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Pastoral Counseling: 10 Key Principles

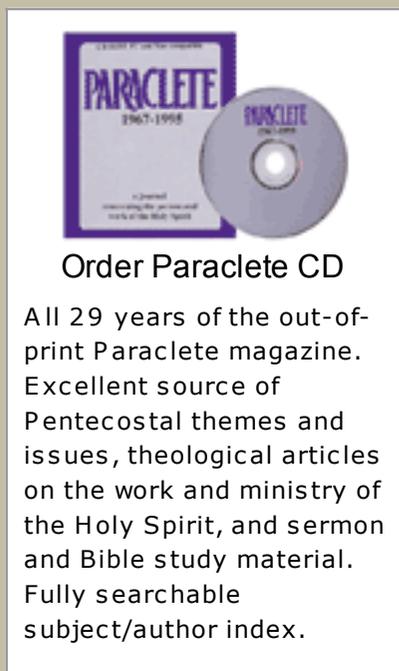
By Wayde I. Goodall

When I read of those who had negative behavioral patterns (sins) that Paul listed for the Corinthian church, it reminds me of people in our culture today—the sexually immoral (adulterers, prostitutes, homosexuals), idolaters, thieves, swindlers, and those who do not control negative conversation about others (slanderers). But then Paul said, “And that is what some of you were” (1 Corinthians 6:11, NIV). When these people came to Christ, He not only saved them, but they were delivered from the sins that bound them. They came out of a world controlled by the devil and became a part of a healthy community. In spite of the Corinthian's problems, it was still a church body full of Spirit-filled people who ministered to one another.

The majority of people in our communities turn to a pastor or priest when they have a crisis or counseling need. Robert Morgan wrote: “Pastoral counseling is best done by a pastor—not a professional

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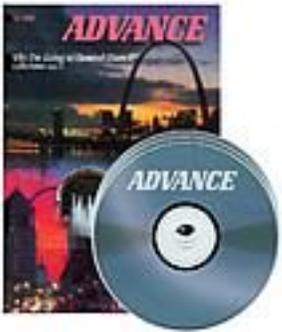
counselor or psychotherapist. Good professional biblical counselors certainly play an important role when the complexities of mental illness are involved, but they are allies of the pastor, not substitutes for him.” Morgan listed several advantages pastors have in counseling.¹

- Friendship. Those who need help are counseling with a friend, not just a professional.
- Prior relationship. In many cases, there has been an ongoing relationship between the person and the pastor. The pastor often knows the family's history, spiritual maturity, and past crisis experiences.
- Preaching. Preaching can include biblical counseling from the pulpit.²
- Biblical advice. People want to know what the Bible says about their particular need.
- Availability. Typically, pastors are much more accessible to their parishioners. It is important for people who have lived in destructive behavioral patterns to become a part of a caring church, pastored by a caring pastor. This kind of community is healthy and is an encouragement to those coming out of spiritually or physically harmful lifestyles.

At times, part of the care we offer people is helping them find a competent Christian mental health professional. My rule of thumb has always been that if I sense mental illness, serious depression, or suicidal thinking, I automatically refer to a Christian mental health professional. I remain their pastor. Even for those I refer, I still pray for them and meet with them for pastoral counseling. However, I believe that the professional has the expertise to handle the complicated and delicate issues that come up with these types of difficulties.

Remember these 10 key principles when you are involved in pastoral counseling.³

1. The Scripture is always right. The Bible covers a myriad of



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problems, difficulties, and issues that people face every day. We can know how God feels about divorce, adultery, substance abuse, dishonesty, and numerous other harmful behaviors. Scripture is clear about God's desire to set people free, forgive them of their sins, and restore their lives. The Bible is our blueprint for living and should be every pastor's counseling manual.

2. The counselee is always responsible to do what is right. None of us can blame others for our personal choices in life. It is the counselee's choice whether to make the right or wrong decision. You can pray for and encourage those who come for counseling, but in the end it is their choice.

3. There is always a biblical, Christ-honoring response that the counselee is capable of choosing. What is the right thing to do when a person has wronged you? Every issue a person faces in life has a Christ-honoring response. It might be confrontation, a gentle rebuke, or forgiveness.

4. Listen carefully. What is said and what is meant may be different. Often people will hint at their situation but never clearly spell it out. As you listen to people, try to hear what they are really saying and ask them questions such as: "Am I hearing you say...?" or "Is there something else you want to talk about." This type of question often prompts the person to bring out the real issues.

5. Don't be afraid to ask about willful sin. If you suspect sinful behavior, ask about it at the appropriate time. You could say: "Have you been seeing someone else?" or "What behaviors have you been involved in that you know God would not approve of?"

6. The counselee is a person of worth, made in the image of God. No matter what people have done, they are important to God and should be important to us. God can cleanse, redeem, and

restore anyone who comes to Him for help.

7. Counseling advice should be specific and doable. When you give people advice about how to overcome their problems, be specific about how to do it. Write out a "road map" for them. Just saying to counselees that they need to stop a certain behavior is not good enough. They often know they need to stop, but they don't know how. You can help them find the "how."

8. Remain hopeful, but realize there are no instant cures to life's problems. The habit that has lasted years will often take months or years to overcome. A bad marriage doesn't become a good marriage overnight. Those who have grown up in an abusive home could have similar challenges with their family. Be patient with people, and remain hopeful. Be an encourager to counselees that God will get them through.

9. Know that God can use you. Take charge. There are a variety of people and problems you will face in ministry. Help, in some way, those who cross your path. It might be through counseling, or it could be through referral to a Christian mental health professional or medical doctor. God will help you work with the people He has placed under your care.

10. You are a person talking to a person. Counseling is a relationship. Let people know that God has helped you with your difficulties and challenges. This gives people hope and lets them know that you are also working out your salvation with "fear and trembling".

Counseling is a part of every pastor's life. We counsel after a tragedy, at a funeral, during a marriage difficulty, or in a premarriage counseling session. We counsel in the church foyer, during visitation, or before a critical surgery. Whenever it occurs, remember these 10 key pastoral counseling principles.

Wayde I. Goodall, D.Min., is executive editor of Enrichment and

coordinator of the Ministerial Enrichment Office, Springfield, Missouri.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Morgan, "Why Pastors Make Great Counselors," Leadership, Spring 1997, 29-31
2. Using an illustration from one of your counseling sessions is not ethically correct. Counselors must protect the confidentiality of those they counsel.
3. Larry Crabb has used a variation of these points in his books and counseling seminars.

Enrichment Journal
1445 Boonville Ave., Springfield, MO 65802
Email: enrichmentjournal@ag.org
Phone: 417-862-2781, ext. 4095
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