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## Counseling in the Local Church

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Counseling is not the major task of a pastor. He is to preach and witness. But counseling is a necessary if not major part of his work. He will find he cannot himself handle all the counseling which presses in upon him. He will need to send some to people outside the church and direct others to mature leaders in the church. Whether handled personally or by others, all counseling should be controlled and directed by the pastor.

Lay counseling is a Biblical ministry of the church (Eph 4:11-12; Rom 15:14). One counselor writes, "People-helping is taught in the Scriptures; it is required of all believers (not just pastors); it is urgently needed in all congregations, whatever their size, as people struggle with today's stress, confusion and anxiety" ("Lay Counseling" Collins, 1980, p 79). The pastor who cares to be Biblical will initiate and promote such a ministry for his members.

Wayne Oates states: "The pastor, regardless of his training, does not enjoy the privilege of electing whether or not he will counsel with his people. They inevitably bring their problems to him for his best guidance and wisest care. He cannot avoid this if he stays in the pastoral ministry. His choice is not between counseling or not counseling, but between counseling in a disciplined and skilled way and counseling in an undisciplined and unskilled way" (1959, p vi).

Lawrence Crabb, Jr concurs, "Effective biblical counseling requires encouragement, exhortation, and enlightenment. God intends the local church to provide these elements. Counseling therefore belongs ideally in the local church and not in the private professional office" ("Moving" 1978, p 18). In *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, Jay Adams (1973, p 9) agrees with this position by asserting, "While every Christian must become a counselor to his fellow Christians, the work of counseling as a special calling is assigned particularly to the pastor."

In support and clarification of this view that counseling is the job of the pastor and under him of leaders and members of the local church, this study will set forth the reasons for it, the responsible people in it, the real

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*The preacher to be prepared for counseling responsibilities should have a solid biblical and theological background.*

4:12 means "to prepare" or "repair" or "restore to its former condition." The same word appears in Hebrews 11:3 as "preparing the world," in Luke 6:40 as "equipped" or "prepared" as his master, and in Mark 1:19 as "repairing or restoring the nets."

As the bishop (*episkopos*) the pastor is the superintendent or overseer of a working force (Ardnt and Gingrich, 1957, p 299). This makes him responsible for overseeing the counseling ministry of the church. As a shepherd of the flock, he is to care for them (I Pet 5:2-3; Acts 20:28-31). Caring involves preaching, counseling (*nouthetountes*) and teaching every man in order to present him mature in Christ (Col 1:28):

Robert R King Jr in a study of evangelical Christians found that 54% went to their pastor for counseling and that 83% of the pastors provided counseling for marriage, family and personal problems (1978, p 279). The Christian minister is to be the preacher and counselor because this is his function or office in the church. To be best prepared for these responsibilities he should have a good seminary education to provide a solid Biblical and theological background and to provide the knowledge of the language in order to exegete the Scriptures.

The members of the church are also to be counseling. The Greek words used to set forth the pastor's responsibility to counsel are used also in reference to lay people. The Greek word *katartidzo* which appears in Ephesians 4:12 also appears in Galatians 6:1. This is a ministry of restoring a brother who has sinned. The Greek word *noutheteo*, which means "to admonish" or "to counsel," is used in reference to lay people (Col 3:16; Rom 15:14).

Paul commanded the Thessalonian believers to counsel those who were disorderly, to encourage or cheer up the faint-hearted or discouraged and to support the weak while being patient toward all (I Thess 5:14). In James 5:16 believers are commanded to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another that they might be healed. Romans 12:15 instructs Christians to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep. The counseling membership of a local church is a great support system for these people in need.

### **Real Dangers**

There are real dangers to individuals and to the local church itself when counseling is sought and practiced by the laymen and women of the church. These dangers fall into the following categories: wrong pastoral

attitudes, wrong programs, wrong lifestyle of lay counselors, wrong motives and wrong practices.

### **Wrong pastoral attitudes**

Some pastors feel threatened by a lay counseling program. Others do not want to take the time. Still others do not relate it to the total ministry of the church.

### **Wrong programs**

Training programs and the total structuring and supervision of lay counseling must be tailored to fit the unique needs of each church. "An informal survey recently discovered over 20 evangelically oriented published programs for training lay counselors in the church" (Collins and Tornquist, 1981, p 76). The approach to counseling and the appropriateness of the content of the material and the time required to teach it must be evaluated. Biblical counselors (nouthetic) must beware of the eclectic nature of many of these programs. Jay Adams has a "Competent to Counsel Training Kit" which may be adapted to the local church and supplemented by writers of nouthetic material. The pastor will have to decide what format will be used in the training programs.

### **Wrong motives of lay counselors**

Regrettably, some people are drawn to a counseling role by the desire to work out their problems without exposing themselves in a position of counselee. Others may be attracted by the apparent position of authority, by the opportunity to talk openly to counselees about intimate subjects, or by the hope of finding personal fulfillment. Christian counselors should be ministering for the glory of God and by the motive of love (Isa 43:7; Jn 13:34-35).

### **Wrong practices**

First, Christian leaders must not promote feelings of inferiority among laymen by restricting them to simple tasks only. Secondly, confidence leaks must be avoided. If the counselee's problem is discussed with another, it might cause a loss of faith in the counselor. Thirdly, the counselor must control his curiosity and seek only information to help the counselee with the problem. Fourthly, the counseling member must remain objective and not become too emotionally involved. Fifthly, sexual stimulation must be avoided. Words and actions must be directed for the good of the counselee. Sixthly, lay counselors must not be too proud to refer a case which they cannot handle. Lastly, schism must not be the outcome of lay counseling. Paul warned, "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).

## Range of Counseling Ministries

The extent of the counseling ministry in the local church will be determined by the number and age of the members, their needs and the availability of caring believers who can counsel. In a church with a full range of ages, there is a need for counseling in the following areas: discipleship of new converts; counsel for those who seek it after a message; instruction for new members who have come from other areas and churches; older women teaching younger women; counsel for youth about problems, growth, dating and vocation; pre-marital and marital counseling; counsel and visitation for the elderly and personal counsel on a multitude of topics.

The local church should provide this counsel for the edification of the body of Christ in love (Eph 4:16, 29). It should provide preventive, remedial, and educational counseling. Jay Adams stresses, "Every counselor must see clearly that whatever he does in counseling he does not only for the counselee but also for Christ and for His church. Every lay counselor also must be willing to subject his counseling activities to the oversight and order of the church" (*Ready to Restore*, 1980, p 6).

The lay counselor must remember to counsel only those whom God has providentially placed in his pathway to help (Gal 6:1, 2, 10). He must not become a busybody (I Thess 4:9-12; II Thess 3:11), nor must he search out problems among the saints as the pastor of the church (Heb 13:17).

In weighing priorities, a pastor will probably seek first to train competent personal workers to deal with those who respond to the invitation. Personal workers should be efficient soul-winners, should have a pattern for follow-up, should be familiar with polity and procedures of the church, and should be competent to deal Scripturally with a range of personal problems.

## Realistic Goals

The ultimate goal in the counseling in the local church is to glorify the Lord (I Cor 10:31, Col 3:23). In order to do this in counseling, the caring believer serves to restore the erring Christian to usefulness (Gal 6:1). Jay Adams asserts, "Restoration to usefulness, therefore, is the objective of Christian counseling" (*Ready to Restore*, 1981, p 5). This counseling is aiming at Christian growth or progressive sanctification (Rom 8:29; II Cor 3:18).

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In addition to the ultimate goal, the goal for the troubled believer and the loving goal of the counselor, there are other important goals for a counseling program in the local church. They include: (1) a structured counseling program supervised ultimately by the pastor, (2) a counseling program which allows the pastor to do his other work in addition to counseling, (3) a counseling program which ministers to all the problems of all ages in the body, (4) a trust in the Lord by the counselee and the absence of leaning on the counselor or others, (5) a conformity to biblical behavior patterns in every area of the counselee's life, and (6) a church which is growing by selfless service both spiritually and numerically. To achieve these goals the route of promotion, training and supervision must be followed.

### **Route of Promotion, Training and Supervision**

The success of a lay counseling ministry in the church will depend on pastoral leadership and support, careful selection of counselors who will be dealing with special problems, effective training and development of programs for using trained counselors.

In the promotion of lay counseling, a pastor may inform the congregation of his plans to organize, train and supervise such a program. He could bring a series of messages on passages dealing with the responsibility of the members to edify one another. Biographical sermons on Bible characters who responded correctly and incorrectly to problems and circumstances would be helpful.

The pastor should endeavor to acquaint the members with the organizational structure. There would be three levels: (1) pastor or pastoral staff (level 1); (2) selected mature trained members which would include deacons and deaconesses (level 2) and (3) the members helping each other (level 3).

This is in contrast to Lawrence Crabb Jr's proposal with the top counseling level (3 instead of 1) being filled by a person trained in "psychological functioning" instead of a Bible-trained pastor (level 1) ("Moving the Couch" Crabb, 1978, p 19). His three levels are: encouragement (level 1) for problem feelings; exhortation (level 2) for problem behaviors; and enlightenment (level 3) for problem thinking. These levels are arbitrary because all counselors should encourage, exhort and enlighten the person whom they are helping.

To further promote lay counseling, the pastor may post the names of those special counselors (level 2) on the church bulletin board or in the church bulletin. When members need assistance with their counseling, they may see these people (level 2) or the pastor (level 1) for aid or may refer certain counselees to them.

In addition, a survey card could be passed out in the church services for several weeks to see who is interested in general training (level 3) or special training (level 2) and what resources are available in abilities and materials such as the use of homes, cars, and possessions. Howard Eyrich suggests the categories of discipleship, foster home and depression recycling with divisions under them ("Preparing" 1979, pp 26-27).

The training of the members for general counseling (level 3) could be done on Sunday evenings an hour before the service for the length of one year or it could be done for three hours for a third of a year on some evening during the week. Once it was completed for the first time, it could be offered every six months for new members and it could be taught by a trained specialized lay person who had completed the course and advanced training (level 2). Materials written by biblical counselors such as Adams, Mack, Eyrich and Bettler could be used.

Certain mature members would be selected for specialized training for counseling problems of greater complexity (level 2). The selection might be determined by the volunteer's adherence to the church's doctrinal positions, by his or her personal Christian experience and by an interview to determine maturity, stability, motivation, abilities, gifts, and compassion. These people would not only have the general instruction which was given to the others (level 3), but they would be given specific training on more difficult counseling problems (level 2). This could be given to them in a special class during the Sunday school hour or some evening during the week. The length of the training could parallel that of the general instruction (level 3).

Some of the areas of training could include marital counseling, vocational counseling, financial counseling, stress, anxiety, teenage problems, alcoholism, self-image problems and others. There would be a need for post-training regularly because of new problems. After the initial training, these specialized counselors (level 2) could meet once a month for assistance and instruction. The pastor should work closely with this group or have a staff member or lay leader supervise this ministry. The pastor should know what is going on in the specialized counseling (level 2) since he is the overseer (level 1).

The methods used in the training of both levels (2 and 3) could include lectures, role-playing, cassettes, discussion, Bible study, assigned reading, video tapes, films and retreats.

Obstacles in these training programs are time, lay motivation, lack of good training materials, leader's lack of training skill and frequent leadership turnover (Muck, 1982, p 44). Once specialized counselors (level 2) have been trained, some of them could be used as leaders to teach counseling topics to women's Bible studies, to the junior-senior youth, to new members who desire to learn to counsel, to others desiring specialized training, to new converts with problems and to the caring members who serve the elderly.

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Counseling in the local church is a ministry of the entire membership under the leadership of the pastor. The purpose of this study was to set forth the reasons for counseling at all levels of need in the local church and to show how this could be done in spite of the dangers. The type of church in view was one which follows congregation polity. The range and goals of such a ministry were discussed as well as the route of promotion, training and supervision. Stress was placed on the responsibility of the pastor as the shepherd of the flock to promote, serve in and supervise the counseling ministry of the church. In addition, guidance was given to assist the lay people to see the limitation of their ministry as compared to the pastor's ministry to "watch for" their souls. For all who need divine wisdom in this task, God promises "it shall be given him" (James 1:5).

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