letting them slip away. So be persistent and even a bit insistent for at least an initial meeting to get a lay of the land. Usually once folks get over their hesitation for that first meeting, they see the

value of the process.

Those who are uninterested or busy. If only we could inject the desire for help into some people's hearts. It would make our job a lot easier. But since we can't do this, we need to be prepared to make our case for the importance of seeking help. Getting an initial session with someone is usually not difficult; but getting them to commit to more can be troublesome. And in some situations, a busy schedule makes it legitimately difficult for the person to commit. In these situations, it is best to approach people from the angle of priorities. If you were offering them an hourly wage of \$1500 to meet with you, they would find the time as well as the interest. And what you offer from the Word is infinitely more valuable to their joy and well-being.

Those who are hostile. Even in churches, people are sometimes hostile toward leaders for various reasons. If that hostility is personal suspicion of a certain pastor, then we would advise the church's leaders to arrange meetings with a different pastor or staff member for ministry to this disgruntled individual. Part of the long-term care would be to seek reconciliation, of course. But trying to understand *why* a person is hostile is very important to the care of her soul. Hostility is a direct path to at least one major facet of her trouble. In situations where a person is hostile to the entire leadership of the church, it may be wise for those elders to seek help from pastors at another like-minded church.

Those who are overzealous. You may already know the feeling of getting numerous calls from the same individual in one day. The person's pursuit of you quickly becomes inappropriately intense, but you may feel guilty for even thinking so. Don't feel guilty. Part of loving people is helping to shape their expectations. It is always more merciful to lay down appropriate ground rules early than to allow people to overly depend on you. They must learn that the Lord is their constant refuge, and that you are his servant, among other servants, who will walk with them steadily over the long haul. And they must learn that all God's servants have limits.

With all of these situations, a pastor should avoid being too strong in pushing a counseling process on someone. Sometimes the Lord's timing is different from ours, and we can entrust such folks to him so long as we keep a close, caring eye on them. It may be that the Lord intends to let their trouble kick them around a bit more. Or, it may be the

Lord's will to transform their hearts through some other means by which the Word penetrates their life. We should be humbly open to God, not insisting on the particular tool we think is most appropriate.

On the other hand, someone who is living in outright, identifiable sin and thus destroying himself and those around him should be required to commit to meeting with a pastor. If the individual refuses to do so, that refusal may speak to a broader refusal to repent of this sin, which can eventually provoke the later stages of church discipline.

UP NEXT: OUR METHOD

Now that we have some grasp of how counseling starts, we can establish our method of approach. This is the last aspect of what we're calling the *concept* of counseling. After that, we'll be ready to walk through the process.

THREE

Your Method: How You *Do* Counseling

You would never trust an author who claimed to teach a fully developed method of preaching in one short chapter. We are not claiming to do so with counseling. But you do need to have some framework for directing a counseling conversation. We have done our best to boil it down to its most necessary elements so you can have a clear sense of what you're doing. We laid out the three main goals of counseling: to address the problem, to display the relevance of the gospel, and to help people grow in Christlikeness. If you have these goals clearly in mind, you will have a much greater chance of saying something beneficial.

Pastors know they need to do more than simply find a more compassionate way of saying, "Stop it," or hand a person two verses and say, "Let me know how those work for you." Pastoral counseling involves at least three core elements: listening, considering, and then speaking. Pastors actively utilize these three aspects of counseling in order to uncover, weigh, and offer redemptive insights for the troubles in their people's lives.

THE METHOD

If the goals of counseling are like construction drawings, then the method is like the implementation plan for the phases of construction. You start with the foundation, move through structural framing, and end with the finish work.

Pastoral counseling follows a similar trajectory—you move from listening to considering to speaking.

- *You listen to the problem*—to understand the context of the person's life and troubles ([Prov. 18:2, 13](#); [James 1:19](#)).
- *You consider heart responses*—how the person's heart is responding to God, to self, to others, and to circumstances ([Prov. 20:5](#)).
- *You speak truth in love*—in order to teach, comfort, warn, encourage, advise, and admonish as appropriate ([2 Corinthians 1](#); [Col. 3:16](#); [1 Thess. 5:14](#)).

These three actions—listening, considering, speaking—are key to our methodology. All three parts are woven throughout the process of counseling.

1. *Listen to the problem.* You want to know what is going on, but people often share their troubles haphazardly, piling up details in an unorganized lump. You can sort things into smaller piles and help a person organize what he is saying. Here is a system of organization we've found helpful:

- *Circumstances.* First, what is going on? What circumstances seem most important to the person?
- *Other people.* Who are the most prominent people in his story? How are they treating him? How is he treating them?
- *Self.* What is his posture toward his troubles? Does he see himself as a victim, perpetrator, inferior, superior, ignorant, insightful, confused, clear-headed, guilty, innocent?
- *God.* How is the person factoring (or not factoring) God into his troubles? What is his perspective of the Lord's involvement with his predicament?

2. *Consider heart responses.* After you've found out the basics of what's going on, you want to consider how the person's heart is responding in each of these areas. His responses will be characterized either by faith or by a number of other things—fear, anger, discouragement, lust, indulgence, escape, ignorance, sadness, disappointment, discontentment, suspicion.

- *Circumstances.* Does the person recognize the difference between his circumstances and his *response* to his circumstances? Is his response characterized by faith or by something else?
- *Other people.* Is this person loving others? Is he being influenced by others in unbiblical ways?
- *Self.* What is this person's functional identity—the beliefs or values about himself that shape his conduct? How does this identity align with what God says about him in the gospel?
- *God.* Does this person trust God to be who he says he is and to do what he says he

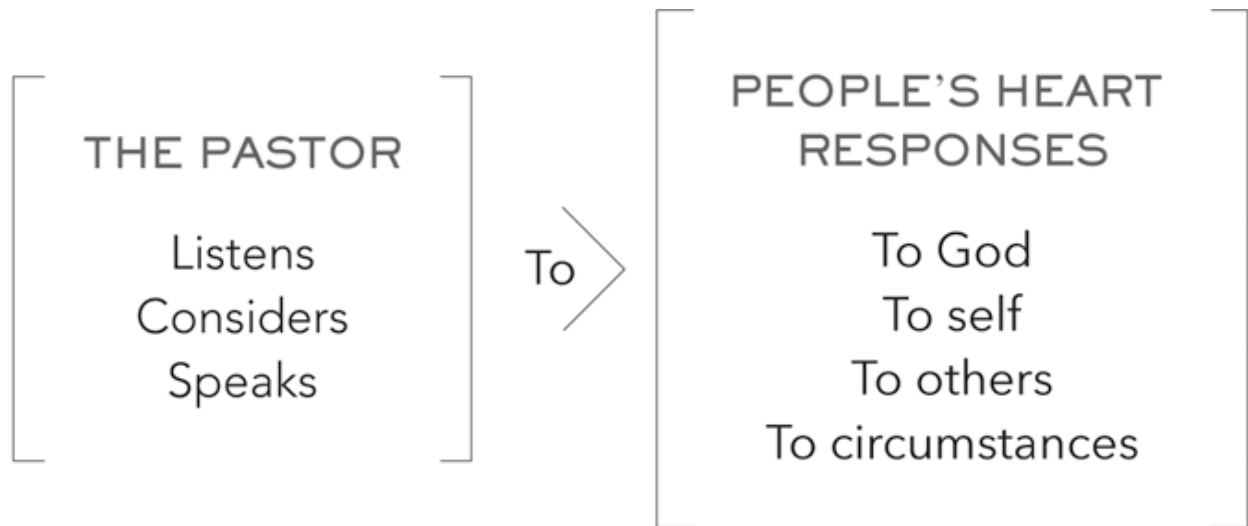
will do? Or is there some preferred version of God he's quietly holding?

3. *Speak the truth in love.* Speaking accurately to the need of the heart comes only after listening and considering. A pastor knows whether to teach, comfort, warn, encourage, advise, and admonish from Scripture based on the person's heart responses. The goal is to call people to faith in a way that specifically addresses their heart responses, since faith alone is the means by which a person responds rightly ([Heb. 11:6, 13–16; 12:1–2](#)). And faith comes through hearing the word of Christ ([Rom. 10:17](#)). This is why counseling must be biblical. Here are some appropriate ways you can speak to a person's need:

- *Circumstances.* A pastor gives biblical guidance appropriate to the situation. For those grieving, he comforts them by pointing to the hope found in God ([Rom. 8:18–25](#)). For the abused, he protects them from the abuser with the law ([13:1–4](#)) and calls them to forgive ([Luke 6:27–36](#)). For the anxious, he helps them understand that fear reveals desires that must be actively entrusted to a loving God ([Phil. 4:4–13](#)).
- *Other people.* A pastor will help people get a biblical vision of how to relate to others with both the dignity and humility of Christ. Active faith means loving others instead of fearing or using them ([Rom. 13:8–10](#)). You help people see what it means to believe the best about others while being realistic about their faults and sins ([12:17–21](#)). You help them know how to lay down personal interests for the sake of others ([Phil. 2:1–8](#)).
- *Self.* A pastor calls people out of rival identities and into Christ as their source of identity. These identities are where people try to find life—as a successful businessman, a respected minister, a capable mother—so finding confidence in these is a direct competitor to confidence in Christ alone ([Phil. 3:3–16](#)).
- *God.* Most importantly, a pastor helps people to have a more accurate view of God from his Word. You help them to know and trust God as the only way for human life to be meaningful and to yield lasting change in the soul ([Jer. 9:23–24; Col. 1:9–10](#)).

Figure 1 illustrates this methodology of listening, considering, and speaking.

Figure 1.



CONCLUSION

We have laid out the *concept* of counseling in these three chapters, beginning with a vision of counseling as pastoral labor, moving to the broad goals in counseling, and rounding it out with a description of the method of counseling. This gives you what you need now to understand the *process* you're going into, beginning with the initial meeting. Our hope is that if we can walk you through the shape of an entire counseling conversation, you will be better equipped to do it yourself.

A Few Practical Considerations for Your Office

- *Be prepared for the criers.* Have a box of tissues next to the couch or a chair where folks typically sit for counseling. Even with it there, someone who is emotionally overwhelmed might not notice the tissues, so you can serve criers with a simple prompt like, "There are tissues next to you."
- *Position clocks strategically.* Put a clock on the wall above the counseling couch or chair, within your natural line of sight. Avoid looking at your watch or cell phone during the session; it will make counselees feel hurried. Occasionally peek at the clock so that you can pace the session without making the person feel time-conscious.