

# The *SBJT* Forum: Applications of Counseling in Ministry

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Larry Crabb, Ed Welch, Mark McMinn, and Charles Tackett have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT: What practical advice would you give to young pastors who want to be careful and faithful in the counseling components of their ministry?**

**D. A. Carson:** These issues are not only complex, but their complexity is compounded by the harsh reality that today people adopt highly polarized positions on these matters. Some are suspicious of almost all counseling. Naturalistic structures of thought govern the dominant psychological theories, it is argued, and those who train in such traditions are almost always tainted by them. What we need is more biblical preaching and teaching. Others concede a place to psychiatrists when there is an organic problem (e.g., a chemical imbalance in the brain), but not elsewhere. On the other hand, many pastors spend less and less time on sermon preparation, swamped as they are by seemingly endless demands for counseling. The moral structures of our culture are falling apart, and people need help. Sermons merely introduce people to broader truths and principles, these pastors argue; beyond that, individuals need individual help. So whether from choice (because some pastors think that counsel-

ing is more effective than preaching) or from sheer necessity (because the demands for counseling never go away), Greek exegesis and homiletic excellence are devoured by Freud and Jung, or at least by Larry Crabb.

What follows are far too many points. Their strengths are: (a) their individual brevity, and (b) the fact that I might easily have trebled the list!

(1) For our purposes, "Christian counseling" is nothing more than what takes place when a Christian who in some area is more informed or more mature helps another person, usually a Christian, or another Christian pair or family, to gain similar maturity or help in that area. Of course, such advice and help can take place on an informal basis at countless levels in the church, but when its structure is more formal, it is appropriately called "counseling."

(2) Pastors must be deeply committed to the priority of what has traditionally been called "the ministry of the Word." But the ministry of the Word must not be restricted to preaching on Sunday and the odd group Bible study. The ministry of the Word is a comprehensive category. Doubt-

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less its high point is public preaching and teaching, but it ought to take place in every conversation in which a Christian is helping another, especially another Christian. It follows that counseling, as here understood, should have as one of its aims to teach the Word of God, especially as that Word is applied to the problem or need or challenge at hand.

(3) That in turn means that pastors should build files on appropriate passages to use for a wide array of circumstances: for the bereaved, for the abused, for those consumed by guilt, for the apathetic, for the discouraged or the lonely, for young couples seeking counsel in preparation for marriage, for those facing death, for the abused, for the postmodern seeker, and on and on. Do not merely make lists of such passages, but add to the lists, study the passages, understand them well and know how to teach them. Develop illustrations that flow from them. As often as possible, use your Bible openly in such sessions, and insist that the person seeking counsel is to bring and use their Bible as well. Understand that counseling, properly done, is part of the ministry of the Word.

(4) Be properly suspicious of those who think that conversion means nothing more than sort of tipping people inside, while the real life-changing power is counseling. This anemic view of the gospel turns out to be a self-fulfilling prediction: it will guarantee that your presentation of and experience of the gospel will be anemic. The gospel, holistically considered, is the power of God unto salvation. It restores us to God, and it transforms us—partly in this life, and climactically at the resurrection. In line with Jesus' prayer, one of the means the gospel uses is God's truth: "Sanctify them by the truth," Jesus prays to his Father; "your word is truth" (John 17:17).

Thus the faithful and penetrating application of the Word, whether in one-on-one sessions (hence counseling) or in large public meetings of the entire body, is the crucial means on which we should rely, rather than on the mere *form* of communication, whether counseling or something else.

(5) Many, many, personal problems are intimately tied to poor relationships. But that means that when the church of God, empowered by God's Spirit, is functioning in line with the gospel, it becomes a home. The body of Christ respects and encourages its weakest members. Mutual encouragement and admonition abound. The solitary individual Christian is embedded in the Christian family. In other words, on the long haul the transforming gospel of Christ ought to build a Christ-centered community of believers, with the result that many ordinary problems of poor relationships will dissolve or be handled (super-)naturally within the life of the community.

(6) In line with your particular responsibilities in ministry, budget certain hours for counseling, and, apart from emergencies, do not exceed those hours. That means that if Mr. Jones asks to see you, and all your counseling hours are booked for the next two weeks, gently probe to make sure that what is on his mind is not in any sense an emergency, and book him into your first free slot. But do not increase the number of hours you allot to counseling, unless it is a *principled* decision, and not the decision of pressure for more. The reason, of course, is that in many churches counseling could easily devour more and more of your hours, until you are finding no time for praying, no time for basic administration, and, worst of all, no time for study and preparation. You end up robbing the flock of God of the nourishment they des-

perately need from their under-shepherd, because you are spending all your time with a handful of troubled sheep.

(7) Almost every church has a few troubled souls who will happily eat up every hour you give them. Like death itself, they always want more, and, for whatever reason, they never change. Identify such people, and refuse to give them much time. Some of them need nothing more than companionship and a sympathetic ear, and in due course you can develop a kind of junior tier of helpers who will devote some of their week to bringing encouragement and patience to these tried and trying people. In other words, try to make some provision for them, but under no circumstance may you justly permit them to take up much of your time. You are called to evangelize, make disciples, and engage heartily in the ministry of the Word and prayer. You are not fulfilling your calling if you spend substantial numbers of hours each week holding the hands of those who will never have enough and who will never change.

(8) Many problems people face take time to heal. Nevertheless, it is helpful to distinguish between two different kinds of temporal demands. The first kind almost always improves with time. The extraordinary loneliness of bereavement, and the pain of abandonment engendered by a divorce precipitated by a marriage partner who has run off with someone else, are two good examples. In the early stages, you will be wise to spend extra time with such people. But others can often share the burden, and in due course such people usually return to an even keel, and, in God's mercy, often become people who can help others who go through similar trials. So mark such people well, and find ways to use them. But the other kind of tempo-

ral demand is trickier. It is found in the person who *could* be improving with time, but instead is nurturing the problem, feeding the sin. Sustained and carefully maintained bitterness is a good example. You might like to think that this will improve as the months or years go by, but sometimes it simply gets worse. In such cases you may be wise to demand change, to set concrete goals, to assign homework—and if these things are not done, you will not see them again. The homework may involve memorizing some substantial passages of Scripture, writing a letter asking for forgiveness, re-establishing a broken friendship. But do not permit your hours of counseling to be chewed up by people who want a sympathetic ear regarding their “problems,” but who frankly refuse to address those problems. Where possible, set achievable goals, and hold people accountable.

(9) Work hard to maintain, so far as practicable, biblical terminology and biblical categories. Counselors in the secular world refer to those who come to them as “clients” or, in the case of psychiatrists, sometimes “patients.” Avoid those categories: you are a pastor, and such terms are loaded with overtones you do not want to foster. The panoply of Freudian or Jungian categories can, if given free rein, so domesticate the gospel that you end up selling your gospel heritage for a mess of psychological pottage. This does not mean that there are not important lessons to be learned from others. It means that ideally the best lessons need to be transmuted into biblical categories, so that people instinctively turn to their Bibles as the supreme source of help. That often means learning where the secular categories are *properly* related to biblical themes, and where they are not. Perhaps no topic of this sort is more

important than questions relating to “self-esteem,” which is scarcely a biblical label, but which can certainly be tied appropriately (and terribly inappropriately!) to various biblical themes. But that would take another article!

(10) Don’t bluff. Admit what you do not know. Keep a list of people you can consult to fill in the many gaps where you find your information or training wanting. If while counseling someone you find yourself coming to the end of your resources, tell the person you are helping that you will try to find better responses and more penetrating biblical insight before you meet again. This is especially important for young pastors whose experience is still quite limited, whether the cases they are dealing with are “ordinary” or extraordinarily convoluted.

(11) How much more important is it, then, to develop strong ties with medical people and with experienced counselors when you are uncertain if you are facing things like bipolar disorders, the onset of schizophrenia, and things of that order. The list of things that a pastor should not handle is not nearly as long as many professional psychologists and psychiatrists think, but you should become aware of what is on the short list!

(12) Recognize that there are often problems behind the problems, sins behind the sins, patterns behind the patterns. A marriage that is falling apart, or a woman sliding into deeper depression, may have lurking in the background suppressed bitterness and fear stemming from child abuse during childhood or puberty. Counselors in the Puritan tradition were considered particularly penetrating in their “cure of souls.” That part of evangelical heritage needs to be restored.

(13) Never forget that we are complex

people, and our spiritual state, our emotional well-being, our perceptions of things, and the chemical balances in our brains can all be related to one another in subtle ways. A Christian going through treatment for cancer may suffer some depression. But is this depression generated by a fear of death? Or has the constant nausea from chemotherapy driven the person down? Or have some of the side effects of the anti-nauseants kicked in (for some of them are known to depress some people)? Or is the depression a subtle mix of all of these factors, and more? You may be able to help this Christian think more clearly about death, and trust Christ more knowledgeably and confidently as the resurrected Lord who has triumphed over death. But even if the depression owes much of its power to the drugs being used, the ongoing depression may be interpreted by this believer as irrefutable evidence that he or she is not *really* trusting the Lord, and the depression may deepen. Once again, good medical advice is crucial: the right antidepressant might be a gift from God.

(14) Preserve a healthy place for common sense! I have counseled people who seem to be in danger from complex and subtle pressures and broken relationships, when a little probing and a modicum of sense made it pretty clear that what this person needed above all was a little less stress and a good deal more sleep. Sometimes the godliest thing in the universe is to go to bed and sleep.

(15) Never overlook the profound importance of the gospel insight that you find your life by losing it, you receive by giving, you live by dying. Some cranky and miserable people have matured remarkably in a matter of weeks, when they have been directed to help out in an AIDS clinic, take on some responsibility in a boys club,

join a prison ministry, teach an inner-city kid how to read, learn how to share the gospel effectively, or the like. One pastor I know was on the edge of resigning from the ministry, beaten down by cynics, little fruit, frustration, and loneliness. I asked him when was the last time he had actually explained the gospel to someone in detail. He looked startled. With a little help, he started two evangelistic groups, and recruited and trained others to do the same. A year later he is full of the joy of the Lord, seeing people being converted, and leaving the whiners to gripe in peace while he gets on with the ministry of the Word and prayer. A great many counselors, including pastoral counselors, do not conscientiously aim to draw *every* person to God-centeredness, to Christ-centeredness, removing them from the ugly focus on self and self-fulfillment that degrades so much of our culture and is nothing more than ruinous and odious idolatry.

(16) Take notes. Often this should be done after the person has left, but take notes. The weakest ink (or computer record) is stronger than the strongest memory. Besides, notes will help you to plan ahead, to think through relevant passages in advance of the next session, to discipline your prayer life for these people. Make sure such notes are secure, especially if others in the church commonly have access to your study (and note: I said “study,” not “office”!).

(17) Read widely—occasionally in the more popular counseling literature, but more systematically in serious treatments *from different perspectives*, including those of secularists, those who are attempting theological integration, and historical examples (such as the Puritans).

(18) Become acquainted with relevant legal issues. For example, if you discover

that your youth pastor has been sleeping with one or more of the young people in his care, in addition to securing sound and godly advice from more senior pastors who have faced such a crisis and handled it well, you must be clear as to the age in your state at which the issue extends beyond fornication to statutory rape. If statutory rape is involved, the youth pastor has not only sinned, but committed a crime, and the police *must* be notified. Not only because our society is terribly litigious, but also because we want both to be clean and to be seen to be clean, it is becoming increasingly urgent, in several domains, to become familiar with the relevant law. Nowadays there are seminars, essays, and even books that sometimes help.

(19) Learn how to talk about death; learn how to prepare people to die. Christians used to be known as those who knew how to die well. Nowadays we are not very differentiable from the world in this respect. This abdication of Christian responsibility must be overthrown.

(20) Be very careful about using examples from your counseling as direct illustrations in your sermons. In addition to the offense you may cause to the person you have counseled, you may unwittingly prompt some others to conclude, “Well, I will never seek counsel from *him*. I may end up as a sermon illustration.”

(21) Although I am a bit suspicious of certain kinds of group therapy in the context of pastoral ministry, sometimes it is an effective way for those facing similar challenges to help and support one another, to bear one another’s burdens (which is surely a biblical injunction).