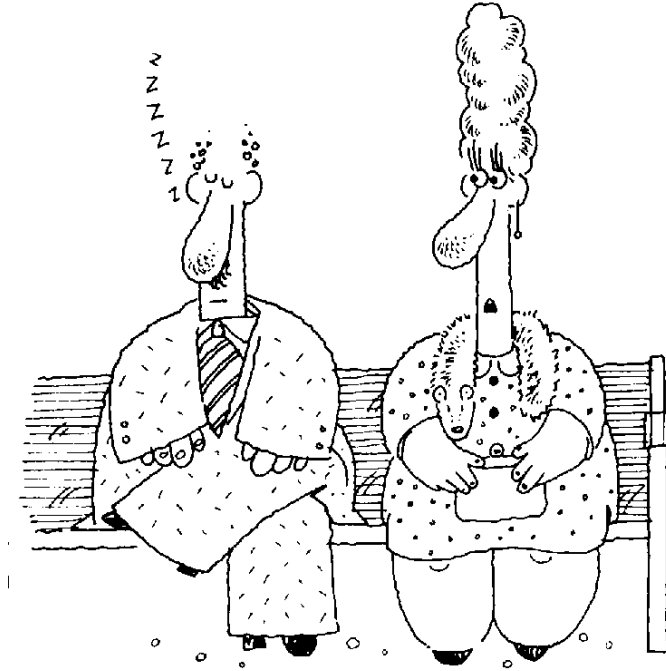


# Counselling

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“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Counselling is vital to effective Christian leadership. In Paul's words, God “comforts us in all our troubles” so that we can help others as they confront their own problems. “Counselling” describes this process of helping and comforting others in God.

In this article we will focus our attention on counselling. As with all practical disciplines, the attitude and skills which are necessary can only be developed through facing real-life situations. Such a paper as this can only serve to orient.

## The Backdrop

Too often, Christians are frustrated, cowed, defeated, apathetic. We have been browbeaten with all the expectations, but, somehow it seems to be a matter of “Do as I say, but not as I do.” Where are the effective examples? What of the individual, personal attention which is so vital if skills and attitudes are to be passed on? In short, where are the shepherds?

The truth is that there are some very basic dynamics which must be in place in our leadership if we are to be effective in building disciples of Jesus Christ. Counselling is central to these dynamics, and in turn, counselling rests upon six critical factors:

1. If we who lead do not know where and how and why we are going - if we are blind leaders of the blind - we will lead others right into the ditch.
2. If there is no openness, trust, and trustworthiness; worse still, if we do not openly love and care for one another, there is no basis for the quality of relationships in which problems and sins can be exposed, perspectives shared, and advice given and received.
3. If I make a decision for you, then it becomes my responsibility, and the results, good or ill, are mine, not yours.
4. Problems develop and “present” themselves in ways which fit basic patterns. An exploration of the situation and of the obvious issues, using careful and sensitive tools such as questions and listening eyes and ears, can therefore help us to unearth the roots of the thorny bushes we have bumped into.
5. If there is an atmosphere of respect and confidentiality, then these roots are far more likely to be exposed. Patience, however, is always necessary. It is always slow and difficult work when it comes to exposing matters which we find painful or embarrassing.
6. The more involved I am in digging up the root of my problems, and in developing approaches to solving them, the more likely I am to want to exert the hard and painful effort required.

See Galatians 6:1,2;  
Hebrews 10:23-25

These six factors are quite general. However, they do not, themselves, provide solutions: at most, they show us what the basic approach of an effective counsellor is like.

As convinced Christians, we know where the solutions we seek are - in the Bible. We know that it is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Surely, that is enough!

2Timothy 3:16-17

Unfortunately, it is not. The problem of “how” still remains. Although the Bible does contain answers, it is not a technician's troubleshooting guide, and, rightly so, for people are not machines. Issues of relationships, love, perception, trust, truth, maturity, tact, patience, and so on are vital. Sometimes, for instance, people cannot put their feelings into words, or are too ashamed to tell the truth.

Thank God for the Holy Spirit, The Counsellor! As Jesus himself said: “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth... He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”

John 16:13 - 14;  
1 Corinthians 2:9-12

Whilst we must be diligent and careful Bible students, we must also cultivate a sensitivity to the Spirit of God, who lives in us who are born of the Spirit, and who opens to us the things of God. (It is just as much a supernatural work of the Spirit of God to quicken a text of the Bible to our consciences and show us that it is relevant to this specific situation as it was for him to inspire the men who wrote the Bible.)

In short, we must cultivate a sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit of God as he awakens us, ever so gently, to the light and power of the Word of God. As we walk with him, we become more sensitive and confident, and so will be able to develop the sensibility and integrity to understand what he is saying to us in counselling situations, and also will have the wisdom from him to know how to best use what he reveals to us.

This, of course, is simply the outline for our walk with God in love, power, truth, and holiness. This aspect of counselling can only develop as we walk with God in our daily lives. There are no short-cuts to maturity.

Against this backdrop, also, the question of referral must arise. As we think of ourselves “with sober judgement in accordance with the measure of faith God has given (us)”, there will come the time when we meet a problem which is out of our depth. We should then seek out someone who should be more competent to handle the matter in question. The decision to seek such a counsellor, of course, should be made by the person undergoing counselling, as should all counselling related decisions.

Romans 12:13

Sometimes, in fact, professional help is needed. Thank God there are many sound and professional counsellors available to us today.

## **Problems and Solutions**

We are dealing with tertiary students in and from the Caribbean, and we are working in a framework oriented towards the building up of effective disciples. We are therefore dealing with those who are being groomed to carry our region on their shoulders well into the twenty-first century, and who reflect the cultural milieu of the Caribbean, with all its strengths and weaknesses. If we are to be successful, we must understand the challenges, problems, issues and tasks which we and our fellow-students face, and we must be able to identify with one another, and to work out and articulate forceful and effective responses.

1. We have characteristic, low, self-image. We lack confidence, self-respect, and respect for others, so we find it hard to accept how we look, speak, and act. We therefore need to learn to see ourselves as people made in God's own image with all the vast potential, dignity, and worth that this implies.
2. Our primary (familial) relationships, as a rule, are in disorder. The chaos of family breakdown leads to complicated problems when it

comes to sorting out relationships with parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and others we have to deal with. Conflicts are poorly handled and so we never do learn proper teamwork, especially when it comes to relating with authorities. We must therefore work to sort out the root of our problems with authority, conflict handling, teamwork, and relating to people, especially in our families.

3. Basic beliefs and values, as a rule, have not been thought through and so are not really our own. They are therefore vulnerable, and easily collapse under pressure of crisis or challenge. Cults, sects, political utopianism and similar groups and speculations thrive on this vulnerability.
4. Sex is a big problem. Fantasies, pornography, masturbation, fornication, homosexuality, and many other problems are live issues but are often entangled in a web of silence and shame. Passions enslave and cow us into apathy and defeat. We do not know how to have a positive, healthy courtship. A proper perspective on sex, the taming of wild passions, and the conquest of sexual sins must be high on our agenda, if we are to be, and to build, sound disciples of Christ.
5. Loneliness, mistrust, and a paralyzing fear of being betrayed must be dealt with, if we are to understand and value true intimacy and friendship. To make it worse, we have learned all the dirty and cowardly tricks when it comes to handling interpersonal differences -- lies, gossip, slander, half-truths, back-stabbing. If we are to live as the body of Christ, these must be faced and dealt with.
6. Issues such as how to work out what to do with our lives against the backdrop of societal expectations, parental ambitions, issues of social status, career options, and the question of Christian service, bedevil us. Often, we are not sure why we are in college, or whether we really want to spend our lives doing what we are studying. The social pressure to go through school and college and get a diploma or degree and thence a high-prestige, high-salary job, often lead us to rush ahead of our personal maturity and development. When problems come up, we lack a perspective and a goal, and so are easily disillusioned. Worse still, sometimes we squelch the voice of God, in pursuit of the world's agenda; prestige, pleasure, and power. We must therefore stress the issue of priorities in life, and of sorting out the basic issues before making vital decisions.
7. Matters such as careful management of time, money, efforts, and, generally, of being well-ordered and disciplined are often not dealt with until a crisis erupts. Academic failure, financial distress, being side-tracked into side issues, and other similar problems inevitably result. Discipline, order, and stewardship must be watchwords.
8. Too often we lack competence and skill in basic discipleship. We cannot study our Bible, we do not know how to share the gospel

See Matthew 7:1-5; 18:15-20  
Ephesians 4.15-16.)

See 1 John 2:15-17

effectively. Our prayer-lives are shaky. We have the bad habit of not participating in the mutual sharing, meeting and encouraging which are vital. This reflects the sad state of teaching and training and shepherding in the Church in the Caribbean.

As a rule, most common counselling situations will fit under one or more of these headings. I suggest you sit down with other (aspiring) leaders, regularly, to discuss problems in these eight areas. How do the problems arise? How can they be recognized in real-life situations? How do you approach someone about such a problem? How can such problems be dealt with, solved, removed, adjusted to, whatever?

Other problems of a more technical nature, may arise - persistent depression, deep seated personality maladjustments, serious demonic oppression, and so on. Should such a case arise, I strongly urge that you get help, fast. Being realistic about what we can and what we cannot handle is important.

## **Helping People**

Counselling is not just about problems and their solutions, but also about people, people who have problems and need help, people who want help, people who do not, people as they are, not as they “ought” to be, in short.

In trying to help people, then, we have to learn how to understand people as they are, and how to reach to them, and if it is possible, how to help them.

The first principle of helping people is simple. People can only be helped by you if they want help from you. This means that we cannot force ourselves into their lives, and that we should not trick or manipulate them into asking us to help them. Aside from being a wrong approach, the resentment it builds up will frustrate our attempts to help.

Prayer and encouragement are far more effective, and far less frustrating. Ask God to act in the situation, and to open ways to help. (Since the point is to help, resentment if God uses someone else to help is pointless.)

Relationships, and especially confidence and trust, are also critical. Love people, and care for them. Seek to encourage and to build up-and make sure you are not projecting the idea that, “if you want my approval, then you must throw your life open to me.” Acceptance of people must be unconditional - look at how Jesus accepted us, sins and all. It is only after acceptance is present, in fact, that sins and other problems can be dealt with.

Being trustworthy is vital. Can you be trusted with a secret? If not, you have no business trying to counsel others. Betrayal of a trust is perhaps

the worst form of rejection and abuse of a person. Keep confidential matters confidential, in short.

Integrity is also important. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eyes and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" carries all the force it ever did. It is therefore wise to examine ourselves before God, regularly, as we seek to counsel others.

"What are my attitudes and motives?" should ever be in our hearts, in prayer, before God. It is only when we remove the planks from our own eyes that we can see clearly to help our brothers with specks of sawdust in their eyes.

Experience, finally is basic. If we lack experience in going through tribulation, we simply lack the empathy and feel for how terribly heavy and confusing and painful and embarrassing problems and sins are. Indeed, it is as God comforts us in our own problems that we are enabled to help other people with theirs. Experience, in short, is

a basic qualification and preparation. Without it, we are all-too-prone to burden people beyond their ability to bear.

## **Practical Pointers**

In an essay such as this, it is not possible to say everything. So far, then, we have simply tried to build up a basic framework for counselling. In this, section we will simply list out some quick little points which are helpful in practical situations.

1. Listen, don't preach.
2. Guide and reflect. Don't control and decide. In effect, if you decide for someone else, you are responsible for the results of the decision. Make sure your role is that of friend, listener, clarifier, mirror, pointer, compass - not dictator.
3. Mirror questions are helpful. Rephrase what was said to you as a question, and pause. As a rule, this helps the other person probe deeper into his or her problem:
  - "I am not sure what to do."
  - "You seem to be torn two ways ..."
  - "I want to do A, and yet I don't want to."
  - "There is something about A that both attracts and repels ..."
  - "Somehow, I cannot make up my mind about B."
  - "So, B is a source of tension ..."
  - "If I could only clarify B, then A would sort itself out ..."
4. Use positive words as much as possible, or at least, neutral ones. If, for instance, above, we had said, "so, you are confused about B," it would imply that we are telling our friend that he is confused! True, perhaps, but not tactful.

5. Ask for opinions, and resist the temptation to tell people what is wrong, and what should be done. This cuts off the opening-up process (and, maybe, the NEXT item was the critical one!) and moves you into the driver's seat.
6. Patiently wait until you both have a clear picture before looking at possible solutions. This is especially true of the temptation to fire off a Bible verse or two prematurely.
7. Let the person confront his own words, especially where contradictions come out, but do so very, very gently and tactfully.
8. When using Scripture, ask the person what he or she sees. Use questions to clarify and correct, avoiding overt correction as much as possible, so you help the person to correct himself or herself.
9. It is wise to clarify what the goals are for each counselling interview and for the overall counselling situation. Do not impose your own goals or use "hidden agenda" tactics.
10. Be as positive, accepting, tactful, encouraging, unassertive, confidential and trustworthy as possible - treat the other person just as you would want to be treated . Matthew 7:12
11. Try to clarify the who, what, where, when, why, and how, within the limits of what you need to know to help and what it is safe for you to know. Galatians 6:1-2
12. Be unshockable - ANYTHING can come out: a criminal record, hatred, hypocrisy, homosexuality, or worse. Whatever comes out, communicate the loving acceptance of Christ. Romans 5:6-11
13. Think of other useful points to add to this list. Read some good books, attend a seminar or two, discuss counselling issues with other leaders. Put whatever is useful into practice.

## **Where to go from Here**

Counselling is a vast field – one can make a career of it. Unfortunately, we have neither the time nor the space to go into more details. Besides, one only really learns to counsel by counselling. Work through the following practical exercises, which are intended to make the plunge easier.

1. Jesus was the Master Counsellor. Read the case studies in John chapters three, four and eight. Why did Jesus approach these three cases in such different ways? Is there a basic underlying method? How could we apply it today?
2. Visit a good Christian Bookstore, and look at the books in the Counselling, Courtship, Family Life and Cults sections. Which

authors seem to be most sound, clear and practical? What are the basic points they make? How can you apply them?

3. Personal Evangelism involves counselling, and many counselling situations require evangelistic counselling as people work to resolve their problems. Discuss how the sharing of the gospel and the counselling process can be integrated.
4. List some typical problems faced by college students, set up some role playing situations, and see how the principles and insights work out. Discuss the results. How does the gospel fit in?
5. Next time a friend shares his or her troubles with you, use the approaches, perspectives and pointers you have learned as you try to help.
6. How can counselling be integrated into your ministry as a cell leader, a committee member or just simply as a Christian?

Counselling is the art of helping people. We therefore need experience, some basic insights and skills. Practice, therefore, is one key.

The other key is simple - prayer: God changes situations and hearts when we pray. Let us, therefore, learn, practice and pray.