

# Ethical Issues in Pastoral Counseling

*By Bill Blackburn*

[Dr. Bill Blackburn is pastor of the Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville, Texas. This article was originally prepared for InterVarsity Press and published in a Handbook for Therapists, Pastors, and Counselors under the title Christian Counseling Ethics. It is used here by permission.]

Pastor, can I talk with you sometime this week? I need some help." "I am so torn up about what I need to do with my mother. Can you see me this week?" "I lost my job, and I need to talk." "Pastor, my wife told me that she wants a divorce and that she hasn't loved me for a long time. I don't know what to do. Can we get together?" "I think the Lord may be calling me into the ministry, but I'm not, sure. I just need to talk with you." "I've never felt anything like this before. Somebody told me I might be depressed. Can you help me?"

As a pastor I receive numerous requests such as these, many of which result in pastoral counseling sessions. Each story is different, and new dimensions of the original request are discovered once the story unfolds. But what is similar in each instance? Here are people who are hurting and reaching out for help, and they are reaching out to a pastor of a church, implying a recognition that there are spiritual dimensions to their dilemmas.

This chapter will address the major ethical issues involved in pastoral counseling. These issues center around how a pastor sees his or her role as Pastor and the particular dimensions of that role when he or she is doing pastoral counseling. The kinds of questions this article will address include: How is Pastoral counseling understood in light of the total work of the pastor? Considering the biblical image of the pastor as shepherd, how does that affect the understanding and practice of pastoral counseling? What about the common tendency in pastoral counseling that "uses" God as a means to the end of personal peace? What are some of the limits of what a pastor can or should do in the area of pastoral counseling? What are the ethical dimensions of referral? What are some basic guidelines for pastors who counsel? Searching for answers to these and other questions will, I hope, aid pastors and others who counsel to explore some of the ethical dimensions of counseling.

## **Pastoral Counseling in Context**

Many pastors divide their work as pastor into three main areas:

- (1) preaching/teaching,
- (2) pastoral care and
- (3) leadership/administration.

Obviously, the three areas overlap and are intertwined.

I include pastoral counseling in the area of pastoral care (2), Whereas pastoral care would include such things as hospital visitation, telephone calls expressing concern or reassurance, and informal, brief conversations about needs in people's lives, pastoral counseling, as used here refers to those times when an appointment is made and a church member comes asking for help, guidance, or perspective on a problem she or he is facing.

It is important for a pastor to set guidelines and limits as to the amount of time he or she will spend on various duties. In my own case, I explained to my church when I became their pastor that I would do only three to four hours a week of pastoral counseling and that I would see persons for no more than three sessions.

Why did I set these guidelines, and why do I still hold to them? I do not believe that a pastor can do more than three to four hours a week of counseling and get the rest of his job done. My major thrust as a pastor is preacher/teacher. My mornings are spent in my study and are given to prayer, study and preparation of sermons and Bible studies. My main focus as a pastor is not on counseling, although I do much pastoral-care work. But I do not believe a pastor can lead and build a church with the emphasis on pastoral counseling. And as a fellow pastor noted, "When the body of Christ functions as it should, a lot of problems will be resolved at a 'grass roots' level, the first level where counseling ought to take place" (Getz, 1980, p. 132).

Second, I keep these guidelines to protect myself and my church members. Ministers can get into trouble in sexual relationships with persons they were first counseling. It is striking how dangerously intimate and even seductive a counseling session can become when a woman is pouring out her heart to a male minister, especially if she is in a bad marriage or is unmarried. He can be providing with his listening and acceptance something no other male is giving her, and the issues of transference and counter transference loom large (Seats, Trent and Kim, 1993). Additionally, if there is not a general guideline regarding the number of sessions, it can be easy to start selecting who will have more sessions and who will have fewer. Often those decisions are made even unconsciously by such needs as affirmation, dependence or sexual desire.

Third, research has shown that many parishioners who do in-depth, long-term counseling with their minister will end up leaving the church. The counselees can end up feeling exposed and feeling that the accepted veneer of social contact has been removed. They can also believe that the pastor is singling them out from the pulpit in his sermon examples when in fact he is speaking more generally.

Finally, by following these guidelines I limit my counseling to brief, supportive counseling and referral counseling. I believe that these are the forms of counseling most appropriate for pastors (Stone, 1994). Although I have the educational requirements and experience necessary to do counseling, I do not feel that long-term counseling is what I should be doing as pastor. That is not what God has called me to do as a pastor of this local congregation. By adhering to these guidelines, other pastors are able to decide this for themselves as well.

### **The Pastor as Shepherd**

The most basic image of the pastor in the New Testament is that of a shepherd. That is, of course, what the word pastor literally means. And what is the role of the shepherd? Looking at the key passages of Ezekiel 34 and John 10 as well as Matthew 18:10-14 and Luke 15:3-6, we see that the shepherd (1) provides for the sheep, (2) protects the sheep and (3) guides the sheep.

What does this tell us about the pastor as counselor? Counseling is an extension or different dimension of the pastor's total work. In the context of counseling the pastor provides scriptural and spiritual insight as well as perspective on what is happening in the counselee's life, given the pastor's training and experience and the exercise of the gifts of wisdom, discernment and teaching.

The pastor offers protection in several ways. In the trusting and confidential counseling relationship, the individual, couple or family can pour out what is being felt or report what has happened, knowing that what is heard is listened to with openness, concern, confidentiality, and prayer. Protection is provided when a couple or family has come for counseling and the pastor serves as interpreter/mediator. The pastor acts in this role as one who helps the counselees deal with conflict but also keeps the conflict in bounds.

There is another way the pastor provides protection. He or she can warn the counselee(s) about the destructive ways other persons have dealt with the same kinds of problems. And he or she can caution the client from seeking help in either destructive or inappropriate ways, such as abusing alcohol or drugs, "looking for love in all the wrong places," or wrongful sexual encounters. It is important to discuss the danger of major decisions made during a crisis, which can sometimes include suicide.

A Pastor also provides guidance, which can include various ways of listening, responding, and offering observations and possible suggestions. For example, I was initially trained in the somewhat stereotypical Rogerian nondirective approach to counseling, and although I continue to benefit greatly from that training, which taught me to listen carefully and to let the person know by some form of reflection that at they were being heard, I moved some time ago to a more directive stance in counseling, which I believe is thoroughly biblical.

In the more directive approach to guidance, a pastor listens carefully and explores through questions and clarification what the client's issues are, how they are viewed by him or her, how they have been responded to and what the person sees as the options. Then the counselor shares what he or she has heard from the counselee, some perspective on what is happening, and initial guidelines or suggestions about how to deal with the issues. Here the pastor can deal with biblical principles that seem pertinent and can point to particular Scripture passages, and can even assign some specific tasks to do, such as reading certain Bible verses or other books. Here the pastor may also discuss with the counselee the importance of taking care of him- or herself in regard to diet, exercise, sleep, hobbies, social contact, and spiritual disciplines.

### **Integrity of the Pastor**

In any discussion of ethics, integrity is central. Integrity implies soundness, adherence to principle, completeness in the sense of being undivided. What shape does integrity take for pastors who counsel?

**First**, integrity is seen as faithfulness to the Lord. It must be understood that whatever problems are presented in a pastoral, counseling session, the ultimate issue is the person's relationship to the Lord" Wayne Oates, a pioneer in the fields of pastoral counseling and psychology of religion, deeply desires to help pastoral counselors see "the difference it can make if you and I make the presence of the Eternal God the central dynamic in our dialogue with counselees." He adds, "In essence, I want to move from dialogue to triologue in pastoral counseling" (1986, p. 23).

This does not mean that every counseling session should become a mini--sermon. But when pastoral counseling is understood this way, it can dramatically change the counseling event. How the counselee presents himself, what issues he raises, what he does not want to talk about, what history he reports--all become facets of the deepest issue of his life, his relationship to the Lord.

In a classic work in the field of pastoral care, *The Minister and the Care of Souls*, Williams writes, "To bring salvation to the human spirit is the goal of all Christian ministry and pastoral care" (1961, p. 23). He goes on to observe, "The key to pastoral care lies in the Christological center of our faith, for we understand Christ as bringing the disclosure of our full humanity in its destiny under God" (p. 13).

God is not just a utility player called in as one among others to help the client. In a prophetic

message to pastors and other Christian leaders at Leadership Network's 1993 annual conference, "The Church in the 21st Century," Crabb detailed how easy it is to so focus on the needs of people that God is then used to meet a need. God becomes part of the recipe given to people to help them feel better. Crabb suggests that a crucial question to ask when a counselee presents symptoms is, "What are the obstacles in the soul of this person that are blocking them from God?" (1993).

Consider a distinction made by Oates between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of psychoanalysis concerning the issue of leaving one's father and mother. Oates observes that psychoanalysis dwells on the fixation and looks to the individual to use the insight to manage his or her life better by a courageous act of will. The New Testament, to the contrary, says that "in the beginning it was not so," i.e., the Creator intended that a person leave father and mother. He or she is empowered to do so by reason of the larger love of God and neighbor (1986, p. 47).

This is another illustration of the importance of faithfulness to God in pastoral counseling. When God is at the center of the counseling session, he is never just one of those "things" trotted out to help someone.

A **second** facet of integrity is integrity of role. A continuity exists between who you are as pastor of the church and who you are in the counseling session. Who you are, your perspective and how you present yourself have unity, completeness. In the pastoral counseling session you are still the pastor; you are not now junior psychologist or psychiatrist. You are not now a counselor applying the latest technique learned in the last workshop you attended. You are a pastor seeking to be faithful to the Lord and to your calling as you listen and address a person who is seeking help.

**Third**, there is integrity in regard to Scripture. The person seeking out the pastor may not be directly asking, as did King Zedekiah, "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17), but that question is certainly in the background of the session. Therefore what is shared and advised must have integrity with Scripture and not be in violation of scriptural principles,

**Fourth**, there is an integrity with the congregation. In the pastoral counseling setting the pastor represents the congregation. Pastoral counseling occurs within the body of Christ. The pastor acts as agent for the congregation in the sense that he or she symbolizes the care of the congregation, speaks as the leader of the congregation and represents the congregation's further resources to help deal with what is raised in counseling. What happens in the counseling session should not be in conflict with the pastor's role as representative of the congregation.

Integrity must be kept in regard to what has been promised. The pastor must take opportunities directly and indirectly to interpret and reinterpret his or her role in the counseling setting. Care must be taken not to promise too much or to hold out unrealistic hope. My mentor and professor of pastoral counseling, Wayne Oates, used to tell students of pastoral counseling, "It's the promises I make that keep me awake. It's the promises I keep that let me sleep."

**Sixth**, integrity can concern the limits of the pastor's training, experience, or responsibility. Many lay people do not understand what pastors have been trained to do and what their training did not include. I have found, however, that when this is discussed, most persons appreciate the pastor's being honest in confessing a lack of training, background, or time to deal with the particular issue being faced. In regard to such things as substance abuse, unrelenting depression, sexual abuse, bulimia, or the serious threat of suicide, for instance, I am careful to explain why I cannot provide all of the help that is needed and why another professional needs to be called on.

Sullender and Malony state in an article in the 7th journal of Pastoral Care, "Clergy must be mature enough and professional enough to know their limits when it comes to counseling troubled persons. These limits may involve training, available time, conflict of interest, or just available energy" (1990, p. 206).

All pastors and other Christian ministers would do well to meditate on this verse describing King David and his leadership of the people of Israel: "And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (Ps 78:72).

### **The Ethics of Referral**

It is important for pastors who counsel to be willing to refer their counsees to other professionals and to be knowledgeable about when and to whom a counselee should be referred. Following are some general guidelines that can be used in this regard.

**First**, a minister has a responsibility to know the variety of professionals to whom she or he might refer. In my situation, I minister in a semirural area but have the good fortune to have competent professionals in two nearby towns and a metropolitan area about an hour away. If I am going to refer a parishioner to another professional, I will want to know his or her (1) reputation, (2) training, (3) experience, (4) professional supervision, (5) network of other professionals or hospitals to call on, and (6) faith commitment or appreciation of such a commitment in the client. The first three points are self-explanatory, but the last three may require some explanation.

It is very important that the professional, whether a pastoral counselor, clinical social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist, is receiving some form of supervision or consultation on their work. This indicates their professional ethics and their desire to keep perspective in the midst of helping people in need. What is the extent of the professional's network of consultation and referral? And if hospitalization is a possibility, what arrangements can they make for the client?

Should a pastor refer parishioners only to Christian counselors? No. I do so whenever I can, and I am fortunate that I have many to whom I can refer. However, I will refer to a non-Christian if I know she has the best skills and background in dealing with this particular need and that she would neither demean religious faith nor suggest that the person do something in violation of their faith commitment.

**Second**, a pastor has the responsibility to appropriately present the referral to the client. The pastor must interpret carefully why she is making the referral and why it is being made to the particular professional. He or she should explain personal limitations of time and/or training, and the qualifications of the other professional, while being careful not to promise what the professional will do. It is a good idea for the pastor to reassure the counselee at this point that he isn't crazy (and I do use that word sometimes) or about to lose his mind. This is what many clients have been afraid of, and that fear can be reinforced with a referral to a mental health professional.

**Next**, the pastor should explain how to get in touch with the person referred to and something of what the client can expect from the sessions. If the cost is raised, provide what information is available and let the person know that the church has a fund to help with these sorts of costs (if it does). In some situations the pastor can make the call to the professional and help set up the first appointment.

**Fourth**, the pastor should reassure the client about their relationship together. I do this so that the

counselee knows I am not rejecting him or her. I explain that I will be in touch and that along the way we can get back together to talk things over and to pray. I am, of course, careful here not to serve as another therapist, but as pastor.

**Fifth**, after reassuring the client I as pastor have a responsibility to maintain that relationship. I do this myself by having the client on my prayer list so that I am reminded regularly to pray for him or her and to maintain contact through phone calls, notes, and visits.

**Finally**, it is appropriate for the pastor to keep proper contact with the professional to whom the client has been referred. Some professionals want information prior to the first visit, and others do not. Personally, I do not seek to get a report on the sessions, but with appropriate consent from the counselee I do want to know how things are going and what I can do to be of further help. And because of the continuing relationship with the client through the church, I will sometimes consult with the professional on any relationship issues that may come up due to this.

### **Boundary Issues**

How should pastors decide how much to counsel, whom to see, appropriate boundaries in counseling, and how available to be to persons in need? These boundary issues are crucial, because if they are not decided in some reasonable manner, the pastor can risk his or her effectiveness, mental health, family life, and leadership of the congregation.

In the guidelines outlined earlier I noted that I do only three to four hours a week of counseling. That obviously varies week by week, but that is still almost half a day per week of pastoral counseling, and depending on the size of the church, even that can be too much time for this facet of pastoral ministry. In order to hold to a limited amount of counseling it is important that the pastor not communicate an unlimited availability to the congregation. One of my professors of preaching, George A. Buttrick, used to tell us, "Many pastors are a quivering mass of availability." I cannot be the husband, father, and pastor I need to be and also be constantly available for counseling.

Most pastors could end up counseling twelve hours a day if it were allowed. But a failure to draw boundaries and deal with the limits of what one can do often implies other issues. Is there such a need to please that the pastor cannot say "No" or "Later"? Is there a feeling of impotence in other areas of ministry that leads the minister to do an inordinate amount of counseling and thereby feel the power and helpfulness and adulation that often comes from counseling? Is there a problem in the pastor's marriage or family that encourages getting emotional needs inappropriately met in counseling? Does the pastor have a messiah complex, seen in rescuing persons in trouble? Is there withdrawal from other duties and relationships and into counseling? In looking at those who are seen for counseling and those who are not, is there a clue to the underlying issues related to too much counseling?

On this last question of who is or is not seen for counseling, a troubling issue for many pastors is whether or not to do counseling with persons who are not members of the congregation. I generally do not see persons for counseling who are from outside my congregation. I will see someone who is attending and not a member, and I will on occasion see persons in crisis whom I know in the community and who ask to see me. In this latter instance, it is almost always for one session in which a referral is made if that is needed. One of the issues for pastors today is that there is a greater possibility of legal liability when counseling persons who are not members of your congregation (ABA, 1989).

Concerning boundaries, in looking at the Gospels, did Jesus see every troubled soul in each village he visited? Did he stay in one place until every sick person was healed? Was Bartimaeus the only blind person in Jericho? Didn't Jesus in fact retreat either with the disciples or by himself when he needed to? And when he retreated, were there not still persons who could have been helped who were left behind? And didn't Jesus in his ministry move more toward preaching and the training of the disciples and less toward healing and other miracles?

From the time of Satan's testing in the wilderness at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, to how Jesus presented himself to the crowds and the authorities in his last days in Jerusalem, to his resurrection appearances and final discourses prior to the ascension, Jesus was setting boundaries and defining limits according to who he was and what his mission was. Look again at the repeated "I am" statements of Jesus, and you will see boundaries, limits, and possibilities.

As a contemporary pastor, how does one deal with these boundary issues? I myself find it necessary to continue interpreting to the congregation what my role is as pastor, how I spend my time, and what my guidelines are for counseling. It is important to set aside time for the various parts of pastoring, such as preparation for preaching and teaching, administration, and pastoral care. My secretary has my schedule and sets appointments for me within the time that is already allotted to certain things. Time is protected for sermon preparation, worship planning, administrative matters, meetings with staff and other key leaders, and pastoral visitation. I also protect time for my family and for my own personal renewal and rest.

### **General Guidelines for Pastoral Counseling**

Following are some general guidelines for pastors who counsel to keep in mind. Some of these have been discussed earlier in the chapter but bear repeating here.

**1. Maintain confidentiality.** The exception to this rule would be if there are ethical or legal reasons dictating the breaking of a confidence. It is imperative that pastors familiarize themselves with the laws in their state pertaining to privileged communications with the clergy and to the exceptions to confidentiality. Usually these exceptions will include such things as suspicion of child abuse. These kinds of situations point to the necessity of not making a blanket promise that nothing will be shared out of the counseling session.

**2. Avoid manipulating the counselee.** This almost goes without saying, but because there is such a risk due to the vulnerability of many persons in crisis who seek pastors out, it needs to be stated.

**3. Avoid making decisions for the person seeking help.** Because the pastor is an authority figure who is knowledgeable about the Bible and is assumed to have a strong prayer life, many persons come to him or her expecting a divinely revealed answer to the problem at hand. As I've indicated earlier, I believe the pastor should be directive in his or her approach in counseling but should be careful about simply making decisions for the counselee.

**4. Do not inappropriately carry messages.** There are times in the ministry of reconciliation when interpreting the behavior or words of one person to another can be appropriate and healing. However, because the pastor often has contact with the family or group the client may be in conflict with or alienated from, sometimes there is the desire or expectation on the part of the client that the pastor act as a Western Union messenger. This is inappropriate.

**5. Do not be a voyeur.** Particularly in the area of sexuality, the pastor must careful not to seek,

directly or indirectly, information that is not germane to the issue at hand. Seeking information for sexual titillation is inappropriate, unfair and counterproductive.

**6. Never become romantically or sexually involved with a counselee.** This is assumed, of course, but needs to be stated because it is an immensely important and pervasive issue. A one-on-one counseling relationship with a person of the opposite sex can be powerfully seductive. This is why I make sure someone else is in the office area if I am counseling a woman counselee, and why I have maintained a guideline for myself of seeing a person for only three sessions. In a study done of Southern Baptist ministers through the Baptist Sunday School Board, it was found that among ministers who became involved in adulterous affairs, 71 percent of those affairs started through counseling sessions (Booth, 1994).

Wayne Oates used to tell his students that he knew he was beginning to cross over a dangerous line when he woke up in the morning and began thinking about a female counselee he would see that day. If, in anticipation of seeing her, he was careful to think about which tie to wear, he knew danger was lurking.

## **Conclusion**

The opportunity, responsibility and calling to be a shepherd is awesome and ought to be so intimidating that we go to our knees before the Lord, knowing that we cannot do what must be done and be who we need to be without God's help. I firmly believe that in the years ahead, the task of the pastor will grow more difficult because of the needs of the people, the expectations that grow into demands, and the confusion and deterioration of our society. Only by prayer, wisdom and much discipline will pastors be able to carry out their God-given assignment and maintain their spiritual, mental, physical, familial and social health.

My deep conviction, borne of experience as a pastor, is that time management that grows out of faith and a clear understanding of the mission of the church and the work of the pastor is crucial to maintaining health. In that regard, I highly recommend two books that have proved invaluable to me in this area: *First Things First* by Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), and *The Management of Ministry* by James D. Anderson and Ezra Earl Jones (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

Finally, my prayer for pastors reading this article is that God will use it to help every pastor be a shepherd with integrity of heart and skillful hands (Ps 78:72).

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