

Counseling *is* the Church

By David A. Powlison¹

Jesus gives His disciples a great calling. The things that make the Wonderful Counselor so wonderful include a boat-load of His “communicable attributes.” Of course, there are attributes that the Lord of all keeps for Himself, His incommunicable attributes: omniscience and omnipotence, for starters. (Wouldn’t *those* make counseling sing, to know everything and to be able to throw all the switches!) But the Lord freely gives away what it takes for us to counsel well. He teaches us to treat people with wise love that is able to search out every facet of the human condition. The Redeemer makes under-redeemers who can effectively aid others where they need aid. The insights, love, and skills it takes can become resident in our lives individually and communally. Wise love, intelligent joy, peaceable savvy, patient engagement with people and problems over the long-haul? Counseling is a prime expression of such fruit. These are what the church is by definition, and is becoming by redemptive process. Counseling is what church—the Wonderful Counselor’s trainees—is *about*.

1. For a somewhat different development of some themes in this article, see my “Questions at the Crossroads” in Mark McMinn and Timothy Phillips, eds., *Care of the Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 23–61.

That assertion raises a thousand questions. But I'm going to focus not on our "faith and practice" (Christ's vision for "theory and therapy"), but on our institutional structures (Jesus' take on the social "system" we seek to establish). Sound boring? It's not. We're social creatures by creation, not hedgehogs or rogue bull elephants. Social creatures form communities that are organized in some way or other. And counseling is an activity that calls forth many organizational structures and functions. This article will turn on two sets of questions regarding our institutions.

The first set of questions asks, "What *ought* to be the social structure for counseling, if we are to please the Shepherd of sheep?" How should cure of souls be organized? What institutional structures ought to be in place to equip and oversee face-to-face ministry? How should grass-roots care be delivered? What credentials and characteristics define leadership and valid professionalism in the cure of souls? What is the role of one-anothering, friendship, mentoring? How should the faith and practice, the concepts and methods, of our counseling be both enriched and regulated so that we grow faithful and stay faithful to God?

The second set of questions asks, "How *is* the church doing in counseling?" What is the viability and validity of our current institutional arrangements? Are we meeting the needs? Do we even know what we need? What are the implications for the church of Christ that she currently lacks many crucial institutional components necessary to accomplish the cure of souls?

The Bible addresses not only ideas and practices, but also social structure: institutions, communities, ways of organizing things, programs. Does the Holy Spirit intend that we develop the social organisms for curing souls? The answer is Yes. The church—as the Bible defines it—contains an exquisite blending of leadership roles and mutuality, of specialized roles and the general calling, of truth and

love, of wisdom for living, of flexibility to meet the gamut of problems that sinners and sufferers face. The people of God functioning as the people of God provide the ideal and desirable institution to fix what ails us. That institution can adapt to take on a thousand different problems.²

Soul care and cure—sustaining sufferers and transforming sinners—is a component of the total ministry of the church according to the Bible (however poorly we may be doing the job). The Lord whose gaze and will the Bible reveals lays claim to the cure of souls. If counseling is indeed about understanding and resolving the human condition, if it deals with the real problems of real people, if it ever mentions the name Jesus Christ (or ought to, but doesn't), then it traffics in theology and cure of souls. “Counseling” ought to express and come under the church’s authority and orthodoxy.

What is the state of the church itself regarding cure of souls? It is not enough for those who believe in this vision to proclaim “the church, the church, the church.” That sounds good, and, sure, it’s

2. I include under “church” not only local churches, but also “meta-church” organizations that bring together believers and organize joint endeavors (presbyteries, associations, denominations, agencies, synods, and the like), as well as a carefully circumscribed place for Christian workers in “para-church” specialized ministries. Meta- and para-organizations often serve useful auxiliary roles, with a scope or specialized purpose different from what a particular local church is able to do. In my view, there are a number of valid roles for cooperative ministries operating in a wider sphere than parish or locale: education, publishing and other mass media, cooperative endeavors to meet particular needs (crisis pregnancy, marriage enrichment, prison, campus, military chaplaincy, etc.), hospitals, international and regional missions, and carrying a banner for particular causes within the large scope of Christian concerns. Such extramural Christian works need to remember that they are “barely legitimate,” in the sense that they ought to exist only when they genuinely and intentionally serve the interests of the communities whose mature functioning will put them out of business. For example, para-church and meta-church become illegitimate when they compete with or use local churches to their own ends: power, status, wealth, autonomy, etc. There is room for and need for *much* institutional innovation and development, both within local churches and in meta- or para-church forms. Explicitly biblical truth and love must take institutional forms tailored to meet particular needs for redemptive help: e.g., street people, drunks and addicts, schizophrenics, immigrants, elderly, etc.

true—in theory. But the church does not currently have in place many of the necessary commitment statements, educational resources, training arrangements, oversight mechanisms, and practice venues to deliver the goods. There are some good beginnings and promising signs—but *lots* of room to grow. Functional autonomy and the potential for confusion and error are not only problems of mental health professionalism. Within the church herself, cure of souls operates in mirror-image autonomy, with mirror-image potential for theological and practical trouble.

Let me give a concrete example of the problem. I am part of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). One of the leaders in our congregation, AJ, is pursuing ordination. In order to be ordained in the PCA, to be recognized as competent to lead the people of God pastorally, AJ will be tested in many significant areas. His personal character must match the requirements for Christian maturity and seasoned fidelity to Christ. He must sustain examinations in Bible knowledge, theology proper (view of God), soteriology (view of salvation), exegesis (his ability to get at what the Bible says), church history (how we got where we are), church government (how the machinery works), and preaching (his ability to talk to a crowd and to communicate true and gracious orthodoxy).

But what about the cure of souls and counseling? AJ will not be examined on what he believes and how he practices ministry to individuals. He will present no case study of a disintegrating marriage, or a woman who binges and purges, or someone in the sloughs of depression. There is no tradition of wisdom for the cure of souls into which AJ has been intentionally, necessarily, and systematically disciplined. There is no institutional system—creedal, educational, qualifying, and supervisory—to help him think as biblically about counseling as he does about soteriology, preaching, and evangelism. His views on counseling will be matters of opinion and conscience.

Counseling is a wild card. AJ can believe and do whatever he wants about counseling, as long as he is able to profess the right answer to the technical, theological question about sanctification.

Imagine, then, that AJ must deal with Roger, a troubled church member. Roger is emotionally volatile, given to fits of rage, bouts of depression, and restlessly pervasive anxiety. His relationships with others are estranged, and his work history is spotty. As a pastor in the PCA, AJ could take any of many fundamentally different approaches towards this member of Christ's flock. Roger could be sent to a secular psychiatrist to get Prozac to level his moods. Or, he could be sent to a Meier New Life Clinic, and, in addition to Prozac, be taught the principles of *Love is a Choice*. Perhaps AJ himself could counsel Roger, exploring his pain and disappointment at primary care-givers, in order to refocus his deep longings for relationship onto the Lord. Or, AJ might treat Roger as frustrated in his pursuit of significance, and needing to look to Jesus to give him the significance he craves: "God doesn't make junk, and Jesus singled you out to love. Creation and redemption can help you feel good about yourself." AJ could attempt to identify and cast out demons of anger that became attached to Roger's family line through the sins of previous generations, and which now hold him in bondage. Roger could be referred to a secular psychologist for cognitive-behavioral retooling that would disciple him into self-referential stoic rationalism, rather than a relationship with the living Savior. AJ could give Roger a course of study in basic Christian doctrines, or a concentrated dose of a particular favorite doctrine, or a Navigators 2:7 study. In fact, AJ need not believe in counseling at all, but might assert that sitting under the preaching of the Word, participating in corporate worship, and cultivating a more consistent devotional life will be sufficient to cure what ails Roger. Or AJ might seek to understand and counsel Roger according to the thought forms and practices of some form

of biblical counseling, however he understood that (which might include components from some of the options mentioned above, too). In any case it is his choice what sort of cure and care Roger will receive. AJ will not be taught, seasoned, questioned, supervised, encouraged, or disciplined about that choice.

How can this problem be remedied? Let me identify five needs. First and foremost, Christian people (“the church”) need to become *wise in the face-to-face cure of souls*. We cannot articulate, practice, teach, or regulate what we do not know how to think or do. Breadth of understanding, penetrating insight, discerning skill, patient and generous love, efficacy, teachability, courage, these sorts of biblical wisdom are highly attractive and persuasive. They adorn the truths that they profess. It’s easy to argue with someone who just waves a flag of professed commitments, but is clumsy, ignorant, and arrogant. It’s harder to discount the views of people who are getting their hands dirty and making a difference as they speak biblical sense. The practical reality is that the church has been poor in understanding and enabling the processes of change, and that makes the psychotherapies plausible to many both outside and inside the church. Wisdom must be articulated conceptually, must become skillful methodologically, and then must become incarnate institutionally. Let me highlight the institutional. When people are troubled or troublesome, *who* will help them? *Where* is the social location of that aid? *How long* will it last? *What forms* of help are offered? Because all ministry costs money, how will help be *funded*? That Jesus and the Word have something fundamental and determinative to say about counseling will sound increasingly plausible as mature biblical counseling characterizes the grass-roots practice and structures of the church of Jesus Christ. Can we do what needs to be done?

Second, we need *creedal standards* in cure of souls, or at least a widely recognized corpus of practical theological writing. A system

of practical theology serves as something to which we can refer and subscribe, towards which we can aim educationally, from which we can be supervised and challenged regarding our faith and practice. A creed is a starting point, orienting a trajectory of subsequent development. Currently, the requisite “faith and practice” does not include views of counseling (except by extension and application from historical formulations that generalize about the nature of ministry, human nature, and progressive sanctification). Faith and practice need to be extended into “personality theory,” “counseling methodology,” “dynamics of change,” and “delivery systems for cure of souls.” What is the standard for faith and practice in counseling?

Third, we need *educational institutions* committed to the Bible’s distinctive model of understanding persons and change. For many years seminaries taught virtually nothing substantive about progressive sanctification and the particulars of hands-on, case-wise, heart-searching, life-rearranging cure of souls. In the past 30 years there has been a stampede to create “counseling” programs and departments, but the results are very spotty in terms of consistent biblical thinking. Christian colleges typically contain a psychology department. But, typically, neither seminary nor college teaches things that significantly differ from what a secular institution would teach. Most institutions give a junior version of secular theory and methods, or prepare students for graduate education in mental health professions, or make students “ordainable” with those state-licensed professions. Few teach how to understand and counsel people in ways harmonious with the Bible’s vision for the cure of souls. How do people learn to become case-wise counselors of others?

Fourth, we need cure of souls to become part of the church’s *qualifying procedures* that recognize trustworthy and skillful practitioners. Forms of recognizing truth, love, and skill need to be

established at two levels. One level qualifies the pastoral leadership: licensure, ordination, accreditation, per se. Skill in conversing with individuals, couples, and families must become as important a part of doctrinal fidelity as skill in speaking to crowds. Pastoral candidates should not only prove that they are orthodox and that they can give an address to an audience. They should present a case study of how they would think about and engage marital conflict, an eating disorder, or depression. A second level of recognition qualifies members of local churches to function in grass-roots ministry under the authority of pastor and elders. Here is where most wise and long-haul counseling, whether formal or informal, will occur. Small group leaders, trained lay counselors, mentors, members seconded out to counsel in crisis pregnancy centers, and so forth, ought to operate within the unique Christian worldview. Most Christians who currently counsel with secular professional credentials are laypersons ecclesiastically, not professionals, and as part of their own discipleship to Jesus they should willingly submit their theories, methods, and structures to the church's oversight, learning to subscribe to the distinctly Christian model of persons and change. How can wisdom and fidelity in conversational ministry be recognized and affirmed?

Fifth, we need ecclesiastically grounded *supervisory structures* for cure of souls. The secular mental health professions usually offer continuing education, discipline for morals offenses (breach of trust in sexual, financial, or confidentiality matters), and case supervision to continually enhance skills and thinking. The church has often offered continuing education (e.g., books, seminars of various sorts, D.Min. programs). The church has often disciplined for morals or doctrinal offenses. But cure of souls tends to drop through the cracks. As I have said, it is an optional activity with optional beliefs and practices: a wild card. Pastoral oversight—case

supervision and discussion—are clear needs within local churches and other arenas of ministry. There ought to be extensive interaction and supervision regarding the faith and practice of cure of souls. It *matters* what interpretations of life and what advice are mediated to counselees. A secular psychotherapist can freely adopt any of many theoretical orientations—behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic, existential, somatic, etc.—or can hold theory loosely and function multi-modally. The church does not believe in such theoretical diversity, but aims to refine its truth and love to cohere with how God sees things and with the character and purposes of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible. How can we protect and enhance counseling wisdom?

How are we doing in this? Current competencies, standards, structures, and functions are often far, far removed from what I am proposing. Perhaps it sounds ludicrous even to propose that the church get a grip on cure of souls. Counseling is renegade from God and truth within the culture; counseling is largely a runaway from the church even within the church. But without such wisdoms of truth, practice, and social structure, we as the people of God do not really function as the people of God. The church is counsel and counseling, if Ephesians 4 speaks true. Life-changing truth and love is our calling.

Sure, the motivation theories of the modern psychologies would not last ten minutes if they were examined in a decent systematic theology class on human nature. But the shoe fits on the other foot, too. The current state of most church structures, theoretical development, and practice of ministry for the cure of souls would not last ten minutes in a secular counseling class on how to go deep and hang in for the long haul with a troubled person! *In the pages of the Bible* we have a social model to die for (and the secular world would kill to get even an approximation!): a seamless joining of specialized

competency with community and peer resources, a seamless joining of nurturing and remedial functions, a seamless joining of comfort for those who suffer and transformation for those whose lives are misformed. But *in the practice of the extant church*, both the defined specialists in curing souls and the community of care often fall woefully short of biblical understanding and competency.

We who call for the centrality of the church in counseling face a dilemma. The very thing we believe in and aspire to lacks many of the necessary components to define, enable, and regulate the hands-on cure of souls. Conceptual and structural defects of secularity among psychotherapists are mirrored by intellectual and structural defects of religiosity among pastors and other Christian workers. It is fine to call Christians to practice and seek cure of souls in submission to the doctrine and life of the local church. But the church needs to *become* a far better place to come into and come under.

I believe that to orient face-to-face cure of souls towards the mental health professional model is fundamentally, even disastrously, wrongheaded. At the same time, a commitment to truly wise church-oriented counseling ministry is years and decades from significant institutional realization. (And, given how the Lord runs history, we never “arrive”; there will always be miles to go before we sleep—or before we are fully awake!) What must we do now? Jesus calls us to ply our oars in the right direction, however far away the destination seems. Let’s aim right. Let’s walk in the right direction. Let’s work toward the right ends. Jesus Christ our living Lord will complete us together in the maturity of His wisdom. Ephesians 4 gives our *modus operandi*, as well as our goal. I hope this article serves as one small “speaking the truth in love” in the direction of perfecting our collective wisdom, love, and power as the people of the living God. We are being redeemed. We must each labor to disassemble autonomous professionalism, rather than to further

assemble it. We must each labor to make our professed loyalty to the church a significant reality, rather than a mere profession of good intentions.³

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