

Chapter Three

Preview of the Process

Perhaps you have sensed the possibility that you may have already been involved in a sort of counseling ministry without being aware of it. You probably don't think of yourself as a *counselor*, and yet there may have been times in your life as a Christian when someone has talked about his problems or struggles with you, and you perhaps thought of a verse of Scripture that could throw some light on the situation. Or maybe you simply listened and empathized with him, feeling helpless but wanting to help. Perhaps all you could do was to encourage the person in his faith, reassuring him that God is to be trusted. If you've been in this sort of situation, you have the idea. The desire to counsel is there, within you, but you may not know how to go about it. Before we go any farther, I'd like to whet your appetite with a simple outline of the process of effective counseling.

First, let's observe that there are at least two types of counseling we may encounter as Christians:

- 1) The informal kind, growing out of an established, ongoing relationship.
- 2) The more formalized situation where we are counseling someone whom we may not know at all but who has come to us for help.

Many of this second type grow out of our teaching or leadership ministries, such as teaching a Bible class or acting as discussion leader or advisor to any of the various groups in

A Simple Procedure

We need to approach a counseling ministry with some basic principles in mind. Here are my suggestions:

- 1) Listen--with compassion. Help them be at ease. Identify with them.
- 2) Ask God for wisdom to discern the *real* problem.
- 3) Highlight the net results of the alternative courses of action on a factual, non-judgmental basis.
- 4) Apply Christ's "Formula for Freedom" (John 8:31-32).
- 5) Help them discover the Lord's alternative to failure.
- 6) Don't tell them what to do; leave the decision squarely on them as to which way they choose.
- 7) Remind them they will live with the results.
- 8) Pray with them and *for* them.

First--Listen!

The counselor's first assignment is to be a good listener. This means that the first twenty to forty minutes of an interview will usually be listening--with an occasional leading question or a gentle nudge to get them back on

the main track. We must consider our counselee the most important person in our program for the time we are together. No preoccupation factors are permissible! How do you like pouring your heart out to someone who isn't paying attention?

With Compassion

If you are mentally or emotionally "out to lunch," you are absolutely no good to your counselee! Compassion is "feeling with," and unless they sense our empathy, they might as well talk to a brick wall. That doesn't mean we are to say, "Oh, you poor thing! You've really been wronged." Sympathy of this kind is probably the last thing they need. They just need to know we care.

Help Them Be at Ease

It's very hard to unload our innermost feelings and problems to *anyone*, especially to one we may have never seen before. Our counselee doesn't know if this character in front of him is going to scold him, scathe him, or scald him. He usually has a well-developed guilt syndrome--so he fears the worst. What he really *hopes* for is to be loved and understood, at least--maybe even helped!

So, when our counselee first enters the scene, we should seek a way to help him relax. Usually he will say, "I don't know where to start." So we can take the pressure off by saying something like, "Well then, why don't you let me start? I'd like to tell you about me: I'm just here to help; I don't have any magical powers; I'm no psychologist; I'm just God's man (or God's woman); and if I can, I want to help you find out what he can do for you. And I've found out he can do plenty! He's the One to whom I look for help. Now, why don't you start by trying to state the problem, as you see it, in one sentence?"

Or perhaps you see them sitting on the edge of their chair and say, "You look all tensed up. Won't you sit back and relax?" Or you might offer them a cup of coffee, or compliment them on their clothes, or hair style, or whatever good feature you observe.

Identify with Them

Somehow, and as early as possible in the interview, you must let them know you share the same frail, fallible humanity. This is not hard if you look for an opportunity, because you *do* share a common, fractured human nature. Let them know it!

Ask God for Wisdom

As you listen--pray. For apart from your discernment of their *real* problem (which *may* or *may not* be the one they state) there is no way you can help. We don't want to end up just treating symptoms; we'd like to see God use us to cure the disease! Our genuine dependence on the Wonderful Counselor at this point is crucial.

Highlight Results of Alternative Courses

An objective appraisal of the results of their present course and a projected look at the changes the Lord's way would make can comprise a rather attractive package. This assumes you can present this on a totally redemptive, non-condemning basis. Counselees don't need or want a scolding. But they will usually welcome a constructive proposal which holds the promise of better days ahead.

Christ's Formula for Freedom

How simply and concisely our Lord put it: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). In 20th-century American language the Lord Jesus is giving us four simple points:

- 1) "Just keep doing what I'm telling you."

- 2) "Then you'll be learning what it's all about" (a disciple is a "learner").
- 3) "You will know the truth." (You won't be just drifting in a swamp of opinion, but you'll be anchored to reality.)
- 4) "The truth will set you free."

And freedom is what everybody's looking for! The word in our day is "liberation": women's liberation, gay liberation it's even a favorite word of the communists! But, to alter the lyrics of an old Negro spiritual, "Everyone who's talking about liberation ain't liberated." A telling example of this fact is the inscription we see in marble on many college and university campuses: You SHALE KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH SHAKE SET YOU FREE.

In that context, the idea is apparently that education is liberation. But this word about liberation is true only if we keep it in the biblical context. It is only our response to the Liberator himself, the Lord Jesus, that results in *true* liberation. Education literally means "to lead out." If our education relates to learning how Christ can "lead us out" of our problems and hurts, then education *can* result in liberation. This is the kind of education and liberation we need to employ as Christian counselors. Incidentally, freedom is *not* just "doing as I please" but rather, *being what God designed me to be*--an important distinction to make in our counseling.

Help Them Discover

There's an old rule of pedagogy that says, "Don't ever tell your students what they can discover for themselves." This is a good approach to counseling, as well. But help them discover what?

The Lord's Alternative to Failure

What counselees need is to find the way the Lord has made to handle their present dilemma. Incidentally, he always has a way; he is never stumped on a problem. That's nice to know.

Usually the ones seeking help are already sick of the way they've been handling things. So, quite often, their hearts are conditioned to respond if we can give them a reasonable alternative to their "status quo." (Status quo, in case you've forgotten, is Latin for "the mess we're in.")

Don't Tell Them What to Do

Giving advice is a trap counselors fall into rather easily. I have learned, the hard way, to avoid this temptation. Usually, when someone asks for my advice, I tell them, "It will be worth every penny you'll pay for it--zero."

But what do we mean by "giving advice"? It's like this. Someone tells you their situation and asks, "What do you think I ought to do?" This question is invalid on two counts: It is shifting the responsibility for decision off them and onto you; it ignores the right of Christ to exercise his Lordship in their life. And invariably, when we mistakenly tell people what we think they should do, it boomerangs. They come back later and tell us, "I did what you advised and it didn't work!" Then what do we say?

So, we don't give advice.

Leave the Decision Squarely on Them

Jesus is Lord, and our counselees should be taught to ask *him* what to do. We must be careful not to usurp our Lord's prerogative to be what he designs to be to every Christian-- our *Lord* Jesus Christ. As counselors, we *can* help them see what he has said in his Word, in specific commands, or promises, or in terms of broad operating principles. This is our place of ministry.

Remind Them They Will Live with Their Choice

If there is resistance to God's Word and will, we need to help people see the obvious fact: They are stuck with the status quo. If there is compliance, we have the joy of sharing in their new-found liberty and pointing out the bright prospect God has for them through his redemptive grace. Thus, we can encourage and help them to keep on trusting the Lord.

Pray with Them and for Them

This is many times the most profitable time we have with them. I've found it very heartening to have another Christian bear us up before the Lord in prayer. It does two things: It brings the Lord directly into the action on a very realistic basis; it places their dependence (and ours) squarely on the Lord's ability to handle the situation. But when you pray, make it a genuine placing of the real issues squarely before the Lord with no fancy phrases--just straight talk.

So much for our approach to a formal counseling interview. But these same principles apply to the informal counseling opportunities; the basic difference in procedure is the time element. With the "friendship" kind of situation we have the luxury of waiting for opportunities to speak, and moving at a more leisurely pace.

Now--The Hard Part

A Christian counselor *must be* a man or woman of the Word of God. We must know specific truth to apply or we cannot prescribe in accord with Christ's "Formula for Freedom." Generalities won't do; we soon find that out. If we splash some neat little Christian cliché on them like, "Just pray about it" or "Just turn it over to the Lord," we are offering them only frustration and defeat. So we must do our homework, being lifetime students of God's Word. Counseling is a one-on-one teaching ministry of *applying the truth to life* --so it demands a clear knowledge of the Word of God and how it applies to life's problems. It also demands *speaking the truth in love*. We cannot let our desire to be popular keep us from "leveling" with them about their problem. Sometimes the truth hurts, but it also *heals*. And if we believe our Lord in John 8:31-32, it's *the only way to* real freedom. We must be willing to risk friendship and popularity, if necessary, to help them. Otherwise we're not acting in love.

On the other hand, we can't just plaster Scripture verses on them like biblical Band-Aids in callused unconcern, without compassion.

In addition to what we have reviewed on *counseling procedures* and *knowledge* of the truth, we need a *basic philosophy* from which to operate. I'd like to propose that our biblical approach to counseling be something like this:

We believe that: ALL HUMAN PROBLEMS AND HURTS ARE SOMEHOW A CONSEQUENCE OF SIN. SO WE MUST APPROACH A COUNSELING MINISTRY WITH SOME UNDERSTANDING OF SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES--THEN APPLY THE REDEMPTIVE TRUTH OF GOD TO THE PROBLEM.

The beginning of that understanding necessary for a fruitful counseling ministry is only possible if we seek to understand the problem--and the problem is sin. So we need to grasp the psychology of sin, or *how sin affects our souls*. I think you'll be amazed at the change in your own understanding and attitude toward sin (and God) as you follow the action of the next chapters. Unless, you're afraid to look!

[Go to Chapter Four](#)
[Back to Table of Contents](#)