

Only when we leave the easy road of glittering generalities and promising panaceas, and struggle over the rocky path of specific understanding of a particular person with a particular problem, can we hope to become truly effective in our pastoral counseling.

The Essence of Counseling

MORE effective counseling is something we all want to achieve. For that reason, discussions of technique often help to suggest new approaches. But any discussion of counseling technique is certain to be colored by the particular beliefs of the discussor, and by his particular personality. Certain techniques are obviously more suitable than others for certain persons and for certain situations. Everyone who tries to help others inevitably develops techniques, or ideas about technique, that are particularly satisfying to himself, and as a result the variety of techniques is very great. For practical purposes, it is important to try to emphasize certain fundamentals of counseling, from which individual variations can be developed, rather than trying to emphasize one's own individual variations as the only true method. For instance, the passive non-directive technique is splendid for certain people to use, in certain situations, but is not the only effective technique. Similarly, a more active technique is useful for some but not for all. No single approach is the final answer in all cases, or for all counselors.

What are the fundamentals in counseling? The essential situation is that a particular person with a particular

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problem comes to his pastor for help. Such a statement is obvious, and yet is often forgotten. The person, the problem, and the help must all be considered, in that order, if one's counseling is to be effective. Any technique, to be effective, must focus on these fundamentals, so that we can learn as much as possible about the person, the problem, and our role in helping.

First, a particular person comes to us. He is unlike any other person in the world. He has his own physical self, his own mental processes, his own emotions, his own beliefs, and his own individual way of approaching life and reacting to it. He is the product of his own individual inheritance and his own environment. He has had certain experiences in life that have influenced him in certain ways. Everything that has happened to him in his life has left its mark on him. If we make the mistake of regarding him as just one of a group or a type, rather than as an individual, we will fail to understand why his particular problem is a problem to him.

We all become annoyed when people

regard us only as members of some particular occupational or social group, without recognizing our individuality. Yet we may fall into the same error of judging people in terms of what we think they ought to be, rather than recognizing them for what they are. It is so much easier to think in sweeping generalities rather than to focus on specific individuality. Every day we hear people refer to members of some group in general terms such as saying that all colored people smell, that all Swedes are stupid, that all professors are impractical, or that all ministers are sanctimonious. There are different members of any group, even though they be all of one body.

THE IMPORTANT thing to recognize is the individuality of each person, the fact that he is a particular person with his own particular way of going at life. In order to understand him, we must use our eyes and our ears, and all our other senses as well, including that sixth sense with which God endowed us but which we are sometimes so hesitant to use. We must be alert not only to what is said but also to what is not said, and in what manner it is said or not said. We must be quick to note the underlying hostility that may be covered by a smile, the underlying depression that may be masked by bright chatter, or the underlying doubt that may be camouflaged by a surface appearance of cooperation. We must get all available information about this person, not only from himself but from other sources. Often people can fool themselves but not those who have had to live with them day by day, and we can learn much from what relatives and even neighbors say, even though we may not believe all of it literally.

Secondly, we have to consider the problem that he brings to us. No one

problem is just like any other problem. Every problem is complicated, but not necessarily complicated in the same way. We must get the most possible information about the particular problem, from all available sources. That means hearing all sides of the story separately, so as to get the true picture that always lies somewhere in between the viewpoints of those involved in the problem. For instance, with a marital problem, how easy it is to get an entirely false idea of the situation if we only hear the story of either the husband or wife, without hearing both viewpoints separately. Another difficulty is that many problems are difficult for the person to discuss, particularly with his pastor. He may start in on one subject when he really wants to talk about another. How often we find that the person who starts talking to us about some abstract theological question eventually summons up enough courage to ask us about the specific personal problem that really troubles him. While he tells us of his problem, we must be alert to his emotional reactions to the discussion of the problem, the tears, the anger, the pauses, the perspiring, or the other evidences that the subject under discussion has real emotional significance to the discussor.

THE THIRD point is that this particular person with this particular problem has come to us for help. This does not mean that we should give him a sermon, or conversation, or charm, or a brush-off. "If his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?" It is our help that is wanted, and nothing else. But help does not necessarily mean immediate action. Many problems require patient study, often prayer for guidance as to how best to proceed. To help means our interest first, and then our sincere effort to be of use in the solu-

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tion of that particular problem presented to us. Probably our usefulness will be greatest if we encourage the person to solve the problem in his own way, rather than trying to solve it for him. Sometimes the greatest help we can give is just our interest and willingness to listen. It is often a great temptation to preach. We must remember that sermons add to the effectiveness of public worship, but not to the effectiveness of counseling. Conversation, moralizing, discussion of irrelevant subjects, or dictatorial advice, all are ineffective in helping that particular person to solve his particular problem. Much counseling that is otherwise adequate fails because we forget that the person before us needs our help to win his battle. By remembering that the person coming to us expects our interest, our understanding, and our help, we can keep from becoming distracted into unproductive conversation or abstractions.

A successful counselor keeps the fundamentals in mind, rather than trying to make each case fit some preconceived explanation or some stereotyped method. Of all the fundamentals in counseling, the most essential are, first, the recognition that the person who comes to us is an individual, and so requires individual study; secondly, the recognition that the problem he brings to us is unique, and so requires individual understanding; and thirdly, the recognition that what is expected of us is help that will enable that particular individual to cope more successfully with his particular problem. Only when we leave the easy road of glittering generalities and promising panaceas, and struggle over the rocky path of specific understanding of a particular person with a particular problem, can we hope to become truly effective in our pastoral counseling.