Nouthetic Confrontation in 1-2 Samuel: Two Case Studies

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Introduction

Although the concept of counseling as an institutionalized field is relatively new, the practice of advising others is not. Long before adherents crowned Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) the father of psychoanalysis, counseling already existed. In reality, the first few pages of the book of Genesis demonstrate that providing others with guidance is nearly as old as the human race.

The first counselor in history was God. After Adam and Eve transgressed against His law by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6), the Lord confronted Adam. The father of mankind was hiding in the midst of the Garden of Eden, wearing hastily sewn fig leaves that covered his recently discovered nakedness. To confront Adam with his wicked actions, God posed the penetrating question: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). This simple inquiry forced Adam’s hand and impelled him to confess what he and his wife had done.

Years later, Cain’s actions showed him to be the son of his parents. As he stood before the Lord with his rejected sacrifice and eyed with fury his brother Abel’s acceptable offering, God asked Cain: “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you master it” (Gen. 4:6b-7).

Lamentably, Cain indignantly refused God’s loving direction and instead slaughtered his brother. As with his father Adam, the Lord confronted Cain by posing a piercing question: “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen. 4:9a). Rather than recognizing his sin, Cain retorted, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9b). As a result of his murderous act and his subsequent arrogance, God exiled him to a vagabond life (Gen. 4:11-12).

God’s interactions with Adam and Cain are examples of nouthetic confrontation. This type of counseling is prevalent in Scripture, and as such is an important tool for any Christian who desires to minister to fellow believers. This paper will examine: 1) a definition of nouthetic confrontation; 2) the purpose of nouthetic confrontation; 3) two examples of nouthetic confrontation in 1-2 Samuel; and 4) some appropriate applications.

A Definition of Nouthetic Confrontation

The Meaning of Nouthetic Confrontation

Before examining two biblical case studies that illuminate the process of nouthetic confrontation, it is necessary to define the concept. The word nouthetic is a
transliteration of the Greek word νουθετέω. In New Testament times, the term carried the threefold idea of instruction, admonishment, and warning. Each of these components is important, but space limitations prohibit a detailed analysis of each. Accordingly, the remainder of this paper will focus on the second definition of the word. Jay Adams refers to this element as nouthetic confrontation, and provides a helpful explanation of what Paul meant when he urged believers to admonish each other: “[It entails] 1) Discernment of wrong doing in another that God wants changed; 2) Verbal confrontation of another with the Word of God in order to change his attitudes or behavior; 3) Confrontation of another for his benefit.”

A Defense of Nouthetic Confrontation

Although nouthetic confrontation is biblical and essential for spiritual health, numerous North American Christians are hesitant to adhere to Paul’s guidance in this area for at least two reasons. First, some Christians misunderstand Jesus’ words in Luke 6:37a: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” Recently the author overheard a woman cite this verse after listening to a pastor condemn a particular sin. Because of his “judgmental attitude,” she vowed never to hear another of his sermons. The irony of the situation is that in her zeal to adhere to a faulty interpretation of Jesus’ teachings, the woman deemed the pastor’s message to be too judgmental.

Context, however, indicates that Jesus did not denounce the practice of assessing others’ actions, but instead He addressed the issue of self-righteous judging. He criticized people who look down on others while being guilty of the same—or even more horrendous—deeds. Jesus declared: “Hypocrite, first remove the plank of wood from your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother’s eye” (Luke 6:42b). In order to help brothers and sisters who are struggling with problems, therefore, one must not be a slave of the same enticements. To ignore this point amounts to the blind striving to lead the blind (Luke 6:39).

Second, a number of believers misunderstand the true meaning of the word love. Mark Lowry, a well-known Christian comedian, articulated their aversion to the confrontation process: “How do you love the sinner and hate the sin? There’s [sic] too many of you! I ain’t got time to hate your sin—hate your own sin! Hating my sin is a fulltime job. . . . Love the sinner and hate your own sin. You hate your sin, I’ll hate my sin, and let’s love each other.” Lowry, who identifies himself as a recovering fundamentalist, sees any focus on others’ faults as pharisaical self-righteousness.

His advice, however, ignores the following mandate: “Brothers, if anyone is overtaken by some trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of humility, looking out for yourself so that you will not be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). Furthermore, James, the half-brother of Jesus, assures the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way that he is accomplishing two important tasks: 1) he is saving the sinner’s soul from death; 2) he is covering a multitude of sins (Jas. 5:20; cf. Prov. 10:12). In other words, the loving involvement of the Christian who draws attention to his brother’s faults encourages him to repent, resulting in God’s forgiveness.

Consequently, believers must hate each other’s sin because they desire God’s best for their fellow followers of Christ. True love, after all, seeks the good of others (1 Cor. 10:24). What could be more loving than turning a brother from a destructive path that will leave his life in shambles?
The Purpose of Nouthetic Confrontation

The purpose of nouthetic confrontation, therefore, is not to disparage a brother in order to feel spiritually superior. Likewise, the reason for calling attention to another’s sin is not to make certain that he pays the price for his infraction in the form of church discipline. Rather, according to Scripture the motivation for confronting a wayward brother is threefold and centers upon his restoration.

First and foremost, obedience is the primary reason why believers must take nouthetic confrontation seriously. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus commanded Christians to take an interest in each other’s spiritual wellbeing: “But if your brother sins, go and expose it confidentially. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.” The verse contains two imperative verbs (go and expose) that emphasize the Christian’s obligation to heed this directive. Only after the sinning brother rebuffs this initial attempt at restoration may one return with two or three others, and then ultimately take the case to the church for disciplinary purposes.

Second, love is another motivation for confrontation, but one must be careful to define the word correctly. Unfortunately, the term love is notoriously ambiguous in the English language. For example, one may love soccer and love his wife, but hopefully not to the same degree. Furthermore, biblical love is not a passive bubbling of emotions or mere words as one teenager learned after receiving the following email from her boyfriend: “I would cross the driest desert for you. I would swim the deepest ocean for you. I would climb the highest mountain for you because I love you! I’ll come by your house for a visit on Saturday if it doesn’t rain.”

True love, on the other hand, is active because one articulates love through concrete actions rather than abstract feelings. It is easy to say, “Let’s just love each other,” but the proof of the declaration is how one exhibits the sentiment. A powerful way to express love is to warn a errant believer of the devastation that results from continued disobedience. This concern for each other’s spiritual wellbeing mirrors the attentiveness that Jesus has for His followers, and is one way to show the world that we are His disciples (John 13:34-36).

Third, the health of the church is another motive for nouthetic confrontation. Paul told the Ephesian believers that every member serves an important purpose in the body of Christ. Rather than functioning as individualist, disjointed disciples, church members unite to form a single organism that exists to honor Jesus Christ, the body’s head. As such, the church, “being fitted together and united by what every ligament supplies, according to the proper function of each part, promotes the growth of the body for the building of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). When parts of the body do not function correctly, the fitness of the entire structure is affected. In much the same way, failure to seek the restoration of wayward believers in an active manner results in a weakened, feeble body that does not accomplish all that Christ desire His church to achieve.

Two Examples of Nouthetic Confrontation in 1-2 Samuel

Having defined nouthetic confrontation and made a case for its importance, it is time to turn the reader’s attention to two Old Testament texts in which the concept is put into practice. Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David, displeased the Lord at certain points during their reigns. Since no one is above God’s law, in both instances He sent a representative to expose the rulers’ sins.
Samuel Confronts Saul (1 Sam. 13:1-14)

When the sons of Israel looked at the nations that surrounded them, they became envious that each one possessed a human king. Throughout the preceding three centuries God had raised up many judges to deliver His covenant people from their enemies, but none of them had worn a crown or established a kingdom. The prophet Samuel was grieved to learn of the Israelites’ inappropriate yearning, but the Lord directed him to anoint a ruler even though the people had rejected God as their king (1 Sam. 8:7).

In His providence, God chose a man whose name means “asked for” in order to remind the people in the years to come that this foolish decision was theirs. Scripture reveals that Saul was handsome and stood head and shoulders above his countrymen (9:1-2). In addition to these appealing characteristics, he was a mighty warrior (11:1-11). Essentially, the son of Kish looked and acted like a king.

God confirmed His choice for ruler by directing Samuel to anoint Saul, by placing His Spirit upon him, and by changing him into another man (10:1,6). As a result of the Lord’s empowerment, Saul began to prophesy (10:10) and fight against his people’s enemies. The first monarch of Israel began well, but his heart soon drifted into flagrant disobedience.

During a campaign against the Philistines, Israel’s most persistent enemies in the eleventh century BC, Samuel instructed Saul to wait for him at Gilgal (1 Sam. 13:8). When the aged prophet failed to make an appearance within the allotted number of days, the king took it upon himself to offer a burnt offering and peace offerings to the Lord (13:9). These actions may appear to the casual reader to be innocent or perhaps even noble, but they cost Saul his kingdom.

In the book of Leviticus God selected Moses’ brother Aaron, a member of the tribe of Levi, to serve as Israel’s high priest. Only he and his descendants received divine sanction to perform the bloody work of presenting sacrifices to the Lord (Lev. 1:1-10:20). Saul’s offering of the sacrifices at Gilgal, therefore, was not praiseworthy, but prohibited. Impatience was not the king’s only offense that day; his sin was motivated by sheer rebellion. God commanded each Israelite ruler to write with his own hand a copy of the Torah and study it daily (cf. Deut. 17:18-20), so Saul deliberately transgressed against the Lord’s law.

As soon as Saul finished presenting the offerings, Samuel appeared and asked the probing question, “What have you done?” (1 Sam. 13:11a) Rather than taking this opportunity to confess his sin, the king blamed his impropriety on three sources: 1) the Israelites had scattered, likely because of discouragement; 2) Samuel’s tardiness; and 3) the Philistines’ aggressive incursion into Israelite territory. He reasoned that sacrificing to the Lord might make him more successful (13:11b-12), as if the practice were some sort of magic talisman.

That day the king learned that desperate times do not call for desperate measures. The prophet labeled Saul’s behavior and excuses as foolishness. He prophesied that the Lord would give Saul’s kingdom to a man after His own heart because the king had broken God’s commandments (13:13-14). Tellingly, Scripture does not report that Saul ever repented during this episode, and two similar acts of rebellion against the Almighty later in his life suggest that he never changed his ways (cf. 15:10-35; 22:6-23; 27:3-19).
When the king admitted he was a transgressor (15:24-25), he only did so half-heartedly because he still blamed the Israelites for his evil deeds. The Lord’s refusal to forgive his sin during this episode (15:26) is a further indication that Saul did not truly repent. In the end, his rebellion ultimately cost him his life (1 Chron. 10:13-14). His perpetual wickedness led his subjects to coin a proverb that questioned his spiritual state: “Is Saul among the prophets?” (1 Sam. 19:24). In other words, they wondered whether or not Saul truly was a follower of Yahweh.

Nathan Confronts David (2 Sam. 12:1-15)

After the Lord rejected Saul, he advised Samuel that the next king of Israel resided in Bethlehem. He directed his representative to Jesse’s family, but one by one God passed over seven strong and kingly-looking sons because He looks at the heart rather than one’s outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:7-10). Finally, the Lord led Samuel to an unassuming teenager who tended his father’s sheep. The prophet poured the horn of oil on David’s head, and the Spirit of Yahweh came upon the newly anointed young man (16:13).

Before David officially ascended to the throne, he proved himself a faithful servant of God by defeating the ferocious Goliath (17:1-58), delivering oppressed Israelite areas from Philistine aggressors (23:1-5), and sparing Saul’s life when the paranoid king sought to murder him (24:1-22; 26:1-25). Similarly, David’s four-decade reign over Israel typically was marked by godliness, and modern readers can gain insight into his intimate walk with God by reading his numerous psalms.

Second Samuel 12:1-15, however, records one of two events in which David willfully disregarded God’s commandments. One spring after he had reigned for years, David remained in Jerusalem while his armies went out to war. His military advisors were concerned that he might be killed in battle and had recommended that he remain in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 21:17). After rising from an afternoon siesta, the king stumbled across a scene that he would come to regret in later days.

From his high perch on the palace rooftop, he could look down into the courtyards of the surrounding houses and see the private activities that took place behind high walls. When he accidentally spied a woman bathing, his heart became lustful. Although he had many wives, David inquired about the woman and learned that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of his mighty warriors (2 Sam. 23:39).

David ignored Bathsheba’s marital status and “took her” (11:4). The force of the verb is such that it relays the rashness of the king’s sinful act. His moment of passion led to Bathsheba’s pregnancy (11:5), and David’s progressively frantic schemes to conceal his immorality ultimately led to Uriah’s murder (11:6-25). In a move that made him look like a compassionate rescuer rather than the heartless executioner that he really was, the king took Uriah’s widow as his wife and thought that the matter successfully was hidden.

Perhaps a year later, a long twelve months in which David’s relationship with the Lord must have been distant and cold, God sent Nathan the prophet to drag the ruler’s sin before his eyes. The esteemed prophet complained that one of David’s rich subjects had abused a poor man by stealing his only sheep even though he possessed a great flock (12:1a-4). Angrily, David pronounced judgment on the greedy aggressor and Nathan dropped the pretense of the thinly disguised parable by declaring: “You are the man!” (12:7a).
When he heard the Lord’s condemnation from the prophet’s lips as well as the promise of divine retribution (12:7b-12), David repented of his wickedness (12:13a). Although the consequences of his deeds would plague him for the rest of his life, the Lord forgave David’s sin and allowed him to retain his kingship (12:13b-14) because unlike Saul, David truly sought forgiveness. Psalm 51 preserves the words of David’s sincere, penitential prayer, and explains that ultimately all wickedness is rebellion against the Lord (Ps. 51:4).

Observations

An analysis of the prophets’ confrontations with Saul and David is helpful for modern readers. On the one hand, the text helps Christians to see the importance of exposing each other’s sin for the purpose of encouraging repentance and restoration. On the other hand, 1 Samuel 13:1-14 and 2 Samuel 12:1-15 highlight a number of biblically based techniques that assist in initiating nouthetic confrontations. This section of the paper will examine these useful procedures.

First, although in both of the above cases prophets confronted Saul and David with their deficiencies, the texts do not suggest that only recognized spiritual leaders bear the responsibility of confronting others. Rather, Jesus directs all of His followers to caution each other when necessary: “Pay attention! If your brother sins, rebuke him” (Luke 17:3a). The verb ἐπιτίμησε (ἐπιτίμησον) in this passage carries the idea of “a frank, but gentle admonition”¹⁴ that is devoid of any arrogance or self-righteousness. Simply put, if one knows that a fellow believer is drifting from his walk with Christ, God requires the faithful Christian to take action in a biblical manner.

Christians are not without guidance in this important endeavor. Scripture offers several measures to put into practice as one prepares to speak to a fellow brother or sister. For instance, prayer certainly is an important part of the confrontational process. Not only does Paul direct believers to pray for each other (Eph. 6:18), James invites them to pray for wisdom whenever they lack it (Jas. 1:5). Indeed, in and of itself, though, prayer is insufficient because the philosophy of “letting go and letting God” is not a scriptural mandate. An illustration will help to establish this point.

Once, two children overslept and were worried that they would be late for school. Both prayed that they would reach their classrooms in time, but their approach to the situation was different. While one paused to kneel down and ask God for a speedy journey, the other made a similar petition as he raced down the block. Only one child’s request found fulfillment that day—the one who refused to take a quietistic approach to life by praying as he ran.

As one prays for the wisdom needed to help an errant believer, the answers will not magically appear. Rather, one must make an effort to study what Scripture teaches about any given subject. God’s Word details His standards for all humans, emphasizing that no exceptions exist, regardless of whether the individual is a parishioner or a pastor.

The Bible also reveals what godly conduct should replace sinful behavior. This information is indispensable for the person who wishes to assist a brother who is overtaken by a fault. For example, if a Christian struggles with lusts, his helper must instruct him to flee from his yearnings by pursuing righteousness, faith, love, and peace (2 Tim. 2:22).

Second, once one is certain of what Scriptures teaches regarding a subject, he must approach his brother or sister with both frankness and gentleness. Although these
admonishments appear contradictory at first glance, they are complementary. The apostle Paul directed Christians to speak the truth in love to each other as they grow together in Christ (Eph. 4:15).

For example, one must resist the urge to allow sinners to espouse a philosophy of victimization (e.g., “the devil/circumstances made me do it”), to speak of lying as “fibbing,” or to refer to deliberate disobedience as “mistakes.” Furthermore, a self-righteous attitude can be no part of the process of nouthetic confrontation. Christians who wish to help others must be careful lest they be tempted as well (Gal. 6:1).

Third, in a confident manner one must offer real help that provides practical solutions. Recently the author read the transcript of a counseling case in which a biblical counselor told his charge, “I think that I can help you.” Such talk provides little comfort that one has the answers that a counselee needs. A better way to assure the counselee is by saying, “I know that I can help you because Scripture shows us exactly what you need to do in this situation.”

The errant believer will need more than a Bible lesson, however, but someone who will take an active role in his spiritual restoration. When the Samaritan found the assaulted man on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:30-37), he did not recommend that he see a doctor and wish him a speedy recovery. Rather, he took it upon himself to make certain that the battered man recuperated by pouring oil on his wounds, bandaging them, and taking him to an inn on his own beast.

In the same manner, believers must aid their fellow Christians. When one, for example, struggles with credit card debt, his helper must provide genuine support by showing how to differentiate between legitimate and frivolous purchases, how to establish a repayment plan that systematically lowers the monthly balance when high interest is a factor, and how to develop a budget that is geared to one’s salary. Of course, this illustration assumes that the helper does not have the same problem. Otherwise, he must come to terms with his own delinquency before addressing that of others.

Fourth, one should explain what consequences an errant believer might expect when continued disobedience persists because “the way of the transgressor is hard” (Prov. 13:15). The prodigal son learned firsthand that living according to one’s selfish desires only leads to destruction (Luke 15:13-16), but thankfully Jesus forgives prodigals who forsake their evil ways. True repentance means to recognize an action as sinful and to abandon such behavior. John, the disciple that Jesus loved, assured believers that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Fifth, one should not be surprised when some errant believers interpret their fellow Christian’s concern as meddling or attempt to defend their actions. Years ago the author became aware that a fellow church member had decided to move in with his girlfriend. After inviting him to a coffee house and asking him several pointed questions in order to gather relevant data, the writer explained what Jesus teaches about the subject of premarital sex (e.g., Mark 7:20-23). Uncomfortably, the person being admonished began to defend his actions. Rationalization soon gave way to anger, which then led to accusations of a “holier than thou attitude” on the author’s part. Ultimately, however, the Holy Spirit brought conviction as he began to grasp God’s Word. Afterward, he was thankful for brotherly concern and ceased living with his girlfriend.
Not every confrontation ends successfully, however, which is the sixth point. In a similar situation to the one outlined above, the writer spoke with another young man who also resented the intrusion. Rather than recognizing his sin and repenting, he angrily left the congregation and sought membership elsewhere at a church that unfortunately accepted him without examining his Christian walk. When the author alerted his pastor to the situation, the man shrugged his shoulders and dropped the subject. The encounter was not a failure, however, because an errant believer’s response to confrontation is not the only purpose for approaching him. To obey Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:15 is one’s primary motivation, regardless of the outcome.

Seventh, in the event that a fellow church member refuses to listen, one must take care not to use a brother’s sinfulness as an opportunity to gossip (cf. Prov. 20:19), but should remember that a wise man “conceals a matter” instead of engaging in idle talk by repeating it to others (cf. Prov. 11:13; 17:9). If the sinning brother refuses to listen to godly counsel, one must involve two or three godly church members (Matt. 18:16) in the process. This group serves the dual purpose of: 1) continuing to admonish the sinning brother; and 2) reporting the believer’s fault to the church if he refuses to repent (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:17-20). Nouthetic confrontation, therefore, functions as the doorway to church discipline when an errant believer shuns the loving rebuke of his fellow Christians. On the other hand, it also helps a brother to avoid the necessity of church discipline when his concerned friends convince him of his fault and persuade him to repent.

**Conclusion**

If believers can learn anything from the concept of nouthetic confrontation, it is that Christians do not have all the answers. Scripture, however, does have answers to life questions. Followers of Christ must use the Bible to help the brother who has been overtaken by sin. Seeking an errant believer’s restoration is not an opportunity to express a self-righteous or a spiritually superior attitude, but to help restore a fellow believer’s walk with Christ. Cain, therefore, was mistaken. Christians are their brothers’ keepers.

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1 All Scripture translations are original to the author.
6 Ronald F. Youngblood, *1, 2 Samuel,* vol. 3 in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 618.
7 Scholars are divided on the issue of whether or not Saul was a believer, and proponents of both views offer good evidence for their positions. This author holds that Saul was a true follower of God, and this view helps to explain why Samuel confronted him with his sin.
9 The five books of Moses (i.e., Genesis-Deuteronomy).
The other text is 2 Sam. 24:1-14. In this passage David sinned greatly against the Lord by taking a census that emphasized his greatness as a ruler rather than God’s power. Space prohibits an analysis of this event within the confines of this paper.

Because the afternoon sun in the Near East is brutal, inhabitants often ceased activities during the hottest part of the day. One should not interpret David arising from his bed in the early evening a sign of laziness, then, but a culturally acceptable way of avoiding the heat. For information on spring siroccos in the Near East, see Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, in the *Tyndale Reference Library* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 396.


According to 2 Sam. 12:15, David and Bathsheba’s child already had been born by the time of this account.


One should note that consequences may persist even after one repents, such as in the case of the drunkard who lost his arm in a car accident—his arm did not regrow when he purposed to serve the Lord. One will avoid additional consequences by repenting, but the ultimate reason for making things right with God is to obey and please Him.

Some details of this nouthetic encounter have been changed in order to protect the counselee’s identity.

“What” questions are helpful in gathering data because they are more difficult to dodge than “why” questions (e.g., 1 Sam. 13:11a).

Some details of this nouthetic encounter also have been changed in order to protect the counselee’s identity.