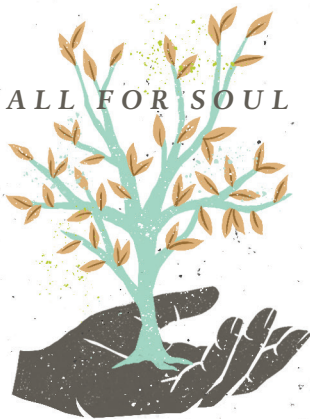


FOREWORD BY ED WELCH

THE
PASTOR
AS
COUNSELOR

THE CALL FOR SOUL CARE



DAVID POWLISON

“Here is a loving, tender-hearted, gospel-confident pastor, calling pastors to be loving, tender-hearted, gospel-confident counselors. David Powlison lived the message of this book and gave his life to mobilizing the church to believe it and live it as well. If you’re a pastor, this book is a must-read, but not just once. Read it again and again, praying that its beautiful vision would become your daily ministry model.”

Paul David Tripp, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *New Morning Mercies* and *My Heart Cries Out*

“It is a rare privilege to get to hear from someone who devoted his life to being good at one thing. That is what you hold—a conversation with David Powlison about what it means to be a pastor who counsels well. That is what David devoted his life to exploring. Learn from him about the beauty and unique opportunities that emerge from counseling as a pastor, and every area of your ministry (teaching, preaching, mentoring, administration) will be enriched. Your ability to serve as an ambassador of Christ to those who are hurting will be enhanced.”

Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina

“David Powlison was a remarkable man. Out of his passion that the church of Jesus Christ take up the mantle of care for broken human beings in this fallen world, he became the quintessential leader of the biblical counseling movement. Out of his incredible gifting to communicate this with beauty and grace, he became one of the most compelling Christian authors of his generation. As a busy pastor myself, I promise that you and your church need to hear what Powlison has to say. If you are looking for a glorious, compelling, and clear introduction to the heart of Christ for his church, you will not find a better place to start than this book.”

Heath Lambert, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Jacksonville; Executive Director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors; author, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* and *Finally Free*

“David Powlison’s book is a profoundly fitting final gift to the church. It is a book that takes us to the very heart of everything David believed the church and her pastors should be, a vision that is simultaneously thrilling and challenging, visionary and practical, theologically rich and culturally astute. My work as a pastor is so much better because of it. This book will expand your pastoral ambitions and encourage you to be more like Christ. Every pastor will profit from it.”

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Senior Minister, Christ Church Cambridge; coauthor, *The Heart of Anger*

“Pastors have unique opportunities to counsel unlike anyone else. With his typically rich insights and thought-provoking analysis, David Powlison encourages pastors to counsel and shepherd their church members. Buy a copy and give this Christ-honoring book to your pastor. He’ll be strengthened and encouraged through it!”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; author, *The Pastor and Counseling*

“When our preaching reaches people’s hearts with the gospel, it raises as many questions as it answers. That’s where our pastoral counseling comes in—gentle, honest conversations with sinners and sufferers who want Jesus at their personal point of need. David Powlison is a faithful guide, helping us pastors fulfill this deeper ministry, where people get traction for newness of life.”

Ray Ortlund, President, Renewal Ministries

The Pastor as Counselor

Other Crossway books by David Powlison

God's Grace in Your Suffering (2018)

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Making All Things New: Restoring Joy to the Sexually Broken (2017)

The Pastor as Counselor

The Call for Soul Care

David Powlison

Foreword by Ed Welch

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Foreword

I AM SO PLEASED TO INTRODUCE this concise monograph from David Powlison. As with most of David's writings, this is a rich banquet. You will return to it and find more. I am also sad that this is a posthumous publication. David went to be with the one he loved above all others in June 2019. Reading *The Pastor as Counselor*, I miss him all the more.

David was a polymath who knew much about many things. After working with him for almost forty years I still chuckled at his passing references to specific flowers, trees, and birds; quotes from early church fathers; details of a solar event scheduled to appear later that evening; and trivia about Philadelphia sports—those references made all the more amazing because he grew up in Hawaii and spent his pre-CCEF (Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation) years in Boston. But these were peripheral adornments on a man

who knew Jesus and loved him, fed on the word, was wholly engaged with the person in front of him, and could enjoy teasing close friends and family (and was happy to be teased). He went through life knowing that he was created in God's image yet also had much in common with the grass of the field that passes quickly. All this might not be enough of an introduction to persuade you to love him as I and many others do, but perhaps it is enough for you to know that he will be a trustworthy and engaging guide to the pastor as counselor.

For all its practical direction, this book is not intended to be a how-to manual. It is more a marker that clarifies your place in this sometimes confusing world of counseling. It reminds you that—right now—you have much counsel you *can* offer to others and already *have* offered, and imagines the path ahead. It will serve you both as an introduction to biblical counseling and as a long-term mentor.

David will persuade you that your ministry is both the public ministry and private ministry of the word. Pastoral care includes both. He will keep larger culture matters in view, especially the psychotherapies and their reputations to go deep and cure souls. In contrast he lets Scripture state what we all know: God alone reveals the depths of the heart and its cure in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We might not be the most skilled practitioners. Yet Scripture accents how

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weak, prayerful, and loving friends are the pastoral engine of our churches. It also leads us in always-growing wisdom in “the art of arts,” which is Gregory the Great’s description of pastoral care and counsel.

David’s questions throughout this volume will cause you to assess where you are in your own counseling theory and skills. Like all good questions, each could provoke fruitful reflection and stimulating conversations with colleagues and friends. All this will make *The Pastor as Counselor* the thickest small book you have ever studied. My fifth read was as helpful as the first.

Edward T. Welch

Introduction

PASTOR, YOU ARE A COUNSELOR.

Perhaps you don't think of yourself that way. Perhaps you don't want to be a counselor. But you are one.

Perhaps preaching, leadership, and administration keep you preoccupied, and you do not do much hands-on pastoral work. You don't take time for serious talking with people. In effect, you are counseling your people to think that most of us don't need the give-and-take of candid, constructive conversation. Apparently, the care and cure of wayward, distractible, battered, immature souls—people like us—can be handled by public ministry and private devotion. The explicit wisdom of both Scripture and church history argues to the contrary.

Perhaps you are a poor counselor. Are you shy, tentative, passive? Are you aggressive, controlling, opinionated? Do you sympathize with strugglers so much that you have trouble

shifting the conversation into forward gear? Do people feel you don't listen well and don't really care, so they don't find reasons to trust you?

Unlike Proverbs, do you moralize, unhinging advice from deeper insight and deeper reasons? "Read your Bible. . . . Just get accountable. . . . Have your quiet time. . . . Get involved in a ministry."

Unlike the psalms, are you pietistic? "Just pray and give it all to Jesus. . . . Claim back your inheritance from Satan. . . . Learn mindfulness and listen for the voice of God in your inner silence."

Unlike Jesus, do you speak in theological abstractions and generalities? "The sovereignty of God. . . . Justification by faith. . . . The synergy of God's initiative and man's response in the sanctification process . . ."

Unlike Paul—no two letters and no two sermons ever the same!—do you offer the predictable boilerplate of pat answers and pet truths?

Do you talk too much about yourself—or too little? Does your counsel sound like a self-help book? There are innumerable ways to run off the rails. But even if your counseling is ineffectual, off-putting, or harmful, you are still a counselor.

If you are a good counselor, then you're learning how to sustain with a word the one who is weary (Isa. 50:4). This

is wonderful, nothing less than your Redeemer's skillful love expressed in and through you. You've learned to speak truth in love, conversing in honest, nutritious, constructive, timely, grace-giving ways (Eph. 4:15, 25, 29). You deal gently with the ignorant and wayward because you know you are more like them than different (Heb. 5:2–3). You don't only do what comes naturally but have gained the flexibility to be patient with all, to help the weak, to comfort the fainthearted, to admonish the unruly (1 Thess. 5:14). You bring back those who wander (James 5:19–20), just as God brings you back time and again. You're engaged in meeting the most fundamental human need, both giving and receiving encouragement every day (Heb. 3:13). In becoming a better counselor, you are growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Pastor, you are a counselor—and much more than a counselor. A pastor also teaches, equips, supervises, and counsels other counselors. Is your preaching worth the time you put into it and the time others spend listening? The proof lies in whether they are growing up into wise mutual counselors. That is the call and challenge of Ephesians 3:14–5:2. Hands-on pastoral counseling never means that you become the only counselor in the body of Christ. You are training Christ's people how to walk in the image of the "Wonderful Counselor" (Isa. 9:6). This

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is a refreshing vision for the care and cure of souls! It is a distinctively Christian vision.

This small volume focuses on the counseling aspect of a pastor's calling. But other readers are most welcome to listen in. All human beings are counselors, whether wise, foolish, or mixed. *All* Christians are meant to become wiser counselors. God intends that *every* word you ever say to anyone is actively constructive in content, intention, tone, and appropriateness (Eph. 4:29). Those who face *any* affliction should find you a source of tangible comfort (2 Cor. 1:4). Wisdom sets the bar high. We are to become a community in which substantial conversations predominate. You who are not pastors will grow in wisdom by considering how pastoral work particularizes the wisdom of Christ in the cure of souls wherever the body of Christ is working well.

This volume has two chapters. First, we will discuss how to understand the word *counseling* within a pastoral frame of reference. Second, we will unpack a few of the distinctives that make a pastor's counseling so unique.

What Is Counseling?

THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC CONCEPTION of counseling operates in a different universe from the pastoral conception. The human problems are the same, of course: broken, confused, distressed, distressing people who need help. How should we define the “talking cure” for the ills that beset us?

A therapist’s treatment typically means a private relationship confined to an appointed hour once a week. Like medicine or law, the mental health professions treat patients/clients on a fee-for-service basis. State licensure recognizes education and experience that presumably grant esoteric explanatory insight and exceptional interventive skills. Like medical professionals, mental health professionals present themselves as possessing objective scientific knowledge and offering

value-neutral technical expertise. The ostensibly healthy treat the definedly sick. A client's difficulties and distress are susceptible to diagnosis in morally neutral categories: a DSM syndrome, dysfunction, or disorder.¹

Therapeutic professionalism serves a distinct ethos. Clinical detachment intentionally avoids the mutuality of normal social existence: willing self-disclosure, "dual relationships" that live outside the office as well as inside, the candid give-and-take of story, opinion, persuasion, and mutual influence. Professional reserve dictates that "the therapist will not impose or otherwise induce his personal values on the patient. . . . The exploration and acquisition of more constructive and less neurotically determined values [is] conducted without ethical or moral pressure or suasions of any kind."² Psychotherapeutic faith roots in "the assumption that in every human being there is a core selfhood that if allowed free and unconflicted expression would provide the basis for creative, adaptive, and productive living."³ Religion is recognized as a factor that might be individually compelling for some clients, either a comforting resource or an aspect of pathology. But "God" has no objective significance or necessary relevance either in explanation or treatment of dysfunctional emotions, behaviors, and thoughts.

This constellation of assumptions and expectations expresses the professional self-image of the talking-cure professions. It shapes our culture's implicit belief that "psychotherapy/counseling" is essentially analogous to medical doctoring. But this complex of meanings profoundly misshapes assumptions of what counseling really is and ideally ought to be. Counseling per se is not like medical doctoring. It is pastoring. It is discipling. If we want to use the physician analogy, counseling is the "bedside manner" part of doctoring, not the medical part. It expresses the influence human beings have on one another's thoughts, values, moods, expectancies, and choices. Counseling is not essentially a technical enterprise calling for technical expertise. It is a relational and pastoral enterprise engaging in care and cure of the soul. Both "psycho-therapy" and "psych-iatry" attempt pastoral work. They engage in "care and cure of the soul" as their etymologies accurately signify. Sigmund Freud rightly defined therapists as "secular pastoral workers."⁴

Personal factors—who you are, how you treat people, what you believe—are decisive in pastoral work. The key ingredients in pastoring another human being are love, wisdom, humility, integrity, mercy, authority, clarity, truthspeaking, courage, candor, curiosity, hope, sane humanity, wide experience, much patience, careful listening, responsive immediacy,

and willingness to live with uncertainty about process and outcome. Therapists also know this, deep down, and say as much when they doff the professional persona.⁵ These are terrific personal qualities. They express nothing less than how the image of God lives in human flesh while going about the work of redeeming broken, confused, distressed, distressing people who need help. The mental health professions intuit well when they say that personal factors are the essential factors. But they serve in pastorates with no God and no church. They aim to restore straying, suffering, willful, dying human beings. But they consider Christ unnecessary to their pastoral work. As a matter of principle, they will not lead strugglers to the Savior of strays. You know better. But the secularized-medicalized definition of counseling powerfully intimidates pastors and laypersons alike. If the habits, instincts, outlook, and goals of therapeutic pastorates define counseling, then you had better not pretend or aspire to be a counselor. You need a different way—a better way—to understand counseling.

A Redefinition of Counseling

Consider four ways that you as a pastor must redefine counseling.

For starters, if the psychotherapeutic definition controls our vision, *what pastor could ever provide the necessary care and*

cure of even thirty souls, let alone one hundred, five hundred, or five thousand souls? What pastor has time to get the presumably necessary secularized education? Having labored long toward your ordination by the church, who has time or inclination to labor for a second ordination by the mental health system? What pastor could ever invest so much time in one-to-one counseling? A pastor needs a very different vision for what counseling is and can be.

Second, *what true pastor believes that the love of Christ and the will of God are value free?* You will never say to anyone (except ironically), “You are free to discover your own values, whatever works for you, whatever way of living with yourself and others brings you a sense of personal satisfaction.” God has chosen to impose his values on the entire universe. First Timothy 1:5 bluntly asserts nonnegotiable goals: “love . . . from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” God insists on the supreme worth and glory of who he is and what he has done. God insists that self-centered people learn love—not coping skills, not self-actualization, not meeting felt needs, not techniques of managing emotions or thought life, not fulfilling personal goals. God’s morally charged categories heighten human responsibility. His willing mercy and sheer grace give the only real basis for true compassion and patience. He insists that we learn love by being loved, by

learning Jesus: “In this is love . . . that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). On the last day, every knee bows to God’s “values.”

The whole nature of ministry is to “impose” light into darkness, to induce sanity, to form Christ’s life-nourishing values within us. Pastoral counseling openly brings “ethical or moral suasions” as expressions of genuine love that considers the actual welfare of others. The conscious intentions of Christless counselors are kindly, but they do not consider the true welfare and needs of actual human beings. A pastor has a systematically brighter vision for what counseling is all about.

Third, *what honest pastor would ever buy into the arm’s-length professional reserve of the therapist?*⁶ Ministry is self-disclosing by necessity and as a matter of principle. After all, we follow David, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul. Shouts of delight along with loud cries and groaning are part of the whole package. No real pastor can be clinically detached. The Paul who wrote 1 Thessalonians 2:7–12 is far too emotionally involved. Like Jesus, he cares too much to ever stand at arm’s length from people and their troubles. If Jesus had entered into purely consultative, professional relationships, he’d have had to stop being a pastor. Pastoral self-disclosure is one part of wise love. It is not self-indulgent. It is neither impulsive venting nor

exhibitionistic transparency nor a pontificating of private opinions. It includes proper reserve. But Christian openness is a different ball game from the ideal of dispassionate professionalism. Ministry expresses the honest emotional immediacy of team sports and contact sports. It is full-court basketball, not chess or poker.

How about you? Don't people know you in all sorts of other roles besides counselor?—proclaimer of words of life, friend at the dinner table, bedside visitor in the hospital, second-baseman on the softball team, mere man and leader who can't help but show how he faces financial pressure or handles interpersonal conflict, object of uproarious roasting at the church retreat, public speaker who tells a good story on himself, host and landlord to the struggler staying in your spare bedroom, husband of a woman who is well-known in her own right, father of kids in Sunday school, fellow sufferer who needs what he asks of God, fellow worshiper who candidly gives thanks for what he receives, fellow servant who yearns to love better than he does. You not only have a dual relationship with the people you counsel; you have multiple relationships. And that's as it should be. Christianity is a different counseling ethos.

Finally, *what good pastor could ever in good conscience adopt the ethos by which the ostensibly well presume to treat*

the evidently sick? Aren't we all in this together, facing the same temptations, sorrows, and threats? Aren't we all prone to the same sinfulness? "Behavioral medicine" (as the health insurance companies label it) claims to cure a patient's character disorder, identity confusion, mood disorder, thought disorder, maladaptive behavior, relational dysfunction, and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Ministry addresses the same problems but humanizes the struggle. A dark disease deranges our character, identity, emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. A bright Savior sets about curing such souls. Endemic sinfulness deranges our reactions to both traumatic and everyday sufferings. Psalm 23 infuses a different way of suffering. Our derangement is fundamental, rooting in dedicated attentiveness to our own inner voice, the liar we find most persuasive (Prov. 16:2; 21:2). But our Pastor's voice heals us: "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). Don't you have the same kinds of problems as those you minister to, and aren't our differences matters of degree, not kind? Aren't you part of the same ongoing healing? Real ministry engages the same personal and interpersonal problems that the psychotherapies address—but more deeply. It pursues hidden moral cancers that we all share, whether our symptoms are florid or mild. And any healing is our healing, one and all.

Jesus Our Counselor

Where does this pastoral ethos come from? Jesus himself was touched with the weaknesses, struggles, and temptations of those with whom he spoke and for whom he died. Jesus eschews clinical detachment. He chooses frank self-disclosure and the multi-relationships intrinsic to pastoral love. He was never value neutral. He used every form of loving suasion, right down to publicly dying for those he sought to persuade.



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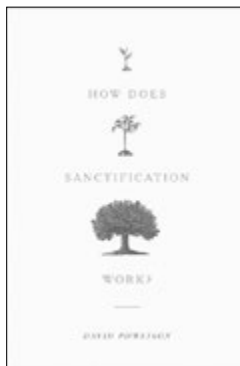
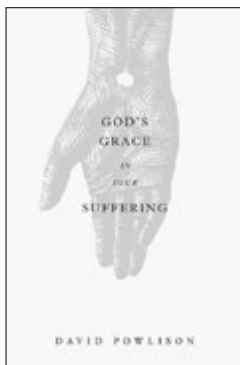
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“The vision of the centrality of God, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the necessity of sweet spiritual communion with the crucified and living Christ—these impulses that lie behind the CCEF ministries make it easy to commend them to everyone who loves the Church.”

John Piper, Founder, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary

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For more information, visit crossway.org.

A pastor inhabits multiple roles—teacher, preacher, youth leader, and counselor. Yet many church leaders feel unprepared to counsel church members who are struggling with difficult, multifaceted problems.

David Powlison reminds pastors of their unique role as the shepherds of God's people, equipping them to apply biblical wisdom to the thoughts, values, moods, expectations, and decisions of those under their care.

“If you're a pastor, this book is a must-read, but not just once. Read it again and again, praying that its beautiful vision would become your daily ministry model.”

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author,
New Morning Mercies and *My Heart Cries Out*

DAVID POWLISON (1949–2019) was a teacher, a counselor, and the executive director of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation. He received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and was the senior editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. He wrote a number of books, including *How Does Sanctification Work?*; *Making All Things New*; and *God's Grace in Your Suffering*.