

Shepherd or Counselor?

A Biblical Model for Helping Troubled Believers

by David A. Huston

ACCORDING TO A RECENT SURVEY, the number one challenge facing today's American churches is how to deal with the results of the social decay of North America. According to one pastor, "We are already seeing the results of broken homes: abused children, alcoholism, unchecked sexual diseases and more." Few church leaders would argue that behaviors which were once rare exceptions are now commonplace. Fifty years ago the vast majority of people coming into the church were raised in two-parent families where Dad worked and Mom stayed home with the kids. Today, far fewer than half come from such a home. The result of this deterioration —along with its increase in drug and alcohol use, pornography, wanton violence, and unbridled hedonism —is a society literally filled with troubled people.



Many apostolic pastors and church leaders are perplexed by the seemingly acute nature of these personal problems, feeling unequipped to help people with such severe needs. Some feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of problems. Most have wondered at times, "Are there any normal families left out there?" As a consequence, some pastors are referring troubled believers to professional counselors, some Christian in orientation and some not. While this may seem wise on the surface, we must ask ourselves: Is this God's plan for helping and healing the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind which the Master is bringing into His house? (Luke 14:21).

When Peter wrote to the church of Asia Minor, he instructed the leaders of his day to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2). And when Paul addressed the elders of Ephesus, he admonished them to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:28). Neither of these apostles ever told church leaders to counsel the flock. In fact, the New Testament makes no mention of either the position of counselor or the ministry of counseling as an element of what Jesus has provided as a resource for redemption and growth. What it does speak of is the power to deliver and heal,

and the fivefold gifts of grace called apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Luke 4:18; Ephesians 4:11).

For purposes of this article, we will refer to what Jesus has provided for His people by the single term *shepherding*. It should be understood, however, that included within this ministry is deliverance, healing, teaching, and equipping. It should also be noted that shepherding is a *work of ministry* established and empowered by the grace of God, not a position or office. As leaders of local assemblies and ministers of the gospel, spiritual shepherding is what we should be providing God's people, not counseling.

The Counseling Model

Ask a counselor, especially a Christian counselor, why he or she got into the field and the typical response will be, "Because I wanted to help people." Ask a young Bible school graduate why he or she wants to pursue a Master's degree in counseling and the response will be the same, "Because I want to help people." But even though the motives may be noble and the intentions sincere, does counseling actually help people the way Jesus wants them to be helped?

Consider the typical counseling model: A regular weekly meeting (though it may be more or less frequent); usually in a formal setting (the counselor's office) for a set period of time (typically one hour). In many cases the counselor charges a fee for his or her professional services. Even though this is not the common practice for pastoral counseling, some people believe that their tithes are a sort of fee which obligates pastors to slavishly sit and listen to their endless array of personal issues."

Most professional counselors are trained in psychological theory and techniques and tend to rely on their training and skills rather than the grace and truth of God. Although pastors and Christian counselors certainly have some knowledge of the Bible, serious trouble arises when they begin to believe that the Word and power of Jesus are not enough and begin to look instead to the wisdom of man. And what men concocted this so-called wisdom? Atheists, occultists, and New Agers such as William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, and B.F. Skinner.

The Bible says, "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man" (Psalms 118:8). Are we to believe that this is true in all matters except serious emotional, relational, and psychological problems? Hasn't God already said, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent" (1 Corinthians 19)? Over the past thirty years or so, two versions of counseling have arisen to placate those Christians who are skeptical of secular

counseling. The first is called Christian counseling. Keep in mind that this was unheard of before the 1970s. The second came along a short time later when some Christians began to realize that Christian counseling was nothing more than psychology-based counseling with a veneer of Christian terminology. This next version was called Biblical counseling. The Biblical counselor rejected all man-made psychological theory and guided his counsees strictly by the Scriptures. The problem is, even this approach falls short of the Lord's plan for healing and transforming His people.

The fundamental problem with the counseling model, be it psychological or Biblical, is that even when a counselor has genuine concern for the well-being of his counsees, he is nevertheless simply doing his job. This reality cannot help but leave the counselee wondering, "Is this person spending time with me because he cares about me or because it's his job? Is he speaking the truth in love or just speaking the truth? When fees are involved, it becomes virtually impossible for a counselee to believe at a deep level that the counselor really cares about him. It has been asserted that paying for counseling services gives the counselor's words greater value in the mind of the counselee (based on the flawed psychological theory that people don't value what costs them nothing). But this is no more than a clever and self-serving justification for charging people money to give them what Jesus paid for with His own blood so that He could make it available to everyone without cost.

The simple fact that the person doing the counseling occupies a recognized position as the counselor negates perhaps the single most important ingredient in spiritual ministry: agape love. On top of that, the fact that the counselor position is an official position carrying a title (counselor) produces a positional and relational split between the counselor and the counselee, the counselor occupying the superior position of specialist. This is also the case with a pastor doing pastoral counseling. To the counselee, he is the healthy one, the spiritual one, the superior one, doing his job as The Pastor. In both cases, the counselee cannot perceive himself as a peer, but only as a lesser and dependent party. This positional split also negates agape love, since on the human level love is a relational dynamic that can only flow horizontally from one person to another. The only agape love that can ever descend from someone who is higher in position than another is the love of God that is found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Love is also a sacrificial dynamic, for the Bible says that Jesus loved us and gave Himself for us; yet rarely do we find a counselor who is willing to sacrifice for the recovery of a client. Instead, when fees aren't paid or appointments are broken, the counseling often comes to an end.

The Purpose of Shepherding

When we confine ourselves to the plain teachings of Scripture, we find that all relational problems, such as marital or parenting problems, all thinking problems and emotional problems, all problems with addictive behavior, and all other so-called psychological problems are at their root spiritual problems. They all have their origins in man's broken relationship with God and other people. We must therefore approach all of these varied human problems from a spiritual perspective.

This is why people need shepherding rather than counseling. We read nothing in the Bible about mental illness, depression, or schizophrenia; but we do read about fleshly minds filled with vain thoughts, embittered hearts that are blind to truth, unrestrained people who are alienated from the life of God, and the oppressive powers of demonic spirits (Ephesians 4:17-19; Acts 10:38).

Are people really any different today than they were 2000 years ago? Do today's believers really need more than what God provided when He established the Church? God's solution for the numerous human problems people have faced in all ages is not formalized counseling sessions and prescription drugs. It is redemption through the Blood, the Word, the Spirit, and the Body of Jesus Christ. It is a growth process that includes deliverance, healing, teaching, and equipping by the power of God.

The purpose of shepherding is that the people of God would grow up in all things into Jesus Christ, to whom they will one day be presented as His eternal bride, perfect and complete in Him. For this to happen, however, people need to be set free from the spiritual powers that keep them bound in disobedience, healed of their spiritual wounds, and nurtured in the life-giving power of the Word of God. They need to put away childish things and grow up into maturity, having their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. They also need to be equipped for their God-ordained work of ministry.

The New Testament Model

The Bible tells us that God has given us through His divine power all things that pertain to life and godliness. It goes on to say that we receive the benefits of His power through the knowledge of Him (2 Peter 1:3). This passage tells us that God has made available everything any person needs to experience complete redemption and growth, but that it comes only by means of an experiential relationship with Jesus. (The word knowledge means more than simply knowing about someone; it means experiencing someone in a personal relationship). This is God's plan for providing His resources to His people.

Many church leaders and sincere believers feel a nearly oppressive obligation to help virtually every needy person who comes their way, especially if the need seems spiritual in nature. Because of this, whenever they conclude that a situation is beyond their level of expertise, they often look for any available alternative. But this is not the responsibility of the Church. God has called us and equipped us to help people only within the framework of the gospel. It alone is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). The problem is, not everyone believes the gospel. In fact, many people simply will not allow the gospel to do its work.

When He issued the Great Commission to his apostles, Jesus warned that those who do not believe the gospel will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16). As followers of the apostolic pattern, we are not responsible for helping condemned people find healing and peace by any means other than the gospel. To do so is to step outside of our calling and purpose. From God's perspective, anyone who is rejecting the gospel is on his own.

In recent years, many hurting Christians have been encouraged to turn to various forms of counseling. But all counseling models are no more than weak substitutes for God's provision. The problem is that the leaders of many assemblies have no clear concept as to how God intends to deliver His provision to His people. The reason for this is that most local assemblies are not built according to the pattern revealed in the New Testament. Instead, they follow the pattern employed by the Roman Catholic Church during the Dark Ages. The result is that rather than focusing people on healing and growth into the likeness of Jesus, the focus is on compliance with external forms and submission to authoritarian leadership. This is not God's plan.

Consider for a moment the following descriptions. Which of these models is the more biblical approach to providing God's resources to His people?

1. Ministry that consists of congregational worship and preaching, supplemented by pastoral counseling as needed and professional counseling in cases beyond the pastor's expertise.
2. Ministry that consists of congregational worship and preaching, plus small groups meeting in homes with an emphasis on worship, sharing, and teaching.

Clearly the New Testament places a stronger emphasis on the community of the body than the authority of its leaders. In fact, many of the regular meetings of the early Church took place in the privacy of people's homes where the focus was on teaching and fellowship. For example, the book of Acts tells us that the original believers continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from

house to house (Acts 2:46). It further records, And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:42). It concludes with the words, Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ... (Acts 28:30-31).

What the New Testament tells us is that instead of turning to counseling, what the damaged and disordered people of today need is ministry in homes where the Word is being applied and where all the spiritual gifts are functioning under the oversight of the fivefold gifts of grace (Ephesians 4:11). Instead of sitting in an office with a specialist who is doing his job, people need to sit in a living room with a small group of caring believers who are going through, or have been through, the same kinds of struggles. God didn't provide weekly appointments as an answer; He provided on-going personal relationships. And He didn't consider fees to be a vital part of the healing process; He considered freely given love to be a vital part. His ministers are to model Jesus Christ, whom though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Paul was an excellent example of the spirit of Jesus, writing, Did I commit sin in abasing myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you free of charge? and, I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls (2 Corinthians 11:7; 13:15). Paul understood the principle that if he received payments from the people he was endeavoring to help, he would in fact be hindering the work of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:12). Are there any professional counselors who share this insight?

Shepherding, Not Counseling

It is no wonder that so many men who are attempting to pastor a local assembly all by themselves are sending the troubled people they encounter to professional counselors. These people need a great deal of love, far more than any one man can give. But a small group meeting regularly in a private home can close around a person like a cell membrane, providing a safe and loving environment where the healing process can flourish. The Bible says that safety is found in the multitude of counselors, not under the clinical care of a lone professional (Proverbs 11:14).

A properly functioning home group provides the ideal atmosphere for spiritual healing and growth. No one is there because it's their job; no one is paid to be there. All of the formalities of a congregational meeting, with its preacher-spectator design, are absent. In the informal environment of a home group, the members are peers, ministering to one another according to the varied gifts and

experiences of every believer. Rather than relying on the unchallenged counsel of a single specialist, the group offers a multitude of voices, providing a sort of check and balance system. Out of the warmth and genuine concern that naturally flows in the meetings, people find the acceptance they hunger for, and lasting friendships are formed.

In the summer of 1998, some folks from our local assembly brought a woman named Sharlene to one of our evangelistic meetings. It didn't take long to see that Sharlene was an utterly broken person. Within a few weeks, she had been baptized in the name of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit. But nearly every time we met for worship, she wept through most of the service. Whenever I approached Sharlene to greet her, her countenance dropped and she would barely speak to me. I later learned that Sharlene had been sexually molested by her father beginning when she was nine and continuing up through her early twenties. I felt that she in some way associated me, as an authority figure, with her father. I also noticed that she seemed much more at ease with most of the other members of the assembly than with me.

Almost immediately Sharlene began attending one of our home friendship groups. As the months passed, I received frequent updates on how she was doing from her home group leader. The group showed Sharlene great compassion and acceptance, even after an awful truth came to the surface: Sharlene was facing criminal prosecution for sexually molesting her own son.

When Sharlene came to us, she was taking anti-depressant drugs, having recently been hospitalized with a nervous breakdown. She was also undergoing professional counseling. But as the months passed and her home group continued to love her, even with all her imperfections, she began to show signs of healing. During this time, the group demonstrated total acceptance of Sharlene as a person; yet never gave any approval or justification for her past behavior. This combination of grace and truth, administered over time, was God's plan for redeeming Sharlene's life from destruction.

It took nearly ten months before she finally stopped weeping during our church services. As she began to come out of her grief, she seemed to be better able to relate to me. During her trial she told me that she was prepared to accept whatever sentence the court handed down. She is presently serving a minimum five-year sentence in a state correctional facility. But she is off the anti-depressants and spends most of her time reading the Bible and worshiping the God of her salvation.

As a pastor, I must admit that I could not have helped Sharlene. She couldn't receive from me, not because of anything about me personally, but because she perceived me as being in some way superior to her because of her concept of my

role in the church. This perception resulted in her placing me in the same category as her father, thereby erecting a wall that only grace, truth, and time could tear down. If Sharlene had come into a local assembly without home groups, she probably wouldn't have lasted more than a few weeks.

Assessment and Oversight

Rather than referring people to professional counselors —Christian, Biblical, or otherwise —pastors need to provide shepherding by placing people in safe and nurturing home groups where they can talk about their problems and receive love, prayer, teaching, correction, and acceptance. This is the New Testament model.

This is not to say that it is never appropriate for church leaders to meet with a person to discuss his or her personal or relational problems. The issue is not whether or not such a meeting should take place, but rather what its purpose should be. Rather than attempting to be the source of the solution, leaders should see themselves as assessors. In other words, their job is to assess the nature of the problems and guide the person into a place within the body where these problems can best be resolved: the appropriate home group. Leaders may oversee the ministry, but they must not presume to be the primary avenue of ministry.

In the story of Simon the Sorcerer, Peter made an assessment using the spiritual gifts God had given him. He told Simon, "I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" (Acts 8:23). He then told Simon where the process needed to start, saying, "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you" (v.22). From that point on it was up to Simon to respond. Jesus won't heal those who refuse to heed His instructions.

Conclusion

In Old Testament days, it was common for kings to surround themselves with wise and learned men called "counselors" (ref. 1 Chronicles 27:32-33). These men served as advisors to the king, sometimes in religious matters and sometimes in the more practical affairs of state. Apparently some of these counselors put themselves out for hire. During the time of the building of the second temple in Jerusalem, the Bible says, "Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah" (Ezra 4:4). And what did these heathen people do to discourage the people of God? "They troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose..." (Ezra 4:5).

Today, the people of God have a grand and glorious purpose. It is to build the Church, the eternal dwelling place of God. But just as it was in the days of Ezra, the anti-God heathen are attempting to trouble the building and frustrate the purpose. And how is this being done? Clearly one significant way is through a profusion of paid counselors.

The fact that the New Testament never mentions counseling as a ministry ordained by God ought to be enough to convince us to drop the practice completely; but when we also consider the worldly and pseudo-spiritual baggage the whole concept of counseling carries with it, it becomes clear that we should never offer God's people counseling services. Counseling is part of the world's false system of redemption and has no place in the Church of the living God.

Endnote:

1. Needs for the New Millennium by Richard C. Brown, *Perspectives* magazine, Vol. 9, No. 11, (Indiana Bible College, Indianapolis, IN), p. 2.

Note to the reader:

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Published by

Rosh Pinnah Publications

PO Box 337, Carlisle, PA 17013 717-249-2059

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Rosh Pinnah means Chief Cornerstone in Hebrew.