



Discipleship Counseling

Contents

Introduction	3
Approach to Discipleship Counseling at Summit Woods Baptist Church	4
The Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition	7
Affirmations and Denials	14
Appendix:	
Bibliography of Guiding Resources	26
“Strict Confidentiality?”	27

Introduction

The purpose of Summit Woods Baptist Church (SWBC) is to glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ. While the disciple-making process includes corporate elements such as preaching, singing, praying, fellowship, and evangelism, individual emphases exist also. Small group Bible studies and discussion groups as well as individuals meeting together for mutual accountability and growth are key tools in the realm of individual discipleship. We refer to such emphases as “General Discipleship.”

Counseling at SWBC is nothing more or less than another form of individual discipleship, yet applied to specific issues of a person’s life. Therefore, what we offer our members and those outside our church seeking help is discipleship in Jesus Christ; that is, applying the Bible to the details of an individual’s life. It is one arm of the discipleship sphere that must include other means of discipleship (corporate worship, fellowship in the body, biblical instruction, etc.) to be ultimately effective.

The following document provides material to help define what our church does and do not offer in what is typically referred to as counseling. Any counseling done at SWBC will reflect the principles contained in this document. We want to ensure that those who come to us for counseling understand what we seek to accomplish and what it is we offer.

The opening article in this document explains some of the specific issues often raised with local church counseling and how we seek, as a church, to apply the Bible to them. However, our definition of counseling and assumptions about what we offer in counseling are based on the articles that follow the description of our approach.

The “Counseling Confession” is reproduced from the Biblical Counseling Coalition. They reflect our convictions and provide a more than adequate standard by which we define and guide our counseling ministry.

David Powlison of the Christian Counseling & Education Foundation writes the “Affirmations and Denials” article. We heartily embrace his articulation as our convictions of the relevance of Scripture in the realm of counseling as well as our concerns with the modern psychological movement and the church’s stereotypical embrace of it.

We see the “Confession” and the “Affirmations and Denials” as foundational in describing our approach and expectations of counseling at SWBC.

The bibliography of guiding resources is obviously not an exhaustive resource, but merely a sample of a few books and ministries that we find foundational in describing our approach to biblical counseling in the local church.

As with any attempt to define an approach to ministry, this document is limited and inadequate in perhaps addressing some specific concerns or ideas about counseling. We offer it and use it as a guiding document in our quest for discipling people through our local church ministry.

Approach to Discipleship Counseling at Summit Woods Baptist Church

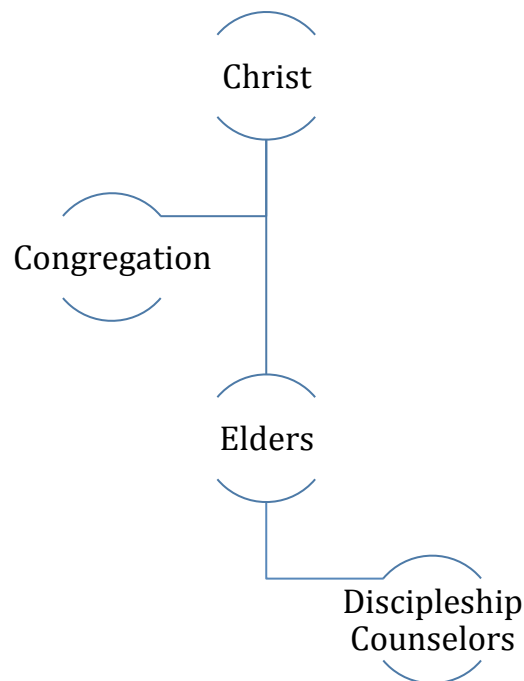
With counseling defined as applying the Scriptures to the details of life in the ongoing process of discipleship in Jesus Christ, the principles described below govern some of the details in our discipleship counseling ministry.

Hierarchy of Discipleship Counseling

Discipleship Counseling is fundamentally the work of every Christian with any other Christian within the Church. We are to be discipling one another in ongoing and practical ways.

At SWBC, we seek to equip everyone in the body to serve one another with the gospel and the Word of God. However, we also recognize that watching over and being accountable for the souls of the congregation is a particularly pastoral function as well (Hebrews 13:17). Therefore, the elders are tasked primarily with the oversight of those who will be publicly recognized as discipleship counselors.

The following is a brief illustration of the lines of authority and oversight for those who are recognized as discipleship counselors.



Gender and Discipleship Counseling

Counseling at SWBC is based in and governed by the authority of our local congregation in submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as expressed in the Bible. We affirm that both men and women are competent to counsel one another in applying Scripture to the details of life (Romans 15:14). Scripture even gives evidence to men and women assisting others in accurately applying biblical truth to life and ministry (Acts 18:24-26). Specifically, women are called upon to be instructors of truth to other women within the congregation (Titus 2:3-5); and men are equally tasked with instructing other men in the faithful application and propagation of biblical truth (2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 2:1-2, 6ff). SWBC will aim to develop both men and women who are called and capable in providing biblical counsel.

While anyone in the body of Christ can use the Scriptures to instruct others in applying God's word in general ways, SWBC, through the elders, will affirm some who show giftedness and providential biblical preparation to be recommended as officially sanctioned discipleship counselors. These counselors will be overseen by and accountable to the elders (or whomever they may designate to assist them with this).

Because discipleship counseling involves authoritative instruction from God's word and its patient application to life issues, we do not allow or advocate women taking the primary counseling role in the ongoing discipleship counseling of men. We base this on applying the truth of 1 Timothy 2:12-15, which forbids women from assuming officially church-sanctioned roles of authoritative teaching over men. For propriety and wisdom, SWBC does not permit ongoing discipleship counseling from a man to a woman who is not his wife, without the presence of another person.

Medication and Discipleship Counseling

Because of the nature of what we offer as a church (discipleship counseling), those who are recommended to provide such counseling through our church do not (will not) engage in advising those who come to us regarding the use or non-use of psychological medications. Our task is to provide biblical instruction to the practicalities of life. Discipleship counselors may recommend a person to receive medical tests that may demonstrate the need for medication, but our counselors provide no affirmation or denial, nor recommend the use of psychological medications. We do believe the Bible is sufficient to address the issues of life and the gospel enables a person to apply Scripture to life. We encourage individuals to follow the direction of a medical doctor where medical tests clearly dictate a medical need.

Confidentiality and Discipleship Counseling

SWBC seeks to provide biblically and legally appropriate confidentiality and security to those who come for discipleship counseling. Those coming for counsel must submit to an accountability to Christ through His church, as overseen by the elders of the congregation. The elders are ultimately tasked for giving an account of the souls of those under their oversight (Hebrews 13:17; 1

Thessalonians 5:12, 13). The state also mandates that certain people are obligated to report specific illegal acts to the appropriate authorities and, in regard to these acts, we gladly submit ourselves to the governing authorities God has established over us (Romans 13:1-5). Discipleship Counselors at SWBC will provide confidentiality to those they work with in as far as the situation does not warrant an appropriate approach to sinful activity as described in Scripture (Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 5:19-21; Titus 1:9; 3:9-11).

Because the elders are responsible to Christ and His church for the oversight of the souls of those in the congregation, discipleship counselors are affirmed as those who assist the elders in their task. Therefore, counselors at SWBC will discuss any relevant details the Elders deem necessary in the shepherding of their souls within the context of the church.

See the article "Strict Confidentiality" in the appendix for more explanation.

What We Do Not Offer in Discipleship Counseling

Simply put, we offer our congregation and our community discipleship in Jesus Christ through the Bible in the specifics of life. We do not offer professional psychological services. We are not a counseling service, we are a church that seeks to apply the Scriptures to every area of life.

The Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition

Preamble: Speaking the Truth in Love—A Vision for the Entire Church

We are a fellowship of Christians committed to promoting excellence and unity in biblical counseling. Our goal is to foster collaborative relationships and to provide robust, relevant biblical resources that equip the Body of Christ to change lives with Christ's changeless truth. We desire to advance the biblical counseling movement in Christ-centered cooperation by relating in ways that are loving and wise, pursuing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

We pursue this purpose by organizing our thinking around one central question. "What does it mean to counsel in the grace and truth of Christ?" All that we do flows from our calling to equip people to love God and others in Christ-centered ways (Matthew 22:35-40).

More than counseling, our vision is for the entire church to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:11-16). We are dedicated to developing the theology and practice of the personal ministry of the Word, whether described as biblical counseling, pastoral counseling, personal discipleship, one-another ministry, small group ministry, cure of souls, soul care, spiritual friendship, or spiritual direction. We seek to promote the strengthening of these ministries in churches, para-church organizations, and educational institutions by ministering to people who offer care, people who are seeking care, and people who train care-givers.

Introduction: In Christ Alone

The goal of biblical counseling is spiritual, relational, and personal maturity as evidenced in desires, thoughts, motives, actions, and emotions that increasingly reflect Jesus (Ephesians 4:17-5:2). We believe that such personal change must be centered on the person of Christ. We are convinced that personal ministry centered on Christ and anchored in Scripture offers the only lasting hope and loving help to a fallen and broken world.

We confess that we have not arrived. We comfort and counsel others only as we continue to receive ongoing comfort and counsel from Christ and the Body of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-11). We admit that we struggle to apply consistently all that we believe. We who counsel live in process, just like those we counsel, so we want to learn and grow in the wisdom and mercies of Christ.

All Christian ministry arises from and is anchored in God's revelation—which is both the written Word (Scripture) and the living Word (Christ). This is true for the personal ministry of the Word (conversational and relational ministry which our culture calls "counseling") and for the various public ministries of the Word. In light of this core conviction about Christ-centered, Word-based ministry, we affirm the following central commitments as biblical counselors.

Biblical Counseling Must Be Anchored in Scripture

We believe that God's Word is authoritative, sufficient, and relevant (Isaiah 55:11; Matthew 4:4; Hebrews 4:12-13). The inspired and inerrant Scriptures, rightly interpreted and carefully applied, offer us God's comprehensive wisdom. We learn to understand who God is, who we are, the problems we face, how people change, and God's provision for that change in the Gospel (John 8:31-32; 10:10; 17:17). No other source of knowledge thoroughly equips us to counsel in ways that transform the human heart (Psalm 19:7-14; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3). Other systems of counseling aim for other goals and assume a different dynamic of change. The wisdom given by God in His Word is distinctive and robust. He comprehensively addresses the sin and suffering of all people in all situations.

Wise counseling is an insightful application of God's all-embracing truth to our complex lives (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6; Philippians 1:9-11). It does not merely collect proof-texts from the Bible. Wise counseling requires ongoing practical theological labor in order to understand Scripture, people, and situations (2 Timothy 2:15). We must continually develop our personal character, case-wise understanding of people, and pastoral skills (Romans 15:14; Colossians 1:28-29).

When we say that Scripture is comprehensive in wisdom, we mean that the Bible makes sense of all things, not that it contains all the information people could ever know about all topics. God's common grace brings many good things to human life. However, common grace cannot save us from our struggles with sin or from the troubles that beset us. Common grace cannot sanctify or cure the soul of all that ails the human condition. We affirm that numerous sources (such as scientific research, organized observations about human behavior, those we counsel, reflection on our own life experience, literature, film, and history) can contribute to our knowledge of people, and many sources can contribute some relief for the troubles of life. However, none can constitute a comprehensive system of counseling principles and practices. When systems of thought and practice claim to prescribe a cure for the human condition, they compete with Christ (Colossians 2:1-15). Scripture alone teaches a perspective and way of looking at life by which we can think biblically about and critically evaluate information and actions from any source (Colossians 2:2-10; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Biblical Counseling Must Be Centered on Christ and the Gospel

We believe that wise counseling centers on Jesus Christ—His sinless life, death on the cross, burial, resurrection, present reign, and promised return. Through the Gospel, God reveals the depths of sin, the scope of suffering, and the breadth, length, height, and depth of grace. Wise counseling gets to the heart of personal and interpersonal problems by bringing to bear the truth, mercy, and power of Christ's grace (John 1:14). There is no true restoration of the soul and there are no truly God-honoring relationships without understanding the desperate condition we are in without Christ and apart from experiencing the joy of progressive deliverance from that condition through God's mercies.

We point people to a person, Jesus our Redeemer, and not to a program, theory, or experience. We place our trust in the transforming power of the Redeemer as the only hope to change people's hearts, not in any human system

of change. People need a personal and dynamic relationship with Jesus, not a system of self-salvation, self-management, or self-actualization (John 14:6). Wise counselors seek to lead struggling, hurting, sinning, and confused people to the hope, resources, strength, and life that are available only in Christ.

Biblical Counseling Must Be Grounded in Sound Theology

We believe that biblical counseling is fundamentally a practical theological discipline because every aspect of life is related to God. God intends that we care for one another in ways that relate human struggles to His person, purposes, promises, and will. Wise counseling arises from a theological way of looking at life—a mindset, a worldview—that informs how we understand people, problems, and solutions. The best biblical counselors are wise, balanced, caring, experienced practical theologians (Philippians 1:9-11).

Biblical counselors relate the Scriptures relevantly to people's lives (Hebrews 3:12-19). All wise counseling understands particular passages and a person's unique life experience within the context of the Bible's larger storyline: God's creation, our fall into sin, His redemptive plan, and the consummation of all things. Thus we engage in person-specific conversations that flow naturally out of a comprehensive biblical theology of life.

Biblical Counseling Must Be Dependent upon the Holy Spirit and Prayer

We believe that both genuine change of heart and transformation of lifestyle depend upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-16:16; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Biblical counselors know that it is impossible to speak wisely and lovingly to bring about true and lasting change apart from the decisive, compassionate, and convicting work of the Spirit in the counselor and the counselee. We acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the One who illuminates our understanding of the Word and empowers its application in everyday life.

Wise counselors serve in the truth that God reveals and by the strength that God supplies. By the Spirit's work, God receives glory in all the good that takes place in people's lives. Biblical counselors affirm the absolute necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the counselor, the counselee, and the counseling relationship. Dependent prayer is essential to the work of biblical counseling (Ephesians 6:18-20). Wise counselors humbly request God's intervention and direction, praise God for His work in people's lives, and intercede for people that they would experience genuine life change to the glory of God (Philippians 4:6).

Biblical Counseling Must Be Directed toward Sanctification

We believe that wise counseling should be transformative, change-oriented, and grounded in the doctrine of sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:16-18; Philippians 2:12-13). The lifelong change process begins at salvation (justification, regeneration, redemption, reconciliation) and continues until we see Jesus face-to-face (1 John 3:1-3). The aim of wise counseling is intentional and intensive discipleship. The fruit of wise counseling is spiritually mature people who increasingly reflect Christ (relationally, rationally, volitionally, and emotionally) by enjoying and exalting God and by loving others well and wisely (Galatians 5:22-6:10).

Wise counseling seeks to embrace the Bible's teaching regarding God's role and human responsibility in spiritual growth. God's strength and mercy call for our response of faith and obedience. A comprehensive theology of the spiritual life provides the basis for applying relevant biblical methods of spiritual growth. Biblical counseling helps believers to understand what it means to be in Christ (Romans 6:3-14). It equips them to apply the principles of progressive sanctification through renewing their minds and actions based on Scripture with a motive of love for God and others (Romans 12:1-2).

Biblical Counseling Must Be Rooted in the Life of the Church

We believe that we best reflect the Trinity as we live and grow in community (John 17; Ephesians 4). Sanctification is not a self-improvement project, but a process of learning to love and serve God and others. Wise counseling embeds personal change within God's community—the church—with all God's rich resources of corporate and interpersonal means of grace (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). We believe that the church should be both the center and the sender of Gospel-centered counseling (Romans 15:14).

By example and exhortation the New Testament commends the personal, face-to-face, one-another ministry of the Word—whether in one-to-one or small group relationships (Hebrews 3:12-19; 10:19-25). God calls the church to mutual wise counseling just as He calls the church to public ministries of the Word in preaching, teaching, worship, and observing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. God desires His people to love and serve each other by speaking His truth in love to one another (Ephesians 4:15-16). The primary and fullest expression of counseling ministry is meant to occur in local church communities where pastors effectively shepherd souls while equipping and overseeing diverse forms of every-member ministry (Ephesians 4:11-14). Other likeminded counseling institutions and organizations are beneficial insofar as they serve alongside the church, encourage Christians to counsel biblically, and purpose to impact the world for Christ.

Biblical Counseling Must Be Founded in Love

We believe that Christ's incarnation is not just the basis for care, but also the model for how we care (Hebrews 4:14-16; John 13:34-35). We seek to enter into a person's story, listening well, expressing thoughtful love, and engaging the person with compassion (1 Thessalonians 2:8). The wise and loving personal ministry of the Word takes many appropriate forms, from caring comfort to loving rebuke, from careful listening to relevant scriptural exploration, all while building trusting, authentic relationships (1 Thessalonians 5:14-15; 1 John 4:7-21).

Wise counseling takes into account all that people experience (desires, thoughts, goals, actions, words, emotions, struggles, situational pressure, physical suffering, abuse, injustice, etc.) All of human experience is the context for understanding how God's Word relates to life. Such awareness not only shapes the content of counseling, but also shapes the way counselors interact so that everything said is constructive, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to the hearer (Ephesians 4:29).

Biblical Counseling Must Be Attentive to Heart Issues

We believe that human behavior is tied to thoughts, intentions, and affections of the heart. All our actions arise from hearts that are worshipping either God or something else, therefore we emphasize the importance of the heart and address the inner person. God fully understands and rightly weighs who we are, what we do, and why we do it. While we cannot completely understand a person's heart (even our own), God's Word reveals and penetrates the heart's core beliefs and intentions (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Wise counseling seeks to address both the inward and outward aspects of human life to bring thorough and lasting change into the image of Christ. The Bible is clear that human behavior is not mechanical, but grows out of a heart that desires, longs, thinks, chooses, and feels in ways that are oriented either toward or against Christ. Wise counsel appropriately focuses on the vertical and the horizontal dimensions, on the inner and the outer person, on observable behavior and underlying issues of the heart (Matthew 23:23-28). Biblical counselors work to help struggling people to learn wisdom; to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength; to love one's neighbor as oneself; and to endure suffering in hope.

Biblical Counseling Must Be Comprehensive in Understanding

We believe that biblical counseling should focus on the full range of human nature created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28). A comprehensive biblical understanding sees human beings as relational (spiritual and social), rational, volitional, emotional, and physical. Wise counseling takes the whole person seriously in his or her whole life context. It helps people to embrace all of life face-to-face with Christ so they become more like Christ in their relationships, thoughts, motivations, behaviors, and emotions.

We recognize the complexity of the relationship between the body and soul (Genesis 2:7). Because of this, we seek to remain sensitive to physical factors and organic issues that affect people's lives. In our desire to help people comprehensively, we seek to apply God's Word to people's lives amid bodily strengths and weaknesses. We encourage a thorough assessment and sound treatment for any suspected physical problems.

We recognize the complexity of the connection between people and their social environment. Thus we seek to remain sensitive to the impact of suffering and of the great variety of significant social-cultural factors (1 Peter 3:8-22). In our desire to help people comprehensively, we seek to apply God's Word to people's lives amid both positive and negative social experiences. We encourage people to seek appropriate practical aid when their problems have a component that involves education, work life, finances, legal matters, criminality (either as a victim or a perpetrator), and other social matters.

Biblical Counseling Must Be Thorough in Care

We believe that God's Word is profitable for dealing thoroughly with the evils we suffer as well as with the sins we commit. Since struggling people usually experience some combination of besetting sin and personal suffering, wise counselors seek to discern the differences and connections between sin and

suffering, and to minister appropriately to both (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Biblical counseling addresses suffering and engages sufferers in many compassionate ways. It offers God's encouragement, comfort, and hope for the hurting (Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 1:3-8). It encourages mercy ministry (Acts 6:1-7) and seeks to promote justice. Biblical counseling addresses sin and engages sinners in numerous caring ways. It offers God's confrontation of sins, encourages repentance of sins, presents God's gracious forgiveness in Christ, and shares God's powerful path for progressive victory over sin (1 John 1:8-2:2; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Colossians 3:1-17; 2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Biblical Counseling Must Be Practical and Relevant

We believe that a commitment to the sufficiency of God's Word results in counseling that demonstrates the relevancy of God's Word. Biblical counseling offers a practical approach to daily life that is uniquely effective in the real world where people live and relate (1 John 3:11-24). By instruction and example, the Bible teaches foundational methodological principles for wise interaction and intervention (Acts 20:26-37; Galatians 6:1-5; Colossians 1:24-2:1).

Within the Bible's overall guidelines for the personal ministry of the Word, there is room for a variety of practical methods of change, all anchored in applying scriptural truth to people's lives and relationships. The Bible calls us to use wise methods that minister in Christ-centered ways to the unique life situations of specific people (Proverbs 15:23; 25:11). We are to speak what is helpful for building others up according to the need of the moment, that it may benefit those who listen (Ephesians 4:29).

Biblical Counseling Must Be Oriented toward Outreach

We believe that Christianity is missionary-minded by its very nature. Biblical counseling should be a powerful evangelistic and apologetic force in our world. We want to bring the good news of Jesus and His Word to the world that only God can redeem. We seek to speak in relevant ways to Christians and non-Christians, to draw them to the Savior and the distinctive wisdom that comes only from His Word (Titus 2:10-15).

We want to present the claims, mercies, hope, and relevance of Christ in a positive, loving, Christ-like spirit (1 Peter 3:15). We seek to engage the broad spectrum of counseling models and approaches. We want to affirm what is biblical and wise. Where we believe models and methods fall short of Christ's call, we want to critique clearly and charitably. When interacting with people with whom we differ, we want to communicate in ways that are respectful, firm, gracious, fair-minded, and clear. When we perceive error, we want to humbly point people forward toward the way of truth so that we all become truer, wiser, more loving counselors. We want to listen well to those who disagree with us, and learn from their critiques. Our mission to spread the truth and fame of Jesus Christ includes a desire that all counselors appreciate and embrace the beauty of a Christ-centered and Word-based approach to people, problems, and solutions.

Conclusion: Unity in Truth and Love

We are committed to generating a unified effort among God's people to glorify Christ and multiply disciples through the personal ministry of the Word (Matthew 28:18-20). We trust in Jesus Christ in whom grace and truth are perfectly joined (John 1:14). We cling to His Word, in which truth and love live in perfect union (Ephesians 4:15; Philippians 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:8). We love His Church—living and speaking the truth in love, growing up in Him who is the Head, and building itself up in love as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15-16). We desire to encourage this unity in truth and love through a fresh vision for biblical counseling. When people ask, "What makes biblical counseling truly biblical?" we unite to affirm:

Biblical counseling occurs whenever and wherever God's people engage in conversations that are anchored in Scripture, centered on Christ and the Gospel, grounded in sound theology, dependent upon the Holy Spirit and prayer, directed toward sanctification, rooted in the life of the church, founded in love, attentive to heart issues, comprehensive in understanding, thorough in care, practical and relevant, and oriented toward outreach.

We invite you to join us on this journey of promoting excellence and unity in biblical counseling. Join us as we seek to equip one another to promote personal change, centered on the person of Christ through the personal ministry of the Word.

Affirmations & Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling

David Powlison

Some 1500 years ago, the warrior-chief of a primitive, Germanic tribe bluntly questioned a visiting missionary, “Why should I believe in this Jesus that you tell me about?” The man of God answered, “Because in Jesus Christ you will find wonder upon wonder—and all true.”

That same Counselor is full of fresh wonders today. How do any of us come to serve Him well? How do all of us come to serve Him well? We must know some things.

We must know the gravity of our condition as human beings. We tend to defect. We are false lovers. We are traitors—compulsively, blindly. We want the wrong things. We are doomed. We need rescue from ourselves and what we bring upon ourselves. This isn’t a general problem, a theoretical problem, the other person’s problem. It’s my specific problem, and yours, and the other person’s, too: “There is an evil in all that is done under the sun, in that there is one fate for all. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts while they live, and then they die” (Eccl. 9:3).

We must know the sheer glory and goodness of what our Father has given us in Jesus Christ. To know Jesus in truth and love is to find the one thing worth finding, the one lasting happiness, the purpose of life: “He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Rev. 21:3-5).

We must know the stunning wisdom of the Word of God. God speaks profoundly and comprehensively to the concrete conditions of every person’s life. He speaks with intent and power to change us: “The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether....Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer” (Ps. 19:7- 9, 14).

We must know our calling as children of such a Father. Jesus announces His kingdom with the words, “Repent.” That means, “Change.” His grace and truth gets about the business of changing us. We are called to realize the new creation onto the stage of history, into the details of our lives. We are called to change, and to change the world. We run a race of repentance and renewal. Jesus intends to teach us how to live as “disciples” (changers, learners, students), so that we become His instruments of change in the lives of others. The Counselor full of wonders makes *Christianoi*, “Christ-people,” apprentice

counselors also full of wonders: “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

We must know that God’s way is qualitatively different from everything else available in the bazaar of options, of other counsels, other schemas, other practices, other systems. The only sanity and wakefulness is to know Him-who-is. Anything else perpetuates our insanity, our sleepwalk: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

We must know these things, live them, minister this Christ to others.

Attempts to define Christian faith and practice more accurately and helpfully always arise in a context of controversy. These affirmations and denials are no exception. They are about “counseling.” But a mental health system that knows no Christ dominates the counseling landscape and shapes the mind and practices of the culture. Even the “Christian” counseling field has largely taken its cues from the secular psychologies, as if Scripture did not really have much to say beyond religiosity and morality. But as we look more closely at life, as we learn to look with God’s eyes, as we come to know ourselves truly, it becomes clearer and clearer that Scripture is about counseling: diagnostic categories, causal explanations of behavior and emotion, interpretation of external sufferings and influences, definitions of tangible and workable solutions, character of the counselor, goals for the counseling process, configuring the professional structures for doing counseling, critique of competing models. These are all matters to which God speaks directly, specifically, and frequently. He calls us to listen attentively, to think hard and well, and to engage in a worthy labor to develop our practical theology of face-to-face, conversational ministry. These affirmations and denials attempt to state what our Lord sees, says, and does.

Section I treats the sufficiency of Scripture. Unless God lies, we have the goods for developing systematic biblical counseling, just as we have the goods for preaching, teaching, worship, mercy, and missions. In order to counsel others well, we need a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the human condition: Section II. We must bring to bear effective solutions, equally penetrating and comprehensive, the Redeemer who engages the variety of persons and problems appropriately: Sections III and IV. We must embody counseling in social structures: Section V. We must have a stand- point from which to interact with other systems of counseling: Sections VI and VII. Scripture intends to teach us how to know and do these things, that we might cure and care for souls the way Jesus Christ does.

I. True knowledge about people and counseling practice

We affirm that the Bible is God’s self-revelation in relation to His creatures, and, as such, truly explains people and situations.

We deny that any other source of knowledge is authoritative for explaining people and situations.

We affirm that the Bible, as the revelation of Jesus Christ’s redemptive activity,

intends to specifically guide and inform counseling ministry.

We deny that any other source of knowledge is authoritative to equip us for the task of counseling people.

We affirm that wise counseling requires ongoing practical theological labor in order to understand Scripture, people, and situations. We must continually develop our personal character, case-wise understanding of persons, pastoral skills, and institutional structures.

We deny that the Bible intends to serve as an encyclopedia of proof texts containing all facts about people and the diversity of problems in living.

We affirm that the ideas, goals, and practices of counseling must cohere explicitly with the historic creeds, confessions, hymns, and other wise writings that express the faith and practice of the church of Jesus Christ.

We deny that the wisdom of the past sufficiently defines the issues of counseling ministry for today, as if the requisite wisdom were simply a matter of recovering past achievements.

We affirm that the Scripture defines and speaks to the gamut of problems in living for all people in all situations.

II. The givens of the human condition and the scope of biblical truth

We affirm that human beings are created fundamentally dependent on and responsible to God. People can only be understood when these realities control the counselor's gaze.

We deny that any form of autonomy severs people from dependency on God. We deny that any form of determinism neuters moral accountability to God.

We affirm that the ideal for human functioning is faith working through love. Such love for God and neighbor is the standard against which to specifically understand what is wrong with people. It is the goal to which counseling must specifically aspire.

We deny that any other standard or goal is true. We affirm that evil, done by us and happening to us, is the fundamental and pervasive problem in living. Our own sin, in all its facets and dimensions, is primary and self-generating. The circumstances that happen to us provide both provocative context ("trials and temptations") and just consequences ("reap what you sow") for our moral response, but do not determine the quality of our moral response. We deny that any other diagnostic system is valid, universal, or penetrating. We deny that nature and/or nurture determine the quality of our moral response.

We affirm that the Scripture defines and speaks to the gamut of problems in living for all people in all situations.

We deny that biblical truth is limited to a narrow sphere of "religious" or "spiritual" beliefs, activities, persons, emotions, and institutions, separated from

the other spheres of daily life.

We deny that any particular realm of human life can be sectored off as the unique province of the theories, practices, and professions of the modern psychologies.

III. The solution to the sin and misery of the human condition

We affirm that the Bible teaches, invites, warns, commands, sings, and tells the solution for what troubles humankind. In the good news of Jesus Christ, God acts personally. In word and deed, He redeems us from sin and misery through the various operations of His past, present, and future grace. God uses many means of grace, including the face-to-face conversations of wise counseling.

We deny that any other solution or therapy actually cures souls, and can change us from unholy to holy, from sinners to righteous, from insanity to sanity, from blindness to sightedness, from self-absorption to faith-working-through-love.

We affirm that God's providential common grace brings many goods to people, both as individual kindnesses and as social blessings: e.g., medical treatment, economic help, political justice, protection for the weak, educational opportunity. Wise counseling will participate in and encourage mercy ministries as part of the call to love.

We deny that such goods can cure the soul's evils. When they claim to cure the human condition, they are false and misleading, competing with Christ.

We deny that Christless counseling—whether psychotherapeutic, philosophical, quasi-religious, or overtly religious—is either true or good. Their messages are essentially false and misleading, competing with Christ.

Through speaking the truth in love, we act as tangible instruments of God's grace in the lives of others.

IV. The nature and means of change

We affirm that the growth process for which counseling must aim is conversion followed by lifelong progressive sanctification within every circumstance of life. Our motives, thought processes, actions, words, emotions, attitudes, values—heart, soul, mind, and might— increasingly resemble Jesus Christ in conscious and evident love for God and other people.

We deny that there is any method for instantaneous or complete perfection into the image of Jesus Christ. The change process continues until we see Him face-to-face.

We deny that the processes and goals labeled self-actualization, self-fulfillment, healing of memories, meeting of psychological needs, social adaptation, building self-esteem, recovery, individuation, etc., describe valid aims of counseling, though they may evidence analogies to elements of biblical wisdom.

We affirm that the Bible explicitly teaches the fundamentals of counseling method by precept and example. Through speaking the truth in love, we act as

tangible instruments of God's grace in the lives of others.

We deny that the modern psychotherapies rightly understand or practice wise counseling methodology, though they may evidence analogies to elements of biblical wisdom.

V. The social context and scope of counseling ministry

We affirm that the Spirit and the Word create the church of Jesus Christ, and that the people of God should provide the personal, social, and institutional loci for speaking the truth in love.

We deny that the mental health professions and their institutions have the right to claim any sector of problems in living as their particular prerogative. Even those who suffer mentally-disabling medical problems need godly counseling.

We affirm that the aims, content, and means of counseling ministry are of a piece with public ministry, the spiritual disciplines, and mercy ministry. These are different aspects of the one redemptive ministry of Christ.

We deny that the persons and problems addressed by the activity termed "psychotherapy" fall outside the intended scope of the ministry of Christ in word and deed.

We affirm that the primary and fullest expression of counseling ministry occurs in local church communities where pastors effectively shepherd souls while equipping and overseeing diverse forms of every-member ministry.

We deny that the institutional forms and professional roles of the mental health system provide a normative and desirable framework for counseling ministry.

We deny that current forms of church life and conceptions of the pastoral role are necessarily adequate and normative as vehicles to train, deliver, and oversee effective counseling ministry. The body of Christ needs institutional reformation, development, and innovation.

We deny that para-church and other cooperative forms of counseling ministry in the body of Christ are inherently wrong.

VI. God's providence and the interplay between His common grace and the intellectual-practical effects of sin

We affirm that numerous disciplines and professions can contribute to an increase in our knowledge of people and how to help them. Scripture teaches a standpoint and gaze by which believers can learn many things from those who do not believe.

We deny that any of these disciplines and professions can align and constitute a system of faith and practice for wise counseling.

We affirm that a commitment to secularity distorts disciplines and professions fundamentally and pervasively. People who do not think and practice in submission to the mind of Christ will misconstrue the things they see most

clearly, and will miscarry in the matters about which they care most deeply and skillfully.

We deny that secular disciplines and professions are entirely benighted by the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic effects of sin. The operations of God's common grace can cause unbelievers to be relatively observant, caring, stimulating, and informative.

We affirm that the personality theories are essentially false theologies, and the psychotherapies are essentially false forms of the cure of souls. Even the more descriptive and empirical psychologies are significantly skewed by secular presuppositions, and their findings need to be reinterpreted by the biblical worldview.

We deny that psychological research, personality theories, and psychotherapies should be viewed as "objective science," as that term is usually understood. Neither should they be seen as extensions of medicine and medical practice.

From God's point of view, even foolish attempts to assert a God-less "scientific" or "medical" objectivity register as overtly religious acts.

VII. Good news for psychologized people in a psychologized society

We affirm that mature, presuppositionally consistent, loving, and efficacious biblical counseling will be a powerful evangelistic and apologetic force in the modern world.

We deny that the most important part of the church's interaction with the modern psychologies is to discover what can be learned from them.

DISCUSSION of Affirmations & Denials

On the face of it, Scripture is about counseling. It's about the diagnosis and face-to-face cure of the human condition. It's about trustworthy love, being known by another, a growing self-knowledge, making sense of life's circumstances, an interpersonal process, and specific personal changes. It's about how you understand or misunderstand life, how you behave or misbehave.

It's about what you believe, desire, fear, trust, and value. It's about how you act, talk, and feel. It's about your relationships to others and to Him-who-is. Scripture is also about untrustworthy, inaccurate, misleading, and false messages and persons, about other counsel and other counselors. Seen this way, the dynamic and the subject matter of Scripture is recognizably the activity we term "counseling"—but with a dramatic twist.

What most people think of as "counseling" is controlled by the elitist habits of the modern mental health system: a designated professional with an advanced degree, and with expertise in supposedly objective, non-religious ideas and techniques from psychology or psychiatry; a designated and diagnosed patient/client, who suffers from a syndrome with a medical-sounding label; a formal and consultative relationship that mediates ideas and solutions from science and/or medicine; a fee-for-service exchange occurring in a time-out

from real life social relationships; a fundamental asymmetry between doctor and patient, expert and client, healthy and sick. Seen against this backdrop, the Bible seems to say little about the ideas, solutions, methods, and institutional structures necessary for effective counseling.

The Bible is odd music, playing in a different key with different instruments, even on a different scale. God subverts asymmetries, and views us all as basically more alike than different. All of us are “sick” with the madness in our hearts; each of us needs the “physician.” And each of us—even the weakest, poorest, and most troubled—is capable of helping any of us in some way when grace gifts us and masters us. And the Bible is too straightforward to be very esoteric in its “techniques”; it’s about real life and everyday interactions. Jesus and His apostles are not much impressed with claims to objective superior knowledge, or with claims to specialized authority and professional prerogative. When the Lord uses medical metaphors for life’s problems, it’s just a grabby metaphor, not reality. The Bible paints all life as inescapably religious, and the kinds of problems psychotherapy deals with every day are particularly obvious examples. From God’s point of view, even foolish attempts to assert a God-less “scientific” or “medical” objectivity register as overtly religious acts. To attempt to explain and cure the souls of others while saying in your heart, “There is no God,” is damnably religious. If a blind man leads a blind man, they both fall in a ditch. But people who see...see themselves, other people, and everyone’s life circumstances coram Deo. And they see God in Christ.

The Bible’s vision of everything that “counseling” is about is stunningly different from current cultural habits and received wisdom. It’s a bigger and better way of thinking about “counseling.” And it’s true. The culture says, “We’ve always done it this way” (though historical memory tends to be very short). But Scripture drastically changes the paradigm—to put it mildly. Counseling doesn’t just inhabit clinical settings, nor is it the property of several upstart professions practicing in the wealthier countries. God’s view of counseling cuts deeper, applies wider, aims different, lasts longer, matters more. You live or die based on the counsel you listen to—and the counsel you give. Counseling is not just for those who “need counseling.” It’s not just something that “professional counselors” do with “counselees.” You can’t escape being involved in the Bible’s view of the counseling process. It’s happening all the time, whether you know it or not, whether you want it or not. You are doing it to others; others are doing it to you—today, every day, informally, and (very occasionally) formally. All people influence others by what they believe and want; all people are influenced by the thoughts and intentions of others. All of human life is by definition counseling. “The tongue” is a counseling instrument. Every human interaction, from the most trivial to the most formal, arises from the nexus of meanings, values, and intentions that controls the hearts of the participants.

Counseling is never about neutral, objective knowledge. It’s committed. It always “imposes values,” covertly if not overtly. No one can avoid this. The questions you ask (or don’t ask), the emotions you feel (or don’t feel), the thoughts you think (or don’t think), the responses you give (or don’t give) tip your hand and overflow from your heart. Therapists aren’t just skillful or clumsy, caring or callous; their counsel (diagnostic categories, interpretative schemas, analyses of causality, ideals of health, particular advice, personal character) is true or false, and leads others into good or evil. God evaluates every word out of every mouth, because these register the thoughts and intentions of every heart as either for or against Him. Counseling is not a matter of neutral technical

expertise and an inherently legitimate professional role. Counseling is either wise or perverse, just as all human beings are either sages or fools, either trustworthy or untrustworthy, whatever their professional roles. Either counseling leads truly or it leads astray. Graduate education and professional role are not decisive criteria. Wisdom is the deciding factor, and the organizing center of wisdom is the fear of Christ. God plays by a different set of rules—and He makes the rules. Theories of human nature and formal counseling practices of any sort are a subset of much bigger things. They are subject both to the terms in which those bigger things transpire, and to evaluation by Him with whom we have to do.

The designated counselors in a culture (or church) may do a poor job of communicating what life's all about. They may tell misleading stories, mislabel life, and instill myths to rule the hearts of those they counsel. But God's story is still what's playing in real time, real lives. His story is not about coping better. You either die to yourself and live for Another, or you live for yourself and die. It's not about meeting your needs, but about turning what you think you need upside-down. It's not about locating causality in historical circumstance or biological process, but about your heart vis-à-vis God in Christ. Moment by moment, from the heart, you and everyone else worship, love, desire, fear, serve, believe, and trust either God or something that is not God. God's story is not about finding refuge and resources in yourself, or in other people, or in psychopharmacology. It's about finding Christ in real times and real places, the only Savior able to deliver you from what's really wrong with you and your world.

By words and actions, God counsels all people. He reveals us for what we are, and either changes our ways or hardens us in our ways. Paul's letter to God's people in Ephesus offers an exemplar and synopsis of the contents, methods, and institutional context for "curing souls." As Jesus Christ's personal agent, Paul communicates what's on the mind of the Searcher of hearts. He dissects the human condition. As a recipient of grace upon grace, he extols the one true and comprehensive solution, the living Lord whom we are made to know, love, and serve, and from whom we learn to know, love, and serve others.

In times of spiritual vitality, the church of Jesus Christ submits to God's definition of both counsel (the content) and counseling (the activity), both counselor and counselee (the persons involved in the process), both problems and solutions, both process and goal. The church submits to the Comforter's definitions of both trouble and comfort.

In the providence of God, the twentieth century saw a time of crisis and conflict about counseling. Over the past hundred years in the West, a persuasive redefinition of the ideas, practices, and institutions of "pastoral care" has taken place. The cure of souls has become significantly secularized by the gaze and intentions of modern personality theories, mental health professions, and psychological research. They aim to comprehend and treat human life with no reference point outside of ourselves. This attempt radically dehumanizes patients, clients, and subjects. It purges life of its true context (God in Christ), redefines the true drama (Are you good or evil, a servant of truth or lies?), misconstrues causality (the heart vis-à-vis God, amid trials), ignores the true outcome (life or death forever), and represses the one essential truth (To know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent).

God's story is not about finding refuge and resources in yourself, or in other

people, or in psychopharmacology.

Brilliant thinkers, skilled practitioners, and careful researchers have built powerful institutions claiming the truth, love, and power to comprehend and cure souls. But their gaze is skewed, is blinded to essential realities. Their cures pointedly exclude the Good Shepherd, as well as the apprentice shepherds and recaptured sheep who serve Him. God so governs history that persuasive alternatives to the Faith always have a double effect. They either compel us to sharpen our own faith and practice, or they compel us to counter-convert.

The psychologies and psychotherapies self-consciously compete with the Faith's interpretations and intentions. Sigmund Freud, for example, conceived of his work this way: "The words, 'secular pastoral worker,' might well serve as a general formula for describing the function which the analyst...has to perform in his relation to the public." Freud saw himself doing "pastoral work in the best sense of the word." But this pastoral ministry did not offer people the mercy and grace of the personal Lord who searches every heart and shepherds souls. Instead, when Freud counseled someone, he would seek "to enrich him from his own internal resources." Freud was a bold evangelist for such trust in human resources, calling for the day when "a new kind of Salvation Army" trained in psychoanalysis would go forth as "a band of helpers for combating the neuroses of civilization."¹ What do these missionary-counselors do with people? Nothing takes place between them except that they talk to each other....[The therapist gets the patient] to talk, listens to him, talks to him in his turn, and gets him to listen....And incidentally do not let us despise the word. After all it is a powerful instrument; it is the means by which we convey our feelings to one another, our method of influencing other people.²

Psychotherapy is simply intentional conversation occurring "under the guidance of the therapist" who "plays the part of this effective outsider; he makes use of the influence which one human being exercises over another."³ Such conversations are not value-neutral. They are structured by the interpretive gaze and the intentions of the parties involved. Both "therapist" and "patient" (medical terms for the parties involved are singularly inapt, but ideologically useful) bring their assumptions to every word uttered, to every conversational choice point. What do you say next? The mouth speaks out of the overflow of the heart. At every turn, each speaker's point of view and desires will seek to influence the other overtly or covertly. What is wrong and why? What is the meaning of that social experience? How should we interpret those sufferings or blessings, these hardships or pleasures? What is the purpose of life? What is relatively important or unimportant? What definition of success and failure sets the agenda for our conversation? Differing diagnoses of the human condition inevitably demand different "words" of cure, contain different implications, and construct different

¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis" and "Post-script," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926 and 1927, volume 20), pp. 255f, 250. Freud argued that psychotherapy was not a medical activity, but was fundamentally re-educational and pastoral.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 187f.

³ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1916, volume 14), p. 312.

responses. They call forth different kinds of missionary-pastors. Freud sent forth one kind of salvation army, Jesus another.

Carl Jung described a different aspect of the counseling dynamic. "Patients force the psychotherapist into the role of a priest and expect and demand of him that he shall free them from their distress. That is why we psychotherapists must occupy ourselves with problems which, strictly speaking, belong to the theologian."⁴ Psychotherapists must deal with such things because identified counselees are powerful counselors in their own right, and they force, expect, and demand things. This is what every counseling conversation is actually about, whatever the pretense to doing something else. In Jung's view, Jesus Christ was yesterday's answer to the human condition; but He is not alive and has no abiding relevance. He will not in fact judge the living and the dead. The hopes of those who eagerly await His appearing are futile and fantastic – privately engaging, perhaps, but irrelevant to curing the souls of strugglers from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. Today and tomorrow demand new answers to the old, abiding theologian's problems of meaning and despair, good and evil, life and death, love and hate, trust and fear. Jung proposes different answers to the old problems that every counseling conversation is about.

Psychotherapists function as "secular priests," as the more self-conscious among them freely acknowledge.⁵ The practitioners of psychotherapeutics are not "scientists" studying subjects with cool detachment, nor are they "medical personnel" treating psychic pathologies, nor are they "technicians" of mental content, emotional state, and behavioral habit. Instead, mental health professionals necessarily act as prophet-theologians, who define human nature and the meaning of life while typically excising God. They necessarily act as priest-pastors, who typically shepherd the human soul to find refuge in itself, in other people, and in psychoactive medication, because they construct a universe barren of the living God and His Christ. They necessarily act as king-elders, who run the institutions of the modern cure of souls: hospital, clinic, office, third party insurer, undergraduate and graduate department, referral network, newspaper column, self-help book, television talk show, licensing law, pharmaceutical company. What kind of thing do these "authorities," "experts," "powers-that-be," "vested interests," and "professionals" in counseling actually do? Church- work.

How has the church responded to secular redefinitions of the ideas, practices, and institutions that attempt to cure souls? The church has largely been the borrower and subordinate, not the decided alternative. So what must you do to recover the centrality of Jesus Christ for helping people to grow up into the only true sanity? How will you learn to live in the radical extrospections of faith and love, rather than be lulled by the inward-curving inertia of sin? Will you deal gently with other sinners, the ignorant and wayward, and offer them mercy and

⁴ 4Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, translated by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1933), p. 241.

⁵ 5Perry London, *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), chapter 7.

grace to help in time of need? How will you find meaning, safety, and sustenance in your own sufferings? Will you offer others genuine aid and true refuge in their sufferings? How will you reconfigure face-to-face “helping” relationships to serve as instruments of the only enduring wisdom?

To recover the centrality of Christ and His Scripture for the cure of souls demands conviction worked out into specific contents, skills, and social structures. The conviction? Jesus Christ knows what is in us. Every human being will submit to His final evaluation. His view is the true view. This same Jesus Christ has set his affection on headstrong, confused, and suffering people. No one and nothing else can deliver us from the real-time sin and misery of our condition. He is for us and with us to change us. His Scripture, then, is about understanding and helping people. The sufferings and blessings, needs and resources, struggles and strengths of real people—right down to the details—must be rationally defined and explained by the categories with which the Bible teaches us to see human life. Those problems must be addressed and redressed using the gracious, powerful truth and the effective, loving means that Jesus says and does with us—and teaches us to say and do with others. The mind of Christ looks at life differently; His words and deeds aim in a different direction. The scope of Scripture’s explicit purposes and sufficiency includes those face-to-face relationships that our culture labels “counseling” or “psychotherapy.” These affirmations and denials attempt to state and to guard the lineaments of such convictions.

Conviction alone simply waves a flag. It eventually degrades into sloganeering and hardens into triumphal defensiveness. But when the intellectual ramifications and practical implications are demonstrated to be penetrating, comprehensive, adaptable, and efficacious, then we’ll have something. Such counseling wisdom will edify the teachable—and even persuade the skeptical. The church needs persuading. And the church needs training to live and counsel the content. The surrounding culture also needs persuading. The matters confessed in these pages will only shine in their glory when adorned with humble, tender, bold, and efficacious ministry that actually cures souls.

The goals of this article are necessarily modest. These affirmations and denials cannot begin to communicate the countless positive details of what it means to counsel in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. But they can at least serve as a beginning, an articulation of what must be worked thoroughly into our faith and practice. They are also up for criticism, debate, and refinement. This is a proposal, a current best effort. I sincerely believe it can be improved, with nothing good lost and much good gained.

Appendix

Bibliography of Guiding Resources

Books

Counseling, John MacArthur

Counseling the Hard Cases, Stuart Scott, Heath Lambert

Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands, Paul David Tripp

When People Are Big, and God is Small, Edward T. Welch

Ministries/Web-sites:

Biblicalcounselingcoalition.org

Faithlafayette.org

National Association of Nouthetic Counselors nanc.org

Christian Counseling & Education Foundation ccef.org

Strict Confidentiality?

By Deepak Reju

One of the assumptions that I (Deepak Reju) was taught when I first entered the counseling world was strict confidentiality. You (as the counselor) promise never tell anyone else about the counselee's problems. The counselee is taking the very risky step of revealing his sin to you, and he finds security in knowing that no one else will ever know his junk.

Yet, as a pastor, this created a dilemma for me. Jesus describes a situation in Matthew 18:15-17:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

One brother sins against another. The two talk about it; and it seems to not go well. The offender would not listen to his friend. The person comes back with a second friend to talk about it; and again, he refuses to listen and deal with his sin. That leaves you with one option left—"tell it to the church" (v. 17). Bring this unrepentant sinner before the church and exclude him from fellowship. Treat him like a pagan or tax collector, someone who is deliberately rebellious against God.

Strict confidentiality is not possible for Christians who practice counseling in the context of a local church. If a person is not willing to repentant of his sin, the counselor must eventually expose this sinner to the church. If we are going to follow the ethics of the Bible, it is not an option for us to conceal an unrepentant sinners' sin. Granted, many of us (as counselors) will persevere for a long-time—exhorting, persuading, pleading with the sinner to turn. But if he or she does not, we're left with one two options—bring a second witness (v. 16); and then bring it to the church (v. 17).

As you can see, there are limits to our confidentiality in a church setting. Pastoral counseling requires us to always fit the sinner within the context of a local church. We're not lone-rangers in private practice; but shepherds watching over a flock of God's sheep (1 Peter 5:1-13).

Informed Consent

Because strict confidentiality is the expected norm in our society today, every person who comes for help needs to understand why counseling in a church is different. So my informed consent explains it like this:

Just like all of our other pastors, I cannot promise strict confidentiality. But you should assume that I am always going to use discretion with the information conveyed to me. Most of the time, I will be able to keep your information private.

But, there will be times when I will have to speak to others in order to wisely discern how best to shepherd you as a member of CHBC. Examples of exceptions to confidentiality are when the counselee 1) indicates an intention to harm him or herself or someone else; 2) has recently committed sexual or physical abuse; 3) is engaging in repeated, ongoing serious immorality (e.g. adultery) that might require the involvement of the church; 4) is a minor and I believe it is in the best interest of the child to disclose information to the parent; (5) has done something that violates the law and I am required to report it; (6) is in a situation that might warrant church discipline and requires oversight of other elders, staff, or involvement of the church as a whole; or (7) if I am ordered by a court of law to release your information, I will have to comply with the law. This is not an exhaustive list of examples.

To date, I have not had anyone read this and say, “No thanks, I’ll get help elsewhere.” Most of the time, most of the information told to me by our members never has to be told to anyone else, but sadly, several times, I’ve had to pursue several of the exceptions listed above.

Confidentiality, church discipline, and trust are all important topics to think through in pastoral counseling, so if you are interested in further reading, look at Bob Kellemen’s very helpful book *Equipping Counselors for the Church*.