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COUNSELING: YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

Every Christian needs counseling

Not everyone needs to have formal, weekly sessions with a professional counselor, but all of us need exhortation, encouragement, comfort, rebuke, instruction, warning, and wise advice.

Not only that, but every Christian *is* a counselor. Whether you think of yourself that way or not, the fact is, when you talk to your friends about their struggles or sins or suffering, or when you give advice, you are counseling. That's God's design. The biblical commands to exhort, encourage, comfort, rebuke, instruct, warn, and offer wise advice are directed to *all* believers.

Sadly, in most of what is being written about counseling today, whether it be in Biblical Counseling circles or in the world of psychology, the emphasis is on training certified counselors or therapists. There is nothing wrong with highly trained counselors functioning in an official capacity. But there is a lack of instruction directed toward the average Christian—the person who has neither the time nor the inclination to pursue a degree or intensive certification, but who has friends and family members who need help in the course of everyday life.

Any Christian with a reasonable ability to understand God's Word can be a good counselor. God requires that you let the Word dwell in you richly enough that you can teach and admonish in all wisdom (Col. 3:16). That does not mean we all have to be in a formal teaching role in a Bible study. Teaching is simply explaining to a person how to apply relevant principles from Scripture. We do that in an informal way all the time. All counseling is teaching. It is a Bible study with just one student. Whenever you give any kind of advice or instruction based on Scripture, you are teaching. And you can do it!

Romans 15:14 I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.

The goal of this book is not to give detailed instruction on what to say in every counseling situation. It is rather to introduce you to a way of thinking about problems in relation to God's Word that will enable you to offer wise counsel in any circumstance. This book can also serve as a reference to help you find a starting point in helping those who seek counsel.

Chapter One: Joints of Supply

God's Purpose Statement for Your Church

If you were asked to draft a purpose statement for your church, what would you write? More importantly – what would Jesus write? He would say exactly what He already said in Ephesians 4:11-16.¹ In the Greek it is one, long, complex sentence, and yet it can be summed up in a single word: *maturity*.

Notice the first two verses:

Ephesians 4:11-12 It was he who gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up² 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.³ 14 Then we will no longer be infants... 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up...

God's purpose for the Church is repeated in every verse.

12 built up

13 mature,

14 no longer infants

15 grow up

16 grows and builds itself up

No doubt about it - God's purpose statement for your church is maturity. And the reward for reaching maturity is staggering - "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ"! What could be more important than receiving a great measure of all that Christ has to offer?

This is not to say maturity is the only goal. The Church is also called to function as God's Temple, as Christ's Bride, as God's Household, as a holy priesthood, etc. But the priority is always maturity because it is when only when the Church is mature that we will succeed in all those other roles. Reaching maturity, then, is the central objective of the Church.

How to Reach Maturity

The question of how to attain maturity is answered in verse 16.

Ephesians 4:16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

God won't do it without you

Physical growth takes place only when the lungs bring in oxygen and the heart pumps blood and

¹ This passage what is perhaps the most direct statement in Scripture on God's purpose for the Church.

² Author's translation.

³ All Scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

the nerves send their signals and all the various parts of the body carry out their roles. Each Christian is a unique organ of the body of Christ (Ro.12:5), and so the body cannot grow to maturity unless each part is functioning. But what if someone opts out? What if one member decides to worship God on his own and chooses not to get involved with the functioning of the body? Will God just bypass him and see to it that his part gets done another way? Can the growth of the body happen just through the primary cause (which is God), even in the absence of a secondary cause (which is the individual part of the body supplying the rest of the body)? No. A word-for-word translation of verse 16 makes that clear.

Ephesians 4:16 From whom the whole body,

- joined together and held together through every ligament of supply
- according to working in measure each individual part,⁴

makes the growth of the body toward upbuilding itself in love.⁵

The phrase, “according to working in measure” points to proportion. The whole process takes place only in proportion to the working of each individual part. So if the individual part does not do its work, God will not override that. He will allow the body to be diseased and disabled in the whole area surrounding that dormant body part. God will not allow the body to grow except in proportion to the functioning of the various connective parts. That is why verse 16 says the body **builds itself up**. God will not do it without you.

Most Christians would give a hearty “Amen” to Psalm 141:4.

Psalm 141:4 Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.

We all want victory in our fight against sin. But how many of us say “Amen” to the next verse?

Psalm 141:5 Let a righteous man strike me--it is a kindness; let him rebuke me--it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.

The psalmist knew that the answer to his prayer in verse 4 would come in large measure through the one-another ministry – through the reproof and admonition of some other righteous man.

The Work of Ministry: Joints of supply

What comes to your mind when you think of the work of the ministry? Singing on the worship team? Running the sound board? Serving in the nursery? Cleaning the building? All those support the work of the ministry and are therefore important, however they are not the primary kind of ministry that Paul has in mind here. In verse 16 we get a picture of what the upbuilding ministry looks like.

Ephesians 4:16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The phrase, **joined and held together**, means to be closely fitted together and to relate harmoniously together. The parts work together in harmony, which is best illustrated by the human body. Every part of the body has to work interdependently with the rest of the parts. No part functions independently. Joshua Harris is right: “Lone rangers are dead rangers.”⁶ If you take out your liver and set it out on the table, it will die (and so will you). But more importantly, even if it could be kept alive somehow it could not possibly fulfill its function, because its only function involves working in conjunction with the rest of the parts of the body. Outside the Church you are like a liver on a table – you cannot possibly fulfill

⁴ κατ' ἐνέργειαν ἐν μέτρῳ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου μέρους

⁵ Author's translation.

⁶ Harris, *Sex is not the Problem: Lust is*, 131.

your purpose for existing.

It is no surprise, then, that special attention is given to the connective tissue of the body.

Ephesians 4:16 joined and held together by every supporting ligament

The word translated **ligament** is not a precise medical term. It is simply a term that applies to all kinds of connective tissue – including ligaments, tendons and joints, as well as nerves, veins and arteries. The word translated **supporting** means *supply* or *provision*. The people of Paul's day had enough medical knowledge to understand that the connecting organs in the body *supplied* the various parts of the body with what they needed.

With every breath you take, and every beat of your heart, nutrition and oxygen are carried throughout the body to supply each of the organs. And when they receive that nutrition and oxygen they carry out their function and the body grows. That, says Paul, is how your ministry works. When you do these works of service or works of ministry, your work in the church functions like an artery – to supply something to the other members of the church.

To supply what? Grace from God. Your ministry is to serve the function of taking the Bread of life and the Water of life and delivering it to the rest of the body. God offers grace, but He wants that grace delivered personally – through a human being – through you.

If your ministry is setting up chairs or shoveling snow or cleaning up, that is of great importance but if that is all you are doing it is not enough. Even the preaching ministry – if that is all the preacher does, falls short of the kind of close, interdependent, grace-supplying connection that verse 16 is describing. Each Christian's ministry is to function like an artery.

It also functions like a ligament or a joint, because the interaction between the body parts takes place only where there is contact. We cannot fulfill our calling at a distance. We must be in contact with one another.

Are you functioning as a supplying joint? Or are you a dislocated limb? Are you an arm that is doing nothing for the body because it is out of its socket?

Unless your church is very small it would be impossible to have the kind of immediate, close, intimate connection that verse 16 describes with everyone. No one artery supplies every part of the body. But every artery supplies *some* part of the body. No artery is a dead end. Look around at the people in your church next Sunday. Several of those people are your responsibility. If Judgment Day were tomorrow would you be ready to give an account for that? Are some of those people not as strong as they should be because you are a clogged artery?

When a church becomes weak, lethargic and sick it is often a symptom of some clogged arteries. Clogged arteries walk in, sit down in the pew and watch, say a few hello's, and go home. There are cells and organs in this body that are in desperate need of oxygen and nutrition that are being choked off from their source of life and sustenance because the whole flow from God to them is being blockaded by the fact that those people's ministries are not being done.

Keep that in mind when you criticize the church or someone in the church. There are people who will stand in judgment on the Church and point the finger at some sick, dying body part and say, "Look at that pathetic organ. It is not functioning as it should be!" and they become so offended that they drop out of ministry or even leave the church. The next time you find yourself pointing an accusing finger ask yourself, *Could it be that this body part I am criticizing is weak and sick and dying because I cut off the flow of grace to that person by being unfaithful in my ministry?*

The "One Another" Ministry

Perhaps at this point you are thinking, *I don't even know what it means for me to be an artery. That's such an abstract metaphor – what does it even mean in real life?* If you want to answer the question of how the parts of Christ's Body are to relate to one another you need only look up the phrase "one another" in the New Testament. What sort of interactions are we to have with one another? Mostly we are to love. At least sixteen times in the New Testament we are commanded to

love one another. Beyond that we are to...

- Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other (James 5:16)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other (Ephesians 4:31-32)
- Stop passing judgment on one another. ... do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Romans 14:14,19)

That is a small sample of the many ways we are to function as arteries supplying grace to one another. Pick out a person in your church God has placed within your reach. If God has called you to be the “joint of supply” to bring His grace to that person, then you are responsible to carry out the one-another commands toward him or her. If he is suffering, comfort him. If he is weak, strengthen him and encourage him and spur him on to love and good deeds. Build him up and edify him. If he is in unrepentant sin, rebuke him. If he is repentant but stuck in bondage to a sin, instruct him from Scripture about how to break free. If he lacks motivation, admonish him. If he is discouraged, refresh him. Teach and instruct him with all wisdom.

Those are our responsibilities, and counseling is simply the verbal aspect of all that. When you use your mouth to encourage or instruct or rebuke or supply what the person needs in some way, you are counseling.

The most common biblical word for that is *parakaleo*. The NIV generally uses the word “encourage” to translate the Greek word *parakaleo* when a person is the object of the verb.

Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 12:8 if [one’s gift] is encouraging, let him encourage.

When the word *parakaleo* is used this way it simply means offering a person what he needs. Sometimes that means giving a respectful rebuke (1 Tim. 5:1) or a call to repentance (Luke 3:18). Other times it means offering refreshment or rest.

Encouragement involves begging or requesting

When *parakaleo* is followed by an object⁷ it means “to beg or request.” The word implies a sense of urgency in the heart of the one doing the encouraging. This is seen in many of the uses of the word *parakaleo*. It is translated “appeal,” “urge,” “plead,” “beg,” and “implore.”

When you counsel someone, in order for him to recover from his problem, there are things he will need to do. If he lacks the motivation to do these things, then it is your job to attempt to motivate him. It is not loving to coldly inform him about what he is supposed to do with a “take it or leave it” attitude. If you really love someone, you must be willing to expend a certain amount of energy to get him to do the right thing.

Acts 2:40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded (*parakaleo*) with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”

Peter didn’t just tell them “Turn or burn” and then scoot off to his next speaking engagement. He

⁷ This happens about 70 times in Scripture.

preached a moving, passionate, powerful sermon, called them to repentance, and then “with many other words” he went on to *plead* with them to do what was right.

Preparation

All this can sound pretty intimidating. Perhaps you are thinking, *I can't do all that. I don't have the knowledge or the giftedness or the training. I'm not a counselor – nor do I want to be. That's not my gift.*

Lack of giftedness, however, is not an excuse for neglecting this ministry. Every Christian is called to counsel. The one-another commands are not restricted to especially gifted people; they are given to every believer. God did not say, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom – unless you lack the training and ability, then you can just sit on your hands and let the person wither on the vine.” Not everyone has the gift of faith, yet we must all trust God. Not all of us have the gift of mercy or helps or giving, but we must all be merciful and serve and give.

If we lack the knowledge or training we must simply do what Colossians 3:16 commands – let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Every Christian is responsible before God to saturate his or her heart with God's Word so that we can teach and admonish with all wisdom. It is the goal of this book to help you do that.

Saturate Your Heart with Scripture

There are two parts to preparation for this ministry. The first is daily saturation with God's Word. No one can walk around with full, comprehensive knowledge of what the Bible says about every possible problem or issue. All of us, however, can fill our hearts with Scripture on a daily basis so there is something there for the Holy Spirit to work with.

When you meditate deeply on the Word every day it is amazing how often a problem comes up that “just happens” to relate to the passage you are thinking through. You pick a psalm, or something Jesus taught, or a proverb, or a principle from the prophets or the epistles, and you study it and think hard about the ramifications of it for life, and very soon after that you run into a person who is struggling, and that passage you have been thinking about and the insights you have about it turn out to be just what the Doctor ordered for that person's struggle.

Counseling Deep Problems

Another part of letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly involves some more systematic, targeted study. Some problems are especially difficult and require more than just the typical off-the-top-of-your-head encouragement. They have been wrestling with this issue for years, and the simple solution you offer after a two-minute conversation they thought of years ago. What do you say to someone who has fought against an addiction for twenty-five years and is still on the losing end? Or someone who is suicidal? What about someone with “clinical” depression – or who is cutting herself – or who has a life-threatening problem like anorexia or alcoholism? How about someone struggling with homosexuality? Or someone completely paralyzed with apathy?

If you are meditating on God's Word then the counsel you can give off the top of your head will be valuable to those people, but it probably will not be enough. They are going to need some more extensive help from you. It is my prayer that the chapters ahead will equip the reader with the basic fundamentals for counseling any problem.

Whether through this book or your own study of Scripture, one thing is clear: it is your responsibility to instruct and encourage those who need help. Are you prepared? Do you know where to take someone in Scripture to show him what God's Word says about overcoming fear, or solving a temper problem? Remember, Colossians 3:16 is a command from your Creator directed not to your pastor or the church staff counselor, but to *you*:

COLOSSIANS 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom....

In all counseling, whether it be counseling those in pain or counseling those in sin, we must instruct from God's Word. Every believer in Christ is responsible for becoming skilled enough in God's Word to be able to help one another.

What if we Fail?

Are you reluctant because this seems too hard, or you are just not cut out for it, or you are just not convinced it is all that important? As you consider whether or not you are going to devote yourself to learning how to excel more and more in teaching, admonishing, encouraging, reproof, and comforting ask yourself two questions. First, what happens if we fail to carry out the commands of Ephesians 4?

Maturity is at stake

According to Ephesians 4:14, if we fail at this we will be infants, who are...

Ephesians 4:14 ... tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

An immature church is like a little child. The people are spiritually gullible. They are indecisive. They are easily distracted. They are focused on self. And most of all they are incredibly vulnerable because they have no discernment. For that reason they tend to be worked over by the deceivers. They are theologically unstable and fall into all kinds of deadly error because they are drawn into every fad that comes along.

If God designed for your strength to come through constant, regular encouragement from individuals, but that is not happening, would it be any surprise if most of the people in the church developed a great number of serious problems? Wouldn't you expect a higher number of addictions, emotional problems, behavior problems, and attitude problems? If the flow of God's grace is choked off, should we not expect that the people in the church will lack strength, encouragement, hope, joy, comfort, inner peace, faith, motivation, or any of the other things that God designed to come through the one-anothers? In the last few decades the psychotherapy industry has exploded into a multi-billion dollar industry. What is the commodity for which people are paying these multi-billions of dollars? Talk. Conversation. People's lives are messed up, and they come to such desperation that they will go to a stranger and pay \$200 an hour for words – and for a listening ear. If the Church were faithful in the ministry of the one another commands, would there be as many troubled marriages and emotional disorders and psychological problems as there are? If God designed the one another ministry for our wellbeing and health, then doesn't it make sense that the neglect of that ministry would result in countless problems and disorders?

Eternal life is at Stake

What happens if we fail in the one another ministry? Countless psychological and emotional problems, ongoing defeat and bondage to enslaving sins, and, in the long term – ultimate disaster.

Matthew 24:12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. **13** But he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Hebrews 3:12-13 gives us an idea of how a person's love for God grows cold.

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. **13** But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. **14** We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

We must stand firm to the end, because there is a real danger of becoming hardened by sin's

deceitfulness and developing a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. That is a very real threat. Who are those people at your church for whom God is holding you responsible to be the supply of His grace? Think of one. What can you do to make sure that person is not one of the “most” whose love will grow cold? What will be the deciding factor that will cause that person to persevere to the end and not become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and turn away from the living God? The answer is in verse 13.

Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

What will prevent the brothers from becoming hardened by the deceitfulness of sin is if you encourage them daily. The word encourage is the Greek word *parakaleo*, which is a word that basically summarizes all the one-another commands. If we encourage one another by carrying out the one-another commands on a daily basis, that is what will keep us from falling.

Another famous warning passage about apostasy is in Hebrews 10. The warning section begins with these words:

Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The closer we get to the Second Coming the more urgent the need for us to encourage one another. As time goes by it is going to become more and more difficult to persevere and stand firm to the end, so the need for this is going to increase more and more.

What happens if we fail? Not only do we fail to reach maturity as a church, and not only do we miss the attainment of the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, but many brothers and sisters will become casualties in this war who otherwise would not have. People's lives are at stake! This is a matter of eternal life and death.

What if we succeed?

The reward of reaching maturity, on the other hand, is amazing:

Ephesians 5:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up toward him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

As the church matures, love for one another increases and truth abounds. The church fills up with warmth and compassion and care. And that combination of truth and love causes the church to become more and more like Christ until finally we attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ – a large portion of all that Christ offers.

Counseling Unbelievers?

How does all of this apply in the case of unbelievers? It doesn't. Counseling is for Christians. If an unbeliever comes to you with an emotional or behavioral or marital problem, what that person needs from you is not advice on how to have his path to hell become smoother. He needs the gospel. No matter what problem a non-Christian has, the first step is to turn to Christ. And until that step is taken no other step means anything.