

Skill in Marriage Counseling---

A Review Article

CHARLES S. MILLIGAN

THIS contribution to the study of the minister's work is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on counseling. One might at first thought say this is so despite the wealth of material in the field, but the fact is that the richness of good books in this general area gives added significance to a study which is as clearly focused as this one. As Professor of Psychology of Religion and Counseling at the Iliff School of Theology, with a background of thorough training and experience in varied types of schools, clinics and institutions, Dr. Stewart brings a scholar's breadth and depth to his subject, as would be expected. This is combined with sensitivity and perception growing out of his experience in the pastorate and in marriage counseling. There is an authentic feeling for human beings, with their follies and foibles, troubles and endearing qualities, reflected throughout the book. Many a book, however, which contains insight and perceptive knowledge, lacks clear focus. The particular thing, I would guess, which has given this book its focus is that Dr. Stewart knows which audience he is addressing, and he knows this audience. It is addressed to the minister who is serious about doing a good job as a marriage counselor. The author is not talking over the minister's shoulder to his fellow teachers or to social workers. He assumes that the reader comes to this subject with some background and training, but at the same time may not know where to go or where to write to get the help or information that is needed.

CHARLES W. STEWART, *The Minister as Marriage Counselor*, New York and Nashville: The Abingdon Press, 1961. 223 pp. \$4.00.

ed. Thus without belaboring the matter, the book conscientiously presents those mundane details of information, the absence of which can be so frustrating to the busy pastor. Yet the book is not presented as a substitute in any sense for training in the counseling field, and one can well believe it will lead many ministers to recognize their deficiency and seek further training in this field.

The minister will of necessity, whether he likes it or not, function as a marriage counselor. People with family or marriage problems turn to him for help. Now the minister does not at that moment cease being their pastor, and he cannot escape both the limitations and advantages which this relationship carries with it. Furthermore, in officiating at marriages, working with youth groups, and teaching adult classes, he must inevitably encounter the facets of family life and either bring understanding and help or confusion and stress to various aspects of family relationships. The book takes this realistic appraisal of the given situation and its structures, and then guides the minister into refined understandings and methods of being a pastor-counselor. Perhaps in no other type of counseling do people turn more naturally or with higher expectations than this type having to do with marriage relationships.

I. The Role-Relationship Theory

Dr. Stewart utilizes the "role-relationship theory" in his approach to the subject, in contrast with both counselor-centered and client-centered counseling.

Relationship-counseling is a collaborative relationship between seeker

and helper, established in order to understand the seeker's role image and behavior within his social system and to help him to change or adjust the problems of conflict. (p. 35)

The meaning of "role" in this setting is not that of image projection as such, but of a function to fulfill in a social system. However it may be in other areas of life, in family life there must be concern with the person filling the role. Nevertheless, in role-relationship counseling there is not primary or exclusive concern with the psychic life of the person hidden behind all roles, but rather with the person in his roles of husband - father - provider, etc. This presupposes, I would think, a sufficient degree of self direction and capacity for emergent self-understanding for the person to benefit from counseling. For such benefit the client needs to come to a better understanding of his "role image," both his picture of himself and the picture and expectations of others. This clarification will bring to light discrepancies and conflicts between expectation and performance in terms of his own perspective and that of others. Presumably, then, he will develop alternative ways of meeting situations and adjusting to inexorabilities. (p. 82)

The pastor's role as counselor is also an active one, for the communication in the situation is a two-way business. The pastor responds as well as listens, carries with himself into the situation the values symbolized in degree by his profession as well as psychological skills. Yet in the counseling situation both counselor and client have a sufficiently distinct role, that it requires adeptness to establish understanding of this situation before it can be used to find understanding of other circumstances and structures. One of the underlying themes of the book, related to one aspect of the subject and then another, is that the minister is—when the role-relationship theory is properly utilized—a learner. (E.g., p. 208.) One gathers from the book and the case ex-

amples cited that the counselor is required to have an alertness and responsiveness something like that of a musician who is required to improvise on a theme that has been given to him. The analogy is defective if one thinks in terms of the hackneyed and predictable type of improvisation, but not if one thinks of that type of creative improvisation where, as the variation begins to take on its own shape and character, the performer finds himself working with material that partially controls and challenges him. Beyond this point I am sure the analogy is erroneous, but it may be useful to suggest the kind of responsiveness and alertness, demanding practice, skill and continual criticism that is required. This is emphasized because the minister brings with himself into the situation a number of preconceptions and preferences. He believes in marriage and he wishes this particular marriage to succeed. It is, then, easy to regard a successful outcome to be the one imposed by that rather than the one which will be truly best for the persons involved. (Cf. chap. IX.)

I have attempted to sketch Dr. Stewart's approach. It would distort his book either to indicate that this is all there is to it or to attempt to boil the whole presentation down to summary form. The approach is fully explained, then analyzed in terms of the goals and "the structure and flow" of counseling in the premarital, marriage, divorce, family and group contexts. Throughout the presentations there are illustrations and resources given that the minister will find helpful. A nice balance has been struck between the directly practical and the underlying theory.

II. The Discovery of Neglected Responsibilities

We have seen a number of suppositions about counseling go down the drain in the past several years. Once it was all too widely believed that a minister needed no training in this field. Somehow his being in a holy calling

was assumed to make him automatically a competent counselor. Or, per contra, if he was obviously incompetent it was supposed that no type of training could help. The discovery that training could improve the counseling ability of at least many ministers — and in some cases to an extraordinary degree—demolished this supposition. Considering that the church is necessarily a basically conservative institution, it is remarkable how quickly it has made room for the counseling movement. Other suppositions, perhaps never too widely held, but sometimes in evidence, were that a small amount of training could transform one into an omni-competent counselor or a therapist, in effect, the poor man's psychiatrist. These suppositions, of course, even in disguised form, have been discredited. There is just enough temptation, however, for them to creep back into the picture that one must applaud Dr. Stewart's clear delineation of the limitations of the minister and the boundaries of his responsibility. The importance of the pastoral contribution is increased by recognition of these lines far more than where the lines are blurred.

Another supposition which may be widespread is that a minister who has training in individual counseling will without any particular effort automatically be competent as a marriage counselor. This is perhaps a carry-over from the earlier belief that if a minister's own marriage were reasonably healthy, he would ergo be a competent marriage counselor, as if there were but one pattern and the only problem being to find the way into conformity with it. We have cause to be grateful for this book for the reason that it makes increasingly clear as the reading of the chapters progresses that marriage and family relationships constitute problems and configurations of a very special kind. They must be understood on their own terms and not merely as transplantation of patterns derived from individual or industrial complexes. I cannot

imagine that very many ministers could read this book without having revealed to themselves, with some surprise at the discovery, the degree to which they had erroneously made one of the above assumptions.

It happens that the theme for emphasis by the National Council of Churches in the area of social concerns for this coming season is "The Christian Family in Rapid Social Change." It is fortunate that we have Dr. Stewart's book available for use in connection with this emphasis. It will lend a depth and specialized, concentrated body of knowledge to the other materials which are being published and circulated. The minister who is taking advantage of this emphasis in the life of his church would find his own presentations enriched considerably by the kind of understanding brought to the subject in this book, which in turn would contribute to the self-understanding of his parishioners in their own family life. Chapter XIV, "Family Life Education in the Church," deals directly with the subject of the National Council emphasis, but I think the other chapters would contribute equally to the minister's thought in this area.

There remains the crucial problem of the minister's time and energy, whereby if he becomes valued as a counselor the demands on him for this may be such as to crowd out even the minimally necessary duties and other vocational pursuits essential to fulfill his own sense of calling. The chapter on "A Pastoral Counseling Center" is of interest in this connection. Dr. Stewart's experience with the Marriage Council of Denver, of which organization he has been president, gives a practical and concrete direction to the discussion. Unfortunately for a variety of reasons many communities would find it impossible to begin to do the job in this respect that needs to be done, so that for a vast number of ministers the problem simply remains as one of those things that must somehow be lived

with. I suspect that it is also true that most communities could do better, if they marshalled and coordinated their resources, than they realize. Certainly informed ministers can greatly improve the ministry of their church to family life and education.

This review has so concentrated on the value of the book for ministers that the impression might be that it would not interest anybody else. That, of course, should not be inferred. The fact

that it has a clear focus will commend it to anyone interested in the subject. With that understanding this is a pastor's book and I would think that any minister who reads it would find his ministry strengthened and improved. As Dr. Stewart puts it, "Ten percent of our clergy trained to handle marriage and family problems is not enough," to which we may add, and it is not enough for a minister to do a fair job in family counseling, who could be doing a good job.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.