

Pastoral View

The Techniques of Pastoral Counselling

The Revd Professor Donald Macleod
Free Church College, Edinburgh

The word *technique* is a risky one to apply to pastoral theology. It smacks of the impersonal and mechanical and tends to obscure the fact that no two counselling situations are the same. What we always face is the unique human individual in His own unique context. The mechanical application of some kind of psycho-technology would be disastrous.

It is possible, however, to lay down the broad lines of an approach. That is all we attempt in this article.

Basically there are two such lines.

First, evangelism. The fundamental problem of those who come may often be that they are not Christians at all. They are dead in sin and shut off from both God and man by the barriers which sin erects. Bearing in mind that in our whole role we are ministers — speaking forth God's judgment, not our own — our basic criticism of Christless men must be directed at their unbelief. It need not be the first thing we say, but it is from the very outset what we are aiming to say. The primary duty of unbelieving man is not the mortification of some evil habit but faith in Christ. To seek to impose Christian norms before a man has come to be in Christ — before he has the resources to live like a Christian — is futile. We may, indeed, offer pastoral first-aid and do what we can to help him or her through the crisis which brought him to see us in the first place. But so far as a Christian pastor is concerned, to be content with such first-aid is to be guilty of professional negligence. He must seek access to the real problem — man's estrangement from God.

Sadly this is not confined to the unchurched. There is every reason to think that many of the problems one meets in professing Christians stems from the fact that despite their profession they have never really come to Christ. Their conversion may have been a purely emotional one or one which amounted to no more than concluding that, yes, one was a Christian. Stress — whether persecution or the cares of this world or the allurements of materialism — often exposes the hollowness of the whole experience. The counsellor must therefore be alert to the possibility that the behavioural or emotional problems of church members may reflect serious inadequacies in the very foundation of their spiritual lives. They need to be born again.

The second line of approach is what Jay Adams calls *nouthetic confrontation*. The adjective is from the Greek noun *nouthesis*, frequently used in the New Testament in the sense of *admonition, warning or instruction*.

Nouthesis usually presupposes unruly conduct. This is clearly seen, for example in I Thessalonians 5:14, "Warn the unruly". *Nouthesis* is a pastoral response to deviant or bizarre behaviour, the standard of judgment being, of course Holy Scripture. Typical New Testament examples would be loafing, drunkenness, licentiousness and divisiveness.

Christian *nouthesis* is inevitably judgmental and directional. It not only endeavours to understand and to pity. It disapproves. Remembering again its ministerial function — that its role is to give God's counsel — it declares firmly that God condemns certain conduct and wants it changed. It refuses to accept deviant behaviour as an illness or as something a man "can't

help". Unruly behaviour is sin, not rooted in the inexorable structures of the universe but in the will of the individual. Because of this there is hope. It is possible to mortify sin and to purify oneself as God is pure. With this confidence the counsellor condemns, and calls for *dehabitation* and *rehabilitation*. Old habits must be broken and new habits established in their place. This is not, of course, one single, definitive experience. The summons is to striving, agonising and fighting — all in the context of our offering the individual as much help and support as we can muster.

In modern psycho-therapy, judgmental counselling is taboo. The counsellor serves as a sounding-board, listening and supporting but offering no moral judgment, while the client thinks things through, finds himself and brings his repressions to the surface. There is of course some truth in this. Listening is always useful and sometimes the mere attempt to confess and to articulate problems is enough to resolve them. But from a Biblical point of view it would be entirely wrong to eliminate from pastoral counselling the element of prescriptive moral judgment. Sometimes, in fact, what the counselee wants is precisely an answer to the question, is what I am doing or feeling wrong? But even when this is not what lies overtly behind the approach the pastor cannot abdicate from His God-given role of prescribing and condemning. Our function is to indicate what God wishes — and what He will help men to achieve.

None of this, however, should obscure the fact that counselling should be loving. *Nouthesis* is rooted in *Agape*. It arises out of concern for the people of God, reflects our respect for them and operates with inexhaustible patience. If it degenerates into angry, self-righteous, legalistic condemnation it has lost its soul.

Besides evangelism and *nouthesis* the New Testament indicates at least three further elements in pastoral counselling.

First, *comforting*. This idea, too, is found in I Thessalonians 5:14, "Comfort the feeble-minded". In secular Greek the verb meant to *cheer up* or *console* and might be applied, for example, to someone who was depressed or to the bereaved or to someone anxious about sick relatives. Here it is applied to the feeble-minded (RSV, the faint-hearted). The discouragement might arise from environmental pressure or from temperamental and personality problems (the word *oligopsuchoi* could mean small-souled or psychologically-limited). Whatever the reason, counselling is concerned to cheer up.

Secondly, *strengthening*. This is directed specifically towards the weak. The symptoms of such weakness might be what "Rabbi" Duncan called "a pernicky conscience" or repeated lapsing in the face of persecution or temptation. The strengthening would mean leading men into a deeper understanding of evangelical truth and, even more, helping them to put on "the whole armour of God, that they might be able to stand".

Finally, *encouraging*. Behind this lie the Greek words *parakaleo* and *parakletos*. Apart from their familiar context in the law courts, where the *paraklete* was the advocate or barrister, the word also had a military application. The *paraklete* boosted the morale of the troops, inspiring them with courage and filling them with moral fibre. That is still a key role of the Christian counsellor: so to speak to men and women that they are prepared to go out and face their situations with courage, hope and commitment.