

The Intimidation Factor in Counseling

“Lately I’ve been struggling with a few things. Would you mind having lunch with me next week to help me work through it all? I could really use your counsel.”

Just reading that question may cause you to have a visceral reaction. Requests like this can be quite intimidating, particularly if a friend comes with a long list of problems. After listening, you may say to yourself, “I feel completely lost and am not sure what to say. Maybe I will say the wrong thing and damage our relationship. With so many problems to address, I don’t know where to start! Isn’t there someone else who can help?”

If that’s how you feel about counseling a friend, what about counseling someone you’ve never met before? The prospect of sitting down with a stranger one-on-one comes with all of the pressures of a first date—getting to know one another, awkward pauses, not knowing what questions to ask, and hoping that the person sitting across from you will want to meet again.

Books, conferences, classes, and observational videos are helpful in knowing how to counsel, but how do you organize those details to help someone step-by-step in real life? Maybe you’ve observed a counselor weaving in and out of strategic questions with a counselee—seamlessly stringing together biblical themes and texts, and your initial reaction is one of discouragement: “I could never do that. I would get lost, lose my train of thought, and embarrass myself!”

There is a reductionistic view of counseling that tells people merely to stop what they are doing, pray, read their Bibles, listen to good preaching, and trust God. Then there are the hundreds of competing theories of counseling and psychology—each with its own acronym for success. Depending on who one goes to for answers, the counsel received may be like the proverbial box of chocolates—you never know what you are going to get.

This is only exacerbated with the rising popularity of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Therapy. AI is appealing because it allows people to be anonymous, does not require paying a therapist, and has the air of objectivity to it since it comes from a “higher intelligence.” This seemingly bottomless list of options may leave you frustrated and disheartened.

Can you relate? If so, this book was written with you in mind! Regardless of your denominational background, whether you’re a new Christian or a seasoned saint, a committed pastor or a licensed mental health professional, in the academy or a counselor in training, a stay-at-home mom or a retiree, be encouraged! With God’s help, and through a basic understanding of His Word, you can be equipped to counsel with competence and confidence.

Please don’t be discouraged by the fact that much of this book deals with formal aspects of counseling (using documents, giving homework, signing a consent form, filling out an application); the basic concepts are used in informal counseling as well. Whether it’s over a cup of coffee or across a desk, this guide is designed to give *every* Christian the confidence to self-counsel, and then to counsel others. In short, this is basic biblical counseling for the church, so be assured that this is doable with a clear strategy in front of you.

An Accessible Plan to Counsel for Every Christian

When I was working towards my certification with the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC),¹ I vividly remember watching a video of veteran counselor Randy Patten.² During the

1. <https://biblicalcounseling.com>.

2. *Biblical Counseling Observation – 10 Digital Videos*, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://store.faithlafayette.org/all-products/biblical-counseling-observation-10-digital->

first session with a married couple, and after hearing about their problems, Patten casually and confidently said that he anticipated that the couple would need about twelve counseling sessions to work through their issues.

Twelve sessions? Why twelve and not ten, or eight? I was intimidated! Patten's vast experience no doubt gave him wisdom to know the chronology of counseling, but I was at a loss to predict what would be covered in session two, three, four, and so on. Was he leading this couple through published material or was he just reacting to their weekly problems with his wisdom and experience (which I did not have!)?

Even those that have counseled for decades and are naturally proficient in counseling sometimes labor to explain a method for counseling. One of my favorite counselors, Jim Newheiser, acknowledges, "While I have counseled for thousands of hours, I sometimes struggle when trying to describe the particulars of the counseling process to my students."³ The reason for this is not that Newheiser has a lack of knowledge, but as a gifted counselor, he is able to integrate many different elements of the

videos. Like all good things, various kinds of certifications can be abused. Just as pastors should take care that those who graduate with a seminary degree do not cause other teachers in the church to be neglected, so too those with counseling certification should not make others in the church feel as if they are unqualified to counsel. Both seminary and counseling certificates are not synonymous with ordination and should not create a higher caste in the local church. Dale Johnson helpfully warns about formal counseling ministries subverting this culture of care: "Formal counseling ministries, if not guarded intentionally by the church, can be viewed as the only place where care is given in the church" (*The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* [Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021], 148). Positively, these education opportunities are helpful in training as the words of James 3:1 are taken seriously: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." You may have zeal for counseling, but without knowledge you can become dangerous—inviting judgment upon yourself. *Be warned, bad theologians make bad counselors.* Additionally, since officially counseling people from other churches involves shepherding someone else's sheep, getting approval from the leadership of those churches is non-negotiable.

3. Jim Newheiser book endorsement for Lauren Whitman, *A Biblical Counseling Process: Guidance for the Beginning, Middle, and End* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), Introduction with no page reference.

process without consciously thinking about it. It is much like a professional athlete, who has spent years perfecting his craft, having difficulty explaining his process because it's done from muscle memory. But what about those that do not have that case experience?

I have spoken with many Christians around the world, even pastors, that are in the same quandary I was in. They are left with the question of exactly how to counsel someone step-by-step, despite having read the best counseling resources and even having degrees in pastoral ministry. As a result, church leaders unfortunately decide not to counsel and, instead, refer their struggling church members to an “expert” outside the church.

A Eureka Moment

As I continued watching instructional videos in my ACBC certification process, I experienced a eureka moment of understanding that is the foundation of this book: *in every counseling case, regardless of the person or problem, the same theological themes were discussed over and over*. Those themes ended up providing the essential elements of change. After identifying those key themes, I considered whether it might be possible to prioritize them and focus on one a week while addressing my counselee's presenting problems (what the counselee perceives to be his or her main struggle[s]) through practical homework and application. That way I would not be waiting for the themes to randomly pop up through weeks of counseling, but I was preemptively planning to teach them. The strategy of presenting one of these themes for every week of counseling became the basis for this “directive” form of biblical counseling.

One of the greatest benefits of this approach to counseling is that these basic theological principles not only help you with one problem, but they also give you the tools to live godly in Christ Jesus regardless of *any* challenge you may experience. In other words, the biblical principles that apply to marriage difficulties are the very same principles that apply to pornography or fear, though

they apply in different ways. Consequently, what is presented here is an accessible, Christian worldview that aims for no less than a complete transformation concerning how you think about God, yourself, and the world.

It is from this foundation of first principles, with attention to spiritual disciplines, practical advice, and physical concerns, that counselees begin to see change. This change takes place through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit as He works through His all-sufficient Word, which is the power of God not only for salvation, but also for sanctification (the process where you become more like Jesus).

What then is true biblical counseling? *As a form of discipleship and evangelism, biblical counseling is listening to hurting people, teaching them theological principles from God's all-sufficient Word, and helping them to live practically and consistently with those principles alongside the local church for the glory of God.* While there is a science and art to counseling (soulcraft), and while every counseling case truly is a unique combination of matters that are fundamentally “common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13), soul care really is less complicated than advertised, which is why every Christian is called to this ministry—even you! This is why Romans 15:14 states, “And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and *able also to admonish one another*” (cf. Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:12–15).

A Word to Pastors

Dear shepherds, even if you feel inadequate to counsel, please do not farm out soul care to others outside of your local church. Additionally, you must not fall into the error of believing that you can counsel or disciple solely from the sacred desk. The ministry of the Word must not be isolated to the pulpit, but extended to the pew—from house to house, as was the Pauline method (Acts 20:20, 31).⁴ If counseling is discipleship (which is one of

4. E. Brooks Holifield writes, “For almost twenty centuries [pastors] have spent more

the pillars of the mission of the church), how can a pastor *not* do soul care?

The biblical picture for a pastor is not a chef, but a shepherd. Pastoring involves much more than providing/feeding (i.e. instruction). Even in the physical world, a shepherd that limits his duties to feeding will soon have dead sheep. As John Calvin comments on Acts 20:20, “For Christ hath not appointed pastors upon this condition, that they may only teach the Church in general in the open pulpit; but that they may take charge of every particular sheep . . . for common doctrine will oftentimes wax cold, unless it be holden with private admonitions.” He continues to admonish pastors: “Wherefore, the negligence of those men is inexcusable, who, having made one sermon, as if they had done their task, live all the rest of their time idly; as if their voice were shut up within the church walls, seeing that so soon as they be departed, thence they be dumb.”⁵

If you neglect this major aspect of your calling, you “become mere pulpiteers rather than pastors, managers rather than ministers, clerks rather than clerics.”⁶ If you *do* choose to fulfill your ministry as a counselor, it will absolutely enrich your preaching and teaching. As you serve the weak and suffering, your understanding of your people and their needs will increase. Your people will be drawn to you, and your love and compassion for them will deepen so that you prayerfully think of them when you prepare to preach. Sermons will then be crafted with souls in mind, which also aids in preventing you from speaking over their heads. Jay Adams well understands, “The man who preaches exclusively, and does no counseling, may tend to become abstract and pedantic. He must continually apply the principles of the Scriptures to real life problems, if his examples and his

time listening to people than preaching to them” (*A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1983], 15).

5. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 19:244.

6. Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 20–21.

applications in the pulpit are to ring true.”⁷ There is a symbiotic relationship between preaching and counseling—each informs and enriches the other.

May the words of Spurgeon motivate resolve in you to fulfill your calling:

At this hour, there is a call for men who can struggle against the flood, and swim up stream. We need heroes who would just as soon go alone, if necessary, as march with a thousand comrades. We need men who can think on their own. They have thought out the truth; and, having gone to God about it, and felt the power of it in their own souls, they are not about to be moved from the hope of their calling. They are pillars in the house of our God, abiding, in their places; and not mere caterpillars, crawling after something to eat. We need captains for the good ship who know their longitude and latitude, and can tell from where they came, and to what port they are steering towards. Our Commander needs warriors true as steel for this hour of conflict.⁸

7. Jay Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock: A Handbook on Pastoral Ministry, Counseling, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 369–70. See also Deepak Reju, “Dear Pastor: Shepherd God’s Flock,” in *Biblical Counseling and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 34–50; Deepak Reju and Mark Dever, “The Health of the Church and Biblical Counseling,” in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God’s Changeless Truth*, eds. James MacDonald, Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 239–55; Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); and Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, “Why Sunday Sermons are Necessary but Not Sufficient,” in *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything* (Sydney, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009), 93–108.

8. “An All-Round Ministry: Addresses to Ministers and Students,” accessed November 2, 2021, <https://archive.spurgeon.org/misc/aarm12.php>.