

THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

MUST READS

On Counseling in the Church

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Editorial Staff

David Powlison: Senior Editor
Lauren Berkhouse: Assistant Editor
Bruce E. Eaton: Proofreader

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Must Reads from

THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

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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 illumining 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 psychotherapy 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 charlatanism 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 ballgame 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.

Counseling *is* the Church

*By David A. Powlison*¹

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

3. Excerpted from *Speaking Truth in Love* by David Powlison, © 2005 by David Powlison. Used by permission of New Growth Press. May not be reproduced without prior written permission.

Something Worth Meeting For— A Biblical Vision for Small Groups

By Steve Midgley

Few things in church life absorb quite as much time and energy as our small groups. Whatever we call them—home groups, fellowship groups, cell groups, Bible study groups, growth groups, community groups—their purpose is to get us involved with one another in a smaller setting. Like many, my first experience of regular church ministry was leading one of these groups. I didn't do it very well. And after fifteen years as a church pastor, I have come to think that it's one of the hardest ministries to do well.

Yet there is so much potential for these groups. At their best, they are wonderful. One of my earliest memories as a Christian is being in a student Bible study. We were such a diverse group—nerdy scientists gathered with creative arts students, while social introverts sat alongside the party crowd. I remember thinking that it was hard to imagine any other circumstances when that particular group of students would have gathered together. Yet our mutual faith in Christ gave us not just a sense of belonging, but also a real sense of invested involvement in one another's lives. There was something very special about that.

But small groups don't always work well. And my sense from talking to other pastors is that many of us carry a mild dissatisfaction with our small group program. Things may not be particularly bad, but it's nowhere near as good as we hope. Like many pastors, I have tried all sorts of ways to help: working harder at preparing study notes; supplying DVD courses; running training sessions and more besides. And yet....nothing much changes.

I am increasingly persuaded that the problem lies in the *vision*. It would overstate the case to say that “without a vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18). But without a vision, we certainly end up pulling in different directions. Group leaders need to be clear *why* they are meeting, and that vision needs to be communicated to everyone else.

Can Anyone Tell Me Why We Are Meeting?

There are all sorts of good things we can do in our small group programs. For example, it's good to grow in our understanding of the Bible and to reinforce the essentials of the Christian faith. I have often found myself emphasizing that to our group leaders. At other times, we have pushed the need to build strong relationships and to care practically for people in the group or the local area. And who can resist an occasional pep talk on the need for groups to make prayer a priority? And what about the evangelistic potential of our small groups? Surely we should make *that* our key aim! But small groups also help identify people's gifts and nurture and train new leaders. That's good to emphasize, too!

You can see where this leads. Pretty soon I've put so many tasks in front of our group leaders that they are just rushing around spinning plates. I sometimes think that if I were a small group leader in my church, I'd have resigned long ago. Or I would just have stopped listening to the new initiatives and gone back to what I've always

done: lead a Bible study, drink some coffee, say a few prayers, and head home.

The small groups in our church began to change for the better when I realized we needed a much bigger purpose statement. We were fiddling with mechanics when what we needed was an overarching purpose that would guide the detail. A few years back, I happened to be working my way through CCEF's School of Biblical Counseling courses and arrived at the module "Counseling in the Local Church." One of the final assignments required a ministry project. What better than to inflict still more training on my long-suffering home group leaders? Yet as I put a training program together, I began to realize that the insights of biblical counseling provided exactly what we needed. I became persuaded that the vision for our groups should be one that centers on sanctification—on personal growth and change. Let me explain.

Sanctification and the book of Ephesians. As I have tried to understand more of what God intends the church to be and do, Paul's letter to the Ephesians has been a major influence. In fact, the more I read Ephesians, the bigger my vision of church seems to get. Much to our surprise, the church has a central place in God's unfolding plan for his creation. It's not as though he needs our help, yet he chooses to involve us. It's something like a father taking his six-year-old son to the office with him. He gets to sit at his dad's desk and bash away on his keyboard and even answer his phone. Why does dad allow it? Because he has a particularly tough assignment and needs his son's help? Is there something that can't be accomplished without his six-year-old's brilliance? Of course not. He does it for relationship. He loves his son and wants his son to understand him. His love for his son means that the father wants him to be a part of his world and to share in the things that he does.

As we read Ephesians, we find that God's vision for the church is something like that father/son dynamic. God doesn't *need* us to accomplish his purposes, but he *chooses* to use us. Our participation in his work is one of his prime purposes. He has set the church to be at the very center of his wonderful unfolding plan for his world. Ephesians tells us that God's plan is to bring all things into unity under Christ (Eph 1:10). The local church is the first fruits of that new humanity. In fact, the church is so central to God's purposes that it even expresses God's glory before all the powers in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10). The church is how the whole universe gets to know God's wisdom.

And that's why Ephesians chapter 4 is all about growth into maturity. If the body of Christ is to display God's glory, it needs to be mature. Or, in the language of Ephesians, it needs to mature into the whole measure of the fullness of Christ himself (Eph 4:13). That's it! There's our vision. *God wants us to grow up.* He plans for us to be mature—to grow to be like Jesus—both individually and as a body together.¹ What bigger vision is there than to become like Jesus? By knowing and depending on him, we can become like him. With the Spirit's help, we can act like him, speak like him, love like him, pray like him, evangelize like him. This will grow us into maturity and enable the church to play its intended role. Once I got that clear, all the other ambitions fell into place. Taking Scripture to heart, caring for others, praying our concerns and joys, bearing witness, being wise—these are all expressions of becoming like Jesus. And they are all things that can happen in small groups.

1. The transformation of an individual into the likeness of Christ is what we refer to as personal sanctification. The vision of Ephesians 4 is corporate—the maturity of the body as a whole. Of course the two are intimately interrelated: the growing maturity of the individual contributes to the overall maturity of the whole and the growing maturity of the whole makes that body more effective in taking forward the process of sanctification in individuals.

A new vision for small groups. So I set about recalibrating. Our vision for small groups could be simply (and gloriously) stated as a determination to bring glory to God by helping each other become more like Jesus Christ. That will sound vague at first, but the vision takes shape as the messy details of daily life and the needs and circumstances of group members become apparent. It works out when a group supports a single mother through the birth of a second child or when an elderly Christian explains justification by faith to a new believer and together they respond in praise to their God and Savior. The vision shows itself when, in the face of bereavement, a group meets and sings God's praises and declares his goodness even with tears running down their faces. It's apparent when a non-Christian visits the group and the scheduled Bible study is abandoned as the visitor is welcomed and cared for. These things demonstrate the gospel of grace. They bear witness to the way Christ's people are becoming like him as he stirs them to love God and to love neighbor.

God is glorified when people grow into the likeness of Christ. It serves his ongoing work of building the church and growing his kingdom. As believers mature, relationships are built, evangelism gets done, people get cared for, prayers get prayed, and the Word of God gets studied.

Having a vision helps each person in the group connect the dots between what is being learned and how to live it out. Truly, there is a world of difference between asking a man to carry a load of bricks up a ladder two hundred times a day and asking him to help you build a pyramid. One man works for a reason he cannot see or understand. The other knows he is playing his part in the creation of something glorious. God tells us that we *are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory* (2 Cor 3:18). This is a vision worth showing up to home group for!

As I began to see that biblical counseling's emphasis on becoming like Christ provided an organizing theme for our small groups, it remade my vision for them. We don't meet together to "do a Bible study" or "to care for one another" or "to have a prayer time." We meet together to be transformed into the likeness of Christ for the sake of his kingdom. Bible study, prayer and mutual care are all part of that much bigger aim.

To implement this new vision, I started with our group leaders.

How Can We Help Our Leaders Lead?

Each small group leader is a powerful shaper of church culture, so I knew that when I decided to introduce this new approach to our church life that I needed to start with them. As I hoped, once the leadership group got hold of the emphasis on sanctification, we were a long way down the line to implement it. But don't underestimate the difficulty of this task. Group leaders often think of themselves primarily as group coordinators or Bible study leaders. The idea that they should get involved in the details of the lives of others is often a daunting prospect. Here are the common objections.

- "We aren't trained for this."
- "The people in our groups don't expect us to do this."
- "We're already busy. We can't add any more responsibilities to our role."

These are valid concerns. But they are not insuperable. If it seems that we are simply adding to an already lengthy job list then group leaders will, understandably, resist the change. The key is to help them adopt a radical rewriting of their role—a vision that focuses groups on the process of change.

Cast the bigger vision. Many group leaders have a traditional view of their role, which either tends to emphasize the organizational component or tends to limit the role to the leading of a Bible

study. Helping leaders stand back so that they can see their role in a much broader context is a critical first step. You may need to spend a significant amount of time describing the Bible's agenda for change and exploring the dynamic of that change before leaders begin to accept a new perspective on their role.

But once leaders have a clearer grasp of the way in which God intends believers to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29) and transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, it will be much easier for them to see their leadership role in relation to the process of sanctification.

The next step is persuading leaders that when it comes to the business of change, they have to start with themselves. There is, after all, one essential qualification for being an agent of change in the life of another and it is this: to be experiencing change yourself. Nothing is more important than ensuring that our leaders (and that includes us) are serious about being conformed to the image of Christ. Leaders need to be open to God's work of personal transformation.

Why is a leader's own personal transformation requisite to the ability to lead? Because a leader cannot lead in something he or she does not know how to do. It is so hard to believe the gospel can and will make a difference with our besetting sins. The evils that we do over and over again make it hard to imagine ever being different. But trying to persuade someone else that the gospel really can affect change in *those* areas of life—the hard, stubborn places—is really difficult to do without *experiencing change in your own life first*. It would be like trying to train someone to windsurf without ever having been out on the water. Telling someone to lean back and trust the sail to hold you isn't hugely convincing when it comes from something we read in a book, not from personal experience. To understand something, you need to experience it. It's not enough to hear about it or to read about it.

If our leaders are not already engaged in this process of growth in Christ-likeness, then we need to find ways to foster an experience of personal change. Otherwise, we're no better than that armchair windsurfing instructor.

Help leaders implement the vision. This means supporting our leaders as they pursue personal transformation. We need to provide help that doesn't just speak about the process of change but actually gets people engaged in it.² That, after all, is what the Apostle Paul expected for himself.

I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of me... one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:10–14)

Paul was personally engaged. He knew what he was aiming for with his life. He wanted to know Christ and pressed on toward that goal.

So if growth in godliness is key, how can the ongoing support we offer to our small group leaders facilitate that? The main way my church seeks to achieve this is by holding occasional, smaller gatherings of our leaders. We have been running training seminars for years at our church, but we recently added smaller accountability

2. One way to do this is to offer a course such as *How People Change* as part of the training process. These materials were written by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2006).

groups. This is a context where leaders are expected to talk about their own Christian lives. Often people just need a context to practice sharing personally. So we create that space.

We meet five or six times a year with the leaders from two or three of our groups at once (if there are more leaders than there will need to be multiple leaders' groups). An experienced pastor convenes the meeting. The pastor's job is to help the meeting stay focused on practicalities of spiritual change and growth and prevent the conversation from slipping back to group logistics and mechanics. The group attenders are asked to be consistent in coming. This helps foster trust as we follow up on situations in each others' lives and learn from one another. In advance, I ask one of the leaders to be prepared to speak personally for a few minutes about how God is currently at work in his or her own life. This serves two purposes. It gets leaders used to speaking openly themselves. It also reminds us to expect God's Spirit to be at work driving us toward personal sanctification.

I've found that it works best when I ask a leader in advance to share, rather than on the spot. The sharing is of a higher quality after a person has done some personal reflection and stopped to consider what God is actually doing. I also ask the leader who shares to invite others to say what they are noticing about his or her growth as well. This helps emphasize the community work of growth. We need one another to help us see our sin. But we need one another to help us see our growth, too.

We also spend time listening to challenges and sharing thoughts on caring well for group members. Younger leaders learn from older ones. Those who are nervous about discipling individuals see how others do it and borrow ideas.

So a typical agenda for these leaders' support meetings looks something like this:

1. *A devotional thought.* The convener sets the tone by speaking personally from a Bible passage about change and growth.
2. *A personal testimony.* For 5-15 minutes, one of the leaders speaks about his or her own sanctification issues, with a particular emphasis on lessons learnt and areas of growth and change.
3. *A time of prayer.* In response to what has been shared, we pray specifically for the areas where change and growth is needed, or we offer prayers of thankfulness and praise for how God has worked so far.
4. *A review.* We specifically discuss one or more of the groups. Leaders describe some of the issues they are facing both as leaders and as they support the individuals in their groups. This will often lead either to a focused discussion or a more general reflection on the issues raised. Often there are specific pastoral ministry lessons to be learnt as we discuss how people can best be loved and served.
5. *Further periods of prayer.* We follow each of the “reports” with prayer. Asking different group leaders to pray can help to train those who feel less comfortable praying about personal issues.

In my experience, the quality of these meetings improves steadily as time goes on. Even though we meet less than half a dozen times a year, there has been a steady growth in the sense of group identity. Leaders have been very good at remembering what others have said and follow up in helpful ways. The fostering of a sense of mutual support and learning from differences has been a particular strength of these “mentor groups.”

Getting the leaders on board and practicing how to implement it is important, but the new vision won’t go anywhere if the group members are not committed to it as well.

Are Group Members Agreed on Growing?

It's not enough to persuade only our leaders that sanctification should be the goal for their groups. Group members have to be on board with the vision, too. I knew that if the groups were going to work well, members and leaders alike needed to be in agreement with the goal of personal growth. Their buy-in would make the leaders work much easier, because everyone would be pulling together.

So how to achieve that? At the start of the year we asked each group to answer the question: "What are we meeting for?" We based it on Ephesians 4.³ Some groups created a specific list of expectations and ambitions for themselves, but all of the groups were introduced to the concept of the goal of personal growth.

We planned regular reminders of the mission for our small groups. Vision easily "leaks." A vision that seems at first so clear and engaging and that provides new direction and energy has a habit of slowly fading away, replaced by old habits. Things eventually revert to the way they were before. Vision, therefore, needs to be revisited regularly if we are to keep it central. We encouraged our groups to return to their list of aims later in the year and take stock of how effectively they were being fulfilled. The arrival of new members proved to be another good time to revisit the group's aims.

Eventually, bit by bit, the group develops a style and a character defined by this new vision for growth. What does that look like? It's a group that expects change, talks change, notices change, encourages change. It's a group where leaders have a much easier task engaging people on issues of personal holiness because the group expects it and has agreed to it. It's not just the group's leaders who

3. 1 Corinthians 12–14 or Psalm 1, 2 Peter 1, Galatians 5 or any other sanctification passage could be used.

are pursuing the agenda of personal change—everyone is. That helps with another concern: the increased workload. Once growth in godliness becomes part of the culture of a group it affects everything—the way we pray, study, talk and socialize. The ambitions for change get shared round. It's not the leader's job. It's a concern for the whole group. Once people catch the vision, the group sees that they are co-workers for change in one another's lives. That produces a sense of "we are in this together." People share in one another's struggles to grow and change. If this flies, the group leaders won't feel they have acquired an extra job, but a group full of co-leaders.

The next step is to find ways of monitoring ourselves. It's easy to fool ourselves that the vision has caught on and that change is happening, when in reality progress has been very small. We need ways to assess our progress.

How Do We Know If We Are on Track?

It's one thing to agree to pursue personal change and growth into Christlike-ness, but it's quite another to make it happen. Vision needs realizing and it helps to have ways of checking whether a group is staying on track. Leaders could use the following questions for personal review or in discussion with the group as a whole.

1. *How blurred are our boundaries between group time and social time?* Take a look at the moment when the "official bit" of the evening ends and the "social bit" begins. How much of a gear shift is there? A sharp distinction is a bad sign. It suggests the group isn't big on one-anothering (Eph 4:32, Col 3:16, 1 Thess 5:11 and many other places). It's as if growth in Christ can only happen in the "spiritual" part of the evening; once that's finished, so is the work of the Spirit. But in a group where mutual encouragement and concern for spiritual growth has begun to develop, the conversation *after* the Bible study is closer to the conversation *in* the Bible study. This

would be an indication that our groups understand the point of a Bible study: we're not studying to become more knowledgeable but to become more godly. As brothers and sisters, we show love one for another when we are concerned for each other's growth. Nothing is more loving than to help one another grow in Christ—and that love can be expressed in all of our interactions. When we understand these things, what happens over coffee and what happens in a study will begin to blur.

This doesn't mean being pious and peculiar. It's not that at all, quite the opposite. Once a group learns to connect the everyday stuff with the gospel, they actually sound less pious. They stop dividing the world into secular and sacred. As Abraham Kuyper famously put it, they understand that there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry "Mine!" So whether you are talking about work, or films, or friendships, or hobbies, you do so in the light of Christ. Jesus is as interested in our holiday as he is in our study of Haggai. In the language of biblical counseling, the Bible is getting applied to everyday life.

2. *How authentic are our prayer requests?* Prayer requests are a great measure of a group's development. It's obvious really. Once a vision for growth in godliness takes hold, that will be what people pray about. What could be more obvious than asking God for the biggest thing—change into the likeness of Christ? So look out for prayer requests that major on change in self, not in circumstances. But understand that prayer requests like that are scary. Asking God to help your children behave better at bedtime is safe. It's much riskier to ask for help to stop screaming at the kids, banging the wall, and slamming their door. What makes that kind of vulnerability possible? What makes it possible is that others are also speaking of

their struggles and weaknesses and failings. As the soccer players put it: it plays you onside.

Here is where leaders should give a lead. Previously people might have felt exposed and judged when they admitted struggle, but if you share *your* sins, the floodgates will often open. Once requests of this sort become commonplace, things change. A new culture is created: the group is now a place where less-than-fully-sanctified believers admit that that is what they are. They finally get to stop pretending all is well. And actually that is often a relief to everyone. It's certainly more honest.

I also look out for prayer requests and Bible study beginning to merge. It goes like this. Say your group has been studying Philippians 2, which includes, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose” (v. 12–13). Now say that Tom knows that Mike is struggling with perfectionism and overworking. Knowing that makes a difference. Instead of a true, but bland, comment about persevering as a Christian, something very different happens. Tom says:

“Mike I’ve been thinking about what you said last week about overwork. I’m trying to think how this promise that God works in us could help alleviate that pressure you feel to overwork. What difference could it make that God promises to fulfil his good purpose in your life?”

With questions like that, God’s Word gets personal. It begins to do its job. It penetrates. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12).

3. *How much listening is there in our Bible studies?* I've started telling our leaders to study the Bible less. Saying that in my church is the proverbial red rag to a bull. Everyone gets twitchy. I intend to be provocative, of course. It's a way to wake us up to a funny phenomenon. For some of our groups, studying the Bible has become more important than hearing God speak. Now I know what you're thinking—that I've finally gone off the deep end. Surely studying the Bible is the very way we *do* hear God speak. Isn't that the whole point? To which I have to say: yes, usually..... but occasionally, no. Let me explain.

I've been in groups that spend so much time debating words and sentences and contexts that they never do much of anything else. Maybe that's what Paul had in mind when he told Timothy to warn against quarrelling about words; it is of no value and only ruins those who listen (2 Tim 2:14). These studies never get beyond the quarrel. They certainly never get to implications for the way we live.

I'm all for getting to grips with the words of a passage (and structure, context, grammar, the works). But I am not for it if we end up muzzling the very Word we are claiming to study. That's what I notice. Studying the passage becomes, paradoxically, a version of putting our fingers in our ears. I suppose it's no surprise. Sharp two-edged swords are uncomfortable and if a detailed study of grammar dulls the edge, we may well do it. It keeps the blade at arm's length. We examine it, but it no longer examines us.

The remedy is to speak personally. And with limited time in a busy evening, that probably will mean less time spent puzzling over grammar, syntax, alternative translations and the footnotes in our study Bibles (!). Instead, when studying a passage, we need variations on the "so what?" question. Once all the analysis is done, we need to ask ourselves: what is the point? What would God have me believe or feel or love or do differently because I have read this

part of his Word? The Bible isn't meant to top-up our informational reservoir. He speaks in order to make things happen. Studying the Bible without opening ourselves to change is like listening attentively to the doctor's diagnosis, but never actually taking the medicine we are prescribed.

Rebecca Manley Pippert tells a story about this. She had enrolled as a mature student in an undergraduate psychology class at Harvard. She noted that the students there were honest. They puzzled about life. They debated the choices they were making. They wrestled with big things. It was the candid, earnest debate typical of undergraduates. Then one evening on her way home from class, she dropped in on her church Bible study. The differences were stark. No one was talking honestly. No one was wrestling with how to live well. The psychology students had good questions—but no answers. The Bible study members had good answers—but no questions. They wrestled with sentence structure, interpretation and cross-references, but they weren't wrestling with life.

Could that be said of our Bible studies? Do we carefully dissect the truth yet never arrive at the point of actually applying it to our lives? Jesus had stern words for the Pharisees who studied the Scriptures diligently, but never let those Scriptures lead them to him (John 5:39–40).

When groups are listening to God, they will also be changing, and when they see that change, they will want to listen all the more. These three checks help us assess if our groups are keeping an agenda of change at the center of all they do.

Growing Up Together

So how is a biblical counseling approach helping our small groups? Two main ways stand out. First, we are restoring sanctification as a central ambition for these groups. When this happens, God's great

ambition for our lives and our churches is put in its proper place. God is glorified and his kingdom advances when we grow into his likeness and his church assumes the stature of the fullness of Jesus himself. Once we get that right, all the other things we seek in our small groups will begin to be realized, too.

Second, we are improving our ability to connect the truths of Scripture with the business of life. When these things happen, our groups become increasingly compelling places to be. We sense that God is speaking richly into our lives and we find that those around us are helping us to listen well. Turning up at our small group stops being a chore we feel obliged to fulfil and starts being a delight we can't afford to miss.

Small groups are hard to do well. But as we learn to do them better—to serve Christ's goals—we find we truly have something worth meeting for.

Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling

By Timothy J. Keller

Summary

The works of the Puritans are a rich resource for biblical counselors because:

1. The Puritans were committed to the functional authority of the Scripture. For them it was the comprehensive manual for dealing with all problems of the heart.
2. The Puritans developed a sophisticated and sensitive system of diagnosis for personal problems, distinguishing a variety of physical, spiritual, tempermental and demonic causes.
3. The Puritans developed a remarkable balance in their treatment because they were not invested in any one 'personality theory' other than biblical teaching about the heart.
4. The Puritans were realistic about difficulties of the Christian life, especially conflicts with remaining, indwelling sin.
5. The Puritans looked not just at behavior but at underlying root motives and desires. Man is a worshipper; all problems grow out of 'sinful imagination' or idol manufacturing.

6. The Puritans considered the essential spiritual remedy to be belief in the gospel, used in both repentance and the development of proper self-understanding.

Importance of the Puritans

Why should those seeking to develop a truly biblical counseling approach give special consideration to the Puritans? Because they were the first Protestant school of Biblical Counseling.

J. I. Packer, who is most conversant with the writings of these men, puts it well:

... the Puritans ... were strongest just where evangelical Christians today are weakest ... Here were men of outstanding intellectual power, in whom the mental habits fostered by sober scholarship were linked with a flaming zeal for God and a minute acquaintance with the human heart.¹

Today's biblical scholars don't understand the human heart, Packer says, while our counselors don't know the Scripture. But the Puritans were an entire generation of men who combined these two strengths. He goes on:

The hollowness of our vaunted biblicism becomes apparent as again and again we put asunder things God has joined ... we preach the gospel without the law and faith without repentance ... in dealing with the Christian experience we dwell constantly on joy, peace, happiness, satisfaction, and rest of soul with no

1. P. Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Haywards Heath: Carey Publications, 1975), p. 12.

balancing reference of the divine discontent of Romans 7, the faith of Psalm 73, or any of the burdens of responsibility and providential chastenings that fall to the lot of the child of God ... they consult their pastor, and he perhaps has no better remedy than to refer them to a psychiatrist! Truly, we need help, and the Puritan tradition can give it.²

Lessons for Counselors

1. The Puritans Were Committed to the 'Functional Authority' of the Scripture in Counseling

The Bible was the main authority for the Puritans in helping souls in distress. We need to take very little time to establish this point. They considered the Scripture more than comprehensive enough to deal with every basic human condition or problem. John Owen was happy to glean from pastoral experience and the variety of “casebooks” of that era, but he added a warning that nothing was a substitute for

a diligent study of the Scriptures, meditation thereon, fervent prayer, experience of spiritual things, and temptations in their own souls, with a prudent observation made to the work of his grace in them. Without these things, all pretences unto this ability and duty of the pastoral office are vain.³

Clearly, the Puritans rested their counseling approach on Scripture.

2. *Ibid.* p. 13.

3. Quoted in Daniel Webber, “The Puritan Pastor as Counselor” in *The Office and Work of the Minister* (Westminster Conference, 1986), p. 84.

In many ways the Puritans are an excellent ‘laboratory’ for studying biblical counseling, because they are not influenced by any secular models of psychology. Many of those today claiming to be strictly biblical in their counseling approach still evidence the heavy influence of Maslow or Rogers or Skinner or Ellis. But the Puritans had the field of the “cure of souls” virtually to themselves; they had no secular competition in the area of counseling. Thus we need to consider very seriously their counseling models.

2. The Puritans Had a Highly Developed System of Problem Diagnosis

The Puritans had sophisticated diagnostic casebooks containing scores and even hundreds of different personal problems and spiritual conditions. John Owen was representative when he taught that every pastor must understand all the various cases of depression, fear, discouragement, and conflict that are found in the souls of men. This is necessary to apply “fit medicines and remedies unto every sore distemper.”⁴ Puritans were true physicians of the soul. Their study of the Scripture and the heart led them to make fine distinctions between conditions and to classify many types and subtypes of problems that required different treatments.

Discerning Conditions

Thomas Brooks’ *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* and Richard Baxter’s *A Christian Directory* are two classic Puritan case-manuals.

Brooks discusses twelve types of temptation, eight varieties of discouragement, eight kinds of depression, and four classes of spiritual pride!

4. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Brooks' "temptation" sections are addressed to anyone struggling with besetting patterns of sin, particularly to those fighting addictions. As a pastor, I often have turned to this manual to help confused people who have fallen into an old temptation after years of freedom. Invariably I discovered that, while they had become fortified against a couple of temptation approaches, they were still defenseless against others named in the casebook.

The "discouragement" section applies to persons who suffer from 'burnout' as well as anxiety, grief, and disappointment. Brooks distinguishes between discouragement caused by covetousness,⁵ by false expectations,⁶ by a manpleasing spirit,⁷ by self-righteousness,⁸ by doctrinal distortion,⁹ or by simple lack of self-discipline.¹⁰

The "depression" section largely deals with persons whose despair arises from guilt and from a "low self-image." The Puritans called this condition "accusation," in which the conscience and the devil attack the person over his failures and sins. Brooks recognizes several types of pathologies of the conscience: a numb conscience,¹¹

5. Alexander B. Grosart, ed., *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, vol. I (Banner of Truth, 1980). See device II. I "by presenting the world in such a dress ... to win upon the affections of the soul."

6. *Ibid.* See device II. 2: "by presenting to them the dangers, the losses, and the sufferings that do not attend the performance of such and such religious services."

7. *Ibid.* See device II. 5: "by presenting to them the paucity and poverty of those that walk in the ways of God."

8. *Ibid.* See device II. 8: "by working them to rest in their holy performances."

9. *Ibid.* See device II. 4. This deals with persons who use the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints as a basis for languor in Christian life.

10. *Ibid.* See device II. 3: "by presenting to the soul the difficulty of performing them."

11. *Ibid.* See device III. 7: "by suggesting to the soul its often relapses into the same sin, which formerly he hath pursued with particular sorrow, grief, shame, and tears, and prayed and resolved against."

a wounded conscience,¹² a seared conscience,¹³ and an over-scrupulous conscience.¹⁴

Finally, the section on “pride” deals with several forms of this great sin. It brings out cases of materialism, of power-lust, of intellectual arrogance, of love of ignorance and crudeness, of bitterness, and of jealousy.¹⁵

Richard Baxter’s *Directory* is staggering in its scope and comprehensiveness. It fills 900 pages of tiny, two-columned type. A broad outline of its contents follows.

Christian Ethics

- A. For the unconverted
 1. 20 directions for the unconverted
 2. 30 hindrances that keep men from Christ
 3. 10 ways non-converted men are deceived into believing they are converted
- B. For weak Christians
 - 20 directions on how to grow in grace
- C. General Directions for Walking with God
- D. For dealing with “the Great Sins most directly contrary to Godliness” [These are ‘root’ motivated drives underlying more obvious sins of behavior.]
 1. Unbelief
 2. Hardness of heart
 3. Hypocrisy
 4. Man-pleasing; the idolatry of approval
 5. Pride; the idolatry of power/influence

12. *Ibid.* See device III. 1: “by causing them to pore more, and mind more their sins than their Saviour.”

13. *Ibid.* See device I. 3: “by extenuating and lessening of sin.”

14. *Ibid.* See Device III. 2: “by working them to make false definitions of their graces.”

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–138.

6. Materialism and worry; the idolatry of possessions
7. Sensuality; the idolatry of physical pleasure
- E. Dealing with the results of 'root' sins (more obvious behavioral sins)
 1. Control of time (the sin of time-wasting)
 2. Control of the thoughts
 - a. Idle thoughts
 - b. Meditation vs. introspection
 - c. Depressed thoughts
 3. Control of the passions
 - a. Over-attachment ("sinful love") of things or persons
 - b. Discontentment
 - c. Sinful Humor
 - d. Anger and bitterness
 - e. Fear
 - f. Grief and distress
 - g. Despair and doubt
 4. Control of the senses
 - a. Gluttony
 - b. Addiction to drink
 - c. Fornication and sexual immorality
 - d. Lust
 - e. Regulating sleep
 5. Control of the tongue
 - a. Swearing/profanity
 - b. Lying and deception
 - c. Rambling/babbling
 - d. Scorning/mockery
 - e. 30 other sins of the tongue
 6. Control of the body
 - a. Work and idleness

- b. Sport and recreation
- c. Fashion and apparel

This was just the first section of the *Directory*; three more followed! “Christian Economics” treated the Christian’s relationships: of husband and wife, of employer and employee, of parents and children. In addition, Baxter here discusses a Christian’s relationship with God, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, the sacraments, and problems of assurance and backsliding. In the third and fourth sections he deals with Christians in the life of the church and, finally, “Christian Politics,” in which he outlines a Christian’s social responsibilities. At this point Baxter shows more maturity of thought than most Puritans (and most biblical counselors today!) who were individualistic and often pietistic in their approach to discipleship. On the contrary, Baxter outlines in detail the public discipleship duties of Christians who were poor and who were rich, who were rulers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and military personnel.

Discerning Causes

In addition, the Puritans were able to make fine distinctions in diagnosing the root causes of the problems. Baxter’s sermon, “What are the Best Preservatives against Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow?” discerns four causes of depression (sin, physiology, temperament, and demonic activity) which can exist in a variety of interrelationships.

Baxter lists a number of sins which feed depression. He first notes the underlying sinful inclinations which are the ground for depression: impatience, discontent, too much love of the material world, selfishness, a distrust of God, and a lack of real submission to the sovereign will of God.¹⁶ He concludes that any guilt over

16. Richard Baxter, “What are the Best Preservatives against Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow?” in *The Morning Exercises At Cripplegate*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, Ill.: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), pp. 264–265.

willful sin (i.e., a bad conscience) is a cause of depression.¹⁷ But Baxter carefully distinguishes between physical and spiritual causes of a problem:

With very many there is a great part of the cause in dis-temper, weakness, and diseasedness of the body; and by it the soul is greatly disabled to any comfortable sense. But the more it ariseth from such natural necessity, the less sinful and less dangerous to the soul; but never the less troublesome, but the more.¹⁸

Baxter then notes some of the specific physical causes of “over-much sorrow” or depression. He includes “violent pain as natural strength is unable to bear,” a weakening of the rational abilities (such as mental decay in very elderly persons), and “when the brain and imagination are crazed” through other physiological causes.¹⁹

This shows a remarkable balance. Baxter recognizes that some depression is not caused by sin or a failure to handle life God’s way. (At the end of his sermon on depression he provides instructions on proper diet and health care!) But on the other hand, he recognizes a very complex relationship between the physical and the spiritual. Note that he says, the more the sorrow arises from physical causes, the “less sinful and dangerous to the soul.” There are some degrees of sinfulness and of responsibility. In some cases a person’s pain is mild, and his sorrow is partially due to a refusal to trust God. But if the pain is violent and unbearable, a person’s hysteria might have very little sin involved in it.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

19. *Ibid.* pp. 258–259. Baxter speaks of “the disease called ‘melancholy,’” by which he was referring to a depression caused by physical causes.

This is highly instructive for modern counselors. Modern research is finding physiological bases for everything from addiction to schizophrenia to selfishness. On the one hand there is a danger that biblical counselors will ignore this information and still insist that virtually all problems are caused completely by deliberate sin. But on the other hand we must resist the growing trend in the world to label nearly every problem a ‘disease’ over which the patient has no control and in which he has no responsibility.

But Baxter is not done; he also posits two other roots of depression, “this complicate disease of souls.” “Temperment” is a factor. Some people have a “natural temper” which is “timorous and passionate”²⁰ and which, while not the first cause of depression, can be an inclination which causes some people to be more cast down by trials than others. It aggravates “overmuch sorrow” and makes certain people far more prone to it throughout their lifetime.

Besides temperment, Baxter devotes attention to satanic activity as a cause of depression. “I must tell the melancholy person that is sincere, that the knowledge of the devil’s agency in his case may be more to his comfort than to his despair.”²¹ While stating that Satan “possesseth only the souls of the ungodly,” nevertheless he “maketh too frequent motions to the faithful.”²² These “motions” can include bodily diseases (he notes the book of Job as an example), but Satan also causes temptations and can inject streams of sinful and blasphemous thoughts and doubts into the mind.²³ Baxter carefully states that Satan “cannot do what he will with us, but what we give him advantage to do. He cannot break open our doors, but he can enter

20. *Ibid.* p. 259.

21. *Ibid.* p. 261.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.* pp. 262–263.

if we leave them open. He can easily tempt a ... phlegmatic body to sloth ... a choleric person to anger ... a sanguine man to lust ..."²⁴

It is important to note that Baxter does not seek to work pastorally on Satan directly, authoritatively addressing him directly and commanding him in the method of some today. Instead, he seeks to get us to "close the doors" that we have left open for Satan. "Most evil motions on the soul have Satan for their father, and our own hearts as the mothers."²⁵ Baxter deals with satanic activity by telling the troubled person not to feel guilty for the blasphemous imaginations and thoughts (which come from Satan), as long as he does not act on them.

But I add, God will not impute [Satan's] mere temptations to you, but to [Satan], be they ever so bad, as long as you receive them not by the will, but hate them.

Nor will he condemn you for these ill effects which are unavoidable from the power of bodily disease, any more than he will condemn a man for raving thoughts or words in a fever, frenzy, or utter madness. But so far as reason yet hath power, and the will can govern the passions, it is your fault if you use not the power, though the difficulty make the fault the less.²⁶

Baxter's balance here is intriguing. He does not believe satanic activity should be ignored in diagnosis or treatment. He comforts the afflicted person by showing him Satan's hand in his troubles. He confronts demonic activity through bold prayer and encourages the believer to use the authority he has for spiritual conflict.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

He shows the believer how to eliminate the “footholds” that he has given Satan (such as bitterness, Ephesians 4:27; 2 Corinthians 2:10, 11). Yet Baxter does not see “demon possession” as the major cause of any Christian’s problem. Lovelace draws on the Puritan approach when he says, “the ordinary remedy may not be exorcism but counseling into the fullness of Christ, including an understanding of our authority against demonic agents and a stance of resistance against them in contested areas of personality.”²⁷

The Puritans’ balanced understanding of the roots of personal problems is not mirrored in the pastoral practice of modern evangelicals. Most counselors tend to ‘major’ in one of the factors mentioned by Baxter. Some will see personal sin as the cause of nearly all problems. Others have built a counseling methodology mainly upon an analysis of “transformed temperments.” Still others have developed “deliverance” ministries which see personal problems largely in terms of demonic activity. And of course, some evangelicals have adopted the whole ‘medical model’ of mental illness, removing all ‘moral blame’ from the patient, who needs not repentance but the treatment of a physician.

But Baxter not only shows an objective openness to discovering any of these factors in diagnosis, he also expects usually to find all of them present. Any of the factors may be the main factor which must be dealt with first in order to deal with the others.

So we see sophistication of the Puritans as physicians of the soul. If anything, the Puritans sometimes made distinctions unnecessarily. (Anyone reading a Puritan’s fourteen-point sermon can see how it could have been reduced better to three or four headings!) But biblical counselors today, who sometimes are rightfully charged

27. Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, III: IVP, 1979), p. 143.

with being simplistic, could learn from the careful diagnostic method of these fathers in the faith.

3. The Puritans Provided Balanced Solutions Not Based on a Particular ‘Personality Theory’

We just have seen how balanced the Puritans were in their diagnosis of the causes of personal problems. We should not be surprised to discover that they were just as balanced in their prescriptions and treatments. Many Christian counselors tend to mirror secular approaches that either focus their treatment largely on the feelings (such as the client-centered approach of Rogers), on the actions (such as the behaviorist approach of Skinner and his kin), or on the ‘thinking’ (such as the rational-emotive therapies of Ellis and Beck). But the Puritans do not fit into any of these modern categories.

Consider Thomas Brooks’ classic discussion of temptation in *Precious Remedies*. He writes that some temptations have straightforward doctrinal roots. Brooks sees roots of temptation in false views of repentance, an inadequate understanding of God’s holiness, and a shallow understanding of indwelling sin.²⁸ Many other temptations have social roots, namely wicked company, a man-pleasing idolatry, or the disillusionment caused by inconsistent Christian leaders.²⁹ And many temptations come from distorted thinking about what will really satisfy. We “rationalize sin as virtue.”³⁰

To each case Brooks attaches from three to four ‘remedies’ or counseling approaches. Some of the remedies are behavioral ‘homework,’ such as shunning wicked company.³¹ Many other remedies are pure comfort, as for the person who repeatedly is relapsing

28. Brooks, *op. cit.* See devices I. 3, 5, 6, 11.

29. *Ibid.* See devices I. 4, 8, 9, 10, 12.

30. *Ibid.* See device I. 1, 2, 7.

31. *Ibid.* pp. 61–62.

into the same sin. Instead of simply charging the person to repent, Brooks tenderly encourages. He points out “that the most renowned and now crowned saints have, in the days of their being on earth, relapsed into one and the same sin. A sheep may slip into a slough, as well as a swine.”³² He also gently reminds the discouraged believer that no experience of the conviction of sin or even the love of God can “forever fence and secure the soul from relapsing into the same sin.”³³ Even people like Peter, who saw Jesus in his glory on the mount, later denied him. Such counseling is indeed aimed at comforting, at bringing peace to a person in emotional pain.

Yet many of Brooks’ remedies look very similar to ‘cognitive’ therapy. Brooks sees problems as being largely due to doctrinal distortions, to unbelief, and lies that we believe about God and ourselves. Therefore, many of Brooks’ remedies are passionate scriptural arguments to be thrust forcibly and constantly into the consciousness against the lies which are dominating the heart. He constantly urges the reader to “dwell more upon” particular truths. For example, Brooks recognizes that many persons are tempted to presume on grace. The person has come to believe that “the work of repentance is an easy work, and that therefore the soul need not make such a matter of sin.” “‘Why! Suppose you do sin,’ saith Satan, ‘it is no such difficult thing to return, and confess, and be sorrowful, and beg pardon.’”³⁴ Brooks tells the tempted person, under the power of this distortion, to remember continually that Satan is a liar. Before you sin, he will tell you repentance is easy, but after you sin, he will tell you repentance is too hard! Both are lies. “Ah, souls! he that now tempts you to sin, by suggesting to you the easiness of repentance, will at last work you to despair, and present repentance

32. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

as the hardest work of all in the world, and a work as far above man as heaven is above hell, as light is above darknes. Oh that you were wise to break off your sins by timely repentance! Repentance is a work that must be timely done, or utterly undone forever.”³⁵

In another example, Brooks explores the problem of the prosperity of the wicked. Many Christians are led into self-pity and thus into sin because they see that the unholy often live comfortable lives. Brooks helps the tempted person to “dwell upon that strict account that vain men must make for all that good that they do enjoy.”³⁶ He quotes Phillip III of Spain on his deathbed, who cried out: “what doth all my glory profit me, but that I have so much the more torment in my death.” Brooks tells the tempted person to dwell upon and see life from the perspective of God’s judgement. Therefore, he also tells the person, tempted through self-pity, to tell himself “that there is no greater misery in this life, than *not* to be in misery—no greater affliction, than not to be afflicted. Woe, woe to that soul that God will not spend the rod on!... Hos. 4:7: ‘Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone.’ ”³⁷ These are powerful arguments that the believer is told to “solemnly consider.”

Throughout the book Brooks continuously urges the believer to argue with his soul, “to dwell, till your hearts are affected,” to “receive the truth affectionately, and let it dwell in your souls plenteously.”³⁸

By modern standards this is balanced remarkably! We see that many of Brooks’ remedies appear similar to ‘cognitive’ therapy, seeking to change the thinking in order to relieve anxiety, fear, depression. Yet he also can appear to be a ‘behaviorist’ at times, calling

35. *Ibid.* p. 38.

36. *Ibid.* p. 47.

37. *Ibid.* p. 43.

38. *Ibid.* pp. 61, 57.

people to change their pattern of living immediately. Brooks is not afraid to plumb deep for underlying motives and desires. He comforts. He takes emotional states very seriously.

Then is Brooks a behaviorist, a cognitive therapist, or a Rogerian counselor? Of course the answer is: “none of the above.” His balance comes from the fact that he is not controlled by either a ‘cognitive’ personality model or a ‘behaviorist’ personality model. He does not consider either ‘thinking’ or ‘behavior’ or ‘emotion’ to be the more basic part of personality. Neither does he appear to have his own personality theory in which he inter-relates these components in a neat pattern of cause and effect. Instead, he concentrates on the heart (a word Brooks uses interchangeably with the word soul). The “motions” of the heart are thoughts, feelings, and actions. Problems develop when the heart operates in unbelief. Problems are solved when the truth of the Word is “presented” (Brooks’ terminology) to the heart, and that means to the thoughts as well as the will and emotions. Brooks will tell a person to obey a truth instantly and at the same time to reflect and dwell on it until the principle changes his thinking and feelings as well.

4. The Puritans Were Realistic About Indwelling Sin, Conflicts, and Problems That Christians Routinely Face in Their Walk

The Puritan View of Sin

The Puritans, with just a few exceptions, were staunchly Reformed in their theology. They believed, therefore, in the radical depravity of man’s heart and in the continued presence of indwelling sin in the believer.

Modern evangelicals on the whole do not reflect this realism due to a shallow understanding of sin. The tendency in some circles is to see all deeply ingrained, compulsive behavior as demon possession or else to deny that real believers have such problems.

Other evangelicals are ready to adopt the ‘disease model’ for any addiction.³⁹ That view absolves the patient of responsibility; he is the victim of biological conditions or of some deep emotional traumas from childhood.

All of these approaches presume a non-Augustinian view of sin as willful, voluntary actions. On the basis of such a theological view any sin which does not yield immediately to repentance and efforts at self-discipline is considered to be demonic or physical (or impossible!). But the Puritans, because of their understanding of remaining, indwelling sin (the flesh), recognized that deep problems are caused by sin and that change may be only gradual—the result of the ‘penetration of truth.’

To observe the modern, overly optimistic evangelical understanding of the Christian life, one need only peruse the headings of our most popular discipleship materials. The Navigators’ *Design for Discipleship* is a case in point. It is a six-book, 29-topic course of instruction in the Christian walk. It is used as part of a two-year course called the “2:7 Series.” Yet, in that two-year program only three chapters deal with trials and conflict with sin.⁴⁰

39. “The 12-step program developed by Alcoholics Anonymous and adapted by Overeaters, Gamblers, Narcotics, and other anonymous groups ... calls addiction a disease and stresses that the individual is powerless over it ... This concept removes the stigma of addictions and makes it easier for people to accept their vulnerability ... The anonymous groups allow you to admit that you are vulnerable and, moreover, provide a basis for forgiving yourself and being forgiven. [You can forgive yourself because you are not responsible.]” *The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, February 21, 1988, p. 27. Even secular therapists question the ‘disease’ theory of addiction. “G. Alan Marlatt, professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle, worries about the implications of the notion of addiction as a disease, that is, an ingrained biological condition. This, he says, carries the message that there is nothing much one can do about it. It reinforces the notion that the individual who experiences relapses is a helpless victim of circumstances beyond his or her control.” p. 27.

40. *Design for Discipleship* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1973). The three chapters referred to: Book 4, chapter 3 on “Purity of Life” [Temptation], chapter 5 on “Character in Action” [Suffering], and Book 5, chapter 4 on “Spiritual Warfare.”

Contrast this with the Puritan “design for discipleship,” Baxter’s *Directory*. Baxter spends a great deal of time on backsliding and a loss of assurance (a sense of being “far away from God”). He provides a specific inventory of the “great sins” (including materialism and pride, not just sensuality), helps with temptation, the “benefits of affliction,” and wonderful instructions on facing death. And while *Design for Discipleship* assumes a safe, middle-class existence, Baxter treats the particular troubles of the poor, the rich, the oppressed, as well as the professional.

By no means does Baxter stand alone in this ‘realism.’ Two other classic Puritan texts on depression are Thomas Goodwin’s *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness* and William Bridge’s *A Lifting Up for the Downcast*. Both authors assume that genuine Christians with ‘true peace’ will go through periods of ‘desertion’—times when the light of God’s countenance is hidden. Bridge lists the causes of the loss of peace:

- 1) “great sins” [gross, sinful behavior];
- 2) “weak grace” [the growth of pride and underlying idolatrous desires];
- 3) “miscarriage of duties” [neglect of basic disciplines of the means of grace];
- 4) “lack of assurance” [demonic accusation of the conscience];
- 5) “temptation”;
- 6) “desertion” [God’s deliberate removal of His nearness for the purpose of discipline];
- 7) “affliction”;
- 8) “unserviceableness” [failure to use gifts in ministry];
- 9) “discouragements drawn from the condition itself” [being depressed that you are depressed!]⁴¹

41. William Bridge, *A Lifting Up for the Downcast* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961).

The Dominion of Sin

As noted above, the real cause for the Puritans' realism was their full understanding of the nature of indwelling or remaining sin. One scans modern counseling literature in vain for anything like the treatment given by John Owen, the master in this field. His four works on the subject are peerless: "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers," "Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It," "The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers," and "A Treatise on the Dominion of Sin and Grace." The first three are found in volume 6 of Owen's *Works* and the last is in volume 7.

To Owen the major difference between the believer and the non-believer is that the dominion of sin is broken (Romans 6). However, the influence of sin remains in the believer with its basic tendencies the same, though badly weakened. There are, then, two basic pastoral problems: to convince those under sin's dominion that they really are and to convince those not under sin's dominion that they really are not.⁴² Biblical counselors must be prepared to skillfully accomplish both tasks.

What are the signs of the dominion of sin? To Owen dominion sometimes can be "absolutely and easily discernable ... such there are who visibly 'yield their members instruments of unrighteousness unto sin.'"⁴³ An open licentious life shows the person to be under the dominion of sin, whatever he may claim. But Owen is quick to point out that dominion does not have to show itself in outward acts. A life of outward morality, an interest in Bible study, an enjoyment of religious duties, and a repentance for outward sins (all of

42. I am indebted in these paragraphs to the analysis of Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), chapter 6.

43. William Goold, ed. *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 7, (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1965) p. 520.

these may be present and yet sin still be ‘reigning’). Sin is reigning when the ‘imagination’ (i.e., the motives) of the heart are controlled by sin. The basic patterns of sinful imaginations are three, according to Owen: 1) “pride, self-elation, desire of power and greatness,” 2) “sensuality and uncleanness of life,” and 3) “unbelief, distrust, and hard thoughts of God”; self-centeredness, self-gratification and self-will.⁴⁴

While believers are not under the dominion of sin, they are still under the influence of it. It has a real power; it remains in believers, though dethroned. The ‘flesh’ is that remaining corruption that desires to be God rather than to be under God. It is a principle of hatred of God.⁴⁵ Self-centeredness, self-gratification, and self-will are still powerfully present in us.⁴⁶ Thus Christians must learn to detect the flesh and its operations which, like old tree roots, can penetrate and entangle the life beneath the surface. Unless these roots are discerned, they will control and distort our lives, bringing us to do even religious duties for false motives. Self-will, self-gratification, and self-centeredness must be discerned wherever they are lurking and affecting behavior, relationships, attitudes, and postures. Puritans would not be shocked by revelations of (apparently) effective Christian leaders falling into sexual sin. They knew how easy it is for real Christians to do ministry and good works under the control of the flesh. Lovelace speaks as a good Puritan when he says:

It is therefore not surprising that many congregations which are full of regenerate people are nevertheless not very alive spiritually, since spiritual life demands *metanoia*, a new mind of repentance, and this requires

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 522–523.

45. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 176.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

more than an initial setting of the heart against the shallow expressions of sin which the believer is aware of at the time of conversion ... Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of *dead goodness* ... surface righteousness which does not spring from faith and the Spirit's renewing action, but from religious pride and conditioned conformity to tradition ...⁴⁷

How, then, can we tell the difference between the dominion of sin and remaining sin in the believer? Owen believed it was crucial for counselors to be able to tell the difference! This question is especially important because sin may become more violent and apparently stronger because it has been overthrown and is dying.⁴⁸

Owen teaches first that the dominion of sin is seen in “hardness of heart.” Believers are influenced by the power of sin but they are grieved over their sinful motives.⁴⁹ The very grief and concern over their sin are a healthy sign that a person is not under sin's reign. Owen also points out that real believers engage in “mortification”: they recognize and work on sinful motives, rather than just notice external behavior.⁵⁰ “When the only restraints on sin are the consequences of the action, sin has dominion in the will.”⁵¹

The Puritans (and Owen was no exception) were concerned extremely to classify everything. But even Owen admits that there is a

47. Lovelace, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 30. “As a man nailed to the cross; he first struggles, and strives, and cries out with great strength and might, but, as his blood and spirits waste, his strivings are faint and seldom ... when a man first sets on a lust or distemper, to deal with it, it struggles with great violence to break loose; it cries with earnestness and impatience to be satisfied and relieved; but when by mortification the blood and spirits are let out, it moves seldom and faintly ...”

49. *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 523.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 526.

51. Ferguson, *op. Cit.*, p. 129.

kind of “intermediate condition” that a person can be in, in which it is impossible to tell whether the person is under the dominion of sin or whether he has just fallen into such a deadness of spiritual power that he is not recoverable by the ordinary means of grace.⁵² An example is David in the months after his adultery with Bathsheba. In such cases a pastor must deal with the person as Nathan did, warning him in the most dire terms of his danger.

The counseling approach for those under the dominion of sin is evangelism, of course. Owen tells us that these people are in pain only over the consequences of the sin. They cannot see their sin as sin at all. They need a clear presentation of the gospel.

Mortification of Sin

But what about the believer who is being controlled by his indwelling sin? What if a Christian finds his indwelling sin weakening his communion with God, destroying his peace and assurance, giving him a wounded conscience, and hardening his heart? Owen’s answer is two-fold: he must be counseled to do “mortification” and to “set his mind on things above.” On the basis of Romans 8:13 (“if by the spirit you put to death [mortify] the deeds of the body, you will live”) and Romans 8:5–6 (“those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires,”) Owen wrote his treatises on mortification and on “The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded.”⁵³ We will look at the teaching from this latter work below under another heading. But for the moment we should discuss Owen’s significant help to counselors in his teaching on mortification.

Mortification is loosening sin at the motivational level, detecting the roots and shapes of one’s characteristic fleshly motives, and

52. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 267f.

withering them through repentance until they loose their attractive power. To “mortify” is “to take away the principle of all [its] strength, vigor, and power, so that [it] cannot act or exert, or put forth any proper actings of [its] own.”⁵⁴ Mortification is not just the suppressing of the external action of sin, but it refers to the weakening of the root motives, the desires of the sin.

How do we mortify sin? From Owen we can discern these measures:

1) We must be clear that the person must be a Christian before he does this work; it is not for the unregenerate.⁵⁵ A foundational understanding of the gospel and of righteousness by faith is absolutely necessary. Without an understanding of one’s standing in Christ the person cannot repent fully or accept the full dimensions of his sin. It is too devastating. The conscience must be ‘framed’ and supported by the gospel or it cannot stand deep repentance.

2) One must recognize the shape his sin is taking. Man-pleasing? Need for power? Pride? Thoughts of envy? Look at the most basic motives. We must recognize and “rise against the *first actings*”⁵⁶ of our sin. “It is like water in a channel—if it once breaks out, it will have its course ... Ask envy what it would [really] have—murder and destruction is at the end of it.”⁵⁷

And one must recognize the signs of a dangerously “unmortified lust.” Has it been abiding for a good length of time? Does he find virtually no distaste or disgust but rather a great delight in the sin? Then he must realize that extraordinary measures must be taken.⁵⁸

54. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 8.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

57. *Ibid.*,

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–45.

3) One must fill the mind and conscience with the danger and guilt of sin by bringing it to the cross. One must look at his sin for what it is, unmask it and see it for the ugly thing it is in itself, not just for what it has done to him. There are two parts to this unmasking.

To see the ‘danger’ of sin, one needs to consider what all the consequences will be: hardening of the heart, the loss of peace and strength, the loss of assurance that he is really a Christian, and the possibility of temporal correction or punishment from God.⁵⁹

But one should not consider merely the consequences of sin. Sorrow on that basis can arise out of self-love. Also one must load the conscience with the ‘guilt’ of his sin. It grieves the Spirit, it wounds the new man within him, it makes him useless to the God who has done so much for him, it offends the holiness and majesty of God, and spurns the blood of Christ.

It is important to make this conviction of guilt evangelical as opposed to legal. This is accomplished by taking one’s sin not just to the law (though he must reflect on the majesty and holiness of God for conviction) but also to the gospel—to the cross of Christ. A healthy conviction of sin grows by seeing the patience of God, the riches of grace, the suffering of Jesus—all so one would not sin.

Bring thy lust to the gospel—not for relief [yet] but for farther conviction of its guilt ... Say to thy soul, “What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace? Do I thus requite the Lord? Have I defiled the heart that Christ died

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–56.

to wash, that the blessed spirit has chosen to dwell in?... Do I account communion with him of so little value, that for this vile lust's sake I have scarce left him any room in my heart? Shall I endeavour to disappoint the [purpose] of the death of Christ?" Entertain thy conscience daily with this treaty. See if it can stand before this aggravation of its guilt. If this make it not sink in some measure and melt, I fear thy case is dangerous.⁶⁰

This process of loading the conscience before the cross of Christ helps the sinner begin to hate the sin in itself. It begins to lose its attractiveness and thus its power to move to sinful deeds and actions.

Many modern counselors, influenced by the current 'self-esteem' movement, will think this dangerous. But Owen very clearly warns that "to apply mercy then to a sin that is not vigorously mortified is to fulfill the end of the flesh upon the gospel."⁶¹ It is natural for a person to briefly express sorrow over a sin and then to reassure himself quickly with a verse of forgiveness (e.g., 1 John 1:8–9). But this can produce a tremendous hardness of heart, especially in people who are falling repeatedly into besetting sin. Often the repentance is purely intellectual or based only on a fear of consequences. Without any evangelical conviction of sin no real repentance can take place, and thus no real weakening of sin takes place. Richard Sibbes provided a classic Puritan definition of repentance when he wrote that it is "not a little hanging down our heads ... but a working our hearts to such grief as will make sin [itself] more odious unto us than punishment, until we offer an holy violence against it."⁶²

60. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

62. Richard Sibbes, "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax," *Works*, vol. 1. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth. 1973), p. 47.

When some claim that Owen's approach will create a 'lack of self-esteem,' a self-hatred, they ignore the difference between legal and evangelical repentance (see also Stephen Charnock for helpful comments).⁶³ Owen explains that we must take our sins to the cross and that anyone doing mortification must have a conscience framed by the gospel of grace.

4) After the loading of the conscience, one must go to the scriptural promises of mercy and grace through which God speaks peace to our consciences. This is done by directing one's faith to the death, blood, and cross of Christ.

Set faith at work on Christ ... His blood is the great sovereign remedy ... Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror; yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet ... Act faith peculiarly upon the death, blood, and cross of Christ; that is, on Christ as crucified and slain.⁶⁴

We are to meditate simply on Christ crucified not only for a sense of pardon but also for a confidence that, because of Christ's triumph, sin shall not and does not have dominion over us. This provides grace and strength for holiness.⁶⁵ And now, because of our

63. "A legal conviction ariseth from a consideration of God's justice chiefly, and evangelical from a sense of God's goodness. A legally convinced person cries out, I have exasperated a power that is as the roaring of a lion, a justice that is as the voice of thunder; I have provoked one that is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, whose word can tear up the foundations of the world with as much ease as he established them. This is the legal conviction. But an evangelically convinced person cries, I have incensed a goodness that is like the dropping of the dew; I have offended a God that had the deportment of a friend ... I have incurred the anger of a judge, saith the legalist; I have abused the tenderness of a father, saith an evangelically convinced person." Stephen Charnock, "A Discourse of Conviction Of Sin," *Works*, vol. 4, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), p. 199.

64. Owen, vol. 6, pp. 81, 83.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

previous work of loading our conscience, we will find the doctrines of God's grace and mercy and imputed righteousness to be thrilling and comforting, as they never would have been had we only a light sense of our sin. They will find us with love for God and a new freedom from sin.

Owen points out that we must not speak peace to ourselves until God does.⁶⁶ At first this appears that Owen is saying, "You must wait for some kind of emotional experience from God until you are forgiven." That is not the case. During mortification a believer need not be in doubt about God's acceptance. There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Roman 8:1). Owen is saying that mortification is the work of the Spirit alone: He is the only "efficient" means of mortification.⁶⁷ We cannot mortify sin. In other words, it is the Spirit who "brings the cross of Christ into the heart of the sinner by faith"⁶⁸ with its "sin-killing power." Thus we must not move too quickly to end our procedure of mortification. If we say the procedure is finished, when there is still little or no humiliation or joy or freedom experienced, we are "self-healers."⁶⁹

5) We should continue our watchfulness, discovering the "occasions of sin," the situations and conditions that particularly draw out our sin.⁷⁰ We must fortify ourselves against those. This means we must bring out those things we have learned through mortification 'in the closet' and use them in our hearts when we face the occasions of sin in the world. We rehearse those things the Spirit has shown us and our new freedom to guard both our heart (attitudes, thoughts) and our steps (actions) in those situations.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–76.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

6) We should pray consistently for a greater distaste of sin as well as longing for deliverance from it. In other words, pray for deeper repentance: “his heart breaks out with longings into a most passionate expression of desire of deliverance.”⁷¹ Whereas the first four steps of mortification happen through concentrated times of prayer, these last two happen constantly and continually during the day.

This Puritan theology of indwelling sin, expounded in its most masterful form by John Owen, has many implications for counseling. It sheds light on theoretical issues. First, we see that patterns of besetting sin and addictive behavior have antecedents. There are roots and causes behind the actions which the person can work on. Since our flesh has ‘shapes’ or patterns to it, we can come to know ourselves and root out the evil motives to which we are most prone. Secondly, we are saved from the notion that sin is easily dealt with by quick repentance and will power. And yet we also are kept from the belief that we are not responsible for our own behavior. Thirdly, we have a solution to the controversy over ‘self-image’: we are to live by faith. A person’s self-understanding must be reprogrammed, but not through taking an inventory of one’s ‘good traits.’

But there are also practical, methodological implications of the Puritans’ view of indwelling sin. By modern standards any person struggling with deep patterns of self-gratification or self-will might be told: “You aren’t responsible” or “A real Christian wouldn’t feel like that” or “You must have a demon.” But Owen would both encourage and warn a person: “You have a pattern of the flesh which only can be weakened by concentrated prayer, obedience, and the penetration of the truth of the gospel. However, your very sorrow and grief over the sin is a wonderful sign that sin does not reign in

71. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

you, you are a believer and, therefore, the strength of this particular bondage can be overcome in Christ.”

What is my clinical evidence that Owen’s pastoral counseling works? I have used it personally for many years with great profit. And John Owen counseled me in a highly effective way in a period of my life when no one else could.

5. Puritans Understood Man As Fundamentally a Worshipping Being and Saw an Idol-Making Imagination As the Root of Problems

We have seen already that the Puritans believed pastoral counseling had to help the believer (and the unbeliever) detect indwelling sin in order to reveal the underlying motives and desires beneath surface behavior. We also saw that they sought to help a person discern the patterns or ‘shapes’ of the flesh by which they were affected. However, to understand better the Puritans’ counseling approach, we must observe that they considered the essential character of sin to be ‘idoltry’ and the fundamental nature of man to be a creature who must worship.

The Heart as Idol-Factory

Stephen Charnock in his *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* spells out the Puritans’ view fully. First, he writes, “all sin is found in secret atheism ... Every sin is a kind of cursing God in the heart; an aim at the destruction of the being of God, not actually, but virtually ... A man in every sin aims to set up his own will as his rule, and his own glory at the end of his actions ...”⁷² Every sin is an effort to turn from the worship of God to the worship of self. That is the Puritans’ view. At the base of man’s nature is not some fundamental ‘need’ for relationship or happiness or

72. Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp. 93–94.

significance but rather a necessity for worship. He must worship. At the root, sin is self-worship.

Later Charnock goes on to talk about the effects of self-trust or self-worship. “Inordinate self-love is the first inlet to all iniquity. As grace is a rising from self to center in God, so is sin a shrinking from God into the mire of a carnal selfishness ... therefore, all sins are well said to be branches or modifications of this fundamental passion.”⁷³ Then he goes on to support this claim. He demonstrates that uncontrolled anger is merely a proud self-defensiveness, that envy is merely a selfish desire to have joy at the expense of another, that impatience is a proud demand for sovereignty of one’s own schedule, that drunkenness is merely self-indulgence, that a desire for ‘self-worth’ is merely a proud desire to have self in a higher elevation over others. “Sin and self are all one. What is called a living sin in one place (Romans 6) is called a living to self in another (2 Corinthians 5:15).”⁷⁴

We should recognize that Charnock calls sin an “inordinate” self-love. He discusses three types of “self-love.” There is a “natural” self-love that humans share with all living things. It is a non-self-conscious concern for health and wholeness, an affection for our existence. Paul referred to this when he says, “No man ever hated his own body, but feeds and cares for it” (Ephesians 5:29). It has nothing to do with ‘self-image.’ Secondly, there is a “carnal self-love.” Charnock says it is “when a man loves himself above God ... when our thoughts, affections, designs, center only in our own ... interest.” This is the natural self-love which has become “criminal in the excess” under the influence of sin. We come to “expect a blessedness from ourselves,” an expectation which must be always frustrated.⁷⁵

73. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Lastly, there is “a gracious self-love” which can be generated by the Holy Spirit. It is “when we love ourselves for higher ends than the nature of a creature ... [i.e.] in subserviency to the glory of God.” Charnock says a Christian was created for good works (Ephesians 2:10) and as he comes to see this as his true ‘end’ or purpose, he becomes well pleased with himself.⁷⁶ By no means does this appear to be what many moderns call ‘self-love.’ It is a state of peace and satisfaction that comes from a proper self-understanding that fits with our true nature as servants.

Then Charnock discusses the result of this self-idolatry: “Man would make anything his end and happiness rather than God.”⁷⁷ Because we worship ourselves, we will make gods of other objects besides God, creating our own ‘religion’ as a way to stay in charge of our own lives.

He acts so if something below God could not make him happy without God, or that God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; and the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end, to which he directs his thoughts: thus he vilifies and lessens the true God, which can make him happy, in a multitude of false gods, that can only render him miserable.⁷⁸

Here then is the basic reason that our indwelling sin has different shapes: all of us have manufactured ‘idols’ or false gods that

⁷⁶. *Ibid.*

⁷⁷. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁷⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

we bow to. We are certain that they will bring us blessedness, but they cannot. Charnock goes on to list some of the common idols: worldly wealth (materialism), worldly reputation (power-idolatry), sensual pleasure (physical gratification-idolatry) and respect to man (approval of love-idolatry).

The implications for counseling are obvious. Charnock himself uses this model in personal work. In a sermon Charnock warns the listeners to root out ‘the bosom sin’:

All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination, and the like ... When a general is taken, the army runs. This [the main “idol”] is the great stream, others [other sins] but rivulets which bring supply ... this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort ... The Spirit convinces of spiritual sins, and this is the great work ... it presseth most upon spiritual sins, the first motions, self-conceit of our own worth, pride against God, unbelief, and the like.⁷⁹

Charnock recognizes that on the one hand the central idol(s) of our lives is straight from our fundamental problem, self-worship. But on the other hand he sees that the particular shapes of our idols are formed by a complex of factors: education, custom, and natural inclination. In other words, our genetic inclinations, our experience, our home life, and so on do have a major hand in forming our problems. But the bondage is still sin; we are responsible to deal with it as a sin. The Puritans again exhibit remarkable balance and insight.

So then, what are the underlying motives and desires behind our behavior? Why do we choose the goals that we do? Why do we

79. Charnock, “A Discourse of Conviction of Sin.” *op. cit.* pp. 193, 195.

struggle with the problems we have? What is “beneath the water line” (to use Crabb’s terminology)? The Puritans would answer: man is *homo religioso* and each person is manufacturing his own particular idol-religion. These must be identified and rooted out by a process of mortification.

Charnock was by no means alone in his division of ‘idol’ underlying sinful life-motivations and external sinful behavior. We saw that Baxter outlined “great sins” or idolatries as pride, sensuality, materialism, hypocrisy, hardness of the heart, and man-pleasing. Owen names self-elation (power-idolatry), sensuality (comfort-idolatry), and unbelief (self-will.) Though the lists differ in length, the same basic analysis is held by most of the Puritan divines.

The Power of the Imagination

How do idols efficiently exercise their power over our lives? The Puritans again would answer, “through the imagination.” In the non-believer (as Owen tells us) the imagination is completely dominated by indwelling sin and its particular idols.⁸⁰ But in the believer the imagination can become controlled by idols and thereby the thoughts, affections, and actions are effected.

One of the earliest Puritans to define the “imagination” was Richard Sibbes (1577–1635). He wrote that imagination was a “power of the soul” which is “bordering between our senses [on the one side] and our understanding [on the other].” The office of imagination “is to minister matter to our understanding to work upon.” However, sinful imagination “usurps” and misleads the understanding.⁸¹ Charnock is more specific, for in a sermon he states that the imagination is the place of the “first motion or formation” of thoughts. The imagination

80. Owen, vol. 7, p. 520.

81. Sibbes, “The Soul’s Conflict with Itself, and Victory over Itself by Faith,” *Works*, vol. 1. pp. 178, 180.

was not a power designed for thinking, but only to receive the images impressed upon the sense, and concoct them, that they might be fit matter for thoughts; and so it is the exchequer [bank account], wherein all the acquisitions of sense are deposited, and from thence received by the intellectual faculty. So that the thoughts are inchoative in the fancy, *consummative* in the understanding, *terminative* in all the other faculties; thought engenders opinion in the mind; thought spurs the will to consent or dissent; it is thought also which spirits the affections.⁸²

Let us pause for a moment to summarize what is being said. Modern cognitive therapists see ‘thinking’ as fundamental to behavior and feeling. If we change the thinking, we can change the feelings and thus behavior—so goes this approach. But the Puritans considered imagination, even more fundamentally than thinking, as the control of the behavior. Imagine two thoughts sitting on the intellect: “This sin will feel good if I do it” and “This sin will displease God if I do it.” Both are facts in the mind. You believe both to be true. But which one will control your heart? That is, which one will capture your thinking, your emotions, and your will?

The Puritan answer: the one that possesses the imagination will control the mind, will, and emotions (all three will be captured at once). The imagination is that which makes a thought ‘real’ or vivid. It is the faculty for appreciation and value. Thus Sibbes can say that another name for ‘imagination’ is ‘opinion.’⁸³ It conjures up pictures. Then, from the imagination come thoughts, which illuminate

82. Stephen Charnock, “The Sinfulness and Cure of Thoughts,” in *The Morning Exercises at Cripplegate*, vol. 2. pp. 387–389.

83. Sibbes, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

the mind, stir the emotions, and move the will to choose. It can be diagrammed like this:

The Deceitfulness of Sin

As usual, no one put this more clearly and more comprehensively than John Owen. We have seen how he recognized that indwelling sin with its idols influences us before we do any sinful act. Owen also produces an entire outline of what he calls the “deceit” of sin—how it works to deceive or produce distortions and lies which become the basis for sinful behavior. It is the clearest description of how sin uses the ‘imagination’ to give idols power in their lives.

First of all, Owen says, indwelling sin makes us lose our appreciation for both the vileness of sin and the wonder of grace.⁸⁴ In other words, these truths lose their control over our imaginations. They become abstractions, ceasing to be real and vivid. They lose what the Puritans call “relish” and become mere intellectual notions. When this happens, prayer and meditation become difficult, and we cease serious efforts to seek God’s face.

Secondly, when the thoughts lose focus, the affections cool toward God. We no longer find ourselves filled with love, zeal, joy, or humility. This clears the imagination to begin to appreciate sin. The moment that a person can conceive of sin without a sense of disgust, the believer “has entered into temptation.”⁸⁵ And when the sin becomes positively desirable, sin has then captured the imagination.⁸⁶ Owen is extremely helpful when he explains the operation of imagination through the biblical term “lust of the eyes”:

Now, it is not the bodily sense of seeing, but the fixing
of the imagination from that sense on such things, that

84. Owen, vol. 6, 2 18–223.

85. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

86. *Ibid.*, pp. 245–246.

is intended. And this is called the ‘eyes’, because thereby things are constantly represented unto the mind and soul, as outward objects are unto the inward sense by the eyes. And oftentimes the outward sight of the eyes is the occasion of these imaginations. So Achan declares how sin prevailed with him (Josh. 7:21). First, he saw the wedge of gold and Babylonish garment, and then he coveted them. He rolled them, the pleasures, the profit of them, in his imagination, and then fixed his heart upon the obtaining of them. Now, the heart may have a settled, fixed detestation of sin; but yet, if a man find that the imagination of the mind is frequently solicited by it and exercised about it, such a one may know that his affections are secretly enticed and entangled.⁸⁷

That is a vivid picture of how the imagination works! It ‘rolls’ the pleasures and profits, like the rolling of food on the tongue for tasting.

Now, thirdly, once the imagination is captured, the whole heart becomes affected. Owen, with all the Puritans, teaches that the heart is the seat of the whole man, mind, will, and emotions.⁸⁸ How does the imagination affect the whole heart?

The will consents to whatever possesses an “appearance of good, of present good.”⁸⁹ Thus, at this stage, ‘mental arguments’ may occur in the mind. The believer begins to develop rationalizations and reasons for doing the behavior. Sin “parleys ... reasons ... entices and allures ...”⁹⁰ The affections become stirred up and inflamed by

87. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

the vivid representation of the pleasure of sin. Even at this stage the ‘chain of deceit’ can be intercepted if these thoughts are recognized as being the lies they are, born out of a sinful imagination. (Thomas Brooks’ “devices” are a list of the 60 or so most common lies which occur at this stage of the operation of indwelling sin.) However, if this interception does not take place soon, sin erupts into sinful behavior.

Later, after indwelling sin has developed a habit pattern, the cycle can occur so quickly that there is no longer any consciousness of ‘stages,’ of “parleying and enticing.” Instead, the behavior erupts swiftly and with little warning.

The Discipline of Spiritual Mindedness

How then can the imagination of the Christian be captured for righteousness? Owen treats this in his work on “Spiritual Mindedness.” This is nothing more than a comprehensive and sophisticated manual for Christian meditation. The imagination and the thoughts must be programmed full of “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is admirable” (Philippians 4:8). Owen believes, however, that the reprogramming of the imagination is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is not merely the learning of new information or of passing thoughts through the mind.

‘To be spiritually minded’; that is, to have the mind changed and renewed by a principle of spiritual life and light, so as to be continually acted and influenced thereby unto thoughts and meditations of spiritual things, from the affections cleaving unto them with delight and satisfaction.⁹¹

91. *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 270.

Becoming spiritually minded consists, first, in an ‘actual exercise of the mind’ on spiritual subjects. In other words, while being spiritually minded is more than learning information, it is not less. Owen notes that some try to be spiritually minded without study. But they are without ‘rational conceptions’ and have “no notions wherein either faith or reason is concerned.” In such cases, “imagination they have of something that is great and glorious, but what it is they know not ... when their imaginations have fluctuated up and down in all uncertainties for a while, they are swallowed up in nothing.”⁹²

But we must go beyond mere study. Then, through prayer, meditation, and application the actual operation of the Holy Spirit captures the ‘affections’ with the truths of the Word. To be spiritually minded is to find “that gust, relish, savour” in spiritual truths. “There is salt in spiritual things, whereby they are conditioned and made savoury unto a renewed mind; though to others they are as the white of an egg, that hath no taste or savour in it ... Speculative notions about spiritual things, when they are alone, are dry, sapless, and barren. In this gust we taste by experience that God is gracious, and that the love of Christ is better than wine ... This is the proper foundation of that ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory.’ ”⁹³

What is it to be “spiritually minded”? It is to live in holy consciousness of, to be melted by spiritual understandings of one’s privileges and standing in Christ.

Once counselors have helped counselees identify idols and the resulting lies which distort their lives, how can they help them ‘put on’ spiritual mindedness, an imagination and thought-life which is set on Christ? Many counselors are quite baffled by this. They

92. *Ibid.*, p. 335.

93. *Ibid.*, pp. 270–271.

will tell counselees, “You are accepted in Christ,” only to hear, “But I don’t feel accepted!” The temptation simply is to admonish the person to not rely on his feelings. The Puritans would have given such counsel as well, but they would not stop there. They were not after mere ‘feelings’ either but they recognized that the truth must penetrate to the heart for real growth to occur, and that takes work. Counselors need also to learn how to communicate ‘imaginatively,’ concretely. The counselor must use illustrations.

Regarding the importance of illustration, Richard Sibbes said in an introduction to another book, “But because the way to come to the heart is often to pass through the fancy [imagination], therefore this godly man studied by lively representations to help men’s faith by the fancy. It was our saviour Christ’s manner of teaching to express heavenly things in an earthly manner ...”⁹⁴ An even earlier Puritan, William Ames, in *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* wrote: “As touching the matter of delivery, the Scripture doth not explain the will of God by universal and scientific rules, but by narration, examples, precepts, exhortions, admonitions, and promises: because that manner doth make most to affect the will, and stirred up godly notions, which is the chief scope of divinity.”

While recognizing that these Puritans were talking about how to preach imaginatively, we should realize that what they say holds true for all kinds of communication, including counseling. The “art of illustration” was no mere embellishment for Puritan preachers, but was central to their philosophy of communication and that was based on their understanding of the imagination. The best Puritan speakers literally peppered their discourses with sparkling word pictures and metaphors. Imagination is thinking by seeing,

94. *Works*, Vol. I, p. 66.

as distinguished from reasoning. Jonathan Edwards had a theology which held these two (reasoning and seeing) together in his theology.

In *Religious Affections* Edwards names one sign of a true Christian experience: “our minds are so enlightened that we obtain proper and spiritual views of divine things.”⁹⁵ Edwards distinguishes between two false views of spiritual knowledge. On the other hand, “mere speculative knowledge” is not in view. Spiritual knowledge leads the mind “not only [to] speculate, but to feel and relish.”⁹⁶ Spiritual knowledge is not less intellectual, but it is also “connected to the affections.” On the other hand, mere imagination is not spiritual knowledge:

For instance, when a person is affected by a lively idea suddenly excited in his mind, of a very beautiful countenance, a vivid light, or some other extraordinary appearance, there is something conceived in the mind, but there is nothing of the nature of instruction. Persons do not become wiser by such conceptions, or know more about God ...⁹⁷

Having said that, Edwards qualifies:

I do not assert, however, that no affections are spiritual which are attended by something imaginary. When our minds are fully occupied, and our thoughts intensely engaged, our imaginations are often stronger, and our ideas more lively ... But there is a great difference between lively imaginations arising from strong affections,

95. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise on Religious Affections* (American Tract edition, Baker reprint, 1982), p. 192.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

97. *Ibid.*, pp. 193–194.

and strong affections rising from lively imaginations. Undoubtedly the former often exist in many cases of truly gracious affection. The affections do not arise from the imagination, nor have they any dependence upon it; but on the contrary, the imagination is only the accidental effect, or consequence of the affection, through the infirmity of human nature. But when affection arises from the imagination, and is built upon it, instead of being founded upon spiritual illumination, then is the affection, however elated, of no value.⁹⁸

What do we see here? A far more careful and balanced refinement of the views of Sibbes and Ames. Like Ames, Edwards sees the goal of truth-communication affecting the ‘whole person.’ But Edwards is also careful to explain that the imagination must be based upon an illuminated view of biblical truth. It is possible to do an ‘end run’ around the exposition of biblical information; we may provide extremely vivid, strong illustrations which arouse only emotions but do not affect the heart, the center of our being. Instead, Edwards warns that our imaginations must arise out of the spiritual understanding of the truth.

Biblical counselors must learn to communicate Christian truth vividly! They must teach and exhort as well as listen.

6. The Puritans Saw the Essential Spiritual Remedy to Be Belief in the Gospel, Used in Both Repentance and a Development of Proper Self-Understanding

This last point can be made concisely here because it has been made throughout this article. We have seen that troubled people need a two-fold treatment: mortification and “spiritual mindedness.”

98. *Ibid.*, 212.

But these are just two ways of applying the gospel to a person's heart. In mortification, we have seen, both conviction of sin and comfort come from a faith-look at Christ on the cross. In fact, mortification is impossible unless the conscience is supported by the conviction that salvation is strictly through grace, not through our own efforts or even our repentance. Thus Owen writes: "the daily exercise of faith on Christ as crucified. This is the great fundamental means of mortification of sin in general."⁹⁹

On the other hand, "spiritual mindedness" is nothing more than a continual rehearsing and delighting in our privileges in Christ: access to the Father, sonship, an inheritance that cannot be lost, and our complete acceptance as well as our forensic righteousness before the Father. Believers receive power and boldness and joy to the degree that they grasp the reality of their standing in Christ. Spirit power comes from filling the mind with, reflecting on, and acting in accord with our position: a son, a temple of the Holy Spirit, a king seated and reigning.

For example, Baxter notes that depression is brought on by "ignorance of the tenor of the gospel or covenant of grace ... that no sins, how treat or many soever, are excepted from pardon ..." ¹⁰⁰ He goes on to discuss the case of a person who believes that "if their sorrow be not so passionate as to bring forth tears and greatly to afflict them, they are not capable of pardon." Their problem is that they do not consent "to be saved on his covenant terms."¹⁰¹ In other words, it is self-righteousness which keeps these people distressed.

Another lucid example of the Puritans' use of the gospel is provided by William Bridge in his work on depression:

99. Owen, vol. 7, p. 527.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

101. *Ibid.*

The more you are humbled by God's free love and grace, the more you will be humbled and the less discouraged ... If you will be truly humbled and not be discouraged [depressed] ... then trace all your sins to your unbelief and lay the stress and weight of all your sorrow upon that sin... if a man can trace every sin to the fountain, the head sin, he will be most humbled. Now what is the great sin, the fountain of sin, the head sin of all your sins, but unbelief ... if you can present God to your soul under the notion of His general goodness, as good in Himself, you will never be discouraged, but truly humbled.¹⁰²

Bridge connects all sin to a fundamental unbelief, a refusal to accept the gospel. The gospel does not make us lax; it humbles us over sin. Yet it keeps us from discouragement because we see our sins are covered.

William Gurnall gives a detailed explanation of how a believer must "talk to himself":

This is the difference between a Christian and an honest heathen. He values himself by his patience, temperance, liberality, and moral virtues which he hath to show above others. These he expects will commend him to God and procure him a happiness after death; and in these he glories ... But the Christian ... hath a discovery of Christ, whose righteousness and holiness by faith become his; and he values himself by these more than what is inherent in him ...¹⁰³

102. Bridge, *op. cit.*, p. 85–86.

103. William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964), p. 54.

Works-righteousness is at the root of all of our idolatry. Thus it is fundamental to dealing with all idolatry to penetrate the imagination and heart with the gospel of righteousness through faith. The human conscience is disordered deeply in its belief that we must have our own holiness and good works to be acceptable. Works-righteousness comes from the taproot of self-worship, a desire to be our own God.

For example, the power idol speaks to the heart like this: “Life will only have meaning, you will only be a worthwhile person if you are popular and loved by these people.” Beneath both idols is a basic rebellious desire to ‘earn’ our glory, meaning, and self-appreciation by our own efforts. The drive to reach these false goals is terribly strong because it is worship. We feel we must have the idols or we will die. The gospel alone frees us from salvation from self-effort. Lovelace puts the Puritan position succinctly when he says: “Faith that ... is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness ...”¹⁰⁴

A Model

Perhaps it is possible now to pull together the various elements of Puritan theology into a counseling model.

A. Man must worship something (Charnock).

B. Sin causes every person to worship himself, to ‘be as God,’ self-existent and independent. Christians have remaining sin which is dethroned but still seeking to capture the heart for self-worship. They also have a ‘new man’ created by the spirit (Charnock).

C. While we each seek self-existence, we choose different routes to it. We believe we can reach self-sufficiency through an idol. Every

104. Lovelace, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

man devises an idolatrous religion of his own which is essentially self-worship and some form of works-righteousness (Charnock).

Three examples of idolatrous forms of the flesh (Baxter) are:

Power idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if—I have power and influence over others."

Approval idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if—I am loved/popular."

Comfort idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if—I have this kind of pleasure, this quality of life."

D. Idols seek control of the person by capturing the imagination (Owen). Our characteristic flesh comes to consciousness in the form of positive mental pictures of certain conditions that we believe will make us happy and fulfilled. Our desires or 'drives' toward these goals are powerful because the goals are being worshipped.

E. The flesh-controlled imagination produces distortions and lies about one's self, the world, human relationships, God, and the nature of things (Brooks).

F. The lies and distortions lead directly to gross sin, depression, hardness of the heart, bitterness, and all kinds of sinful behavior which lead to greater misery (Brooks).

G. At the deepest level idols must be rooted out through a process of mortification (Owen).

H. At the thought level lies must be replaced by meditation on the truth (Owen and Brooks). This is a procedure that both comforts and confronts.

I. At the behavioral level disobedience must not be tolerated. Holy living is practiced through discipline and accountability.

Items G, H and I are never to be separated from each other. Faith in the gospel truth is the basis for each of them. Faith is not simply changing our thinking but is a combination of acting upon a truth into the imagination. When it 'catches fire,' it results in

illumination of the mind, conviction and joy in the emotions, and then behavioral change comes naturally. Looking in faith at Christ is the only way to destroy idolatrous longings because then we begin to see that our longings were illegal ways to become ourselves what Christ is for us.

Some Implications for Today

The Puritans probably would not find themselves fitting in comfortably to most of the existing ‘schools’ in the evangelical counseling field. They probably would find some counselors overly concerned to ‘raise self-esteem’ when man’s main problem is self-worship. Yet, on the other hand they would not be in agreement with those who completely ignore or even reject the importance of reprogramming the self-understanding through the penetration of gospel truth. They probably would find many biblical counselors are being far too superficial in their treatment of problems by merely calling for surface repentance and behavioral change. But they also would be quite uncomfortable with the ‘inner healing’ approaches which virtually ignore behavior and the need for mortification. In fact, the Puritans would be quite unhappy talking about people’s ‘unmet needs’ because at bottom they believed a man does not have abstract needs, only a necessity for worship.

As stated previously, the Puritans would not be able to align with anyone either who stressed the thoughts or the emotions or the will (behavior) over the other aspects of the soul or who saw any one faculty as more basic than the others. Puritans worked ‘wholistically’ on the heart through teaching, exhorting, and comforting.

I should not end without noting that the Puritans could learn from us. Many of the Puritans feared calling non-Christians to immediate repentance; they were guilty of what has been called Preparationism. And many of the Puritans defined true spiritualism

in such lofty terms that many weaker Christians lost their assurance unnecessarily. As one teacher put it, the Puritans' net "caught a lot of whales but lost a lot of guppies." Nevertheless, these pathologies were not true of all the Puritans to the same degree and do not offset their enormous contribution.

Above all, the Puritans' 'spirit' would differ quite a bit from other counselors today. Most modern evangelical counselors simply lack the firmness, directness, and urgency of the Puritans. Most of us talk less about sin than did our forefathers. But, on the other hand, the Puritans amazingly were tender, encouraging, always calling the counselees to accept the grace of God, and extremely careful not to call a problem 'sin' unless it was analyzed carefully. One of their favorite texts was: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoking flax he will not quench" (Matthew 12:20).

When will we see their likes again?

What Is Your Calling?

By David Powlison

Our Father works personally and purposefully in each one of his children. Each of us is handmade, one-at-a-time, one-of-a-kind. You and I evidence Christ's workmanship and craftsmanship. We are not mass-produced. We are not clones or spare, interchangeable parts. We are individual components in one infinitely intricate living body of Christ, every component playing its part.

You have been made alive by the Holy Spirit with particular purposes. He places you on location. You live here and now—not anywhere, anytime. You are on call for particular people—not anyone and everyone. The sorrows you face, the happiness you find, these universal experiences take a personal shape. Your life story, your temperament and temptations, the things you know, your abilities and limitations, your experiences and perceptions, the way you think, and feel, and choose... every detail happens in specifics. Nothing happens in general. God's redemption repurposes you, gathering up *every* experience and characteristic into his purpose for you.

So each day, in each situation, you have the opportunity to do and say constructive things that no other human being could do or say. In the loving hands of God, your life is custom-designed and

custom-built. And we will all fit together in the end. Every hand will do its work. Every voice will sing its part.

This is your *calling*.

And this article invites you to reflect on your calling.

The notion of *calling* provides a perspective on all of life and all of Scripture.

The concept springs from the One who calls: God speaks. And because he is vocal, he calls forth all that exists. Because he is vocal, he proclaims who he is. Because he is vocal, when he comes in person, he is the Word becoming flesh.

And because he is vocal, you have a vocation, a calling. Vocation is not a synonym for a professional career. Vocation is not restricted to those in “vocational ministry”: pastors, missionaries, monks, and nuns. God’s calling is personal with each of his children.

The concept of vocation or calling has a wide scope of meaning. This article will soon get very specific and personal, but first let’s orient ourselves. The word *calling* has five important meanings in Christian thought and practice, and these meanings build upon each other.

Calling: Five Meanings

Calling #1 is the *universal call of creation*. God calls out through all that is and through everything that happens: “Here I am! Know me!” This voice comes without audible words. The sun, moon, and stars pour out a wordless speech and knowledge to everyone (Ps 19:1–6). God’s hand paints the sunrise and sunset, and sentient beings everywhere notice with awe and joy (Ps 65:8). The fruitfulness of the earth proclaims God’s continual generosity and goodness (Ps 65: 9–13; Acts 14:15–17). All creation proclaims his presence, power, goodness, and glory (Rom 1:19–20). The activity of the human conscience bears unwitting witness to him, whether that conscience

is accurate, or distorted, or conflicted (Rom 1:32–2:1; 2:15–16). We know, but we suppress the knowing. Though we see and hear, we are instinctively willful, blind, and deaf to this universal call.

Calling #2 is the *universal call of redemption*. The gospel of Jesus Christ's goodness and atoning death is freely offered as the only rescue from our badness and mortality. This offer of life is freely proclaimed to everyone everywhere: "Look, here he is. Look at what he has done. Return, call upon him, and live!" This voice of promise and invitation comes in both spoken and written words. A person must hear in order to believe, and so God's Word and his servants freely call every human being to come and know him (Rom 10:13–15).

Calling #3 is the *effectual call*. God calls his children into Christ, powerfully speaking. He raises the dead to life. The deaf miraculously hear his life-giving voice, and they awaken to Christ. The blind miraculously see, and they come. The willful are miraculously humbled, and they turn. Not-my-people become "My people." This new creation arises as the animating voice of God implants his saving word of life in hearts (James 1:18), this treasure beyond treasures, this gift of gifts. The God of surpassing power, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," shines into our hearts, giving us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6–7). In the Bible, the most frequent use of the actual word *calling* is this Calling #3: "the calling by which you were called" (Eph 4:1). God's initiating power, love and glory in Christ bridge the relational estrangement between us and him. His voice breaks through our stupor of self-will. He awakens us, calling forth a people for himself.

Calling #4 is the *calling to holiness*. God calls us to a life of trust and a lifestyle of thankful obedience: "faith working through love." He calls us into a lifelong discipleship unto the image of Jesus. He

calls us to do his will: “love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.” The psalms become how you think and relate. The proverbs become how you evaluate and choose. The Christian life is a continual response to this calling to become like Jesus whom we believe. As Ephesians 4:1 puts it, we are called to live a life worthy (Calling #4) of the calling with which we have been called (Calling #3).

Calling #5 is the *specific vocational calling*. God calls you by tailor-making you and your circumstances so that you serve him here and now in a specific way. This is your calling in the narrow sense of finding yourself, your “vocation” in the most specific sense. What has God specifically made *you* for on the stage of your time, place, and experiences? Calling #5 defines the specific arenas where you most fruitfully work and serve.

These five uses of the word are logically connected. They build from the general to the specific in how sinful creatures are called into a living relationship with God (#1, #2, and #3). They build from the general to the specific in the shape of our obedience to Christ (#4 and #5). The fifth meaning culminates in a purposeful awareness of the fact that each person has a God-ordained calling. As Francis Schaeffer wrote, there are “no little people.” Your life counts in the details.

The rest of this article will do two things. First, we will focus on that fifth meaning, *your vocational calling*. What has God made you for? Where has he given you specific opportunities to serve him? What has God tailor-made you to do in your time and place? I hope that your awareness of God’s purposes for you will be clarified as you work this through.

Second, we will zero in on the *counseling* aspect within every calling. All of us are called to become verbally wise and constructive in how we interact with others. But we aren’t all good at the same

kinds of conversations. I hope that working this through will boost your self-awareness of both strengths and weaknesses.

Your True Vocation: Why You Are Here

How do we gain an awareness of our calling? It gets hammered out gradually in the process of living your Christian life honestly. We will look at five aspects of life that intertwine as you come to know what you are made for. To put it a different way, your calling is like a river into which five tributary streams flow. I will ask you to reflect on five questions, each of which brings certain key matters into view.

You have been given *gifts and talents*. How are you wired? What are you good at?¹ There is an aspect of endowment.

You have a unique repertoire of *life experiences*: education, sufferings, training, achievements, skills. There is an aspect of experience.

You have been placed in a *life situation* with specific opportunities, challenges, responsibilities, and people whose lives you touch. There is a situational aspect.

You have *grown* to some degree in wisdom, faith, maturity, and love. You are still growing and changing as the Vinedresser is at work in you. There is an aspect of spiritual maturing.

You find joy and satisfaction in certain things that express what you *want* to do. Your calling brings the pleasure, passion, and purpose of doing what you are made for. There is a subjective aspect.

You will understand your calling as you understand the intermingling of these five things about you and your world. This calling is your true “vocation”: what you are called to do in your life situation. Your vocation is much more than your occupation, how you make a living. It is much more than your avocation, what you do

1. And what are you *not* good at?! Only in community do we cover all the bases.

on the side. It is much more than your “ministry.” It is about much more than God’s guidance. Your vocation is expressed in all these and more. It is what you have been made for. What are those specific good works which God has prepared beforehand for you to walk in (Eph 2:10)? Your understanding of your specific vocation grows as you bring together these five strands of self-knowledge.

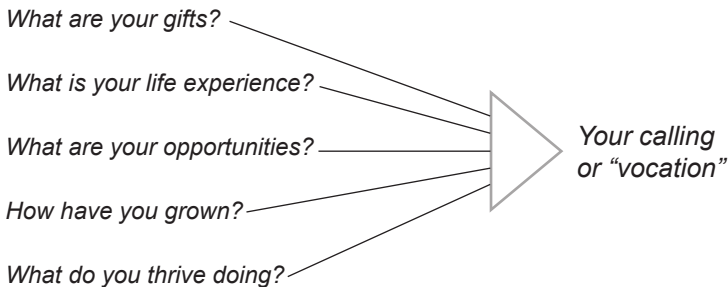


Figure 1. Five Questions to Help Discern Your Calling

The five questions are discussed below. For your ministry needs, we have provided a summary worksheet in Worksheet 1. Use it to help yourself or someone else to learn more about God’s vocational calling.

Question 1. *What are your gifts and talents?* God gives gifts and talents in order for you to “go into business” for him (Matt 25:14–30). Some of these are listed in Romans 12:3–8 and 1 Corinthians 12–14. Which describe you? Think more widely also. These are “for instance” lists that give us key categories, with many subsets and variations on the gifts mentioned. In other places the Bible speaks generally, and expects us to make the application. For example, 1 Peter 4:10–11 simply mentions speaking (word gifts) and serving (helps gifts). How has God equipped you to serve practically and/or to speak helpfully? And 1 Peter 4:7–9 mentions things

to which everybody is called to do to some degree: pray, show merciful love, show hospitality.

This first question is actually the easiest. If in doubt about your gifts and talents, just ask your mother or your best friend! This is a question about “original equipment,” how God has endowed you.

Question 2. What have you been given in life experience, learning, and background? The true God does not inhabit some religious sector or spiritual sphere, expecting us to come to him. He works in the mundane, and comes to us in the normal activities of daily life. Daniel and Moses were educated in the knowledge and ways of the governing class, and so could rise to positions of authority while living in exile. Paul could be the bridge from the Jews to the nations because he was both an educated Pharisee and a Roman citizen. Moses and David were equipped to look out for the welfare of others by years spent shepherding sheep. Older women are equipped to help younger women by their life experience (Titus 2:4). Paul could encourage people facing any sort of trouble because of how he found encouragement in his particular trouble (2 Cor 1:4). God uses everything. Have you worked in a factory? Learned Spanish? Battled cancer? Been disillusioned by a fallen leader? Made millions in business? Raised a disabled child? Been sexually molested? Had an abortion? Done a graduate degree? Come off of street drugs? Been fascinated by South Asia since childhood?

Your calling almost always unfolds along a trajectory. It bears an organic relationship to how your life has unfolded, and expresses the fundamental continuities in your story. This second question is a bit more complex than the first, because it invites you to range widely over what you’ve experienced and learned.

Question 3. Where are the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges that surround you? Your calling is not simply individualistic self-fulfillment, a version of “follow your dreams.” It is

keyed to the true needs of the people around you, and God's purposes for his people. What are the problems, troubles, and struggles of your time and place? In your family and home? Local church? Work place? Neighborhood or city? Nation? World? Wider body of Christ? The sons of Issachar were "men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do" (1 Chron 12:32). What are your times? What needs to be done? Abigail had "good understanding" (1 Sam 25:3, 33), and figured out what she needed to do to defuse a volatile situation. The story of the sheep and the goats addresses elemental human needs that take a thousand forms, and each of us encounters them in different ways (Matt 25:31–46). The Samaritan in Jesus' parable showed himself sensitive to God's call within the exigencies of a crisis situation (Luke 10:30–37). The situational realities in any particular family, community, work place, or church are not the same. What needs godly attention in your time and place, in your church, in your community?

This third question is important because it decenters us off ourselves and locates us in the bigger world. Jesus' calling was not shaped by the general need of fallen humankind, as if he lived, taught, healed, and died for a nameless abstraction. His life took its specific shape from a thousand particulars of the people with names among whom he walked and talked. God's calling to you is not individualistic. He connects you to your context. Where are you located?

Question 4. How have you grown wiser through faith, repentance, and learning to walk in the light? You are living out an unfolding story as God works in you to change you. Your growth process toward deeper faith and wiser love is crucial to understanding your fruitfulness. How are you growing? Where are you struggling? Are you moving from folly toward wisdom? How has your discipleship unfolded? Have you been learning Christ, walking in the truth that is in Jesus, hence equipped to help others? Wisdom

grows in humility, integrity, and realism about yourself and others. Wisdom grows confident in the God of truth who searches hearts, and in gratitude to Jesus Christ. God creates a wise servant by teaching his children many things. Your calling is inextricable from how you are doing as his child. We learn many things in coming to know ourselves before the face of our God.

Are you actually growing to better know the true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3)?

What is your “characteristic flesh,” the pattern of your sinfulness? What thematic desires, idolatries, fears, false hopes, and wrong beliefs show up in your attitude and thinking, in your sinful habits and patterns of behavior? In your typical struggles with yourself, are you finding the way of escape in Christ (1 Cor 10:6–14)?

Are your eyes open to the hardships and troubles in your own life? Are you learning to trust God instead of yourself when you experience life’s pressures and uncertainties? Does the way you process difficulties lead you directly to God himself (as the psalmists demonstrate) and then lead to greater wisdom in helping others (2 Cor 1:3–11)?

What “logs” tend to blind you, making you unhelpful and unloving toward the failings of others? How has God opened your eyes to his mercies and gentled you toward others (Matt 5:3–10; 7:1–6; Luke 6:38–45)?

Where do you see the Spirit’s fruitful generosity in working out wisdom, kindness, perceptiveness, and persistence? Where do you still need the Spirit’s fruit (Gal 5:14–6:10)?

The first three questions about calling are relatively straightforward compared to this fourth question. But this question will be the difference maker in the *quality* of how you fulfill your calling. It is about how you are living. For example, let’s say your gifts, education, and awareness of the church’s needs all point to a calling to

become a pastor. But if you are obtuse in the matters of question four, then you are not yet called to be a pastor.

Question 5. *What do you want to do?* What do you enjoy? What are you compelled to do? Where do you work eagerly and thrive? No doubt, our desires lead us astray in our sins. But, equally without a doubt, your calling will resonate in your desires. For example, key passages speak of the importance of personal willingness and desire to serve in a ministry (1 Tim 3:1; 1 Pet 5:2). This doesn't mean that your calling is always fun and games. From the heart, Jeremiah had to do what he was called to do, however difficult (Jer 20:9). Paul did his calling with all his might, because the Spirit was working in him for this purpose (1 Cor 15:10).

This final question asks about your desires. What do you delight in? What do you thrive doing? What do you *want* to do?

At the confluence of these five streams, you come to know and live your calling. Work these questions through. Make them part of how you come at life, how you come to know God, how you come to know yourself, and others, and why you are here. I hope that you find the process of reflection helpful and clarifying.

These questions have been hugely helpful to me. They are woven into the fabric of how I live. Reflection on these matters becomes second nature. It contributes greatly to having a sense of orientation and purpose.

The interplay between these five elements is part of wisdom. You need all five to understand who you are within Christ's purposes. Your natural endowments (and your inabilities, too) matter. Your varied life experiences matter. The people and situations calling for your wisdom and love matter. It matters that growth in grace is hard-won and freely given. What you want to do matters.

One more comment before we move to the next section. A calling is not a fixed thing. It changes with time and circumstance.

For example, your answer to Question 1 about your gifts usually remains relatively stable—but even that can morph. You may discover an unsuspected gift later in life. Illnesses, accidents, and aging will take away valuable talents—just like what happens with talented athletes. And your answers to the other four questions are always provisional. They will apply for a season, whether long or short. These five questions are not intended to give final answers. They are good for keeping you appropriately flexible and adaptable within the good purposes of God.

Get Specific: Think about Your Opportunities to Help and Counsel Others.

Few people define themselves as “counselors,” but all of us counsel. You counsel others all the time, every time you open your mouth, however seemingly trivial the topic. And you either counsel well or poorly. The things you say are either wise or foolish. Your words offer either nourishing food, or empty calories, or poison. The effect of what you say is either constructive or destructive. This is the thrust of Ephesians 4:29: “Let no unwholesome words ever come out of your mouth, but only what is constructive, what meets the need of the moment, so that what you say gives grace to those who hear you” (paraphrase). All this is why Jesus pointedly says that every one of us will be judged for every single word that ever comes out of our mouths (Matt 12:33–37). We may be just mouthing off or running at the mouth, but God is listening closely. He hears the underlying reasons, attitudes and agendas operating in even the most casual conversation.

These five points will help you to look at yourself as a counselor. A summary is provided in Worksheet 2.

1. Look around you. Hebrews 3:12–14 envisions daily constructive conversations, both giving and receiving.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But *encourage one another every day*, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

We all need help—every day. Sin is subtle, and we are forgetful and prone to drift off into darkness. So we are all called to give help. Who are the obvious people in your life whom you could “encourage daily” (or weekly, or monthly)? Think of people in your home, your neighborhood, your job, your church, your small group, your school.

Think carefully about each person. Consider each person’s strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, fruitfulness and failings, gifts and the pressures they bear, the places they need the wisdom and power of God to be made perfect in their weakness. For what can you give thanks? For what should you intercede? Colossians 1:3–12 communicates the heart of biblical prayer for one another.

Write down names, and affirm, “I commit myself to pray regularly for the following people. I desire to be a source of encouragement and light, as God gives opportunity.”

As you write these names, stop and pray. Is there some practical way you can reach out now—getting together, sending a note, giving a call, doing something thoughtful and helpful?

2. *Where? Who? What problems?* In what settings do you have time and opportunity to counsel and encourage people? For example, lunchtime, prayer group, evening phone calls, pastor’s office, after church, taking a walk, etc.

What kinds of people seek you out and let you get to know them? For example, male or female? Elderly, middle-aged, young adults, teens or children? Married or single or divorced or widowed? What are the typical struggles, disabilities and abilities of those who gravitate toward you? Christian or non-Christian? Rich or poor? A particular ethnic group?

What kinds of people do you work well with? Usually these are people whose world you are able to enter, in order to bring both God's love and truth. Are you best at admonishing the unruly, able to sniff out lies and confront constructively?

Are you best at comforting the faint-hearted, able to come alongside anxious, discouraged people? Are you best at holding on to the weak, at finding practical ways to make a difference in someone else's life?

What kinds of problems do you work well with? For example, you may be particularly equipped and oriented to one or more of the following: bereavement, interpersonal conflict, general stress of life, addictions, people who have suffered traumas, physical disabilities, anger, anxiety, criminal behavior, discipling new believers, financial counsel, etc.

Conversely, what kinds of people do you not work well with? Perhaps they intimidate you or confuse you or trigger impatience, or perhaps it is generally inappropriate for you to counsel such people. Helping such folks is not ruled out—God will always stretch you—but it makes sense that your calling will usually operate closer to home in how God has made you.

What kinds of problems do you not work well with? Perhaps you are ignorant or overwhelmed or simply lack wisdom here. You

can certainly grow. But this area may not end up being your specialty calling.²

3. *Seek advice* of people who know you well. Consider your pastor, wise Christian friends, spouse, parents, members of a ministry team, a small group. How do they answer the above questions regarding your gifts, opportunities, significant experience, maturity and eagerness? How do they answer the above questions regarding the sorts of people and problems you might work well with?

4. *Summarize your current understanding* of your counseling calling (within the general calling you worked through in the previous section of this article). What have you learned doing this self study? What are your hunches and instincts about where your life can be most useful to God? Where are things vague and you need more clarity?

5. *Where do you go from here?* This study aims to help you grow in clarity and confidence about God's purposes for you. Realistic and specific knowledge of your strengths and limitations is part of wisdom. It helps you focus on the right things. Wise self-knowing makes you both humble and confident—a rare combination.

So what are your next steps?

- Take initiative in your church?
- Faithfully continue to do what you are doing?
- Is there someone you need to talk to?
- Gather a group of people to pray with and for you?
- Do further study—reading, education, training?

As you take the next steps, your clarity, humility and confidence will lead you toward others in wise care and concern.

2. As a further resource, you might find my article "Familial Counseling" helpful. (*Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 25:1 [2007], 2-15.) It describes a range of ministry skills that adapt to a range of people and problems.

You Are Called by God

The multi-layered reality of “calling” gives us such a lovely doorway into God’s goodness. Our Creator and our Savior come calling for us. In love he calls us out when we stray. And he calls out to us, catching our ear, so that we come to him and live. He calls us to follow in his footsteps so that we live life in a most wondrous way. And he calls each of us by name to serve him within the grit, the choices, the interactions of daily life. He calls us to talk with other people the way he would, in the words we choose to say (and not say), in how and why we say anything and everything.

You have been called. I sincerely hope that as your awareness of his call grows, your joy and confidence will also grow.

Worksheet 1

Five Questions to Help Discern Your Calling

1. What are your gifts and talents?
2. What have you been given in life experience, learning and background?
3. Where are the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges that surround you?
4. How have you grown wiser through faith, repentance, and learning to walk in the light?
5. What do you want to do?

3. Seek advice. What do others think about who you should work with and what kinds of problems?
4. Summarize your current understanding of your counseling calling.
5. Where do you go from here? What are your next steps?

Pastor's Self-Evaluation Questionnaire

By Tim Keller and David Powlison

Pay close attention both to yourself and to your teaching;
persevere in these things; for as you do this
you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

1 TIMOTHY 4:16

The questions that follow help you to pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching. The purpose is to bless you and those you seek to love and serve. For the vast majority of readers, it will help you set a positive, personal agenda for growth as God's instrument. The Great Shepherd of the sheep will by His grace continue to develop you in His image. Conduct your self-evaluation in the light of His love.

Perhaps for a few readers it will prove to be a pass-fail test for your current ministry. Perhaps God has not given you certain gifts. Perhaps you are walking in some disqualifying pattern of sin. Even in these cases the questionnaire serves a positive purpose. The Lord has another place for those gifts that He has given you. The Lord has a way of repentance and renewal for sins that sabotage pastoral integrity and effectiveness. Remember the grace of the gospel.

So set your heart on Christ, on His gospel of mercy, on His high call, on His abounding riches of grace, on His honor in your life and His church. Here are some suggestions on how to profit from this study.

- *Read the questions carefully.* Pages 140–51 pose the questions. Pages 152–54 provide work sheets. The questions range widely over the pastor's role. If you are not a pastor, you can still profit. Ignore the questions that do not apply in your situation.
- *Think hard.* Answer each question honestly after taking time to ponder. Set aside a day or several evenings to reflect on your life and ministry. Wherever possible give concrete examples of fruitfulness or failure, of growth or struggle.
- *Pray.* Pray for wisdom to know God and yourself better. Pray for wisdom to serve God more effectively. Pray to know yourself before the eyes of the God who is both light and love.
- *Seek counsel from others.* Many of the questions are difficult to answer about yourself. This self-evaluation questionnaire will be most useful when you combine it with feedback from others. Ask other leaders, friends, spouse, co-workers on a ministry team, and so forth.
- *Plan.* The work-sheets will guide you in practical planning.
- *Acknowledge that others have gifts that complement yours.* The second half of the questionnaire deals with pastoral skills. You may have limitations which God covers by providing others on the pastoral team with complementary gifts. In acknowledging personal weaknesses, ask yourself whether or not your pastoral team as a whole is covering all the bases.

Remember, the goal of this self-evaluation is to guide you in the path of growing holiness and growing pastoral skill. The questions are divided into these two major sections: personal holiness and pastoral skills. Effective ministers demonstrate holiness by humility, love, integrity and spirituality. Effective ministers are skilled in nurture, communication, leadership and mission.

Under each category you will find several questions. Notice that each question is two-sided. This captures that you fail either by omission or by commission. For example, biblical love is neither careless detachment from others nor obsession with others. You will likely find that you tend towards one side of each question. Let the questions stimulate you to ask further questions. They are not exhaustive. Some will apply to you; some won't.

Part I. Personal Qualifications of Effective Ministers: Holiness

A. Humility

1. Do you acknowledge your limitations and needs out of confidence in Christ's gracious power?

Are you honest enough? Do you demonstrate a willingness to admit your limits, mistakes, sins and weaknesses? Are you defensive, guarded, hypersensitive? Do you model that the Christian life is the open life? Do you demonstrate that the Christian life is a work in process rather than a completed product? Do you deal forthrightly with the common temptations you face: anger, anxiety, escapism, love of pleasure, self-love, materialism, perfectionism, and the like?

Are you too open? Do you wear your heart on your sleeve, indulging and wallowing in your limits, mistakes, sins and weaknesses? Are you morbidly or 'exhibitionistically' confessional? Or have you learned to speak of your weaknesses in ways that (1) point

to your confidence in Christ, (2) genuinely seek help from people who can help, and (3) edify others?

2. Do you demonstrate a flexible spirit out of confidence in God's control over all things, God's authority over you, and God's presence with you?

Are you flexible enough? Do you adapt faithfully, flexibly and creatively to the unexpected? Do you value and encourage the ideas and gifts of others? Do you insist on your own way, whether forcefully or through subtle manipulation? Do you exemplify confidence in the sovereign control of God down to the details of life? Are you caught up in the various aggressions and fears produced by a drive to ensure your own control? Are you willing to try things experimentally and then reevaluate and make changes? Are you evidently a learner?

Are you too flexible? Do you bend too much? Do you blow in the wind of others' opinions and get overwhelmed by people's demands and agendas? Do you compromise, under-assert, seek to please, fail to push things that need to be pushed? Do you let people or circumstances control you rather than the Lord?

B. Love

1. Do you have a positive approach to people because of confidence in the power and hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Do you give grace to others? Do you love and encourage persons, even when under stress or in the face of an attack? Do you exhibit core biblical virtues: love for enemies, gentleness with opponents, patience with people and circumstances when undergoing trial or suffering? Are you able to confront the failings of others—to discipline your children, to admonish wanderers, to conduct church discipline—in a way that is not punitive, irritable or censorious but breathes the invitations of God's grace? Can you say hard things

lovingly? Is your “speaking the truth” harsh, opinionated, idiosyncratic? Do you create problems by making mountains out of molehills? Do you contribute to destructive conflict or to peacemaking?

Are you too tolerant? Are you naively optimistic about people? Do you massage people’s egos with praise and “unconditional positive regard”? Is your “love” limp and truthless? Do you whitewash or minimize problems rather than tackle them? Because of biblical love are you willing to enter into constructive conflict? Are you a peace-lover and conflict-avoider rather than a peacemaker?

2. Do you show a servant’s heart to people because you are first and foremost a servant of the Lord?

Do you serve willingly? Do you serve yourself or others primarily? Do you truly serve the well-being of others and shepherd them under the Lord? Do you strive for personal glory either aggressively (compulsively driven “on an ego trip”) or passively (preoccupied with your “low self-esteem”)? Do you manifest the combination of forcefulness and sensitivity, commitment and flexibility, which characterizes servants of the Lord’s glory? Do you lord it over other people? Do you resist or avoid serving and loving others?

Do you serve compulsively? Do you serve other people slavishly, kowtowing to their demands, expectations and whims. Do you let others lord it over you? Are you confused about what it means to serve and love others? Do you know how to say “No” realistically, firmly and graciously? Do you regularly rest and lay aside your work?

C. Integrity

1. Are you responsible to God first and foremost?

Are you irresponsible? Do you follow through on convictions and commitments? Do you speak the truth firmly, confidently, faithfully? Do you “trim” the truth or waffle on your commitments because of convenience or social pressures? Do you fail to demand of

yourself and others things that God demands? Do you follow your impulses, moods and feelings? Are you walking in the grip of a sin: e.g., greed, lust, outbursts of anger, fear of man, drunkenness, pride?

Are you overly demanding? Do you behave in a rigid manner? Do you sledgehammer people because of your commitment to principle? Are you legalistic in your commitments and nit-picking in your convictions? Do you major in minors? Do you make demands of yourself and others which God does not make?

2. Do you demonstrate a disciplined lifestyle under the lordship of Jesus?

Are you undisciplined? Is your visible life and behavior disciplined, consistent and attractive? Do you manifest the joy, humility and winsomeness of wisdom and holiness? Would people want to imitate what they see of your faith, your faithfulness, your character? What would people see if they could tag along with you for a week? Do you work diligently or are you lazy?

Are you too rigid? Are you too disciplined, organized, “perfect” on the outside? Does your visible example actually discourage or intimidate people? Are you in effect playing the role of “pastor” or “mature Christian”? Is your visible discipline a mask for hypocrisy, a cover for ignorance of yourself or a denial of a deviant inner life? Are you humbled by conscious awareness that you fight the common besetting temptations of every human heart: pride, fear of man, attachment to money, sexual lust, preoccupation with your own performance, control, judgmentalism, love of various pleasures, and the like? Do you have an active sense of humor? Do you take time to rest or are you consumed with anxious toil?

3. Are your family commitments a proper priority under the Lord?

Do you give yourself to your family? Are you overcommitted to your ministry and under-committed to your family? Do you love

your family in such a way that they willingly become committed to your ministry and really stand with and behind you? Are they being sacrificed to “ministry”? Are they being dragged along behind you? Do you give to them significantly, substantially, willingly?

Are you over-involved in your family? Are you over-committed to your family so that they provide an improper refuge, distraction and excuse to avoid ministry? Is family life an excuse for selfishness?

D. Spirituality

1. Do you demonstrate personal piety and vigor in your relationship with God?

Is your piety genuine? Is your communion with God rich and growing? Is your personal prayer life both spontaneous and disciplined or are you mostly a public pray-er? Do you apply the Bible searchingly and encouragingly to yourself or only to your hearers? Do you praise, enjoy and thank God with heartfelt integrity? Do you know God, rely on God, seek God, praise God genuinely? What does Christ mean in your life on a day-in, day-out basis? Are you significantly prayer-less, Bible-less, praise-less, God-less, Christ-less?

Are you ‘pietistic’? Do you escape into pious cliches and misuse the spiritual disciplines? Do you use “I’ll pray about it” or “I need to study the Bible” in order to avoid problems for which you feel inadequate? Do you pray too much (Matthew 6:7) or self-centeredly (James 4:3) because you do not know God very well? Is your Bible, praise and prayer life a hypocritical diversion in a life far from God?

2. Do you demonstrate faithfulness to the Bible and sound doctrine?

Are you biblically and theologically careful? Are you orthodox, faithful to the whole counsel of God? Do you have clear, definite and

thought-out biblical positions on the central issues of life? Do you have theological quirks or hobby-horses which upset the balance of truth? Do you articulate core biblical truth clearly and consistently, with a working feel for its personal and pastoral application? Are you ignorant? Fuzzy? In error? Unbalanced?

Are you a theological nit-picker? Are your theological convictions abstract, theoretical and scholastic? Are you narrowly dogmatic, combative, critical, reductionistic, overly precise in your interpretations and applications of Scripture? Are you simplistic or superficial in your understanding of contemporary life and of human nature? Do you recognize the broad range of questions on which Scripture bears? Do you recognize the many variables which influence the application of Scripture to particular situations?

Part II. Functional Qualifications of Effective Ministers: Pastoral Skill

A. Nurture

1. Do you show involved caring that comes from genuine love in Christ for your brothers and sisters?

Do you involve yourself with the needs of others? Do you keep people at a distance? Are you able to develop relationships of honesty and trust through which you can comfort and challenge persons? Are you approachable? Do you create frequent conflict? Do you approach people warmly? Do you communicate care for people in ways they can sense?

Do you become overly absorbed in people? Do you become overly involved with people, caring too much because of a desire to be liked or a savior-complex or a fear of failure? Do you seek relationships as an end in themselves rather than as a component of pastoring people unto godliness?

2. Do you counsel people the Lord's way?

Do you counsel biblically? Are you skilled in helping people respond to and solve personal problems using biblical principles? Do you counsel biblically both informally and formally? Do you use unbiblical conceptual categories and methods? Is what you say in your office congruent both with what you say in the pulpit and with how you yourself live? Do you get involved constructively with troubled people, or do you disdain them, refer them, avoid them? Are individuals encouraged in godliness, amid their sufferings and sins, through your personal ministry?

Do you go overboard on counseling? Do you become overly centered on problem people and focus on one-on-one remedial counseling to the detriment of more positive, preventive, upbuilding and corporate aspects of the ministry? Do you tend to turn the church into a counseling center or therapy group?

3. Do you disciple others into maturity in Christ and use of their gifts?

Do you help others productively serve the Lord? Do you demonstrate skills in nurturing growth in grace in individuals and in developing their gifts? Does your ministry have a positive, equipping thrust to it? Do you develop leaders and team ministries?

Do you focus too much on activism and productivity? Does your focus on gifts and discipleship have an elitist flavor? Are Christians with minimal gifts and energies neglected? Are there certain kinds of gifts which you recognize and encourage to the neglect of other kinds of gifts? Do you tend to move only with the movers?

4. Do you give yourself to discipline and to patrolling the boundaries of the church which God bought with His own blood?

Do you protect Christ's honor in the church? Are you committed to church discipline? Are you able to confront winsomely and

persistently? Do you recognize the limits of the edification ministries of counseling, care and discipling? Do you stand courageously against real errors and falsehoods which encroach into the body of Christ that you shepherd? Are you realistic that the ministry is a savor both of life and death? Do you try to be so positive that you cannot be properly and biblically negative?

Are you over-absorbed in border patrol? Do you demonstrate a nit-picking, sectarian, vigilante spirit? Are you uncompassionate of people's failings, negativistic rather than upbuilding? Do you create in others a fear of failure and a fear of being found wrong, rather than creating love for ongoing growth in the Lord and love for ever-deepening truth?

B. Communication

1. Do you preach the whole counsel of God?

Are you preaching and teaching the Word of God? Are you skillful in expounding the Word of God publicly so that people are convicted, encouraged and edified? Do you use the pulpit effectively? Do you downplay the importance of the pulpit and teaching in your attitudes, practice, and theory of ministry? Is what you say in the pulpit congruent both with what you say in your office and with how you yourself live? Do you take adequate time and work hard at preparation, or are you casual and presumptuous?

Are you overly absorbed in your pulpit? Are you overly concerned with pulpit ministry to the detriment of other aspects of pastoral care? Does pride puff you up or does the fear of man tie you in knots? Do you envision yourself as a "pulpiteer," to the harm of reaching people where they live? Do you take too much time to prepare for public ministry because of perfectionism, self-trust or fear?

2. Do you provide education for God's many kinds of people?

Do you educate all? Are you skilled in identifying Christian Education needs and in helping people learn? Does your philosophy of Christian Education reach all age groups and all different kinds of needs? Is biblical and doctrinal knowledge undervalued? Do you tend to ignore, despise or belittle the educational needs of certain kinds of people? Does your approach to Christian Education effectively combine truth and practice?

Do you overeducate? Do you tend to turn your church into a school? Is education and factual or doctrinal knowledge overvalued in comparison with other aspects of the Christian life? Is the teacher-pupil role the dominant one in the church or only one role among many?

3. Do you lead others to worship the Lord?

Do you lead others to worship God in truth? Do you lead people into the presence of God? Is your worship perfunctory and rote? Do you yourself worship God as you lead, or does worship become a performance and task? Do you undervalue worship, viewing it only as a glorified warm-up for the message?

Are you overly absorbed in worship? Do you overemphasize the "worship experience" to the detriment of truth and the other aspects of church life? Are you overly subjective, gauging the Christian life by emotions and sentiment? Do you use words, music and staging to manipulate experience? Is God at the center of your worship or do you worship the worship?

C. Leadership

1. Do you lead God's people into effective work together?

Do you lead groups of people well? Do you help groups develop a biblical vision, and do you motivate them toward biblical goals? Are you confused about what the goals of groups should be? Are

you overly absorbed either in personal one-on-one work with people or in impersonal programs and public ministry? Do you function constructively in groups, or do you hamper and divert groups from achieving God's ends? Do you value groups and encourage them to take on significant responsibilities?

Are you overly absorbed in groups? Do you tend to see groups, committees and task forces as a panacea or a substitute for other aspects of ministry? Does a task orientation sabotage other biblical goals such as prayer, worship, caring, and counseling?

2. Do you administer well, creating a church that is wise in its stewardship?

Are you a good administrator? Are you skilled in using time, money and people efficiently to achieve biblical goals in the church? Do you neglect or despise administration?

Are you overly absorbed in administration? Do you tend to over-administer or retreat to administrative tasks because they are easier or are the squeaky wheel?

3. Do you mediate fellowship among God's people?

Do you help people come together? Are you skilled in stimulating the congregation to mutual ministry in love? Does your ministry create one-anothering opportunities and activities among God's people? Do you enhance a family atmosphere in the church? Are you able to teach people how to make significant friendships through your teaching, manner and example?

Are you overly absorbed with the church's social life? Are you so oriented towards "fellowship and family feeling" that the church's fellowship with God and orientation to mission are lost?

4. Do you create cooperative and team ministry within the church and between churches that honor Christ?

Are you a team player? Do you work well as part of a ministry or pastoral team, or do you always insist on leading (in overt

or covert ways)? Do you tend to stake out turf? Is your leadership based on true biblical wisdom or on personal drive, clerical status and political savvy? Do you build unity and mutual respect among different parts of the body of Christ? Can you cooperate with other evangelical churches and pastors, or do you have sectarian instincts? Are you committed in practical ways to see the work of the local congregation as part of the larger work of Christ? Are you too independent and not enough of a “churchman.”

Do you allow the team to shield you from the front lines of ministry? Do you shirk leadership responsibilities out of diffidence or laziness and seek to embed yourself safely within a niche? Do you put your attention too much into the work of presbyteries, synods, general assemblies, conferences, associations, conventions, ministeriums, school boards and the like? Are you a politician and too much a “churchman” rather than a pastor?

D. Mission

1. Do you evangelize those outside of Jesus Christ?

Are you active in evangelism? Are you skilled both in effectively sharing the gospel and in leading the church in outreach? Are you committed in theory and personal practice to evangelize the lost? Do you believe with all your heart that people without Christ remain under the wrath of God? Do you neglect evangelism out of ignorance, love of comfort, fear, prejudice, bad experiences? Do you lead your people to support worldwide missionary efforts?

Are you overly committed to evangelism? Do you overemphasize evangelism or one evangelistic technique to the detriment of the church's overall ministry? Do you create ministry activists rather than godly people? Do you play a numbers game with evangelism? Do your evangelistic methods hold the message of salvation in Christ in proper balance with God's sovereignty in grace and with the call

for us to demonstrate genuine love for each other and the lost? Are missionaries idolized as a higher species of Christian?

2. Do you show social concern for the many needs of people that God desires to address?

Do you care for the whole person? Are you skilled in applying the resources of the church to the social and material needs of mankind? Do you value diaconal work and the mercy gifts? Do you believe that the gospel addresses the whole man, or do you drift towards a gospel that is a bare verbal message? Do you care in practical ways for justice, or do you tacitly accept the status quo? Can you identify the social needs of your community and mobilize effective modes of addressing these needs?

Are you overly involved in social needs? Do you overemphasize social concerns and drift towards a “social gospel”? Do you ride the hobby-horse of one particular political point of view or one particular social policy issue? Do you tend to view people through the eyes of politics, economics or sociology rather than through the eyes of the God of the Bible?

Application Work Sheet

Part I. Personal Qualifications of Effective Ministers: Holiness

A. Humility

1. Do you acknowledge your limitations and needs out of confidence in Christ's gracious power?
2. Do you demonstrate a flexible spirit out of confidence in God's control over all things, God's authority over you, and God's presence with you?

B. Love

1. Do you have a positive approach to people because of confidence in the power and hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. Do you show a servant's heart to people because you are first and foremost a servant of the Lord?

C. Integrity

1. Are you responsible to God first and foremost?
2. Do you demonstrate a disciplined lifestyle under the lordship of Jesus?
3. Are your family commitments a proper priority under the Lord?

D. Spirituality

1. Do you demonstrate personal piety and vigor in your relationship with God?
2. Do you demonstrate faithfulness to the Bible and sound doctrine?

Part II. Functional Qualifications of Effective Ministers: Pastoral Skill

A. Nurture

1. Do you show involved caring that comes from genuine love in Christ for your brothers and sisters?
2. Do you counsel people the Lord's way?
3. Do you disciple others into maturity in Christ and use of their gifts?
4. Do you give yourself to discipline and to patrolling the boundaries of the church which God bought with His own blood?

B. Communication

1. Do you preach the whole counsel of God?
2. Do you provide education for God's many kinds of people?
3. Do you lead others to worship the Lord?

C. Leadership

1. Do you lead God's people into effective work together?
2. Do you administer well, creating a church that is wise in its stewardship?
3. Do you mediate fellowship among God's people?
4. Do you create cooperative and team ministry within the church and between churches that honor Christ?

D. Mission

1. Do you evangelize those outside of Jesus Christ?

2. Do you show social concern for the many needs of people whom God desires to address?

You have looked at yourself, hopefully through God's eyes. Now work with what you have seen.

If you could change in one area in the next year, which would it be? Where do you most need to mature in wisdom?

What changes in you would bring the greatest glory to God and greatest blessing to other people?

Confess your sins and failings to God. Jesus Christ is your faithful high priest and shepherd. He is the Pastor of pastors.

"Come with confidence to the throne of His grace that you may receive mercy and grace to help you in your time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Believe it and do it. The Lord's strength is made perfect in your weakness.

Now what must you do? Prayerfully set goals. How will you become a more godly person and pastor? Are there people you must ask to pray for you and hold you accountable? Are there Bible passages or books you must study? Are there plans you must make? Do you need advice from a wise Christian about how to go about changing?