Pastors often struggle with counseling. Consistently, from anecdotal evidence to formal surveys, one hears cries for help from ministers regarding their counseling ministries. Some pastors feel undertrained. Many ministers lack formal seminary education altogether. Clergy who have attained theological degrees usually have had only one or two counseling courses. Given the large body of knowledge ministers need from diverse disciplines, seminaries feel stretched to require additional classes unless part of a degree in counseling, which primarily is pursued by individuals who hope to develop counseling ministries outside the pastorate.

Over forty years ago, Jay Adams answered the question, “Are ministers competent to counsel?” with a resounding “yes.” His point, highlighted in his foundational work *Competent to Counsel*, was in contradiction to secular psychological and social work organizations that claimed the work of counseling for themselves. Adams was correct in arguing that the average pastor with a solidly biblical mastery of theology is more qualified to counsel than someone who addresses human problems from a basis of human reasoning rather than godly wisdom that proceeds from the Word of God. Adams does not mean pastors do not have a responsibility to develop the best of counseling skills, or that they can simply toss out Scripture verses without understanding which verses are needed for people’s underlying problems. Rather, his intention is for ministers to reclaim their roles of providing godly counsel for their people.

Some ministers, however, simply do not believe counseling is part of their ministerial responsibility. They gladly focus on preaching and pastoral care, but sometimes separate the latter from counseling. Such pastors consider their preaching and hospital or funeral ministries sufficient to address most problems experienced by parishioners. Certainly, preaching and pastoral care are basic, and many issues can be addressed through both ministries. However, the complexities of human crises highlight the need for intentional biblical counseling.

Pastors in larger churches might claim their responsibilities in leading greater numbers of people in more complex organizations militates against spending much time in counseling. Certainly, pastors could spend the majority of each week in counseling if it were done improperly. Consequently, such churches often delegate counseling ministries to an associate minister, employ a staff counselor, or refer members to clinical counselors. However, doing so robs both the parishioner and the pastor of valuable opportunities for spiritual growth.

Every pastor skirmishes with the wide variety of demands placed on his time. Sermon preparation, administrative requirements, visitation in homes and hospitals, burying and marrying, and a host of other activities push ministers to give greater attention to each pressing need. By default, a few clergy focus on the most immediate issues, or surrender themselves to those aspects of ministry they prefer, while leaving less enjoyable matters for church staff, deacons, or others to handle.

However, most pastors are diligent, caring shepherds of their flocks. They sincerely desire to provide their best service. These “good ministers of Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 4:6) love their churches and sacrifice themselves in caring for their flock. They cry for help in becoming more effective and increasingly efficient in order to fulfill their calling and to be faithful to their Lord. Certainly, seminaries and Christian colleges need to place a greater emphasis on training the average pastor in counseling skills.
Pastors should understand that pastoral counseling not only is needed, but expected by their members. Adams writes, “A minister, therefore, must consider nouthetic confrontation as an essential part of his pastoral responsibility.” Even pastors of larger congregations must take on at least a shared level of counseling responsibilities – if nothing more than to stay in touch with their people and provide a well-rounded ministry. So, can we offer help for the busy, often overwhelmed, pastor?

A clearer understanding of biblical counseling in a pastoral setting may offer at least a path by which ministers may discover means for maximizing counseling effectiveness and utilizing their skills in an efficient manner.

Defining the Concepts

Students of biblical counseling often fall into three primary camps. One group accepts aspects of secular psychology they may have learned in school or through reading, as long as it agrees with their interpretations of Scripture. The second group rejects psychiatry and much of psychology, choosing instead to embrace the nouthetic counseling approach developed by Jay Adams. A third group tries to integrate the two approaches. Adams asserts that the first and the third approach are not only unacceptable, but are harmful to developing truly biblical answers to human problems. Because the integrationist approach often calls itself “biblical counseling,” Adams prefers to use his own definitions and processes under the “nouthetic counseling” banner.

Certainly, integrating secular psychology and Christian counseling fails to qualify as truly biblical counseling. One cannot merely baptize concepts whose bases for truth do not emanate from Scripture. The epistemological basis for any method employed in biblical counseling must be the Bible itself. God’s Word is sufficient for every human dilemma. Therefore, while journal articles usually contain many quotes from various writers, this article will rely primarily on Scripture rather than depending on theorists.

Biblical Counseling

Defining biblical counseling encounters the same challenges as defining biblical, or expository, preaching. Expository preaching has been the focus of numerous studies. A typical approach has been to view expository preaching as preaching verse by verse through a book of the Bible. Another explanation separates types of sermons based on the length of the passage being studied, assigning the word textual to shorter pericopes, while reserving expository for longer passages.

Haddon Robinson argues that expository preaching does not necessarily involve preaching through a Bible book (although he certainly encourages such). He focuses his attention on discovering the authorial intention regarding any passage of Scripture and applying those principles to the hearers. Thus, biblical preaching could involve any number of verses as long as they form a contextual whole. He argues, “Expository preaching at its core is more a philosophy than a method. Whether or not a man can be called an expositor starts with his purpose and with his honest answer to the question, ‘Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?’”

Sidney Greidanus agrees: “At heart, expository preaching is not just a method, but a commitment, a view of the essence of preaching, a homiletical approach to preach the Scriptures.” In other words, expository (biblical) preaching involves finding the truth of any biblical text within its complete context and faithfully proclaiming that truth in the power of its Author – the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, biblical counseling is that counseling that has its epistemological origin, its precepts of truth, and its practical application in the Word of God. Biblical counseling is a commitment to using
the inerrant Word to correct errant humans and help them become more like Christ in their attitudes and actions, their words and their deeds. Its methods, as well as its substance, come from Scripture.

We might say that **biblical counseling involves admonition, exhortation, encouragement, correction, and instruction that come from Scripture alone to help human beings follow Jesus Christ and become more like Him through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.**

**The Pastoral Setting**

Much clinical Christian counseling tends to integrate psychological approaches with biblical precepts. At the same time, it should be granted that some purely biblical counseling happens in a clinical setting as long as the counselor remains committed to biblical precept and eschews psychological integration.

Most biblical counseling, however, occurs in the context of the pastoral setting of local church ministry. Christians usually look to their ministers for counsel for several reasons: 1) They believe their pastors have insight into God’s Word and the problems of people and can use the first to address the second; 2) They have a trust relationship built upon their interactions with the minister through pastoral care; and 3) They have heard their pastor address human issues from the pulpit in the context of applying biblical solutions.

In addition, two less spiritual reasons also motivate believers to seek help from pastors: 1) In the absence of insurance, most people cannot afford long-term clinical counseling, so they come to the church where they can receive assistance without financial obligation; and 2) Some people perceive they might experience a social stigma by using the services of a clinical counselor, while getting spiritual advice from the pastor is acceptable.

**Biblical counseling in a pastoral setting, then, involves providing spiritual assistance from a biblical basis in the context of a relationship between a minister and a parishioner.** The person seeking counseling may or may not be a member of the pastoral counselor’s church. However, such situations are not the best arrangements for several reasons: 1) As Adams points out, church discipline cannot be exercised if the person is not a member of the church; 2) The minister will be handicapped by not knowing the counselee prior to the counseling experience; and 3) The minister likely will not have an ongoing pastoral care relationship with the counselee.

**Describing the Conditions**

Clinical counseling involves office appointments, usually over an extended period of time. While pastoral counseling is best accomplished in a structured environment at the church office, it often involves more informal interactions that may, in turn, lead to formal counseling processes.

Average church members are reluctant to engage in long-term, formal counseling processes until matters become so dire they come to the minister in desperation. Unfortunately, by that time the crisis has progressed so far that the pastor may find it difficult, if not impossible, to remedy. If, however, the minister can use those more common informal opportunities wisely, he can do much good.

Discussions in the hallway, casual drop-in conversations at the office, lunch appointments, phone calls, and other communication may involve the giving and receiving of informal counsel. Too, pastors offer guidance in the context of pastoral care during hospital or funeral visits or while ministering to people in their homes. While such situations may not rise to the level of formal counseling, the typical pastor can make significant impact in these casual settings and lead to more intentional, structured counseling opportunities.

Biblical pastoral counseling requires the minister to be sensitive to every encounter with a view toward observing symptoms of problems. Some persons may not recognize their need or be willing to
come to the office for formal counseling. Ministers who gauge people’s well-being not by superficial, worldly standards, but by biblical criteria will catch clues to difficulties in casual conversations and normal interactions. At that point, they may suggest the individuals would benefit by a more formal, structured process of counseling.

Men are less likely to seek out a formal counseling environment. Most males feel uncomfortable with the notion they need help with personal problems or family difficulties. The observant pastor will see clues in the actions, words, attitudes, or habits of men in the church. Often, when the minister senses a man may have issues that need some level of counseling, he will initiate an informal occasion for the man to talk. A breakfast or lunch meeting, sharing cups of coffee, fishing, playing golf, or merely going for a ride in the car or truck can offer a male the opening he needs to discuss problems with his pastor.

Such informal settings are not appropriate for a male minister dealing with a female counselee. Cross-gender conversations should take place at the church office unless the pastor’s wife is present. Even with the minister’s wife involved, counseling should not take place in a setting that would betray the person’s problems or create deeper issues within a marriage. This situation can be problematic since depth counseling cannot happen in a restaurant or coffee shop. Too, if the pastor’s car is seen parked outside a woman’s home at a time her husband is at work, people will begin harmful gossip since they likely would not know that the minister’s wife has accompanied him.

The best option is to limit cross-gender counseling to the church office, and then make sure the pastor’s wife or secretary is present. The pastor’s wife or other trained women in the church can provide much help for female counselees. Many resources for informal, woman-to-woman counseling are available. In a review, Joye Baker references one such author who, while “not a professional counselor, . . . for many years . . . has tried to help hurting women who have sat at her kitchen table, using Scripture and spiritual encouragement. Her book gives sound biblical advice for those desiring to minister to hurting women.”

Counseling teens usually happens in teachable moments with student ministers or youth ministry sponsors in the general environment of activities – such as youth retreats/camps, Wednesday night youth meetings, fellowship events, and other kinds of situations where youth are already gathered. Rarely will a teen make an appointment with the pastor, or even with the student minister, for formal counseling. Formal student counseling most often occurs at the instigation of the teen’s parents. Ministers need to be alert when involved in youth events so they can engage students in conversations that help them open up about problems or merely talk about issues in general. Effective senior pastors demonstrate approachability and ease of conversation so students will feel comfortable in talking with them.

Counseling children is more problematic. Generally, pastors only counsel children directly regarding evangelism counseling, and even then only in the presence of at least one parent. However, children suffer pain, confusion, and trauma that may require pastoral counseling for them along with the parents. Typical situations include difficulties at school, divorce of parents, or the death of a parent, grandparent, or sibling. Traumatic situations, such as abuse or being in an auto accident or other frightening events, can leave a child deeply affected. Parents and pastors should recognize these kinds of needs and give children opportunities to talk.

Ministers can offer parents guidance and allow them to do the direct counseling with their children. However, many parents are not equipped intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, or experientially to handle more serious issues. In these cases, pastors may have to be more directly involved, alongside the parents. If one or both parent is absent from the family (due to death or abandonment), the pastor will work with family guardians who have responsibility for caring for the child.
In all cases, pastors should be aware that most problems cannot be resolved solely through informal counseling. People often need structured, extended counseling in a more formal setting with a sound biblical methodology. Ministers can invite such persons to participate in counseling at the church office with a defined process and definite purpose in mind. As parishioners see the pastor is able to help them apply biblical principles toward solving their issues, they are more likely to agree to such an arrangement.

Formal pastoral counseling need not take many months, much less years, as is often the case of clinical counseling. Generally, persons can be helped within a few sessions, provided they truly desire a resolution that honors the Lord and follows His Word. Within a structured environment, experienced ministers can follow biblical principles and apply scriptural methods in helping their people.

Determining the Course

The best known approach to biblical counseling is associated with Jay Adams who introduced the concepts of nouthetic counseling nearly a half-century ago. The idea of nouthetic counseling comes from the Greek word often translated “admonish.” Although it is too simplistic to say this system basically involves confronting counselees with their sin, much of nouthetic counseling focuses on these two ideas: (1) people have problems because of sin, and (2) sin must be confronted so people can repent and begin living in a way that pleases God.\(^8\)

A fuller understanding of nouthetic counseling requires separating its epistemology from its methodology for a moment. Nouthetic epistemology involves Scripture alone. As mentioned above, the only basis for truth is God’s Word. A truly biblical counseling approach has the foundational philosophy that all human problems can find applicable principles within the Bible. Pastoral counselors must base their interactions on the Scripture alone.

Once the epistemological foundation is laid, one goes to Scripture for methods. The manner of engaging people with problems must find its basis in the Word of God. The Bible uses a number of words to describe the ways in which believers, and their ministers, provide counsel for one another. The nouthetic approach is a good, foundational method. However, Scripture also lists other actions the biblical counselor should also consider. (This article does not purport to address specific methodologies of biblical counseling. Many good books are available for pastoral counselors who desire to develop their skills.)

Admonish

Nouthetic counseling focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on the word *admonish*. Admonishment is one way believers should counsel, or minister, to one another. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: “And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another” (Romans 15:14). To the Colossians, he advised: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16).

In addition, Scripture offers several additional ways to counsel the myriad issues presented in pastoral counseling. Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14. “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do. And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” Within this passage,
Paul used not only the idea of admonishment, but also employed words like *comfort, edify, exhort, warn,* and *support.*

A quick study of the Greek words from this text gives a clearer picture of Paul’s statement. He used the same root word (*νουθετέω*) for *admonish* as for *warn.* Certain syntax and other hermeneutical guidelines resulted in using the two different English words to display nuances of meaning. The first use of *νουθετέω* relates to part of the ministry of those pastors who have responsibility for the flock of God. The NASB renders this term as “give you instruction.” The second employment of *νουθετέω* relates to the “brethren,” which in this context appears to involve the entire church body. The believers are encouraged to “warn the unruly” (“admonish” in the NASB). In this case, *νουθετέω* has a much stronger connotation than in the previous instance.

The difference in emphases lies in the object of the action. In the first instance, Paul encourages the believers to esteem and heed the pastors who were dealing with the general church membership. Thus, the concept of admonish as “giving instruction” seems appropriate. In the second usage, the action involves the “unruly,” also translated as “insubordinate and disorderly.” As the persons receiving the action were engaged in overtly sinful behavior, Paul told the believers to “warn them.” Thus, nouthetic counseling may involve instruction as well as confrontation or warning.

Admonishment (whether through instruction or confrontation) is not the only method for biblical counseling. Scripture, specifically the text at hand – 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14, uses several other words when describing how pastors, especially pastoral counselors, should help hurting people. The parameter of this article does not allow an exhaustive study, but consider how Scripture uses terms such as *comfort, console, edify, exhort,* and *support,* in addition to the basic concept of *admonish.*

**Comfort/ Console**

Many people, particularly the grief stricken, come to pastoral counselors experiencing deep pain. Their issue may not be so much one of sin (although any issue can have some form of sinful extrapolation), but one of distress caused by loss or injury of some kind. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to comfort one another. In this case, he used the word *παρακαλέω,* which employs the same word from which we get the idea of the Holy Spirit as the Divine Paraclete. The term literally means “to call alongside.” Believers, including pastors, are called alongside one another to comfort, exhort, and entreat one another.

The second use of *comfort* derives from the word *παραμυθέομαι.* It involves the concept of consoling someone. The objects of the action are the “feebleminded” (*ὀλιγόψυχος*), also translated “fainthearted” in the NASB and ESV. Vines renders the term as “fainthearted” and “despondent.” Vines relates this word to Isaiah 57:15 in the Septuagint, with the rendering: “who giveth endurance to the fainthearted.” Given the object of the action, the idea of comforting as offering consolation to hurting people is a legitimate means of biblical counseling, especially in grief counseling. This concept does not lessen the importance of admonishment where sinful reactions occur. The two methods are not in opposition, but complement each other.

**Edify**

A third word, giving yet another aspect of counseling, is *edify,* from the Greek *οἰκοδομέω.* This term literally means “house-builder.” Again, Paul addresses this counsel to the believers as an action they should take with one another (v. 11). To build one another up does not have anything to do with pseudo-issues related to self-esteem, but rather it connotes helping one another to mature and develop in the life of faith. Paul commended the Thessalonians for the fact they were already engaged in
comforting and edifying. However, he emphasized these ministries as necessary for the health of the Body.

Pastors can use many means to edify believers. Certainly, their pulpit and teaching ministries are primary vehicles for building up the faith-life among their congregants. Biblical counseling also lends itself to edification on the basis of building up believers in Christ Who is the Chief Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:7).

**Exhort**

In describing his encouragement and instruction for the Thessalonians, Paul used a term in verses 11 and 14 from the same Greek root word - παρακαλέω. While translated *comfort* in verse 11, the same term is rendered *exhort* in verse 14. In the latter case, exhortation suggests Paul’s earnest entreaty for the people to follow his counsel. It is similar to the idea found in 2 Corinthians 8:4: “Praying us with much *entreaty* that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.”

Pastors should exhort believers publically from the pulpit and privately in counseling. Both activities proceed from sound exegesis and application of Scripture. Indeed, much counsel can be offered to the entire congregation through the preaching endeavor. A healthy regimen of expository preaching can address many difficulties experienced by parishioners and provide a solid foundation of prevention for potential problems.

Referring back to Robinson’s concept of biblical preaching, his definition of expository preaching informs our understanding of the foundation for biblical exhortation in counseling: “Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept derived from and transmitted through an historical, grammatical, literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first makes vital in the personality of the preacher, and then through him applies accurately to the experience of the congregation. As a result the congregation has an experience with God through the accurate application of the Word energized by the Holy Spirit which conforms them more to the image of Christ.”

Robinson’s definition, applied to counseling, means the counselor must not simply throw out proof texts in a vain attempt at appeasing a surface symptom, but the biblical counselor seeks a thoroughly accurate interpretation of biblical truth. Exhortation, then, earnestly entreats the counselee to understand and apply such truth to their lives.

In the counseling setting, exhortation sounds less strident than from the pulpit as the pastor engages in conversation with one or two persons rather than publically addressing an entire congregation. The purpose, however, remains the same – to urge the counselee to heed biblical wisdom in relation to whatever issues they have brought to the counselor.

**Support**

Another way pastoral counselors can minister is by providing appropriate support for “the weak” (v. 14). The concept is not to remove personal responsibility or to take over duties that people should engage to care for themselves and their families. From the Greek word ἀντέχω, the idea of supporting the weak involves ministering to persons who are sick or who for some reason are “without strength.”

Lest this aspect of Paul’s exhortation be viewed as not holding people rightfully accountable, consider how many times Scripture includes the definition of true religion as ministering to the orphan, the widow, the stranger, and the poor. This ministry does not relieve anyone of normal responsibilities of life, but admonishes the believers to lend aid to persons who have genuine need for help.
An example of the difference in application can be found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Galatians 6:5 reads: “For every man shall bear his own burden;” while Galatians 6:2 declares, “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” These verses are not contradictory. Verse 5 employs the word φορτίον, which implies the normal responsibilities of life. The term in verse 2 is ἐπάρος, which describes an overwhelming weight beyond normal capacities.16

The principle laid out in these and other passages means that people should bear the normal duties and expectations of life, but when they encounter overwhelming circumstances, other believers should come alongside and help them. When someone’s house burns, support may come by providing housing, clothing, food, and other means of physical aid. It also would entail a pastor offering prayer and comfort, listening, praying, and encouraging the persons affected by the loss.

**Listening:** While not specified in the Thessalonians reference, Scripture clearly endorses listening as an important means of understanding and helping people. This skill is especially important in biblical counseling. Proverbs advises: “He that answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame unto him” (Proverbs 18:13). By asking good, open-ended questions and listening carefully the biblical counselor can insure appropriate scriptural principles are applied to root problems rather than surface issues.

Certainly, Scripture employs many other concepts of use to the biblical counselor, but these few should expand the counselor’s range of approaches in helping their people.

### Depicting the Counselor

(This section derives from a chapter on pastoral counseling from the author’s book, *Pastoral Counseling for the Next Generation*, Innovo Publishing, 2014)

**Who is a pastoral counselor?** Take a look in the mirror. What do people see when they enter your office looking for help during the most challenging episodes in their lives? Hopefully, they will observe the kind of person described here:

**An Authentic Christ-follower:** People expect their counselor to know Jesus Christ and to follow Him in everyday life. His walk must match his talk. People will not follow someone who says, “Do as I say, not as I do.” No true change can happen in a counselee’s life unless God works such transformation. Without Christ, no counselor has anything to offer of lasting help. Only in Christ can the counselee become right with God. The counselor only serves as one of God’s instruments of change if he lives out an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ.

**A Biblical Scholar:** The only authority by which a counselor may speak into another person’s life is the Word of God. Counseling cannot be biblical unless the counselor studies Scripture and becomes proficient in understanding and applying biblical principles to life. One does not necessarily have to achieve a doctorate in theology in order to counsel, but the more rooted a person is in the Bible the better he is able to help others.

**An Accountability Partner:** Biblical counselors love people enough to confront them with their sin and to hold them accountable for walking in accordance with God’s Word. True love does not let someone continue in lifestyles contrary to God. Sin is destructive. Pastoral counselors are strong enough to lovingly challenge counselees regarding sin and righteousness.
A Compassionate Friend: People do not approach pastoral counselors as they do clinical counselors. In a clinical setting, they expect a certain amount of distance to be maintained. However, they assume their ministers will offer compassion and personal relationship, even friendship. Being a compassionate friend does not lessen the counselor’s duty to confront sin. If anything, true friendship and compassion emboldens the counselor to point out spiritual problems and bring the counselee to see the need for repentance and change. Genuine compassion does not give sin a pass, but recognizes the friend’s best interest is served by change that results in a life in congruence with God’s Word and will.

A Competent Counselor: At the same time, simply being a friend is not sufficient without developing competencies for counseling. The pastor should learn as much as possible in order to offer the best counsel to his people. James H. Robinson noted, “The dangers of inadequate and unskillful counseling are many. It is possible for the pastor to do more harm than good if he has inadequate preparation for the task; if he lacks the knowledge of tested techniques; if he does not provide enough uninterrupted time; if he moves too quickly; if he allows the parishioner to become dependent upon him; if to avoid causing pain he refrains from complete honesty . . .”

Ministers have a responsibility to become highly proficient in skills related to listening, understanding the root problems based on Scripture, identifying spiritual principles involved in people’s lives, and leading them to discover and apply biblical solutions. Too many people are injured by well-meaning ministers who take their abilities for granted simply because they hold the position of pastor without developing their capabilities as counselors. We owe our congregants and our Master the highest level of competence possible.

A Healthy Healer: People who struggle with severe difficulties often desire to be counselors. They want to help other people with problems like theirs. However, “wounded healers” (Henri Nouwen) or “fellow strugglers” (John Claypool) do not make the best counselors. Such persons often have yet to find the answers for their problems. Healing counselors live biblically healthy lives. They maintain a right relationship with Christ. They understand how to solve life’s problems from a scriptural basis. They have a positive outlook on life, a strong emotional constitution, and an empathetic spirit. Their source for counseling lies not in personal struggle, but in clear application of biblical principles.

A Confidential Confessional: People assume the pastor is a maintainer of confidential issues shared in private counseling. Scripture urges Christians to confess their faults to one another and to pray for one another that they might be healed (James 5:26). In order for this ministry to be effective; however, it must be confidential. When a minister shares a private matter with someone else, he not only breaks trust with the counselee, but with the entire congregation. How can a flock trust a shepherd who uses their personal problems as sermon illustrations?

A Releasing Relationship: The goal of counseling must be the release of the individual, not continued dependence. Just as Jesus developed His followers so they might make proper decisions before He left them, even so the under-shepherd must guide counselees into personal responsibility under the guidance of Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. Unless the pastor understands his role properly, he may be manipulated into playing God for every parishioner with a problem. The pastor might enjoy being the provider of every solution, the answer to every question – for a while. Ultimately, however, the dependency of his people will become an albatross around the neck of the counselor, and a stumbling block to the counselees’ growth and health.

Developing the Congregation
**A Forgiving Fellowship:** The compassionate friendship of the pastoral counselor must find wider expression in the *koinonia* of the congregation if a genuinely healing environment is to be created. The unwed, expectant mother-to-be may find empathy from the minister, only to experience reservation by the Christian community. A recovering alcoholic might find understanding in the heart of a counselor, but never be invited to the ladies’ tea party.

As the spiritual leader of the church, the pastor cannot avoid his responsibility to do everything possible to create a loving, healing environment among the church family. Naturally, it is unfair to hold him responsible for every immature response by a few parishioners. However, the pastor will influence whether the overall tone will be one of acceptance and forgiveness, or one of judgment and estrangement.

Forgiveness does not mean excusing behavior without repentance or change in life. A truly healing fellowship helps members by holding up scriptural standards for life. When people sin, we do not help them by overlooking wickedness. However, when people repent, confess, and ask forgiveness of God and others, believers should respond with love and support (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

**Peer Counseling:** The congregation is a rich resource for helping hurting people. The pastor does not bear the complete responsibility for counseling and follow-through. Healthy, mature believers among the laity can be partners with the pastor. For example, Scripture encourages the older women to offer guidance to the younger women (Titus 2:3-5). Similarly, a primary aspect of the pastor’s discipleship ministry is to train godly men who can in turn disciple other men (2 Timothy 2:2).

When the pastor counsels people struggling financially, he may match them with godly business persons who can show the counselees how to apply biblical concepts to practical ways of handling money. More experienced married couples may be paired with younger newlyweds for biblical mentoring. These few examples offer some ideas of how pastors can develop the congregation into an active channel of biblical counsel.

Certainly, before putting anyone into the hands of peer counselors, the pastor should offer training and ongoing guidance to the people he chooses to participate in this ministry.

**Conclusion**

Biblical counseling in a pastoral setting deserves a book, not merely an article. However, these concepts are offered with the sincere desire that the reader will gain more than an academic understanding of counseling constructs. Prayerfully, our brief discussion will prompt ministers to engage in thoroughly biblical approaches for helping people in their congregation apply biblical truth to their lives for the glory of God through Christ.

**Footnotes:**
2. Ibid., 67.
3. Ibid., 41ff.
10. Strong’s, #3870.
11. Strong’s, #3888.
13. Strong’s, #3618.
15. Strong’s, #472, #772.