

The Pastor and Pastoral Counseling

The Purpose of this Seminar: To offer a tool for pastors and pastoral teams to develop flexible strategy for pastoral counseling both in the pastor's office and with the church overall.

The Issue: The task of pastoral counseling falls to every pastor in some way as an essential part of our care for the flock of God.¹ It can be a source of great joy for a pastor, but also a source of confusion and discouragement.

- Pastoral Counseling is messy. We engage with people in the messiness of their sanctification, which becomes part of the messiness of our sanctification. Pastoral counseling is typically responsive counseling - situations rarely fit our schedules or priorities.
- Pastoral Counseling is hard: There are no 'typical' counseling situations that we can replicate. Pastoral counseling doesn't easily systematize. Even the most experienced pastor spends a great deal of his time in counseling wondering what he should do and say next – feeling like a 'stone speaking to stones'.²
- Pastoral Counseling is confusing. How a pastor does counseling is not easily quantified. We are not engaged in counseling cases; we're engaged with folks in a 'full life' way. They are our friends and fellow servants. We're building our lives together. The people we meet with in our office may be dropping their kids off at our house for a party later that day. The world of counseling literature by and large doesn't address the pastor among his people.

The Pastoral Counseling Map: In order to provide a workable, biblically guided pastoral counseling model, the idea of a flexible map is proposed. This Strategy focuses on six markers that should be considered in any pastoral counseling process. These markers give us a general sense of direction as to how we can set a path of progress for counseling. These are markers, not goals. We don't have to complete one to start the others, but if there are problems with one it will limit our progress with the others.

The following notes provide detail to the Pastoral Counseling Map distributed with this outline.

¹ See, for example, 1 Pet.5:1-4; 1 Thess. 5:11-15; Acts 20:28.

² Charles Bridges in *The Christian Ministry* notes how Henry Martyn used to struggle the pastoral work of ministry, and felt like a 'stone speaking to stones'. (359)

Marker 1: Having a Common Purpose

A commitment to Pastoral Counseling should only occur after the pastor has established some relational confidence basis with the counselee(s) and gained a reasonable grasp of the presenting problem(s).³

Charles Bridges: "The Pastoral work is the personal application of the pulpit Ministry to the proper individualities of our people – looking upon them severally, as having a distinct and separate claim upon our attention, cares and anxiety; urging each of them, as far as possible, to the concerns of eternity; and commending to their hearts a suitable exhibition and offer of salvation. For this purpose we must acquaint ourselves with their situation, habits, character, state of heart, peculiar wants and difficulties, that we may 'give to each of them a portion in due season.'"⁴

A. Establishing a Relationship

1. What is the existing pastoral relationship?
 - Church member, visitor, no previous interaction with the church.
 - Personal relationship or previous pastoral history doesn't necessarily establish the basis for present pastoral counseling. A pastor needs to determine what role he is to play or actions he is to take in each situation as it arises.
2. What is the person(s) understanding of pastoral care?
 - Is the person coming with a therapeutic understanding of counseling? What is a pastor in their mind?
 - What is your pastoral theology? How can you articulate it to someone in a way that will allow you to graciously lead the counseling process, and not be led by the felt needs or desires of the person you are counseling?

B. Understanding the Issues

In professional counseling there is often a great deal of time spent getting to know a person and the issues they are dealing with in the context of their life story. Often it isn't practical for pastors to spend significant sessions listening to a person's story. Fortunately, pastor who knows his flock brings into the counseling meeting a great deal of

³ Here and in subsequent discussion the assumption is that we are not dealing with situations where the pastor's authority for the sake of directive church discipline is being exercised.

⁴ Charles Bridges, The Christian Ministry, 344

knowledge about a person in their world. However, it isn't sufficient to operate in confidence on that knowledge. For meaningful counseling to occur a pastor needs to 'know' the person in a way that the person recognizes that they are being understood in their present situation, not just being diagnosed.

1. Circumstances - What are the presenting problems as understood by the person in light of their larger life experience?
2. Emotional State – How does their presenting emotional state compare to how you know them in the overall fabric of their life?
3. Habits and Strategies – How is the person presently dealing with the situation? What are their coping strategies? What in their life seems to be helpful in the situation, and what seems to be unproductive?
4. Relationships – Who do they know and who knows them?
 - Seeing a counselor: If someone is also seeing a professional counselor, how do you relate to that?
5. Physical Issues – Are there physical issues contributing to, or arising out of the situation? Is the person on any medication that might be a contributor?
 - Psychotropic medications: What is your perspective on medications used for psychologically diagnosed conditions?

C. Establishing Biblical Perspective

The Word of God is the truth upon which all understanding, change, and wisdom are founded.

1. What is the function of the preached/taught word in the person(s) life?
 - Is their doctrine/functional theology being shaped by the preaching of the church, or by something else?
 - What is the status of their spiritual disciplines?
2. Biblically Identifying with Suffering
 - To engage in counseling is to enter into suffering. Perhaps it is self-imposed; perhaps it is not. But if we cannot engage with someone so that they know we are loving them in suffering we will counsel problems, not people with problems.
3. Biblical Self-examination

- Most pastors see counseling as an essential task of ministry with occasional joy, but they didn't get into the ministry to counsel. So counseling is often felt to be an interruption in what we are desiring to do in ministry. We must shepherd our own hearts in order to be able to shepherd the hearts of others.
- What types of people or situations are most likely to be temptations to sin for you?

4. Offer Biblical Counsel and Encouragement

- By offering an initial biblical perspective we can help people think differently about their situation and begin to assess whether the scriptures have functional authority in their lives.
- By offering biblical encouragement we can instill confidence and hope, while establishing the trajectory for our counseling priorities.

➔ **Don't Take Short-cuts:** *The pastor needs to be careful not to presume upon previous history or assumed pastoral role in establishing the purpose of pastoral counseling. If there is a lack of clarity on the purpose of pastoral counseling eventually there will be confusion in the direction of pastoral counseling.*

Marker 2: Getting Rooted in the Gospel

The pastor is in the interesting position of having only one thing to offer, but it is not usually what people want. All we ultimately have to offer in pastoral counseling is hope in the transforming power of the Gospel. There will simply be no meaningful help in a pastoral counseling situation if the person(s) grasp on the Gospel is tenuous or deficient, or if what they are looking for from us is not consistent with what we can offer.

Jerry Bridges: *"The reality of present-day Christendom is that most professing Christians actually know very little of the gospel, let alone understand its implications for their day-to-day lives. My perception is that most of them know just enough gospel to get inside the door of the kingdom. They know nothing of the unsearchable riches of Christ."*⁵

- A. Testimony - Can the person articulate a confident testimony of their conversion? Where does conversion fit in their life story? What is 'post-conversion' life like for them?

⁵ Jerry Bridges, The Gospel for Real Life, 15

- A good homework exercise might be to have them write out their testimony including how the Lord is at work in their present circumstances.
- B. Gospel Clarity – What is the person's grasp on the truth of the Gospel? Where do they turn for help in time of need?**
- Do we have readily accessible resources to help people in situationally-appropriate ways ponder the Gospel and its implications?
- **Sanctification or Evangelism?** *In trials the Gospel is always under attack. It would not be uncommon for the struggles a person is experiencing to be so life absorbing as to make it difficult to discern whether they a converted believer or not, even if they have been in the church for years. If this is a question, it becomes in the pastor's mind the primary issue, even if you continue to interact over the presenting issue.*
- **Do you want what I have to offer?** *OUR confidence in the Gospel is tested in counseling as well. When people don't want what the Gospel holds out for them, are we attempted we abandon it in favor of practical advice or moral persuasion? Does our application of church discipline orient around a person's rejection of our counsel or their moral behavior more than rejection of Gospel obedience?*

Marker 3: Building in Community

Perhaps THE distinguishing characteristic of pastoral counseling as compared to biblical counseling in a formal or professional setting is that pastoral counseling is embedded in the context of the church. While true biblical counseling rightly advocates participation in the community of the church, pastoral counseling presumes it. The truth is, if there are change strategies we can offer that don't require participation in the fellowship and ministry of the church to apply, then they aren't the stuff of pastoral counseling. Good pastoral counseling only makes sense if it presumes meaningful participation in a local church.

A. How well are people connected to the church and known in the church?

- Are they actively participating in the existing care and community contexts of the church? If not, why not? Should participation be a pre-requisite for pastoral counseling, or at least a minimal condition for ongoing pastoral counseling?
- How do you relate to somebody who is coming to you, but not necessarily coming to the church?

B. Who else besides the pastor is positioned to speak into the person's life?

- A pastor must be careful that he doesn't become the primary or exclusive voice in a person's life. That is not sustainable care. Much of pastoral ministry is in helping a person recognize and properly access the varied means of grace available to them as a member of the body of Christ.

⇒ Consider a policy of only meeting with someone on a recurring basis if there is at least one other friend involved in the counseling process.

Marker 4: Discerning Wisdom and Foolishness

*Graeme Goldsworthy: Proverbial wisdom calls us to a decision to stand either with the wise man or the fool; to see all of life in the light of God's revelation of himself or to persist in the folly of making ourselves the centre of the universe.*⁶

Whatever counseling goals we have relative to a person's particular situation, we always have the overarching goal of helping people get wisdom (*Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*). This means we also need to help them see where foolishness may set into their thinking. The fool in his heart says there is no God. Often folks in trial live as functional atheists, professing trust in Christ, but living as if He is irrelevant or unjust. Pride and Unbelief are major themes throughout the Bible that lead God's people into disobedience and foolishness.

A. *Pride - Any confidence we have in ourselves is pride.*

- *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).*
- *John Newton: The gospel is calculated and designed to stain the pride of human glory.*⁷
- In raising the issue of pride we are laying the groundwork for potentially addressing life issues like legalism, self-righteousness and condemnation/self-pity.

B. *Unbelief: Any lack of trust in God is unbelief*

⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, 425-26.

⁷ John Newton, *The Voice of the Heart*, (dated 12/8/1775), 78

Hebrews 3:12 *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.*

Thomas Watson: *“Unbelief is worse than any other sin, because it brings God into suspicion with the creature. It robs him of the richest jewel in his crown, which is his truth: “He that believeth not God hath made him a liar” (1 John 5:10).”*⁸

- In raising the issue of unbelief we are laying the groundwork for biblically redefining issues like depression, anxiety, and bitterness.
- *It is helpful to draw pride and/or unbelief conceptually into the counseling process BEFORE they need to be specifically because folks are largely blind to them. To get them on the table as important biblical categories can help us confront them later.*
- *As pastors it is helpful us to not only have a solid systematic theology of pride and unbelief (which will help us identify them), but a solid biblical theology of each as well (which will help us confront them in a redemptive way)*

Marker 5: Pursuing Heart Transformation

We are worshippers by nature. Sin in the heart leads to false worship. God is at work sanctifying his people – conforming them to his image; returning them to true worship in wanting, thinking and doing. Therefore all our ministry must have as its primary aim to be used by God in his work of sanctification in peoples’ lives. Whatever we are dealing with in counseling is always part of this sanctification process.

*Paul Tripp and Tim Lane: Everyday we think about how life would be if things were different. We even evaluate our lives and attempt to make changes. We envision change. We try various strategies to bring about change, sometimes with a bit of short-term success. But our best intentions for change always fall short. Our desires for change are not wrong; they are just not deep enough. The Bible confronts us with a hard-to-accept reality: The change most needed in our lives isn’t change in our situations, circumstances, or relationships, but in ourselves—in our own hearts.*⁹

A. The Gravity of Sin: Pastoral counseling is biblical reinterpretation of a person’s life – it doesn’t mix with therapeutic enculturation. In order to

⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man’s Picture*, p. 225-226

⁹ Paul Tripp and Tim Lane, “How Christ Changes Us By His Grace”, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Spring 2005, 16

help people we must direct people to sinful motives of the heart. Any counsel that leaves sin at the level of behavior and the heart in a comfortably passive state will close the door on Gospel hope. But we must not approach the issue of sin as if it is simply a counseling category. We must speak of sin with the care and gravity of one who recognizes that sin is the reason Jesus died. All true change is Gospel change – it is the grace of God overpowering the sin of man in the finished work of Christ.

J. C. Ryle: "Sin is a disease which pervades and runs through every part of our moral constitution and every faculty of our minds. The understanding, the affections, the reasoning powers, the will, are all more or less infected. Even the conscience is so blinded that it cannot be depended on as a sure guide, and is as likely to lead men wrong as right, unless it is enlightened by the Holy Ghost. In short, 'from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness' about us (Isa. 1:6). The disease may be veiled under a thin covering of courtesy, politeness, good manners and outward decorum, but it lies deep down in the constitution."¹⁰

CJ Mahaney: In order to proclaim grace one must proclaim sin. It doesn't take much skill to expose sin – it takes great skill to unveil grace. The doctrine of sin is not ultimately to convict of sin but to convince of the grace of God. (But) you cannot proclaim the doctrine of grace without proclaiming sin. The message we have been given is grace! How do we avoid misusing the doctrine of sin? Never lose sight of Calvary and what happened there.¹¹

- B. The Necessity of Truth:** To help people we must accept the language they use to describe their condition, but be skilled at helping them reinterpret their experience through clear biblical lenses. Biblical terms (idolatry, doctrine of sin, apply the Gospel, sanctification, etc) unconnected to people's experience are abstract concepts with little grip or functional weight in our counsel. We need to be able to speak persuasively to the false worship of the heart in ways that the person listening to us will understand the call of to obedience, not simply self knowledge.

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

David Powlison: The Bible is an MRI that reveals the inner workings of our lives. But to use that MRI for self-understanding apart from application results in an endless and ultimately pointless idol hunt... If we leave people with the idea that they can't move without understanding why they do what they do, they will never get beyond introspection to application....

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, Holiness, pg. 3

¹¹ C J Mahaney, "Trinitarian Pastoral Ministry", Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference, 2007

Why does a human heart become so morbidly fascinated with itself? The thorn bush tends to stun us and captivate our attention. The barren tree¹² is in fact the least important tree, but it has the important role of pointing us to the other trees. It is meant to create a revolutionary self-understanding. Inward turning is a driving propensity of the heart. The question of whether the looking bears good fruit is answered by whether or not the looking is occurring in light of the cross.¹³

- C. The Sufficiency of Grace:** Counseling success is not in identifying idols, but in helping people see afresh their need for Christ and his overwhelming provision for them in the Gospel, and to then actively love and obey the God who has made that provision.

Ed Welch: Maybe the question is not ‘what is the idol at work in this person’, but ‘what is the word of Christ to this person right now?’¹⁴

Marker 6: Doing Biblical Change (Repentance and Faith)

Ephesians 4:20-24 *But that is not the way you learned Christ!-²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “There is nothing so uncomfortable as clear-cut Biblical truths that demand decisions.”¹⁵

- A.** Putting off the Old Nature – We want to help people with practical strategies to turn away from sinful behaviors, habits, and thinking.
- Confession of sin is always an appropriate step in turning from the old nature.
- B.** Putting on the New Nature – We want to help people take simple steps of obedience in ways that are consistent with what they are called to be in Christ.

¹² The tree analogy is in reference to ‘the three trees’, a counseling and discipleship tool developed by the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation. For a full exposure to this ministry model, see [How People Change](#), but Paul Tripp and Tim Lane.

¹³ David Powlison, “The Idol Hunt and Simple Obedience”, from the 1997 Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference

¹⁴ Ed Welch – Instruction in ‘Counseling Observation’, WTS, Winter 2009

¹⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, [Spiritual Depression](#), 44

Paul Tripp: "The only proper response to the comfort of the Gospel is to accept its call and follow Christ in obedience."¹⁶

- C. Renewing the Mind – We want to help people identify what influences have a dissipating effect on their thinking and feeling and begin to bring to truth to bear on those influences.

- This is where spiritual disciplines can be a very effective tool.

➤ Pastoral Considerations in Doing Biblical Change

The Warrant to Call for Obedience: We can be encouraging biblical change from the warrant of the Scriptures to any believer at any time in the counseling process. But what we anticipate and look forward to is obedience from the heart (2 Tim. 2:22; 1 Peter 1:22), that comes as the Spirit of God acts on the heart with conviction and faith.

The Warrant to Interdict: There are times where the expression of a particular sin requires authoritative intervention for the safety of the individual or others, but this should still be done with a redemptive toward eventual heart change. (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:4-11)

The Warrant of the Word: The best change comes when some bit of clearly understood biblical truth is applied in a faithful and practical way (Powlison). Sometimes this may not be in the area of the presenting problem. It is the prerogative of God to determine what he is doing in sanctification. And it is the power of grace that it is always stronger than sin. Accountability is most effective at this level of counsel, where there is motivation and plan already in place.

Closing

As Pastor/counselors, we are ministers of the word. We are not able to change anyone by what we say, but we have a significant part to play in how God's people change through what we say.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: As we travel through this journey of life we are to help men and women by a word, a word of encouragement, a word of cheer, perhaps a word of rebuke, but a word that will remind them that they are under God, and that if they are in Christ they are precious to Him.¹⁷

¹⁶ Paul David Tripp, Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand, 217

¹⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Darkness and Light, 263