

The Pastor as Counselor¹

By David Powlison

This article is written *to* pastors—but it is *for* anyone interested in counseling. If you are not a pastor, you will overhear ways of seeing, thinking and conversing that give fresh shape to your counseling, too. Listen in. The dots do connect directly to you. I hope that you find this vision illuminating and heartening. If you are a pastor, I hope that the message speaks relevantly, not only to your 1:1 conversations, but with an impact that nourishes your preaching, teaching and leadership as well. All readers will find, along the way, that this article is actually an introduction to biblical counseling philosophy, methodology and process.

During eras when church life has been vibrantly responsive to Scripture, pastors have counseled well and wisely. They have understood that their pastoral calling includes a significant ‘counseling’ component. The faith proclaimed and practiced in congregational life also finds a natural home in conversational life.

Pastor, you *are* a counselor.

1. An earlier version of this article was published in Sam Storms and Justin Taylor, eds., *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 419–442.

Perhaps you don't think of yourself that way. (And perhaps your people don't think of you that way, either.) Perhaps you don't want to be a counselor. But you are one.

Perhaps preaching, leadership, and administration keep you preoccupied, and you do not do much hands-on pastoral work. It can easily happen. Many pastors don't make and take time for serious talking with people. In effect, they are counseling people to think that most of us don't need the give and take of candid, constructive conversation. This absence of engagement, whether intentional or not, communicates that the care and cure of wayward, distractible, battered, immature souls—people like us—can be handled by public ministry and private devotion. The explicit wisdom of both Scripture and church history argues to the contrary.

Perhaps you are a poor counselor. Are you shy, tentative, passive? Are you aggressive, controlling, opinionated? Do you sympathize with strugglers so much that you have trouble shifting the conversation into forward gear? Do people feel you don't listen well and don't really care, so they don't find reasons to trust you? Do you talk too much about yourself—or too little? Are you too folksy, or too clinical?

Unlike Proverbs, do you moralize, unhinging advice from deeper insight and deeper reasons? “Read your Bible... Just get accountable... Have your quiet time... Get involved in a ministry.” But proverbs point to the fruits of grace, not the means of grace. They never moralize. They press us with deep questions about what we most trust or fear. They present the God who actively gives wisdom to those who ask, and who continually intervenes in the consequences of our choices. They attune us to notice what voices persuasively bid to mislead us. Wise, moral behavior is thus located amid the heart's motivations, the workings of God, and the significant

influences around us. The counsel has more ‘texture’ than we might imagine. Life-or-death moral decisions populate the proverbs.

Unlike Psalms, are you pietistic? “Just pray and give it all to Jesus. Pray this warfare prayer and claim back your inheritance from Satan. Learn mindfulness and listen for the voice of God in your inner silence.” But the psalms are neither pietistic, superstitious nor mystical. They teach us to speak a full-orbed honesty— putting our actual afflictions, sins and blessings into words; expressing the unfolding dance of actual experience and emotions; maintaining intent awareness of what God is like and what he says. The qualities of true humanness populate the psalms.

Unlike Jesus, do you speak in theological abstractions and generalities, putting a premium on cognitive ability? “Remember the Sovereignty of God... Rehearse your justification and adoption by grace through faith... Hold in view the synergy between God’s active initiative and man’s active response in the sanctification process...” Shorthand jargon is helpful sometimes, but abstraction holds truths at arm’s length. Ministry talks with people. Jesus talks the way people talk. “Notice how God feeds the crows. The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Ministry takes truth personally, and makes the implications up close and interpersonal.

Unlike Paul—no two letters and no two sermons are ever the same!—do you offer the predictable boilerplate of a pat answer and pet truth? Are you a Johnny-one-note, reiterating one promise or principle as the panacea for every kind of problem and person? The apostle is nimble, continually adapting what he says to the contingencies and exigencies of each situation.

Unlike the Bible, does your counsel comfortably restate the current assumptions and advice of our surrounding culture? Do you sound like a self-help book, perhaps with a sprinkling of Jesus and God? Do you label people with whatever explanatory labels happen to be this decade's hot properties? Flannery O'Connor caught how thoughtful Christian faith is always wild and unexpected:

Push back against the age as hard as it pushes against you. What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.²

If everybody's saying it, then our counsel will take that culturally comfortable muzak and transpose it into a different key, a different arrangement, a different instrumentation. What secular people see most clearly and care about most deeply is always important—and factoring God into the equation will always turn their familiar world upside down.

There are innumerable ways to run off the rails. But even if your counseling is ineffectual, off-putting or harmful, you are still a counselor.

If you are a good counselor, then you are learning how to sustain with a word the one who is weary (Isa 50:4). This is wonderful, nothing less than your Redeemer's skillful love expressed in and through... you. You've learned to speak truth in love, conversing in honest, nutritious, constructive, relevant, grace-giving ways (Eph 4:15, 25, 29). You deal gently with the ignorant and wayward because you know you are more like them than different (Heb 5:2–3). You don't only do whatever comes naturally to you, but have learned

2. Sally Fitzgerald, ed., *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 229.

the flexibility to be patient with all, to help the weak, to comfort the faint-hearted, to admonish the unruly (1 Thess 5:14). You bring back those who wander (James 5:19–20) just as God brings you back time and again. You are engaged in meeting *the most fundamental human need*, both giving and receiving encouragement every day (Heb 3:13). In becoming a better counselor, you are growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Pastor, you are a counselor—and much more than a counselor. A pastor also teaches, equips, supervises, and counsels other counselors. You are the counselor-in-chief. Your teaching and example will profoundly shape both the content (‘counsel’) and the practice (‘counseling’) of the conversations taking place all around you in which people try to be helpful to each other. Is your preaching worth the time you put into it? Is it worth the time others spend listening? The proof lies in whether they are growing up into wise mutual counselors. God gives shepherds and teachers for a reason: to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11–12). That leads directly to the call and challenge that Ephesians 4:15–16 and 4:29 make to all God’s children. Hands-on pastoral counseling never means that you become the only counselor in the body of Christ. You are training Christ’s people how to walk in the image of the Wonderful Counselor. This is a refreshing vision for the care and cure of souls! It is a distinctively Christian vision.

This article focuses on the counseling aspect of a pastor’s calling. But I do hope other people will listen in. All human beings are counselors, whether wise, foolish, or mixed. *All* Christians are meant to become wiser counselors. God intends that every word you ever say to anyone is actively constructive in content, intention, tone, and appropriateness. That’s Ephesians 4:29. Those who face *any* affliction should find you a source of tangible, life-renewing comfort.

That's 2 Corinthians 1:4. Wisdom sets the bar high. We are to become a community in which substantial conversations predominate. You who are not pastors will grow in wisdom by considering how pastoral work particularizes the wisdom of Christ in the cure of souls whenever the body of Christ is working well.

This article has two parts. First, we will discuss how to understand the word 'counseling' within a pastoral frame of reference. Second, we will unpack a few of the distinctives that make a pastor's counseling unique.

A. What Is 'Counseling'?

The psychotherapeutic conception of "counseling" operates in a different universe from the pastoral conception. The human problems are the same, of course: distressed, distressing, straying, broken, confused people. People who need help. How should we define the "talking cure" for the ills that beset us?

A therapist's treatment typically means a private relationship confined to an appointed hour once a week. Like medicine or law, the mental health professions treat patients/clients on a fee-for-service basis. State-licensure recognizes education and experience that presumably grant esoteric explanatory insight and exceptional interventive skills. Like medical professionals, mental health professionals present themselves as possessing objective scientific knowledge and offering value-neutral technical expertise. The ostensibly healthy treat the definedly sick. A client's difficulties and distress are susceptible to diagnosis in morally-neutral categories: a DSM-IV syndrome, dysfunction, or disorder.

Therapeutic professionalism serves a distinct ethos. Clinical detachment intentionally avoids the mutuality of normal social existence: willing self-disclosure, "dual relationships" that live outside the office as well as inside, the candid give-and-take of story,

opinion, persuasion, and mutual influence. Professional reserve dictates that “the therapist will not impose or otherwise induce his personal values on the patient...The exploration and acquisition of more constructive and less neurotically determined values [is] conducted without ethical or moral pressure or suasions of any kind.”³ Psychotherapeutic faith roots in “the assumption that in every human being there is a core selfhood that if allowed free and unconflicted expression would provide the basis for creative, adaptive, and productive living.”⁴ Religion is recognized as a factor that might be individually compelling for some clients, either a comforting resource or an aspect of pathology. But “God” has no objective significance or necessary relevance either in explanation or treatment of dysfunctional emotions, behaviors and thoughts.

This constellation of assumptions and expectations expresses the professional self-image of the talking-cure professions. It shapes our culture’s implicit belief that ‘psychotherapy/ counseling’ is essentially analogous to medical doctoring. But this complex of meanings profoundly misshapes assumptions of what counseling really is and ideally ought to be. Counseling *per se* is not like medical doctoring. It is pastoring. It is discipling. If we want to use the physician analogy, counseling is the “bedside manner” part of doctoring, not the medical part. It expresses the influence human beings have on one another’s thoughts, values, moods, expectancies, choices and relationships. Counseling is not essentially a technical enterprise calling for technical expertise. It is a relational and pastoral enterprise engaging in care and cure of the soul. Both psycho-therapy and psychiatry attempt pastoral work, engaging in “care and cure of the

3. W. W. Meissner, “The Psychotherapies: Individual, Family, and Group,” in *The Harvard Guide to Psychiatry*, ed. Armand Nicholi (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 418–419.

4. *Ibid.*, 418.

soul” as their etymologies accurately signify. Sigmund Freud rightly defined therapists as “secular pastoral workers.”⁵

Personal factors—who you are, how you treat people, what you believe—are decisive in all pastoral work, whether secular or Christian. The key ingredients in pastoring another human being are love, wisdom, humility, integrity, mercy, authority, clarity, truth-speaking, courage, candor, curiosity, hope, and things like these. Pastoring calls for sane humanity, wide experience, much patience, careful listening, responsive immediacy. Pastoring entails a willingness to live with uncertainty about process and outcome. Pastoring calls for the ability to help others both gain big-picture perspective and take practical action.

Secular therapists also sense these things, deep down, and say as much when they doff the professional persona.⁶ These are terrific personal qualities. They express nothing less than how the image of God lives in human flesh while going about the work of redeeming distressed, distressing, straying, broken, confused people. The mental health professions intuit well whenever they say that personal factors are the essential factors. But they serve in pastorates with no God and no church. They aim to restore straying, suffering, willful, dying human beings. But they consider Christ unnecessary to their pastoral work. As a matter of principle, they will not lead strugglers to the Savior of strays. You know better. But the secularized-medicalized definition of “counseling” powerfully intimidates pastors and laypersons alike. If the habits, instincts, outlook, and goals

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969; orig. 1926), 108.

6. Readers interested in doing some digging will appreciate Armand Nicholi, “The Therapist-Patient Relationship,” in *The Harvard Guide to Psychiatry*, 7–22. See also Peter Kramer, *Moments of Engagement* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), esp. 182–218; and Perry London’s classic *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964).

of therapeutic pastorates define “counseling,” then you had better not pretend or aspire to be a counselor.

Consider four ways that you as a pastor must redefine ‘counseling.’

For starters, if the psychotherapeutic definition controls our vision, *what pastor could ever provide the necessary care and cure of even 30 souls, let alone 100, 500, or 5000 souls? Who has the time? And what pastor has time to get the presumably necessary secularized education?* Having labored long toward your ordination by the church, who has time or inclination to labor for a second ordination by the mental health system? What pastor could ever invest so much effort in 1:1 counseling? A pastor needs a very different vision for what counseling is and can be.

Second, *what true pastor believes that the love of Christ and the will of God are value-free?* You will never say to anyone (except ironically), “You are free to discover your own values, whatever works for you, whatever way of living with yourself and others brings you a sense of personal satisfaction.” God has chosen to impose his values on the entire universe. First Timothy 1:5 bluntly asserts non-negotiable goals: “love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” That calls forth an entire package of explicit behavioral, attitudinal and motivational values. God insists on the supreme worth and glory of who he is and what he has done. God insists that self-centered people learn faith and love—not coping skills, not self-actualization, not meeting felt needs, not techniques of managing emotions or thought life, not fulfilling personal goals. (As a byproduct, faith and love accomplish all these secondary things, too—while inverting their self-centering logic.) God’s morally charged categories heighten human responsibility. His willing mercy and sheer grace give the only real basis for true compassion and patience. He insists that we learn love by being loved, by

learning Jesus: “In this is love . . . that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). On the last day, every knee bows to God’s “values.”

The whole nature of ministry is to “impose” light into darkness, to induce sanity, to form Christ’s life-nourishing values within us. Pastoral counseling openly brings “ethical or moral suasions” as expressions of genuine love that considers the actual welfare of others. The conscious intentions of Christless counselors are kindly, but they cannot consider the true welfare and needs of actual human beings. A pastor has a systematically deeper and brighter vision for what counseling is all about.

Third, *what honest pastor would ever buy into the arm’s-length professional reserve of the therapist?*⁷ Ministry is self-disclosing by necessity and as a matter of principle. After all, we follow David, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul. Shouts of delight along with loud cries and groaning are part of the whole package. No real pastor can be clinically detached. The Paul who wrote 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12 is far too emotionally involved. Like Jesus, he cares too much to ever stand at arm’s length from people and their troubles. If Jesus had entered into purely consultative, professional relationships, he’d have had to stop being a pastor. Pastoral self-disclosure is one part of wise love. It is not self-indulgent. It is neither impulsive venting nor exhibitionistic transparency nor a pontificating of private opinions.

7. Not all therapists buy into the reserve valued by psychodynamic psychotherapists. For example, a Virginia Satir or Albert Ellis, a Marsha Linehan or Steven Hayes, brings a dynamic and charismatic “presence” into the counseling moment, freely expressing opinions, emotions, reactions, assertions, personal testimony. In their case, what gives them the right to so freely push their values and perspectives onto others? The more detached psychotherapists rightly see the danger of charlatanry endemic to the more intrusive psychotherapies. But the more intrusive counselors rightly see that values are “induced” in every form of counseling, and that a pretense of neutrality only makes that process covert. Only Christian faith embodies a principle by which values can be openly and continuously induced without either bullying or manipulation.

It includes proper reserve. But Christian openness is a different ball-game from the ideal of dispassionate professionalism. Ministry expresses the honest emotional immediacy of team sports and contact sports. It is full-court basketball, not chess or poker.

How about you? Don't people know you in all sorts of other roles besides counselor?—proclaimer of Words of life, friend at the dinner table, bedside visitor in the hospital, second-baseman on the softball team, mere man and leader who can't help but show how he faces financial pressure or handles interpersonal conflict, object of uproarious roasting at the church retreat, public speaker who tells a good story on himself, host and landlord to the struggler staying in your spare bedroom, husband of a woman who is well known in her own right, father of (less-than-perfect) kids in the Sunday school class, fellow sufferer who needs what he asks of God, fellow worshiper who candidly gives thanks for what he receives, fellow servant who yearns to love better than he does. You not only have a dual relationship with the people you counsel, you have multiple relationships. And that's as it should be. Christianity is a different counseling ethos.

Finally, *what good pastor could ever in good conscience adopt the ethos by which the ostensibly well presume to treat the evidently sick?* Aren't we all in this together, facing the same temptations, sorrows, and threats? Aren't we all prone to the same sinfulness? "Behavioral medicine" (as the HMOs label it) claims to cure a patient's character disorder, identity confusion, mood disorder, thought disorder, maladaptive behavior, relational dysfunction, or post-traumatic-stress syndrome. Ministry addresses the exact same problems. But God humanizes—normalizes—the struggles. A dark disease deranges character, identity, emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. A world of woes besets us, whether those woes are traumatic or chronic, highly unusual or merely inevitable.

A bright Savior sets about curing such souls. Psalm 23 infuses a different way for us to live in the midst of besetting sins and sufferings. Our derangement is fundamental, rooting in dedicated attentiveness to our own inner voice, the liar we find most persuasive—Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2. Our losses are fundamental: a sea of troubles...the heartache and thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to (*Hamlet*, III:1). But our Pastor's voice heals us: "My sheep hear my voice." Don't you have the same kinds of problems as those you minister to? Aren't our differences matters of degree not kind? Aren't we all part of the same ongoing healing? Real ministry engages the same personal and interpersonal problems that the psychotherapies address—but more deeply. It pursues hidden moral cancers that we all share. It consoles universal sufferings, whether the experience is brutal or mild, whether the symptoms of distress are florid or subtle. Any healing is *our* healing, one and all.

Where does this pastoral ethos come from? Jesus himself was touched with the weaknesses, struggles, and temptations of those with whom he spoke and for whom he died. Jesus eschews clinical detachment. He chooses frank self-disclosure and the multi-relationships intrinsic to pastoral love. Jesus was never value-neutral. He used every form of loving suasion, right down to publicly dying for those he sought to persuade.

What applies to pastors, applies to all God's people. Jesus is a different drummer.

B. The Uniqueness of Pastoral Counseling

We have sketched a vision for counseling as pastoral work. What does it look like? We will consider five unique aspects of the pastor as counselor. Your responsibility, opportunities, methods, message, and context are each unique.

1. You Have a Unique Responsibility to Counsel

You must counsel. It's not optional. You can't say No as if it were simply a career choice, a matter of personal preference or an absence of gifting. This does not mean that every pastor will have the same balance between public and private aspects of ministry. How much you'll "formally" counsel (i.e., meet with particular persons at agreed on times) depends on many factors. Some pastors will do a great deal of hands-on cure of souls, some relatively little. But every pastor ought to dedicate some percentage of his ministry to the delicate art of intentional conversation, as well as being continually on the lookout for the informal opportunities latent in every human interaction.⁸

A pastor's calling to counsel is significantly different from any of the other counseling professions. We'll consider several aspects of this uniqueness.

a. Your call to personal ministry is woven into all the Scriptures. Many passages express the significance of hands-on cure of souls. The classic texts include Acts 20:20; Galatians 6:1f; Ephesians 3:14-5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 3:12-14, 4:12-5:8, 10:24f; and scores of other "one-anothering" passages. In fact, every place that addresses the specific concerns of a named individual can be considered a counseling passage. A pastor's counseling responsibility is unique. What other counselor is called by God himself to both counsel and train others to counsel?! Briefly consider three passages.

The Second Great Commandment says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love engages your neighbor's specific personal needs

8. For discussion of how much time a pastor should give to counseling and the sorts of people to whom he should give himself, see "Pastoral Counseling," in David Powlison's *Speaking Truth in Love* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2005), 127-132.

and struggles. Love encompasses many things: attitudes of patience and kindness; actions that meet material needs and offer a helping hand. And love includes honest conversation about what matters. Interestingly, the original context for the command makes a personal counseling illustration and application.

You shall not hate your neighbor in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

(Lev 19:17–18)

God chooses to go after one of the most difficult of all matters: how will you love kith and kin in their shortcomings? Love of neighbor is illustrated by an example of candid, verbal problem-solving, in contrast with the judgmentalism, avoidance, bitterness and aggression that come so easily. You yourself act on this command by doing personal pastoring with your neighbors. Whenever their problems involve interpersonal conflict, you will also help those you counsel to learn constructive, verbal love. What a promise you have! “I am the LORD” (gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving...while honestly reckoning intransigence). Personal pastoring depends on this God, and then lives out the very image of this God amid the exigencies of helping broken people. You live out what is inside that last parenthesis. Exodus 34:6-7 displays the goodness and glory of God...and goodness and glory are communicable attributes, the image of Jesus forming in us.

Conversational love takes many other forms as well. You will ask, How are you really doing? Would you like to talk? How can I pray for you? Where are the pressure points? What are your joys and

your sorrows? Any secret gardens? Conscious struggles? Delightful victories? How are you doing with God and with your nearest and dearest? What burdens are weighing on you? When you did/said _____, what were you after? How are you processing anxiety, anger, or escapism? How are you handling this wonderful achievement or blessing? In asking and answering such questions, we enter each others lives. These are doors for grace, because these are the places Jesus meets people. As a pastor, your most obvious neighbors (beyond family) are the flock for which you have personal responsibility. “Love your neighbor as yourself” calls you to counsel.

Second, consider the Proverbs as a whole. It’s not wrong to preach from Proverbs. Wisdom herself calls out in the streets, inviting all comers to listen (Pro 8-9). But you had sure better *counsel* Proverbs. Verbal wisdom is highly esteemed, and most of what Proverbs commends reads as warmly personalized individual counsel: like a father, like a wife and mother, like a true friend, like a good king, like any wise person. Wisdom is a counseling gift. When it comes to distributing this most valuable, life-renewing gift, God’s generosity is blind to differences of gender, ethnicity, age, wealth, status, or education. Surely he will not lavish the desirable gift of counseling skill only to everyone else in the body of Christ, while leaving out pastors! You are called to become one of the wise men.

Finally, consider the “pastoral epistles.” Paul’s letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are examples of personal counseling captured on paper for all time. Each is addressed to a named individual. Each discusses particular challenging circumstances, considers specific strengths and weaknesses, builds on the actual relationship between counselor and counseled. As a counselor, Paul is tender, knowledgeable, self-disclosing, pointed, relevant, encouraging, challenging. Can you legitimately preach on what amounts to a personal counseling text? Of course. But would you only preach on a personal

pastoring text, and not also do personal pastoring? Pastor, the pastoral epistles call you to pastor.

b. You are called to do the impossible. It is curiously comforting to know that your calling is beyond your capability. This is another way that a pastor's call to counsel is unique. You can place no confidence in your gifts, experience, education, techniques, professional persona, credentials, maturity, wisdom. You are called to do what God must do.

In 1 Timothy 4:6-16, Paul exhorts Timothy, "Immerse yourself in revealed truth, in a life of faith, in active love, in the work of ministry, in serving Jesus Christ. Exercise, devote, practice, persist. Watch closely over yourself and what you teach." Why does Paul so carefully drive this home? The reason is astonishing: "By so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." Come again? You will save yourself and your hearers? It's so. Who is sufficient for such things? God alone saves from death, from sin, from tears, from weakness, from ourselves. Christ alone saves by grace, mercy, and patience at immediate personal cost (1 Tim 1:14-16). The Spirit alone cures the soul of suicidal selfishness, making a person and a people alive to faith and love. Yet this great and good Physician willingly uses Timothy, a mere pastor, as a physician's assistant in the curing process. He also uses you.

It is hard to shepherd souls. It is hard to combat intricate moral evil. It is hard to help people walk through pain and anguish. Gregory the Great called it the "art of arts" in his great treatise on pastoral care.⁹ He thought the task of guiding souls far more difficult than the tasks performed by a mere medical doctor. Think about that. The body is relatively accessible. It is often explicable by

9. St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis (New York: Newman Press, 1950; orig. 591), I:1, 21.

cause-and-effect reasoning and treatable by medication or surgery. But the “more delicate art deals with what is unseen,”¹⁰ the irrational madness in our hearts (Jer 17:9; Eccl 9:3). When you consider the challenge, how is it that most churchly counseling seems slapdash, pat answer, and quick fix? A good M.D. spends a lifetime in acquiring case-wise acumen. A mature psychotherapist pursues continuing education. Can a pastor be content with one-size-fits-all boilerplate? *Kyrie eleison*. People are not served when the Christian life is portrayed as if some easy answer will do—a pet doctrine, religious strategy, involvement in a program, spiritual experience—and *presto!*, case solved. Again, hear Gregory’s words:

One and the same exhortation is not suited to all, because they are not compassed by the same quality of character.... In exhorting individuals great exertion is required to be of service to each individual’s particular needs.¹¹

A pastor’s work is the art of arts.

c. You are called to do something so simple only a Christian can do it. Hearts may be unsearchable and insane, but the Word of God reveals the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12-13). God teaches us the truest form of self-knowledge. My self-righteous reaction to criticism may be an unsearchable morass of iniquity, but I can learn to name it for what it is, to turn for needed mercies, to seek and find the God who humbles me. We can come to know ourselves truly (though never wholly). Similarly, though the purposes and intentions of another’s heart are deep water, a man of understanding draws it out (Pro 20:5). You can learn what you

10. *Ibid.*, 229.

11. *Ibid.*, 89, 226.

need to know. Though you have no privileged access into any soul, though every strategy or truth can be resisted, though you have no power to open blind eyes or to make deaf ears listen, God uses your ministry to cure souls. Human beings are idiosyncratic in every detail, yet there is no temptation that is not common to all (1 Cor 10:13). Each of us faces very different life circumstances, yet you can comfort others in *any* affliction with the comfort that you receive in your particular affliction (2 Cor 1:4). Fundamental unities make us comprehensible enough to significantly help each other. These are things a mere Christian can do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was raised in a sophisticated, modern psychological culture, and his father was a psychiatrist. Bonhoeffer thoroughly absorbed the psychological models and psychotherapeutic practices of the great 20th century psychiatrists, but he had this to say about the knowledge and wisdom that make the decisive difference.

The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of man. And so it does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner. The psychiatrist must first search my heart and yet he never plumbs its ultimate depth. The Christian brother knows when I

come to him: here is a sinner like myself, a godless man who wants to confess and yearns for God's forgiveness. The psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The brother views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ.¹²

You might want to read that again, slowly—I speak as someone prone to skim block quotes. As a fellow Christian with those you counsel, you know depths that other counselors cannot and will not see. You can go where they never go. And as a simple Christian, you can lead those who do not yet believe to true knowledge of their own hearts. You can bring the Savior of the world.

d. Where ministry is strong, pastors practice in private what they preach in public. Your calling uniquely combines public and private ministry. The Christian message preaches well to crowds. The Christian message converses well with individuals. Preaching and counseling stand in a complementary relationship, and no other kind of counselor does both. A pastor's working vocabulary and intentional activity must "counsel the Word" as well as "preach the Word."

Of course, up-front proclamation and in-private conversation bring the message home in very different ways. A talk is relatively planned, scripted, and structured. It usually involves one-way communication—though Jesus did have a way of flexing his message after an outburst from the crowd, or launching a message based on a question someone was asking! In a sermon, you usually have a rough idea what you'll say next and where you'll end up. But giving a talk is different from the give-and-take of just talking. Conversations are extemporaneous, improvised, unpredictable,

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 115.

back and forth, messy—even when you come with a game plan. You never know what a person will say next. Since what you say is usually a response, you almost never know what you'll say next. It's a bad sign when either party reverts to boilerplate, delivering a set piece or shtick. Counseling usually starts with immediate, troubling experience, and moves toward the God whose person, words, and actions bring light. In contrast, preaching usually moves from Bible exposition toward life application. The two aspects of ministry demand different, but complementary, skill sets. The Lord and his prophets and apostles move freely in both directions. Pastors need the complete skill set.

The church has a long tradition of well-reasoned practical theology and skillful pastoral care. Like any legacy of art and wisdom, without continual use and updating, ideas become cobwebbed, applications get out of date, and skills are forgotten. Several factors internal to the church blind our eyes to the pointed counseling implications of Christian faith. Among those who take Scripture seriously, ecclesiastical habits focus almost exclusively on the pastor as public proclaimer, team leader, and administrator. Skill in cure of individual souls is optional—and sometimes is even discouraged as a waste of time. These assumptions structure seminary education, ordination requirements, job descriptions, role models, and the priorities of actual church practice. They shape the illustrations used in books about ministry, the relative dearth of books on how to counsel biblically, and the common associations to “ministry of the Word” that treat the phrase as synonymous with “the pulpit.”

In your preparation and testing to become a pastor, perhaps no one ever said that first-hand understanding of people and first-hand skill in counseling is an essential aspect of your pastoral calling. But it must be said and taken to heart.

e. You already are a counselor—all the time. A pastor is unavoidably a public person. Other people are always reading you, taking cues from you, sizing you up. Unlike other counselors, in an essential way your work life is not spent out of sight in an office behind a closed door. Whether in casual interaction, a called meeting, or public worship, your attitudes, core values and functional beliefs are continually on display. Other people listen, learn, watch and decide whether to tune you in or tune you out. The fact that you are not hidden is a unique aspect of your pastoral calling.

People know how you treat people. They know (or have an inkling) if you are honest (or dishonest). They know if you are kind (or indifferent, even unkind). They know if you are wise (or foolish). They know how you handle (or mishandle) the pressures of life. They know if you are humble (or proud). They know if you care (or couldn't care less). They know if you want their welfare in God's kingdom (or if you are building a kingdom for your ego). They know (or have a pretty good idea) if you are a good counselor (or a busybody, a pontificator, a slacker, a pat-answer man). They know if you are the real deal (or a religious role player). Since you fall short, they intuit your flaws already. They have some inkling of how you handle your failings and how you'll handle theirs. Are you honest with yourself before God, a person who finds the grace and mercy of Jesus? They know (or have an inkling) because you are not a "professional counselor" isolated in an office and self-protected by "clinical detachment." You live, move, and have your being in public space. If you fail the test, they won't seek you out, and they'll be guarded when you seek them out. If you pass the test, your counseling will gain a power for good that is unimaginable to other counselors.

It is daunting to know that your sins miscounsel others. Richard Baxter famously observed, "I publish to my own flock the

distempers of my own soul.”¹³ He warned of the danger that “you unsay with your lives what you say with your tongues.”¹⁴ But it is a corresponding delight to know that God uses your honest faith and love to publicly counsel others, so that both publicly and privately you might bring others under the sweet rule of his voice.

f. If you and the church don't do counseling, who will? It is unique to your calling that it matters whether or not people find help in the church. Psychotherapists want to make a living, but in principle, as a professional courtesy, they are just as happy to have a struggler go to anyone else for help, even if another practitioner operates with a very different counseling philosophy. But the church must not give over the care and cure of troubled souls to other voices. Those voices may be well-intended, but when they try to fix “with-God” problems using a “without-God” message, that’s a problem. From the Bible’s point of view, the fear of the LORD is the ‘beginning’ of wisdom. Consciousness of God is the starting point, the wake-up into reality. Consciousness that we live before God’s eyes and have with-God problems is the system-aligning principle, the architectonic prerequisite for making good sense of life. When friends, family, coworkers, the mass media, self-help books, or psychotherapeutic professionals ignore this reality, they inevitably miscounsel. In Jeremiah’s metaphor, they heal wounds lightly, “saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer 8:11). I will say it again. Pastors must not hand over care and cure of souls to other voices. Any number of people, paid and unpaid, are more than willing to do your work for you.

Pastor, God calls you to wise, fruitful conversations.

13. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974; orig. 1656), I:i:2, 61.

14. *Ibid.*, I:1:3, 63.

I hope that every reader catches the implications. The call that crystallizes in how God defines a pastor's work extends to every Christian. Whether we counsel in some formal capacity or simply seek to love our nearest neighbors well, all of us are called to the fruitful "one-anothering" that includes how we talk with each other.

2. You Have Unique Opportunities to Counsel

Pastoral counseling is unlike any other form of counseling because of the many unusual opportunities a pastor has to engage lives. Here are seven unique facets of the pastoral life that open doors.

a. You have opportunity to pursue people. Jesus Christ goes looking for people. He takes the initiative in loving. Even when people sought him out with their sufferings and sins, they were responding to his pursuit. They had heard about who he was, what he said, how he cared, and what he could do. In a fundamental way, our Redeemer always makes the first move. His entire *modus operandi* is active. The good Shepherd goes after the one that is lost until he finds it (Luke 15:4). Good shepherds do likewise, creating counseling opportunities. You can ask, "How are you really doing?" or "How may I pray for you?" in any context. The person's answer, whether candid or evasive, becomes an opportunity for a significant conversation. When you hear that someone is facing trouble or going through a hard patch, you can stop by to care.

Do you know how radical this is? In contrast, all other counseling models are passive, responding rather than initiating. Psychotherapists must wait until a troubled person seeks aid or a troublesome person is referred by a concerned third party. But a pastor pursues, and people respond in a unique way to being actively loved.

b. You have opportunity in crucial life situations. You have natural access into people's lives at decisive moments of transition,

hardship, and joy. They invite you in. You have license to simply show up. The door is open to you whenever important events unfold:

- engagement and marriage
- injury, illness, and hospitalization
- dying, death, bereavement, and funeral
- birth of a baby
- moving into a new neighborhood
- loss of a job or retirement
- betrayal, adultery, and divorce
- a child on drugs or in trouble with the law
- catastrophic victimization by house fire, crime, or storm

No other counselor has natural access at the most significant moments.

It so happens that these events are the major stressors on every stress scale. It also happens that the inner reality of a person becomes more obvious and more accessible in exactly such circumstances. Is he living for true hopes or false? Are her fears realistic or distorted? Are their joys and sorrows appropriate, inordinate, or oddly absent? What do these insecurities or angers reveal? Where is this confusion coming from? The heart lies open. Furthermore, it so happens that people become unusually open to seeking and receiving counsel at exactly such times.

Consider one example. God says, “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). Those can be heard as nice-sounding religious words. But when the heat is on in any person’s life, previously covert false hopes show up in high-definition video and audio. True hopes also show up. And false hopes can change into true hopes. You have a counseling moment. Life-changing reorientation can occur. The combination of high significance, strong feeling, and unusual

openness means that you have privileged access into the God-sent circumstances when people can grow up in faith and love.

c. *You have opportunity with both the struggling and the strong.* Biblical ministry is not only for troubled or troublesome people. Pastoral care serves both weak and strong, able and disabled, talented and limited, successful and failing. The gospel speaks life-rearranging truth into every person's life, "comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable." Those whose lives overflow need to learn gratitude, humility, generosity—and alertness to temptations of presumption, superiority, and pride. Those whose lives run on empty need to learn hope, courage, patience—and alertness to temptations of despair, grumbling, and covetousness. All of us need to learn what lasts and what counts, whatever our conditions of life. All of us need to learn to comfort others with the comfort we receive from God. The Vinedresser's pruning shears are in every life. As a pastor you understand that every person you meet today needs to awaken, to turn, to trust, to grow, to love God and others. Everyone needs counseling every day: Hebrews 3:12-14. Even God's thriving children need counsel (and counseling training) in order to better help their struggling brethren who are straying, discouraged, or helpless: 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

No other counseling role has a vision for everybody. Other counseling models define some class of human beings as needing help, and others as essentially healthy. Christian faith defines every human being as needing the cure of soul that is a pastor's unique calling.

d. *You have opportunity with both rich and poor.* A pastor has a huge advantage over other counselors in that the counseling relationship is founded on loving concern, not fee-for-service. Pastoral counseling is a gift to the needy. It is funded by free-will offerings of the people of God, whether or not they are counsel-seekers. Broken

and distressed people rightly wonder about professional counselors, “Do you *really* care? Are you *really* my friend?” The gift of ministry takes off the table questions about divided or suspect motives. The exchange of money for time, care, attention and friendship always brings a high potential for warping a relationship.

In contrast, a pastor has great freedom to work. With people who have money, you are in the unusual position of not allowing them to buy the services they want. With people who lack money, you are in the unusual position of not excluding them from receiving the help they need. A pastor is uniquely able to incarnate God’s freely given mercies and wisdom. Counseling is caring candor (Eph 4:15). When no fee is involved, your care is less ambiguous and your candor less constrained.

It makes a great difference that you come free. When the tithes and offerings of many people underwrite how the church meets counseling needs, it creates the best of all possible “delivery systems” for care and cure.

e. You have opportunity with people who already trust you.

What is the first issue in every counseling conversation? Though rarely verbalized, every person who sits down to talk with someone is always asking: “Why should I trust you?...Are you giving me good reason to trust you? ... Do I trust you?” If the bottom-line answer is Yes, the conversation might head somewhere constructive. Basic trust leads to two further questions that also determine the success or failure of the conversation: “Can I be completely honest with you?” and, then, “Will I listen to what you say to me?”

Of course, questions of trust, willing honesty, and willingness to listen are often worked out gradually. But it is a unique aspect of pastoral work that you will counsel people who have already decided to trust you. They come committed to be honest and willing to listen. This trust arises because you are a known quantity. Pre-answering

these questions in the affirmative gives an incalculable boost to the efficacy and efficiency of your counseling. You don't need to spend months building trust. You can cut to the chase, because counsel-seekers cut to the chase.

The fact that you are known and trusted also means you'll be the first person that others seek out to talk over their problems. They will be honest about the most delicate things: grave sins, deep fears, heartbreak, disappointment, fragile aspirations, underlying confusion. Otherwise unspeakable matters find words where there is trust. After you have listened well to these most vulnerable utterances—quick to hear, careful to ponder, slow to speak—you also find that people listen to you if your words are kind, illuminating and true. What comes to the light can become light.

Other counselors rarely enjoy this privilege, but you may find it is a regular occurrence.

f. You have opportunity with people you already know. Not only do others know and trust you, you know them. As a pastor this creates another unique opportunity. If you've made any kind of effort, you already know your people. You are continually getting to know them better. Such first-hand knowledge gives you an incalculable advantage over the office-bound professional counselor. You know people by name, personality and life context. You've seen them in action. You already have a sense for strengths and weaknesses, besetting sins and flourishing graces, good habits and bad. How does a man treat his family? Does this woman pitch in to help? Is this a man who keeps his word or have you learned to wait and see what he does? What is her reaction when she faces frustration, hardship, and conflict? How does he talk about the blessings he receives? How does she worship? You may know significant history and circumstances. You may know someone's family. You have natural access to many involved parties.

Wide-ranging knowledge helps protect you from some of the pitfalls that beset counselors. For example, counselors often hear only one side of any story. They are always vulnerable to spin and disinformation—facts and reactions may be true and plausible as far as they go, but steadily mislead and prevent accurate, balanced assessment. Given various instincts of our fallen hearts, counselors are easily tempted to side with whomever they happen to be counseling (Pro 18:17). When an aggrieved 25 year old paints her mother as a monster, is it so? Perhaps. But if you happen to know both mother and daughter, you may have more nuanced insight into what's going on. The fact that you may already know people and know them in context is a unique strength of the pastoral setting for counseling ministry.

No other counselor has a regular opportunity to get both a head start and a reality check on what you hear in private conversation.

g. You have opportunity with people who already have a wise change agenda. Not only do people know you and you know them, but as a pastor you will counsel people who already have a pretty good idea of what's wrong and of where they need to grow. Such upfront acuity is never guaranteed, but when it happens, it gives your counseling another huge head start.

We mentioned earlier the basic questions of trust, willingness to be honest, and willingness to listen. The next watershed question in all counseling concerns agenda: "Why are we here? What are we aiming to accomplish?" In general, most counsel-seekers come with defective goals:

- "Change how I feel."
- "Change my circumstances."
- "Vindicate me."
- "Give me a formula."

Counseling with any modicum of wisdom works patiently to change these agendas into “Help me to change what I live for and how I live.” Christian faith and ministry fleshes out the change agenda in a particularly rich way. A wise person understands our deepest need:

Help me to change both what masters me and how I treat people. Let me see where and how I run astray. Let me grasp how Jesus’ grace and truth connect to my daily struggles. Help me learn how to turn to God, how actually to trust. Help me to actually love people, rather than using others, fearing others, competing with others. Help me take refuge in the Lord when life is hard. I need to set my hopes on what is indestructible, rather than pursuing my instinctive, obsessive schemes for earthly joy. Help me see more clearly how I contribute to conflict and distance between people. I need forgiveness. Help me to forgive. Make me a more constructive human being.

It’s a counselor’s dream whenever a person comes with even an inkling of such an agenda already operative. If your church has any clear-thinking vitality, you’ll sometimes—often?—counsel people who already have a feel for what’s really at stake. Even having a roughly accurate agenda makes a big difference.

Good public ministry, robust small groups, meaningful friendships, and relevant private devotion form people who already know the framework of reality. They know the contours of the soul’s struggles. They know something of how God connects. But all of us need help connecting the dots. We always need help overcoming the contradictions between what we know and how we live. Those you counsel need the wonderful surprises that always come when an

honest seeker sits down for a patient, probing conversation with a wise pastor of souls.

No other counselor gets regular opportunities to work with people who already have an inkling of what they most need.

Like your responsibility to cure souls, your opportunities are unique. I hope this vision thrills you. I hope it nerves you for the long fight to bring pastoral achievement closer to pastoral aspiration. I hope that every reader hears the implications. In some fashion, these same opportunities come to every single member of the body of Christ.

3. The Way You Do Counseling Is Unique

From a distance, it looks like most counselors do the same things. They talk with people experiencing some sort of trouble. The conversation focuses on the concerns of the troubled party. Would-be helpers demonstrate kind and constructive intentions. They ask questions, elicit personal honesty, listen attentively. They give feedback intended to illuminate, challenge, give hope, reorient, affect, or redirect. Troubled people who take the conversation to heart and act on it experience some alteration of mood, thought, or action. But apparent similarities are like similarities between different religions. When you get up close, you realize profound, systematic differences.

Your counseling methods are unique. Your line of questioning moves in atypical directions. Your interpretation of the etiology/causality of problems takes the conversation to places no one else goes. Your self-disclosure and proper reserve obey a different set of principles, reveal a different set of purposes. You bear witness to the testimony of God himself, who made, sustains, judges, saves and commands. You act as physician's assistant, not the great physician. That affects a conversation in countless details of tone and content. The image you have of your calling as a counselor—pastor-shepherd,

minister-servant, responsible brother, peer in the body of Christ, fellow sinner and sufferer needing a Savior—subtly and openly affects everything that happens.¹⁵ This section could be book-length, but I will highlight only one unique aspect of how you approach the art of arts: *You pray with and for those you counsel.*

Do you realize how unusual this is? Have you ever considered how significant it is that you pray as a matter of course, while other counselors don't pray? The designated psychotherapists in our culture—psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, etc.—in principle do not pray with and for people.¹⁶ This lacuna in their practice signifies that they believe no outside help is needed, wanted, or available. They and those they counsel presumably possess everything they might need for making sense of problems and choosing to live fruitfully. The answers lie within the individual, combined with a supportive, insightful, and practical therapist, perhaps with a boost from psychoactive medication.

You as a pastor do not believe that an explanation and cure of human difficulties can leave out the active, intentional heart that is always loving either the true God or something else. Only an outside agent can turn a wandering heart into an attentive heart. A true cure of the soul can't ignore the active malice of the deceiver, enemy, and slavemaster of souls. In the fog of war, who will help you see clearly? Wisdom does not suppress knowledge of the living God. Who will deliver us from evil? When you and those you counsel lack wisdom, who will give what is needed? You need and want available help.

15. For a discussion of how the counselor's role is conceived both in Christian ministry and in secular psychotherapies, see David Powlison's "Familial Counseling: The Paradigm for Counselor-Counselee Relationships in 1 Thessalonians 5," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 25:1 (2007): 2–16.

16. The odd counselor, out of personal religious convictions, might walk out of step with the professional ethos, and step out of role. But as a rule, there is no prayer.

Therefore, you pray with and for others. Teaching others to voice honest believing prayers is one prime counseling goal. You pray because people need forgiveness for their sins—you cannot grant that. They need a Shepherd who will never leave them—you are not that person. They need the power that raised Jesus from the dead—so do you. They need the hope of the resurrection, that one day all tears will be wiped away and all sins washed away—you share the same necessity. They need faith-working-through-love to become truer in their lives, to run deeper, to take hold of everything.

- You pray for people before you sit down to talk.
- You pray inwardly while you are talking.
- You pray with people as an appropriate aspect of the conversation.
- You pray for people after you say goodbye. Your way of counseling is unique.

This is so for every Christian. If you seek to love wisely, you will as a matter of course learn to pray well for and with others in their real need.

4. You Counsel a Unique Message

The uniqueness of your message is easy to see. But you already know this. I won't rehearse the unsearchable riches of Christ, or the 10,000 pertinent implications.

But I do want to note the uniqueness of your message by contrast. Every counselor brings a "message": an interpretation of problems, a theory that weighs causalities and context, a proposal for cure, a goal that defines thriving humanness. How does your message compare with their messages? Simply consider what our culture's other counselors do *not* say.

- They never mention the God who has a name: YHWH, Father, Jesus, Spirit, Almighty, Savior, Comforter.

- They never mention that God searches every heart, that every human being will bow to give final account for each thought, word, deed, choice, emotion, belief and attitude.
- They never mention sinfulness and sin, that humankind obsessively and compulsively transgress against God.
- They never mention that suffering is meaningful within God's purposes of mercy and judgment.
- They never mention Jesus Christ. He is a standing insult to self-esteem and self-confidence, to self-reliance, to self-salvation schemes, to self-righteousness, to believing in myself.
- They never mention that God really does forgive sins.
- They never mention that the Lord is our refuge, that it is possible to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil.
- They never mention that biological factors and personal history experiences exist within the providence and purposes of the living God, that nature and nurture locate moral responsibility but do not trump responsible intentionality.
- They never mention our propensity to return evil for evil, how hardships tempt us to worry, despair, bitterness, inferiority, grumbling and escapism.
- They never mention our propensity to return evil for good, how felicities tempt us to self-trust, ingratitude, self-confidence, entitlement, presumption, superiority and greed.
- They never mention that human beings are meant to become conscious worshipers, bowing down in deep sense of personal need, lifting up hands to receive the gifts of the body and blood of Christ, lifting voices in heartfelt song.
- They never mention that human beings are meant to obey God's will, not our own wishes.

- They never mention that human beings are meant to live missionally, using God-given gifts to further God's kingdom and glory.
- They never mention that the power to change does not lie within us.

In other words, they always counsel true to their core convictions.

As a pastor, you can't help but mention these things, or you are no pastor. Even more, you are never content merely to mention or list such realities, as if a troubled person simply needed the bare bones of didactic instruction. Like a skilled musician, you develop a trained ear. In every detail of every person's story, you learn to hear the music of these unmentioned realities. You help others hear what is actually playing. A relevant, honest pastoral conversation teaches another person how to listen, and then how to join the song. Need I say more? No one else is listening to what you hear. No one else is saying what you have to say. No one else is singing what you believe. No one else is giving to others what you have been given that you might freely give. Every person who "needs counseling" actually needs your unique message.

This message also belongs to every Christian. May God make all our words (and the thoughts within our silences) ring true to our convictions.

5. You Counsel in a Unique Community Context

As a pastor, you counsel within the church. That doesn't just mean that your office is located in a different building from other counseling offices. Your setting contains unique potentials. God intends that churches serve as schools of counseling wisdom. You serve a congregation of potential members of the pastoral care team. Furthermore, every person whom you successfully counsel becomes

in some way a better counselor of others. I've witnessed this development hundreds of times.

Other kinds of counselors operate as private professionals in an office or as members of a treatment team in a quasi-medical institution. But therapists sometimes dream that counseling services might become truly community-based. For example, Sigmund Freud dreamt that psychoanalytically trained community workers would fan out into every community to offer their services.¹⁷ Over the past century many thoughtful psychiatrists and psychotherapists have candidly recognized the limitations of office-based professional practice, and have longed for community-based "mental health services." It makes all the sense in the world, given that people's problems play out in the home, in the workplace, on the street, amid the relationships, exigencies and contingencies of daily life. But secular counselors have been almost powerless to realize their dream of what is needed to get the job done.

You are living their dream.

You work within the ideal community context. The church's DNA includes wise counseling in daily life by people who already know and love each other. Troubled people find meaning and relationship in a natural social context. People who find true meaning and loving connection to others are no longer 'troubled,' whatever the severity of the ongoing troubles and struggles. We are beloved children, inching along the way of peace, and our troubles and struggles are invested with new significance. In principle, the living body of Christ is the ideal home for counseling practice.

How is this so? Jesus Christ embodies the DNA of compassion. He is purposefully patient with all kinds of strugglers, adapting his approach to the particulars of varying need. So, for people facing

17. Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis, Ibid.*, 98–99.

big troubles, Jesus Christ demonstrates practical care by offering tangible aid. He holds on to the weak. And, with people who feel anxious, discouraged and overwhelmed, Jesus Christ brings comfort and hope. He tenderly encourages the faint-hearted. But, toward headstrong, opinionated, self-centered people, Jesus Christ comes with challenges, constraints and consequences. He admonishes the unruly who use, abuse and misuse others.

As with the teacher, so with his disciples. The body of Christ becomes most itself when expressing this Christ: admonishing the unruly, encouraging the faint-hearted, holding on to the weak, being patient with them all (1 Thess 5:14). This is a comprehensive ‘counseling’ vision. It is tailored for those who need practical assistance: the weak. It is tailored for those who ask for help: the anxious and depressed. It is tailored for those who don’t want to change: the unruly. It is tailored for all of us—who usually have a bit of all three characteristics, and need a bit of all three kinds of ministry help, who need a lifetime of purposeful patience.

What we need and receive, we learn to give. Some of us are better at the mercy ministry aspects of pastoral counseling. Others of us are better at the encouraging, illuminating, walk-alongside-you aspects of pastoral counseling. Still others of us are better at the disciplinary, hold-you-accountable, tough-love aspects of pastoral counseling. All of us should express something of each aspect. Yet all of us need to grow up into the image of Jesus who expresses each of these aspects in perfect balance. All of God’s children put together can patiently do what is needed.

I’m not denying that our churches fall short of this sweet dream—fall far short. When it comes to handling problems well and wisely, church can seem more like a coma, a sleepless night, or a nightmare. But our failures as the church always stand next to Ephesians 4. The dream will come true. Community-based

counseling practice is in our eschatology as well as our DNA. Your task right now is simply to take the next step in the right direction.

I will close with a final perspective on a pastor's unique community setting. You stand in a tradition of pastoral care reaching back through centuries. Wise Christians have come before you. Set out to learn from your brethren.

Every pastor will profit by reading Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, written almost 1500 years ago. We may have better hermeneutics, wider doctrinal understanding, and more awareness of the richness of the gospel of Jesus. But Gregory has more awareness of "the Truth in person," more case-wisdom, more flexibility in adapting to human differences, more sense of pastoral responsibility, more humility about his achievements, more alertness to the subtlety of sin. Stand on his shoulders.

Every pastor will profit from reading Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* (and, if you are really ambitious, his *Christian Directory*). Baxter is dense and, like all old writers, dated. You won't do ministry in the same way he did. But if you sit with Baxter, you will become a wiser pastor. Similarly, every pastor will profit from reading Thomas Oden's *Pastoral Counsel*¹⁸ and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. Oden's digest of ancient wisdom will introduce you to wise pastors you never knew existed. Your church history class likely explored the development of doctrine and events in church politics. Oden explores how pastors pastored. Bonhoeffer's 20th century wisdom and example will inform and nerve you as you take up your unique counseling calling.

Every pastor would also profit from carefully pondering Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*.

18. Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Counsel*, vol. 3 in *Classical Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

Why fiction? It's the same reason pastors in the 1700s read both their Bible and Shakespeare. Good fiction (along with history, film, and so forth) gives you vicarious experience of people. It builds your case wisdom far beyond the bounds of your own social setting. I mention these two novels in particular because you will watch how Christian life and ministry work on the inside, amid the untidy details of life lived. In each book the protagonist is a pastor. Each struggles as an honest man with losses, regrets, fears, angers, sorrows. Each finds grace, and each gives grace.

Of course, I think that every pastor profits by reading and hearing teachers in the resurgence of biblical counseling that began in the 1970s. Ministry never simply recovers wise nuggets from the past. Pastoral theology undertakes fresh work. Current writers address questions and problems the church has never before addressed, or has never addressed in quite such a fine-grained way. Not all of it will stand the tests of time, ministry and Scripture. You will become part of the winnowing of wheat from chaff.

As with pastors, so with all Christians, each of us profits in various ways from the things God uses to make us wiser.

Finally, let your life and your counseling express the faith that you preach and sing. You must involve the body of Christ in this calling to counsel. Growth and perseverance in faith in Christ always has been, and is, and always will be a community project.

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