

Family Counseling: Is It Possible?

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Entertaining the prospect of counseling both a husband and a wife is an overwhelming thought for many counselors. They consider one counselee more than enough; they can't help but wonder, "What do I do when there are two?" Counselors **really** wonder about counseling an entire family, thinking "That would involve more than I could *ever* handle!" Yet, every counselor must learn to confront the many differences that numbers and distinct concerns pose. Think: "How does one deal with so many people – three, four, five, or more?" The challenge not only involves numbers. Consider the age differences: children, adults, teens – all sitting there in the counseling room together! In addition, you have varied interests, goals, prejudices, levels of willingness to receive counsel (or the lack thereof) and so on. Wow!

How to begin? That, in itself, is a matter of concern! What if some of the counselees are Christians and others are not? Does Nouthetic Counseling hold the answers or are its followers perplexed along with everyone else? What if some are willing to come to counseling, but some are not? How about children dragged into the counseling room (or husbands – for that matter)? Is family counseling under such varied conditions even possible? That's a legitimate question. Is there one overarching answer to these questions (and many others), or does one simply throw in the towel and send them off to some "professional"?

In Nouthetic Counseling, we stress the fact that pastors and deacons¹ are required by God to help church members who are (or ought to be) dealing with their family problems. Churches must not pawn them off on so-called professionals whose professions usually are anything other than biblical. There are over some 250+ different counseling views abroad in America today.² Who knows what family members will be told by those who advocate and practice them?³ Dare any pastor risk sending his parishioners off to such counselors?

If you as a concerned minister of the Gospel must counsel families, how do you begin? What do you do? Can you hope for any sort of success?

Take the last question first: "Can you hope for success?" Good counseling always involves the Christian counselor's own view of success. It must be correct. Unless he understands what God deems to be success he will fail. Does success involve straightening out the problems of a family so that they live more or less

harmoniously thereafter? That might be a laudable secondary goal, but it cannot be the criterion for determining success in God's sight. No. The true biblical idea of success means bringing counselees into a right relationship to God – regardless of whether other goals are achieved or not.⁴ It is possible for counselees to reach biblical goals that they never expected when they entered counseling. For them to do so, when necessary, must be your main goal.

That being so, early on in the first session, when possible, your prime goal will be to please God in all you do and say about the matters at hand. Moreover, you must work toward bringing about like responses from members of the family in question. These objectives must be understood clearly and firmly by all. Since potential counselees often will come with other goals in mind, the counselor must establish this biblical objective of learning how to become a God-pleasing family. Presently, we will deal more fully with ways and means of achieving this objective.

First, Let's See What You Must Do to Get Started.

Here they come! Let's say it's a husband and wife, Mary, a teen age girl (13), and two boys John and Bill (ages 8 and 10). You don't have to be introduced because you are their minister. You already know something about all of them. What you know may or may not be correct. You will know some facts, and you also will have ideas that you have formed upon less than solid data.⁵ To be sure of these facts, and to glean others, you will have them fill out a PDI (Personal Data Information) form prior to entering the counseling room.⁶ Stress that you want the last three questions on the form filled out thoughtfully, if not fully. These three questions are:

1. What is the problem as you see it?
2. What have you done about it?
3. What do you want me to do?

Having brought all five persons into the study where counseling will take place, you will go over the PDI, asking for any clarifications that seem necessary. Then, having settled everyone down on chairs arranged so as to keep them close to one another, you immediately get down to business – not allowing much chit chat. After praying briefly, you next read out loud everyone's answers to question one of the three listed above. Thus, in discussing these, you are off and running. Counseling has begun.⁷

"Dad, I see that you say the problem is.... Will you please explain what you mean by.... And, Mom, you say that.... while Mary, I notice that your view seems to be that.... John, I see that you started to fill in an answer, but didn't complete it. How about doing so verbally? You listen to him if he agrees. If not, then you say, "We'll get back to this matter later."⁸ Then, you read Bill's statement. "I see you say John's the problem. That's interesting. We'll have to look at that in more detail later."⁹ Then

you begin to discuss the answers given: “Mom, will you please amplify the words you wrote?”

Let’s say that by now you have finished with answers to question one for the time being (this discussion might have taken most of the session).

Next, you read answers to question two out loud.¹⁰ These responses are very important. Don’t skip over them too quickly. Sometimes what has been done about a problem only complicates it. When wrong, sometimes the complication is more serious than the original problem.

Answers to question three are significant. Here is where you can speak about God’s goal for counseling – whether it conforms to theirs or not, and where you will spend time attempting to show them how important it is to have God’s goal before them at all times. You will strongly urge them to sincerely adopt His goal as theirs. How to go about this – along with much else – will be explained when you take a course in Nouthetic Counseling.

In addition to the above...

What You Want to Achieve in Session One Is To

1. Set forth the biblical goal for counseling sessions (see above)¹¹
2. Make it clear that you mean business by the way you talk and act
3. Reveal your hope and expectation that God will help if they mean business
4. Explain how important counselee commitment is
5. Help them to acquire biblical hope
6. Use the Bible skillfully. Be sure *you* read it to them¹² (Don’t use too many passages. Explain any that are not immediately clear.)
7. Show how passages apply to them by using helpful illustrations. Give biblical homework¹³ (to be explained fully in a NC course).
8. Work especially with individuals who respond positively to biblical teaching
9. Shape the problem for all – as fully as it comes to the surface¹⁴
10. Send them off with prayer and a cheerful word (if suitable)

All of these matters, and more, will be thoroughly explained in NC courses.

Here Are Some of the Problems That You May Run Into:

1. Child(ren) misbehaving (that parents are unable to restrain)
2. One parent not wanting to be there
3. Parents (or children) giving up
4. Homework not done at next session

5. Need to remind them of main goal (even after their supposed commitment to it).
6. Laziness in fulfilling homework. Stress that this is where the change takes place.
7. Doubt that you can help
8. One counselee continually getting off subject
9. Attacking you or your methods
10. Discovering one or more isn't a believer after all (need to evangelize¹⁵)

A Fundamental Consideration:

Is this marriage so far out on the rocks that it possibly might break up? If so, it may be necessary to counsel the parents alone for a few sessions until this matter is satisfactorily dealt with (before inviting children back). The best thing parents can do for their children is to become good parents.

Never allow children to pit one parent against the other in counseling (and warn about the possibility of this happening at home). If a lawyer is involved in a parental fight, try to get the couple to dismiss him. Many lawyers tell people that the best way out of their problems is to get a divorce. Separating is not a viable solution. You can't put two people together again by separating them! Many of the problems with children will clear up when parents solve their problems with one another.¹⁶

Now, Consider Some Examples of In-Session Counseling Situations:

1. One or the other parent is sinfully involved with another person (or is suspected to be).
2. Involvement with someone else affects counseling in such a way that one (or both) does not want problems solved and wants counseling to fail in order to justify the sin.
3. One party may come in with little or no hope and won't put out enough effort to bring about change.
4. Some parents have wrong attitudes toward their children:
5. "That's just kids; they'll get over it."
6. "I'm sick and tired of being the only one to discipline them."
7. "I'm afraid she'll get pregnant."
8. "How do I keep them from hanging around with the wrong companions?"
9. "It's the school's fault." (There may be some truth to this claim.)
10. "That's not the way I interpret the passage."
11. "That's just theology – not practical truth."
12. "We'll never be able to do that."
13. "I'm willing; but I'm sure she (he) isn't."

14. “All we’ve tried so far has failed; why should we think your counseling will help?”
15. “I’m not committing myself to anything.”
16. “I don’t think that will work.”
17. “Did you hear him? I’ve had it!”
18. “I can’t help it.”
19. “That’s just the way I am, I guess. Maybe it’s my parents’ fault.”
20. “It’s too hard to change at my age.”
21. “I may make an effort if I see him doing so.”
22. “She’s too stubborn to admit she’s wrong.”

As a Pastor You Know Something of the Family Already:

1. You know if they are erratic in their church attendance.
2. You may suspect that he or she may be infatuated with another member of the congregation.
3. You don’t like the influence of their friends that is going in wrong direction.
4. Mom seems flighty or rarely says anything substantive.
5. Kids act up in church as well as Sunday School.
6. As you read through Proverbs, you are reminded of this parent again and again.
7. You know that he or she is a hard worker in business.
8. The mother may be a good cook.
9. They rarely (if ever) take a vacation.
10. They talk sports, fashions, celebrities, or movies, but little else.
11. They don’t seem to have much money, but they have a fairly new car.

Now Consider Some Sample Excerpts:

Scenario #1

MOM: Don’t accuse me of something that’s really your fault. Counselor, he’s lying. Don’t believe him. He....

DAD: There she goes again – can’t take any criticism. She...

JOHN: (crying) Now look what you’ve done – mom’s crying!

DAD: Now listen...

CNSLR: Hold it! Arguing isn’t going to solve anything. Remember the verse we learned earlier – the one we decided that would characterize our conversation? It says that Christians should “Do everything decently and in order.”¹⁷ Is there anything decent about what you were doing Dad? Mom?

BOTH: I guess not...No

CNSLR: And “**order**”...remember: that means, among other things, no interruptions. Got it?

BOTH: Yes, I suppose you’re right.

CNSLR: Good. I know it’s easy to revert to old ways – but that’s one thing that we’re out to change! Now, let’s get back to where we were: Dad, you were saying...

Scenario #2

(Mom and Dad alone)

CNSLR: Now I’ve asked you two to meet with me alone because I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere until you are both in sync.

MOM: Glad you decided to do so; I’m frustrated!

DAD: That makes two of us.

CNSLR: I’m going to take a few minutes to explain some things (not that I haven’t preached about this before, but it may take a situation like this to get it across): Marriage is a **Covenant of Companionship**. Proverbs 2:17 says that if a woman forsakes the “companion of her youth” she forgets “the covenant of her God.” The word for companionship refers to closeness, intimacy; it reflects the original creation in which Adam found no animal could relate to him that way. So since God knew it wasn’t good for him to be alone He made Eve. The two became one flesh. In Malachi 2:14 men who were faithless to their wives are said to betray their “companions...by covenant.” The word here for “companion” means one who is in union with or has a very close relationship with another. Do these terms define what is missing in your marriage?

DAD: Sure does; she’s gotten so far away from me that we hardly speak – anything nice, anyway.

MOM: Humpf! Me? He’s the one who is the stranger, and...

CNSLR: Now hold it! We’ll never get anywhere if we continue to blame each other. In Ephesians 5:25 husbands (not wives) are told to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Since husbands are the responsible heads of their homes, if there is no love in a home, it’s primarily their fault!

DAD: Oh my! My responsibility, eh? Not sure I could ever love **her** like Christ loved the church!

CNSLR: He loved it when its members were rebellious sinners! John wrote, “We love because He first loved us” (I John 4:19). The church’s love is responsive (as a loved wife’s love will be). We love **because He took the initiative**. Dad, you must do the same...

DAD: What? I’m to take the initiative? That’s news...

CNSLR: Good news. It gives you a way to begin restoring love in your home.

MOM: Sure does! Now if he would only...

CNSLR: Hold on! Let’s not forget the other side of the equation: Mom, you are to **submit to him** as the church submits to Christ” (Ephesians 5:22). Together, doing

as God says, you will have harmony through true love. Now, let me explain. Biblical love isn't feeling; it's giving.

Scenario #3

MARY: This isn't going to do any good...She...

JOHN: Shut up and let the preacher talk!

MARY: Why...you little brat, I'll...

CNSLR: Whoa! We're not to tear others down. Maybe you talk like this elsewhere; but I can't allow it in counseling. It displeases God, and we'll get nowhere. We're going to speak to one another the way He wants. No tearing each other down. What's the opposite of that?

DAD: Build? Build something up?

CNSLR: Right! Romans 14:19 says we are to do exactly that! Mary, you were going to say...

MARY: Mom says I'll become a "little ..." if I continue to meet with my friends. That's tearing *them* down isn't it?"

CNSLR: Please explain yourself Mom.

MOM: Well, she wants to go to Florida on spring break; everybody knows what goes on there.

CNSLR: Do you trust Mary, mom?"

MOM: Usually, but this is different. You see those other girls...

CNSLR: So up until now Mary hasn't been doing things that break your trust in her; good. Now let's consider her proposal...

CONCLUSION

There is so much more to say than I have said – as you surely realize. These are written to give some idea of what a counselor encounters in counseling families, and how he may do so. There is little more here than hints and glimpses of what is involved. I suggest if you are at all intrigued by what has been said, consider taking a course in Nouthetic Counseling at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary.

NOTES

1. Not to mention Christian laymen (see Galatians 6:1, I Thessalonians 5:14).
2. Conservatively speaking, the last time professionals all got together in Phoenix, the spokesperson for them said that “there was only one thing that they all agreed upon – namely, that they agreed on nothing.” I was foreman of a jury in California in which Richard Rapport, a forensic psychiatrist of note, was asked by a clever attorney, ‘Do psychiatrists agree on anything?’ He truthfully responded, ‘No.’”
3. See my book *Competent to Counsel* for a discussion of this issue.
4. Often one or more of the counselees will not reach God’s goals. If others do, that is but a partial success so far as the counselor is concerned, *but, if proper counsel is given*, the counseling endeavor, as a whole, is a success; you pleased God by it.
5. You will be careful to hold these in reserve until you are sure of the facts.
6. For a copy of the PDI, see *Competent to Counsel*. Have your secretary give them the PDI forms together with instructions for their use. If you have no secretary, meet them in a different room and hand them the forms and pencils accompanied by instructions about their use. You will tell the parents alone to handle some questions and all to fill in answers to, at least, the last three.
7. Apart from these questions by which you slide easily into counseling, you might not have known how to begin.
8. Be sure that you keep this promise.
9. See previous end note.
10. Possibly, answers to question number one may have led to discussion of answers to question number two. In such a situation, note the fact and continue to discuss both questions as they intertwine.
11. 2 Corinthians 5:9 summarizes the goal.
12. Some counselors ask counselees to read. This is unwise: they may not understand, read poorly, be confused, be distracted from the flow of the session, etc.
13. This is an important matter to be stressed when commitment is reached. Homework is given to the believing one (or ones) who agree to the biblical goal. Parental authority is stressed if necessary to any child who shows failure to obey parents. How to do so winsomely is shown in a NC course.
14. Sometimes it will not surface clearly until a later session.
15. You may need to consider the church membership of one or more of them if no change occurs.
16. This is a very important fact to keep in mind.
17. I Corinthians 14:40.