

# The Pastor as... Counsellor

## Fulfilling the Charge to Pastor by Counselling

*Pastor Tim Kerr*

Pastor Tim Kerr Although he was born in Canada, Tim Kerr has spent over half his life in Asia. When Tim was a year old, his parents moved from Canada to India and lived there for the next 10 years. Tim has many fond memories of his childhood growing up in places like Calcutta and Bangalore. Later the family returned to Canada for Tim's high school years.

During college, Tim met his sweetheart Joanne, who had grown up in "Little Italy" in the St Clair area of Toronto. After college Tim and Joanne moved to Japan for 12 years. Tim was involved in starting new churches in that fascinating country.

In 2000, their family moved back to Canada. Tim was involved in mentoring men one-to-one as a full time job for the next 5 years.

He has been the pastor of Sovereign Grace Church Toronto since its beginning in the summer of 2004. Tim and Joanne have 4 children aged 14-20.

Counselling is a huge area, so today, if you don't mind, I think I will focus primarily on the area of counselling as it relates to inter-personal issues. Many of our problems have to do with how we relate to others, so I thought this might be helpful for us to consider together.

My plan is to take us through the following three categories:

1. **Theological Foundations** that answer the question, "Why do we counsel?"

2. **Root Issues** that answer the question, "What's going on in there?"

3. **Wisdom Guidelines** that answer the question, "How exactly do we go about this?"

**1. Theological Foundations that answer the question, "Why do we counsel?"**

The concept of counselling has a lot of baggage attached to it. A lot of this baggage has come about because many of the church's views on counselling have been more influenced by modern psychology than by sound biblical doctrine.

Commenting on this widespread trend, John MacArthur has said the following:

The Church's current preoccupation with psychology ... substitutes man-centered approaches for biblical truth in dealing with problems. The common assumption is that the Holy Spirit and God's word deal with the problem simplistically and superficially, whereas psychology gets at the hidden issues and effects genuine, deep seated healing in an individual's life.

The place to start, then, is not with men but with God. We must begin with God if we are ever to untangle the messes in our lives. I know most of you will be familiar with this quote by Calvin, but let me repeat it again, applying it to the subject matter before us.

It is evident that man can never attain to true self knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself. (*Institutes* Vol 1 p38.)

So let's start this study into Biblical counselling by taking a look at a

passage that, I believe, throws a great deal of light on the subject of counselling as it relates to the nature of God.

Please open your Bibles to 1 John 1. Rather than an exposition of the passage, we are going to make a couple of observations that will hopefully help us gain insight into the foundations of a counselling ministry.

Look with me at verse 5. John, in essence, says “This is what we are all about.” This is what we communicate to others. It has a ring of Paul’s summation statement in 1 Cor 2:2 where he declared that his message was Christ and Him crucified.

It is clear from verses 1-2 that John’s message is also all about Christ. We might say that the word “message” here is another word for the gospel, though John is putting his own nuanced emphasis on it.

Now note what he says. It is surprising. He says this is what he received and faithfully passed on ... and then you would expect him to say something about the person and work of Christ. But he doesn’t.

John defines the message not by what God has done, but by who God is.

The message is tied to the nature of God himself. This point is essential for us to catch if we are to be counsellors of the kind that take people to God ... and Godlikeness.

Verse 5 emphasizes God’s holiness and God’s transparent freedom from any shadows or questionable practices.

Somehow, the gospel is tied to this aspect of God’s nature. To make this a bit clearer, let me ask you a question: “When did God first come up with the idea of saving us? When was the idea of the gospel first emerge in God’s mind?”

The answer, of course, is that it never began in God’s mind. God doesn’t have new thoughts. He knows all things perfectly and infinitely at all times. This means the gospel has always been a part of God. The idea of our rescue is an eternal idea.

Let’s go one step further. Let me ask another question. “Does God ever do anything contrary to his nature?” In other words, “Does God ever act out of character?”

We all know the answer to that as well. No. God never does anything except that which is in accordance with his essential being and nature.

*The gospel expresses to us the mind and nature of God. The self-giving of the Son was done, not contrary to the nature of God, but because this is what God is like.*

This means, then, that the gospel expresses to us the mind and nature of God. The self-giving of the Son was done, not contrary to the nature of God, but because this is what God is like. The desire to show mercy to undeserving sinners was done because that is the inclination and heart of God.

Now in verse 5, John tells us that the gospel reveals something of God’s holiness. The gospel comes from a holy God and it leads those who encounter it to holiness. It comes full circle.

There is one more significant truth I want you to see from this passage.

Look with me at verse 6. This message’s purpose is to move us into fellowship with this God. John has already made this point in verse 3.

But fellowship with a holy God is not possible if we are living unholy lives. It appears that the gospel “message” is not having its intended effect if people remain mired in sinful behaviours and attitudes.

Now I want you to see something else that is unexpected and surprising. Look with me at verse 7.

Here, it expresses the opposite of verse 6 ... Here is the intended effect of this message. If we walk in the light ... we have fellowship ... but wait, we would expect it to say, "If we walk in the light we have fellowship *with God*" ... but John switches this up and instead says ... we have fellowship with "one another"!

Now, this is a most significant and rich theological insight. Sin is the greatest barrier to meaningful spiritual relationships. When we get right with God, we find we are getting along with others. We must get along with God if we are ever to get along with others.

The biggest issue in our relationships is not incompatibility or personality differences, but sin.

Let's regroup then, and summarize what we have found:

1) First, since the message of the gospel came from a holy God and is itself an expression of this God, we can be confident that when properly applied to hearts, it will result in holiness. Simply said, *the gospel leads to holy living*. This is our confidence when we bring the gospel to bear on all manner of people problems.

2) Second, *the key to putting people right with each other is to put them right with God*. Sin is the secret destroyer of relationships. When I am out of sorts with God, I will be out of sorts with others ... whether it be my wife, my kids, those in my church or whoever.

This is far from exhaustive, but I would like us to launch our discussion about counselling today from this two-fold foundation.

Now, bearing in mind that we are taking people to God through His gospel, and

that we are seeking to get them right with each other through getting them right with God, let's move to the diagnostic stage of getting into other people's lives.

## 2. Root Issues that answer the question, "What's going on in there?"

It is essential that we understand what goes on deep inside people.

### a) *Roots of Conflict in Relationships*

Let me give you a typical scenario that, on the surface, seems innocuous but can easily lead to deep problems in a marriage ... especially if repeated hundreds of times, in various ways.

The husband values time alone, and has had a tiring day at work. As he heads home in the

car he looks forward to quiet time reading the paper, or just going over some items in his home office.

His wife is looking forward to her husband's return. She just wants a bit of his time and some affection and attention.

Both of these desires are natural and normal. But when we let our desires become demands – "I *must* have this!" – we will react strongly when our deified desires (idols) are not satisfied.

The husband arrives home and, after a quick greeting, moves to his office. The wife comes in 10 minutes later and asks him to deal with a Rogers bill where "they seem to be overcharging us again". Not surprisingly, this leads to a conflict. But the question is "why?"

He mistakenly says later to his wife "All I did was go to my office to get some things done!" She mistakenly responds, "All I did was ask you to deal with the Rogers bill!"

Many arguments in marriages; between parents and children; and among

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church members, proceed along these superficial lines.

But this is not the issue at all. Listen to what James 4:1-2 tells us:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that *your passions* are at war within you? ... You covet and *cannot obtain*, so you fight and quarrel.

The word translated “passions” is the Greek word “*hedone*” from where we get the word “hedonism.” We have passions and desires that are seeking satisfaction. Paul Tripp explains this dynamic well in his book, *Instruments in The Redeemers Hands*:

If my heart is ruled by a certain desire, there are only two ways I can respond to you. If you are helping me get what I want, I will be happy with you. But if you stand in my way, I will be angry, frustrated, and discouraged when I am with you. There will be times when I will wish you weren't in my life. My problem is not you or the situation we are in together. My problem is that a legitimate desire has taken over my heart and is now in control. This desire has so much power that it is no longer legitimate. It has become an inordinate, sinful desire, because it has grown to a position of authority over my heart (p 80).

In counselling, *it's imperative that we help people discover the ruling desires in their hearts*. This needs to be the bull's eye target we aim for as we hear about conflicts of various sorts.

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Let me also mention another vital area that we need to be on the alert for when dealing with people. Turn in your Bibles for a moment to Heb 3:12-13.

#### ***b) Roots of Spiritual Drift***

Look with me at verse 12. Note carefully what is at the root of people's behaviour and relationship with the Lord. It is unbelief.

Verse 13 gives us further clues as to how this happens. There is a hardening that comes from deceit. In other words, *there are lies believed underneath unbelief. Unbelief is fed by competing beliefs* in something else.

When we face a counselling situation, we usually meet people on the level of their feelings – anger; depression; anxiety; etc. But where do these feelings come from?

Feelings have basically two roots. There are physiological and spiritual reasons for our feelings. Simple physical reasons such as a lack of sleep; an improper diet; all the way to more serious issues like chemical imbalances can, and do, affect peoples' feelings and emotions.

But the vast majority of our feelings don't stem from physical sources, but from spiritual. Let me explain. If you were to hear a funny story, you would feel happy and laugh ... but if someone told you about a tragedy, your feelings would quickly get very sad. This is because *our thoughts affect our feelings*. But that is not all there is to it. There is yet a deeper layer that affects our thoughts. This is the layer of belief. *Our beliefs guide our thoughts*, which, in turn, guide our feelings.

This means that *we need to get at people's belief systems if we are going to see any real change brought to them*.

Our passage tells us how this is done: by words: "... Exhort one another everyday." Truth can penetrate to the very domain of beliefs and bring change. Listen again to these words that you know so well:

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.  
(Rom 10:17)

*The Christ-focused word – the gospel – carries with it a power that is able to dislodge lies and wrong beliefs and put faith in Christ in its place.* Interestingly, we didn't have time to expound on this, but that is exactly what John gives as the key to fellowship as well (1 Jn 1:3).

So, to review - When counselling others, we need to try to get at two vital aspects that underlie all behaviour:

1) What are the underlying desires seeking satisfaction?

2) What are the underlying beliefs that are creating unbelief?

A good question to ask, to discover a person's desires, is simply, "What is it that you're not getting, that you want?"

Getting at the beliefs is a bit trickier. There are several questions you might ask, but one is simply, "Why do you think that is true?"

Many of our wrong beliefs have to do with wrong definitions of what "life" consists of (i.e. pleasure; respect; people's approval; etc.).

I believe that each one of us knows the solution to every problem dealing with desires and beliefs. The answer is the same for every problem. The outworking will be different, but the basic solution is identical.

*The solution is Christ, and Him crucified, and risen from the dead.*

It is the call and duty of pastors to *think clearly about gospel connections and how they apply to each situation.* David Powlison has said, "Connect one bit of truth to one bit of life." Maybe we can cover some examples of Gospel-application, in the question and answer time later.

Let's finish our time together by looking at some wisdom guidelines, to help us with the practical outworking of what we have been discussing.

### **3. Wisdom Guidelines that answer the question, "How exactly do we go about this?"**

What I am going to do here is simply outline several principles that I have learned over the years (but still need to relearn and remember constantly). I will state the principle and then give a few short comments on each one.

#### **(1) Look for patterns, not incidents.**

This is important. Incidents may need input or correction but they must not be treated the same as repeating patterns. If a man confesses to me that he is looking at pornography, I want to know how often and for how long. Habituated sins are much

deeper and are much harder to dislodge than isolated incidents.

#### **(2) Make observations, not conclusions (or assumptions).**

This is very difficult to do, especially if you think you know what is going on. But don't assume you do know. Humility will guard you, and confirm to you that you know very little of the inner workings of another person's heart. Learn to distrust

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your own impressions and humbly seek clarification. *Never assume motives.* We don't know others' motivations.

Instead of: "Your problem is that you selfishly serve yourself before anyone else" ... you might say: "I've noticed that you sometimes don't seem to take other people's interests into account when you do things ... is that something you see in yourself?"

**(3) Don't prescribe the solution before you've diagnosed the problem.**

Very rarely do people know what their real problem is. They will almost always only see the surface issue, or they will be fixated on the other person's problem "speck", while completely blind to the log in their own eye. But a common mistake in counselling is dealing with the issue that the person *feels* is at the bottom of it all.

In carpentry, they say "measure twice, cut once." In counselling, it should be "ask 100 questions, and then prescribe one solution." The key is lots of questions; guided by Scripture, and with much prayer.

**(4) Root obligations in God's provisions – Make clear gospel connections.**

I won't say much on this, since we've already touched on it. Moralism is defeating because it tells people to what do without telling them how to do it. *Change toward God must be on the basis of God's promises toward us.*

**(5) Leave people with conviction, not condemnation.**

This is tied to the previous principle. We must lead them to Christ, where forgiveness for their sins, and the power to overcome their sins, is offered. The law brings needed conviction and lances the wound, but the gospel provides the balm that brings healing.

**(6) Remember that talking about truth is not enough. It must be believed.**

Knowledge needs to be imparted via Scripture – "The unfolding of your words give light" (Ps 119:130), but without the Spirit's activity in the heart (Ezek 36:25-27), nothing will change. We are totally dependant on God! Therefore pray – before, during, and after each counselling session – that God's word will be received, with faith.

Sometimes it is helpful to ask a person straight out: "Do you believe this?"

**(7) Remember there are only two ways to deal with sin.**

- Sins against me: Forgive
- Sins against others: Repent

Both responses are birthed from a fresh view of the cross. Forgiveness is a bigger hurdle, since most believers deny their lack of forgiveness, or just refuse to forgive. Most of us need to be reminded of how much *we* have been forgiven.

**(8) Carefully apply the next-needed truth.**

(From *People Healing People* by Harold Burchett.)

**Symptom → Next needed truth**

- a) Indifference, apathy, satisfied → A More serious view of sin
- b) Discouraged, defeated → Our identification with Christ
- c) Dry, tending to old defeats → The filling of the Holy Spirit
- d) Frustrated, too independent → My place in the local church
- e) Compulsive, erratic, driven, hyper-sensitive → Spiritual warfare
- f) Continuing dullness, burdened step → Life of intercession

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**(9) Don't just exhort – Apply truth with a clear action plan.**

Exhortation is not application (Ex: “We need to pray more!”). Application has a clear action plan: it is *specific* (What exactly needs to be done?), *measurable* (How will we know when this has been done?), and *accountable* (Who will check up on progress? When will this take place?).

**(10) Develop “A Company of Counsellors.”**

Pastors carry a large part of the load of counselling ... often too much of the load. But the Scriptures make it clear that believers in the church are to carry this responsibility.

I myself am satisfied about you, *my brothers*, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. (Rom 15:14)

Take care, *brothers*, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you

may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb 3:12-13)

We urge you, *brothers*, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thess 5:14)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. (Col 3:16)

One way we have tried to do this, in our church, is through the creating of Marriage Accountability groups. We started with a prototype group of leader friends committed to

change (all married couples). We met twice a month and “counselled” each other with the gospel. As people developed skill at counselling others (with encouragement and correction) we expanded.

*We have found that counsellors are developed by experience, more than in the classroom.* Experiencing how biblical counselling is done, and seeing its powerful effect in their own lives, makes them believers in “a word in season.”

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