

INVOLVEMENT AND BIBLICAL COUNSELING¹

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Attempts at biblical counseling sometimes neglect the important factor of establishing a facilitative relationship between the counselor and the counselee. Such a relationship can come through a demonstrated compassion such as Jesus and Paul had for people they ministered to, a compassion that is possible for the counselor to develop through controlling his thoughts. The necessary involvement can also develop if the counselor follows certain guidelines in showing respect for his counselee. The facilitative relationship is also possible when built on the foundation of sincerity, when the counselee realizes that the counselor is perfectly honest and has no hidden agenda. The substance of the counsel given is of greatest importance, but the involvement of the counselor with his counselee is most frequently the packaging that makes his advice effective in helping people.

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Biblical counseling seeks to solve people's problems. It is about discovering the causes of those problems and then applying biblical principles to them. Sometimes even the best-intentioned counselors err, however, by trying to attain these goals without an attempt to incorporate an indispensable element. That element is *involvement*

¹This essay will appear in the forthcoming book *Introduction to Biblical Counseling* (Word) of which Professor Mack is editor. President MacArthur and the faculty of The Master's College are collaborating on this work scheduled for release in the very near future.

with the person counseled.²

Consider the approach of a counselor described by Adams:

Clara comes to you stating that she has filed for divorce on the grounds of mental and bodily cruelty.

Clara returns for the third session. "I tried to get him here but he had *other* things to do," she begins. "You know what his other things are, of course. I told you all of them."

"I don't want to hear such charges behind Marty's back," you respond. "This continuing hostility toward him, even though you told him you forgave him, seems to indicate that you made little or no attempt to bury the issue and start afresh. I don't think that you understand forgiveness. You . . ."

"Forgive him! You know there is a limit. After he has beat me, and his drinking away our money maybe, but when I came home and found him in my bed with that woman, I can never bury that! He is just an immature, immoral, animalistic pig," she declares.

You tell her that it will be necessary for her to change her language about her husband and that you are here to help but not to salve her self-righteous attitude and listen to her ever-increasing charges against her husband.

²Of benefit would be a lengthy discussion of the necessity of the counselor's involvement *with Christ* only when he or she has a vital, intimate relationship with the Lord can counseling be truly effective (cf. Matt 7:3-5; Acts 4:13; 1 Cor 11:1). But this essay will discuss primarily the counselor's involvement with the counselee, an involvement which is intended to develop and maintain a facilitative relationship between the two. Ultimately and preeminently the purpose of that involvement is to enhance the counselee's involvement with Christ. The vertical dimension is what makes biblical counseling different from all other forms.

"Why are you siding with him? I'm the one that belongs to this church!" She breaks into tears.³

Why did that third session deteriorate into near hopelessness before it had hardly begun? It was not because the counselor offered bad advice—most of what he said was probably true. Rather, it turned sour at least partially because he took what may be called the "auto mechanic" approach to counseling.

When someone leaves a car for repair, the mechanic pulls out the shop manual for that particular model. After putting the car through various diagnostic tests, he repairs any indicated problem as the book prescribes. Sadly, some counselors treat people this way. They restrict their responsibility to finding out what the problem is and what the Book says to do about it and to moving directly to "fix" the problem. They devote little effort to developing their relationship with the counselee.⁴

This neglect in counseling commits the error of treating the counselee as a mechanism, in contrast to biblical counseling which tries to help the *whole person*. People's problems are important and counselors should not ignore them, but biblical counselors should come to these painful problems through a genuine care and concern for the total being of their counsees.⁵ Efforts to help people should not be exclusively *problem-oriented*. They should be *person-oriented*, with the resolution of problems flowing from that focus. This sets counseling in its proper context.

The counselor in Clara's case failed because he was too problem-oriented in his approach. Apparently he had done very little to establish involvement with his counselee. He had not labored to develop a facilitative relationship so that she knew he cared about her.

³Adapted from Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Casebook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 186.

⁴The counselor who is guilty of neglecting the relational side of his responsibility lends validity to the criticism that biblical counselors merely "throw out Bible verses" or "shove Scripture down people's throats." As we will see later in this chapter, that kind of "biblical" counseling is patently not biblical.

⁵A friend of the writer told a story of the time when he had a bad toothache and the dentist he called wanted him to come in for a preliminary appointment so that they could "get to know one another." The friend said that he was not interested in "building a relationship" with the dentist—he just wanted to get rid of the pain in his tooth. What is unnecessary in dentistry is, however, quite necessary in biblical counseling.

He could have taken some time to listen to her and sympathize with the pain she was experiencing, but had jumped right in and addressed her sin.⁶ Almost immediately Clara viewed him as her opponent rather than her ally. As long as she had this perspective, his counsel to her was next to meaningless. His words could be completely true and appropriate to her situation, but she would nonetheless reject them.

Proverbs 27 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a *friend* [emphasis added]" (v. 6) and "A man's counsel is sweet to his *friend* [emphasis added]" (v. 9). People are more receptive to counsel from those whom they know to be on their side. Allies can speak to them frankly about their faults. They may find temporary annoyance with criticism, but they soon realize that sincere concern is behind the criticism and their critics are only trying to help. On the other hand, if a stranger or seeming enemy offers the critique, people tend to react defensively and are suspicious of the underlying motives.

As in any other relational function, *a counselor's impact and influence in the lives of people are usually related to people's perception of him*. That is why involvement is so vitally important to the counseling process. Usually the counseling process is most effective after the achievement of an acceptable level of involvement.⁷

With this in mind, a consideration of three ways for developing involvement with people seeking help is in order. *Compassion, respect, and sincerity* are the foundations for building a facilitative relationship with counselees.

INVOLVEMENT THROUGH COMPASSION

A counselee's awareness that the counselor genuinely cares promotes involvement.

Two Great Examples of Involvement

⁶Clara's sin was of utmost importance and needed attention as the counseling progressed, but the counselor's approach gave Clara the impression that he did not view her husband's sin as a serious matter. That created an immediate wall between them at a time when her husband's hurtful actions so completely dominated her thinking.

⁷Of course, the counselor cannot *make* the counselee view him or her as a friend or ally. Some people may be so predisposed against their counselors that nothing can reverse their feeling. Nevertheless, the counselor is responsible to do whatever he can to be the kind of person that deserves respect and trust.

Jesus. Undoubtedly the greatest counselor who ever lived was the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah prophesied that "His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor" (9:6) and that upon Him would rest "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength" (11:2). One of the keys to His success as a counselor was His great compassion for men and women, a characteristic evident throughout the gospel accounts of His life and ministry.

Matthew records, "Seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). The Greek word for His compassion in Heb 4:15 is *synpauv* (*synpathe*) which is the source for the English "sympathy." *Syn* (*Syn*) means "with" and *pauv* (*pathe*) (or *psxv* [*paschi*]) means "suffer." He suffered with the needy multitudes. He felt for them and cared for them with a compassion that permeated all His attempts to meet their needs (Matt 9:35, 37-38). Far from being a cold-hearted, "auto-mechanic" counselor who limited his attention to the problems and treated people like statistics, He was a person who had compassion for them.

Mark 3:1-5 says that Jesus noticed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue and that He was angry and sad over the Pharisees' lack of sensitivity toward the man. He showed His own compassion by restoring the man's hand despite His enemies' objection to His doing so on the Sabbath.

A rich young ruler came to Jesus seeking eternal life, but left without it because he loved his riches too much to give them up at Christ's command. Even so, Mark 10:21 says, "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him." Even when Jesus had to uphold unpopular standards that repelled people, He did so with compassion.

One day Jesus was with His disciples when a funeral procession passed near them (Luke 7:11-15). A widow's only child had died, so Christ stopped to comfort her: "And when the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, 'Do not weep.'" He then proceeded to raise her son from the dead.

Jesus' compassion caused Him to shed tears of grief, as Luke 19:41 notes. He wept over Jerusalem as He predicted the future judgment of God to come upon it. When He saw the sorrow of Mary over the death of Lazarus, "He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled" (John 11:34-35) and wept with her. She and all the others Jesus interacted with throughout His ministry could tell from being around Jesus how much He cared for them. This is one of the qualities that contributed to His being the Wonderful Counselor. He did not

just observe problems and dispense platitudes. He epitomized the compassion every counselor needs.

Paul. In the writer's opinion, the second greatest counselor who ever lived was Paul. Many picture Paul as a staunch defender of the faith and brilliant theologian, but fail to realize that he also was a compassionate man who cared deeply for people to whom he ministered. Paul reminds the Ephesian elders, "Night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears" (Acts 20:31). The Greek word for "admonish" *noyuetv (nouthete)* also means "counsel" and most often means "correct" or "warn." Even when Paul rebuked Christians for their sin, his tears communicated a genuine, caring, and loving heart.

Paul's great love for his fellow Jews is a theme of Rom 9:1-3: "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." He was on the verge of willingness to burn in hell if that would save them! Surely contemporary counselors have a long way to go to match that kind of compassion!

Paul felt the same for his Corinthian converts. He refers to a strong letter of admonishment he had written to them: "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not that you should be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you" (2 Cor 2:4). He also speaks of the "daily pressure" of concern he feels for all the churches, and then says, "Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" (2 Cor 11:28-29). Paul identified with the problems and weaknesses of his "counselees" to the degree that he experienced them himself.

The Thessalonian church received an especially moving expression of Paul's love for them: "We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess 2:7-8).

Paul cared for people, and they knew it. His heart was "opened wide" to them (2 Cor 6:11). That is the reason he could be so straightforward in addressing their faults without alienating them in any way. If a contemporary counselor is to be effective, he must have the same

kind of compassion.

How to Develop Genuine Compassion

Perhaps some question whether they have the kind of compassion Jesus and Paul had or wonder how they can develop more of it. Fortunately the Bible tells how to emulate these great examples. Following are some suggestions from Scripture about how to develop compassion toward people needing help. Because any righteous attitude, action, or emotion originates in the mind (cf. Rom 12:2), these suggestions pertain to how a person thinks.

Think about how you would feel if you were in their position. In many of the previously mentioned passages about Jesus' compassion, the text first mentions His seeing or looking upon people. For instance, Matt 9:36 says, "*Seeing* [emphasis added] the multitudes, He felt compassion for them." The account of the mourning widow records, "When the Lord *saw* [emphasis added] her, He felt compassion for her" (Luke 7:13).⁸ That is very significant. Jesus looked thoughtfully at people who were experiencing difficulty, i.e., He put Himself in their place and intentionally tried to feel what they were feeling. His compassion for them arose from that empathy. Even now though in heaven, He is "touched with the feelings of our infirmities" (Heb 4:15, KJV).

Consider again the case of Clara. She concluded that her counselor was not in sympathy with her. All she sensed from him was condemnation. The counselor should have first listened to her complaints and concerns and tried to understand how she was feeling. Before responding, he could have asked himself, "What would it be like for me to come home to a wife who was wasting all our money on alcohol? What would it be like to have a wife calling me names, scratching me, and throwing things at me? What would it be like to have a wife who did not care about what I thought or what I said? What would it be like for me to come home and find my wife in my bed with another man? How would I feel? What emotions would I be experiencing?"

The counseling process does not end with understanding the feelings of the counselees, of course. Their sin problems need addressing with a view to finding solutions. But the counseling process must

⁸Cf. Matt 14:14; Luke 10:33; 15:20.

start with that understanding. In most cases, effective counseling cannot occur until the counselor demonstrates to the counselee the compassion of Christ by identifying with his or her struggles.

Think of them as family members. Paul says in 1 Tim 5:1-2, "Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters." A deliberate effort to treat the counselee as a close relative will contribute toward developing compassion. In reality, counselor and counselee are spiritual brothers or brother and sister if both are Christians. The heavenly Father expects His children to treat each other according to their spiritual ties.

Think about your own sinfulness. Gal 6:1 instructs and cautions counselors: "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted* [emphasis added]." When counselors learn of sin in the lives of their counsees, they must remember that they are not immune to that deadly disease and can fall into sin just as easily as anyone else. No one has done anything that a counselor could not do, if it were not for the grace of God. Keeping that in mind will guard the counselor against becoming self-righteous or condescending toward those who sin, and help him to reach out to them in compassion as Jesus did to the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11).

Think about practical ways that you can show compassion. Compassion is not so much an emotion as it is a choice of the will. Though a counselor may not *feel* like being kind to someone, he can still do so (cf. Luke 6:27-28). Often those feelings of love for others result from a counselor's choice to act in a way that pleases and benefits them. Asking the following questions may help determine whether a counselor has genuine compassion for the people he is trying to help:

- Have you told the counsees verbally that you care for them? (Phil 1:8)
- Have you prayed for them and with them? (Col 4:12-13)
- Have you rejoiced and grieved with them? (Rom 12:15)
- Have you dealt with them gently and tenderly? (Matt 12:20)
- Have you been tactful with them? (Prov 15:23)
- Have you spoken graciously to them? (Col. 4:6)

- Have you continued to love and accept them even when they have rejected your counsel? (Mark 10:21)
- Have you defended them against those who mistreat and accuse them? (Matt 12:1-7)
- Have you forgiven them for any wrong they have done to you? (Matt 18:21-22)
- Have you been willing to meet their physical needs if necessary? (1 John 3:17)

INVOLVEMENT THROUGH RESPECT

Not only do people need to know that the counselor cares for them; they also need to know that he respects them. Webster defines respect as "deferential regard" and "considering another worthy of honor." The Bible lauds that quality repeatedly. Rom 12:10 tells Christians to "give preference to one another in honor." Phil 2:3 commands, "With humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself." First Peter 2:17 instructs, "Honor all men." To return once more to the counselor trying to help Clara, he failed miserably in this area. The way he talked to her implied only disrespect, which no doubt is the major reason their relationship took a bad turn.

In cases when a counselee shows little respect for the counselor, it is often because the counselor has shown little respect for the counselee. The counselor is repayed what he or she has sown. So when the one seeking help fails to look to the one providing help as he should, the first question the counselor should ask is, "Have I honored him as God commands me to?"⁹

How to Show Respect for a Counselee

One can show respect in a counseling context in several ways that help establish the necessary involvement:

By proper verbal communication. The counselor can demonstrate respect for a counselee in the way he talks both to and about him. Paul advises, "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be

⁹Not every counselee will respond with the proper respect for the counselor, of course, even when he receives the utmost respect the counselor has to offer. He may be a person who simply respects no one. The counselor must, nevertheless, exemplify a godly honor for him, and trust that God will use his example to convict the counselee of his own pride.

kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 2:24-25). Scripture never condones rude or harsh speech, even when speaking the truth (cf. Eph 4:15). Proverbs says that "sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness" (v. 21) and "pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (v. 24). So the way a counselor communicates verbally is of primary importance in showing respect to a counselee.

By proper nonverbal communication. The mouth is not the only way to show respect; the rest of the body can do the same. Moses wrote, "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly" (Lev 19:32, NIV). In the OT, etiquette required younger people to stand when an older person entered the room. That was a nonverbal way of saying, "We honor you, we respect you." This kind of unspoken communication is as important to God now as it was then, because it reflects one's opinion of another.

The acronym S-O-L-V-E-R is useful as a reminder of several ways to show respect to a counselee nonverbally. These are traits of a person who is truly helpful, of which a counselor should be conscious during every counseling session:

"S" stands for squared shoulders. Face the counselee in a way that indicates you are alert and giving him or her all your attention.

"O" stands for open stance. Relax your arms, hands, and shoulders as if to say, "I am here to receive whatever you want to communicate. You have access to me."

"L" stands for leaning slightly forward. This shows interest in what the person is saying to you.

"V" stands for vocal quality. Maintain a volume and intensity in your speech that is neither abrasive nor hard to hear. Let your voice always reflect tenderness and compassion rather than anger and irritation.

"E" stands for eye contact. Look at people, especially when they are speaking. Don't stare at them so much that you make them uncomfortable, but show your interest in what they are saying by giving them your rapt attention.

"R" stands for relational posture. Coordinate all your body, head, and facial movements in a way that is most conducive to the comfort of the counselee. Your posture should not be stiff and robotic, but neither should it be so totally relaxed that the person thinks you're about to go

to sleep.¹⁰

In all these areas a counselor needs to keep a good balance so that the counselee does not perceive him as either too uptight or too indifferent, because either perception can build a wall between him and his counselee and interfere with the counseling process.¹¹

By taking their problems seriously. Never minimize the problems presented by counsees. A counselor may think, "This is so trivial why are they making a big deal out of it?" But it *is* very important to them, or they would not be sitting across from you. By taking their problems seriously, a counselor is communicating respect. On the other hand, making light of their problems will alienate them from the start and remove any hope they might have had that you could help them.

By trusting them. First Cor. 13:7 says that love "believes all things." Applied to counseling, this means that a counselor should believe what his counselee tells him, until the facts prove otherwise. He should also believe that the seeker has entered counseling because he wants to please God more. Presumptive suspicion is a worldly attitude, not a Christian one (Phil 2:3). One psychology textbook says this about Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls:

Perls . . . expresses his skepticism about those who seek therapy and indicates that not very many people really want to invest themselves in the hard work involved in changing. As he points out, "Anybody who goes to a therapist has something up his sleeve. I would say roughly ninety percent don't go to a therapist to be cured, but to be more adequate in their neurosis. If they are power mad, they want to get more power. . . . If they are ridiculers, they want to have a sharper wit to ridicule, and so on."¹²

¹⁰Adapted from Gerard Egan, *The Skilled Helper: Model Skills and Methods for Effective Helping* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1986) 76-77.

¹¹That is why body-language is not a light issue. Over the years the writer has observed many physical habits of counselors from foot-tapping to slouching to constant yawning that have in one way or another seriously hindered their relationships with counsees.

¹²Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1977) 179.

Believers in Christ cannot approach counseling with that cynical attitude, because Scripture says that love believes all things. No doubt people will sometimes come with insincere motives, but the counselor should not allow himself to think that until he has good reason to do so.

By expressing confidence in them. The Corinthian church had more problems than any other Paul wrote to, but nonetheless he told them, "I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you" (2 Cor. 7:16). No matter how many weaknesses counselees may have, if they are believers, the counselor should convey the attitude that he is confident they will respond well to the counseling and grow through it.

Because Scripture states that God is at work in believers "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13) and because Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, . . . and they follow Me" (John 10:27), the counselor should have an attitude of relative confidence that believing counselees will respond positively to the directives of the Lord. He should also communicate the same to people he is helping. Frequently, in fact in every epistle but one, Paul follows this practice with people he was counseling through his letters. In each he advises them about serious problems in their midst and in their lives. With only one exception (Galatians), his teaching, reproof, correction, and admonition join with expressions of confidence in and respect for those whom he counsels.

Paul not only knew the problems of people to whom he wrote; he also recognized and appreciated the good qualities and behavior that God had accomplished in them. Furthermore, he gives the impression that he expects them as Christians to respond to counsel from the Lord in a positive way. In essence, he respected them and had confidence in them because he respected and had confidence in the Lord and His Word. So it should be with today's counselor as he counsels. He should communicate an attitude of respect for and confidence in his counselees because he has respect for and confidence in the Lord and the promises and power of His word. As God works in them to produce godly strengths and virtues, it is appropriate for the counselor to praise God and let his counselees know what he sees. When they have done a good job on their homework, it is fitting for him to tell them that. In counseling, he certainly must deal honestly and forthrightly with problems in lives of people, but he must also remember that the counsel of Phil 4:8 about focusing on the things that

are lovely, honorable, virtuous, right, and worthy of praise applies to counseling as well as to the normal routine of life.

The writer of Hebrews provides another good example of this principle in action. In the last part of chap. 10 he warns his readers sternly about the danger of apostasy, into which he undoubtedly feared they might fall (vv. 26-31). Before leaving the topic, however, he commends them for the good they have already done (vv. 32-34) and expresses confidence that they will heed his warning and prove themselves to be genuine believers. Verse 39 records, "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul."

By welcoming their input. A counselor can show respect for his counselees by asking them to help him through evaluating the sessions and suggesting improvements. He could say to them, "God has brought us together, and He not only wants to use me in your life but also wants to use you in my life." This also entails a willingness to receive their negative input without becoming defensive or irritated. Any such criticism or complaint provides him an opportunity to model the godly responses that he wants them to develop in their own lives. Numerous times in this writer's counseling, he has had to respond to criticism by admitting his wrong and asking forgiveness from the counselee.

By maintaining confidentiality. The counselor must show respect to his counselees by guarding their reputations as much as he possibly can without disobeying God. "As much as he possibly can" is as far as he can go, because confidentiality is not always possible (or best) in light of the commands Jesus gave in Matt 18:16-17. There Jesus says that if a brother is sinning and proves unwilling to listen to private rebuke, a believer should "take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." Regarding these verses Adams has written,

The implication of this biblical requirement to seek additional help in order to reclaim an offender is that Christians must never promise absolute confidentiality to any person. Frequently it is the practice of Bible-believing Christians to give assurances of absolute confidentiality, never realizing that they are following a policy that originated in the Middle Ages and that is unbiblical. . . .

Is it right, then, to refuse any confidentiality at all? No, confidentiality is assumed in the gradual widening of the sphere of concern to other persons set forth in Matthew 18:15ff. As you read the words of our Lord in that passage, you get the impression that it is only reluctantly, when all else fails, that more and more persons may be called in. The ideal seems to be to keep the matter as narrow as possible. . . .

What then does one say when asked to keep a matter in confidence? We ought to say, "I am glad to keep confidence in the way that the Bible instructs me. That means, of course, I shall never involve others unless God requires me to do so." In other words, we must not promise *absolute* confidentiality, but rather, confidentiality that is consistent with biblical requirements.¹³

This kind of confidentiality, along with all the other ways we show respect, is essential to building a relationship of trust between counselor and counselee.

INVOLVEMENT THROUGH SINCERITY

The kind of relationship a counselor should seek to develop with his counselees can exist only when they know he is genuine and honest. Paul described his ministry as "not walking in craftiness . . . but by manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2). Concerning this verse Hughes has written,

So far from being marked by subterfuge, self-interest, and deceit, however, Paul's ministry was one in which the truth was manifested, openly displayed, outspokenly proclaimed (cf. 3:12f.), in such a manner that none could gainsay the genuineness and sincerity of his motives.¹⁴

The counselor must be like Paul in his counseling, having no hidden agendas or disguised motives, but openly revealing the truth about who he is (and even what he is thinking) to those he seeks to

¹³Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 30-32. See also George Scipione, "The Limits of Confidentiality in Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 7/2 (1984):29-34.

¹⁴Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 124.

help.¹⁵ Only then will they be able to trust him through the process.

What are some areas in which he can show his sincerity and practice honesty in counseling? Scripture indicates he can do so in the following ways.

Be honest about your qualifications. It is easy for a counselor to misrepresent his credentials to counselees in an attempt to gain their respect and confidence. His goal may be legitimate, but the method is not. Even the great counselor Paul, who had every right to throw around his title of "apostle," more often referred to himself as merely "a servant of Christ" (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Tit 1:1; etc.). The counselor should follow this humble example and represent himself in the same way to his counselees. Certainly he must never exaggerate or otherwise deceive them about his qualifications. A relationship of trust will be highly unlikely if they find out he has lied to them!

Be honest about your own weaknesses. Openness about his own personal problems and struggles is an effective way of showing others that a counselor is sincere. Paul told the Corinthians, "When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, . . . I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:1-3). He did not present himself as somebody who always had it all together. He was honest about the fact that he had weaknesses and fears. When he wrote to the Corinthians again, he told them that during a time of affliction he and Timothy had been "burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life" (2 Cor 1:8).

That was the man who said in 1 Cor 10:13 that God would never allow Christians to be tempted beyond what they are able to bear. Yet to the same people he admitted to an experience of being so burdened that he did not think he could take it anymore. This is another reason Paul was such a great counselor: he was able to proclaim the truth firmly without leaving people under the impression that he was perfect or unable to relate to their failings (cf. Rom 7:14-

¹⁵This, of course, does not mean that he should tell his counselees everything about himself or volunteer everything he is thinking at any given moment. Nevertheless, a willingness to share his thoughts and experiences with them is a good indicator of the godliness of his attitudes toward them, toward himself, and toward God. Reluctance to be open and transparent when appropriate and helpful, may indicate pride and a fear of man that is unworthy of a Christian, especially a Christian counselor.

25).

A counselor needs to be careful that his self-disclosure is not inappropriate in nature or in duration. He does not want to make his counselees think that he needs counseling more than they do, nor should he spend an inordinate amount of time talking about his problems when they came to receive help for theirs. But an appropriate openness about himself is very helpful in showing sincerity and thus establishing involvement. And whatever he does, he must never pretend to be something he is not.

Be honest about your goals and agenda. Generally speaking, it is advisable and fitting for a counselor to, in a prudent manner, let counselees know from the beginning what he is trying to do and how he intends to do it. He should be up front about his counseling method and standard. He should commend himself to them by being sincere and open. He should not play games with them. He should make it clear that God and the Bible are the sources of his authority. He can also let them know he does it this way because he is convinced that God's way of describing problems, identifying their causes, and solving them is really superior to any other way.

Occasionally people come to this writer wanting their problems to be labeled, interpreted, and solved psychologically. The frequent answer to them is something like this:

I want to serve and help you and I'm firmly convinced that the best way to do that is God's way. I am resolutely committed to the Scriptures as my sole authority, because I believe God knows far better what our problems really are, why we have them, and what to do about them than anyone else. So because I'm a Christian who is convinced that God's way of understanding and dealing with problems is far superior to any other way and because I want to give you the best help available, my method will be based on Scripture. If you want any different approach, you'll have to secure another counselor. For the Lord's sake and for yours, I can't approach it any other way. [This, of course, is a condensed version of what might involve a considerable amount of time to develop and explain, but it does contain the bare bones of this writer's response to people who are enamored with psychology.]

Over the years this response has brought appreciation for the counselor's honesty, and the counselees have stayed for help. From the very start they would see he was going to be honest with them and that did not destroy the needed relationship. It rather enhanced it.

A biblical counselor must never follow the example of many non-Christian therapists, who hide their true intentions and play games with people in order to get them to change. About Haley, one such therapist, Foley has written,

A third tactic [of Haley's counseling approach] is the encouraging of usual behavior. In this case resistance to the advice can only result in change. For instance, asking a domineering woman to take charge of the family will often highlight her interaction and result in her wanting to recede more into the background. What is important in Haley's approach is the question of control. If the therapist tells the domineering woman to lead, she is no longer leading but following the instructions of the therapist. . . . Like Zen Master the therapist induces change in the client by the use of paradox.¹⁶

Any kind of "reverse psychology" like that is unacceptable for the biblical counselor. It will only create barriers to his desired involvement with the counselee.

Be honest about your limitations as a counselor. When a counselor makes mistakes or has difficulty knowing how to proceed in a particular case, he should admit that. Paul told the Galatians he was "perplexed" about them (Gal 4:20; cf. 2 Cor 4:8). Also, he writes, "I am afraid that when I come again my God will humiliate me before you" (2 Cor 12:21). Now that's being honest! Paul knew and admitted that he was fallible as a minister, an admission that revealed his sincerity and enabled people to trust him.

What role does establishing a facilitative relationship with a counselee play in the counseling process? Scripture underscores its crucial place by exhortation and example. Further, what Scripture teaches, counseling experience illustrates. Here is one counselee's evaluation of some of the factors she considered most helpful in her counseling experience:

For me the content of the counseling in many ways was secondary. Often it was who the counselor was that laid the foundation for whether I could trust, accept, and do what was presented during the counseling.

¹⁶Vincent D. Foley, *An Introduction to Family Therapy* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1974) 84-85.

Admittedly, though, the two cannot be separated. If the counseling is not adequate then whoever the counselor is will not make a difference. But the one has had such an impact on me that I'd like to speak to the issue of the counselor first and probably most, but not to negate nor lessen the importance of the counseling.

It was a big step for me to be under the tutelage of a male. My relationships with both men and women have been so bad that I didn't trust anyone, although it was worse with men than with women. A counselor needs to be trustworthy. For me some of the hardest things in my life did not hit the table until long after I knew my counselor. Much of that was simply that I needed to know that no matter what was happening, he could be trusted. I had many experiences with people who didn't believe me when I told them certain things were happening in my life. I assumed that most people were like that, and feared that they all were. So I did not easily trust anyone. Time was needed and I needed to see that this counselor believed in me. I needed to see that he trusted me. I don't mean to suggest that he never had the right to question the validity of my situation (in fact he did), but I simply needed to see that I was going to be trusted, accepted and believed in.

This also then implies the need for patience, longsuffering, love and respect for the counselee. On one occasion I walked out on the counselor and slipped back down the slide, yet he was patient with me. He hurt with me and even in the midst of my own failings, I sensed the respect from him that helped me start climbing the ladder again. The counselor must not express either verbally or non-verbally the impression that this is just another problem and let's quickly get it solved and move on to more important things or people. My counselor's credibility was built over the long haul he continued to love when I did not love and tried to run. The counselee is important and this must be conveyed. The problem, whatever it is, is serious simply because it is to the counselee and the counselee needs to know that he or she is being taken seriously.

One counselor I've had seemed to have the answers too available on his cuff. At times he responded too quickly and gave the impression of having a canned approach, and I left feeling that he didn't sense the difficulty that existed and the time needed for rebuilding. Whereas my counselor seemed much more sensitive to my own hurts, and although he didn't hesitate to confront me with hard truths, he did it in ways that I knew without a doubt that he loved and cared for me and my growth in Christ.

One other very big element I needed and looked for was whether or not I was accepted. Even when things would seem to go from bad to worse, did he still accept me? As mentioned earlier, this didn't mean that he condoned everything I had done or still did. It didn't mean that

he never rebuked or reproved me or called on me to repent, but it did mean that he did it in a loving and gracious way so that I knew he was my friend and not my enemy. It also meant that my counselor affirmed me when possible he commended and complimented as well as challenged.

To sum it all up, I would say that the most effective counselors are those who are given to prayer, sensitive, loving, patient, tender, forgiving, trustworthy, giving, compassionate, and they counsel in a way that matches that lifestyle. In a sentence, the most effective counselors are people who know Jesus, reflect Jesus, relate to and counsel people in the way He did.

As that letter illustrates, those who come for counsel are often scrutinizing the counselor to see whether he or she is someone who can be trusted. If the counselor is trustworthy, he can establish and maintain the kind of relationship that will make the counseling a profitable experience for both parties.

Though God sometimes chooses to accomplish His work through unlikely ways and unlikely people, the Bible emphasizes (and the above letter illustrates) that God usually changes lives in a situation where a relationship of concern and trust exists between the helper and the one who needs help. Thus the counselor must do all he can to wrap the content of his counseling in a package of compassion, respect, and honesty.