

# Faith Pulpit

## A Prescription for Safe Counseling

Pastoral indiscretion has reached epidemic proportions. The news media often headline today's religious leaders who have fallen into sexual sin. However, the list is not limited to Swaggart and Bakker. The sad truth is that many, many pastors have become casualties in the war against the flesh.

Dr. Paul Tassell, the national representative of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, has reported that in the last ten years he knows over 40 GARBC pastors who have become involved in sexual indiscretion.

Leadership journal reports in its Winter 1988 issue that "70 percent [of the pastors surveyed] expressed the belief that pastors are particularly vulnerable" [to sexual immorality]. In fact, 12 percent of the pastors who responded to that survey said that they had had "sexual intercourse with someone other than" their spouse. And another 23 percent had inappropriate sexual behavior with someone other than their spouse.

The 1980s have brought a wave of sexually-oriented problems to the pastoral ministry. Today's pastors are not isolated from the provocative visual temptations that are so available. Even accepted television programs and family news magazines contain sexually-stimulating advertisements, articles and photographs.

But is there a particular danger that leads to pastoral immorality? Many of the fallen pastors have stated that the problem started during a counseling session. There may be a common pattern:

A woman needs counsel. She comes to the pastor for help. The pastor is friendly, kind, and well-dressed. He also has answers. He offers compassionate leadership. The pastor is everything this woman craves in her own husband. She then becomes emotionally dependent. The counseling sessions become longer and more frequent. The pastor enjoys the attention paid to him by this now-familiar woman. He

secretly wishes his own wife would listen that way.

The danger present in the above case study is obvious, but not so obvious to the two persons themselves. Even pastors can miss the obvious when they are personally or emotionally involved.

A wise pastor (or anyone else for that matter) will take specific steps to protect his ministry and marriage before he becomes personally or emotionally attached to someone who is responding to him. A pastor must remain above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2) if he is to effectively minister the 'Word of God.

### **Step #1 Guard daily devotions.**

The man who skips prayer and Bible study walks in danger all day long.

### **Step #2 Avoid any ongoing counseling relationship with a woman.**

There may be times when a pastor must counsel a woman, but the Bible is silent about any kind of one-to-one man-to-woman counseling relationships. In fact, the Bible teaches a woman-to-woman ministry instead (Titus 2:3-4). The pastor's wife or another godly woman in the church should be prepared to take on this type of ministry.

Pastors must protect their reputations and ministries with constant vigilance. Any ongoing relationship with a woman is potentially dangerous, even if the sessions pertain to a spiritual matter. The woman counselee should take her problem to her husband (1 Cor. 14:35) or to another woman (Titus 2:3,4).

It is this writer's opinion that today's pastor might want to consider developing a training program which could effectively train older, mature women in the church to counsel or disciple the younger women in the church. Such a training program could include one or more of the following:

1. The pastor teaching a Sunday School class on counseling
2. Bringing in guest authors who are known experts in counseling, i.e., Drs. Robert Hess and Don Worch
3. Scheduling a film or video series on counseling (Goode and Smith in LaFayette, IN)
4. Sending key lay people to counseling seminars or classes
5. Having good books on counseling available in the church library as those of Jay Adams or Wayne Mack

### **Step #3 Develop a plan for protection.**

There are several people in a local church on whom a pastor may rely in order to protect his ministry. These people include his wife, the church staff, and the deacons. (Of course there is a delicate balance between privacy and protection of a pastor's reputation.) These people could be involved in several ways. The pastor's wife can actually be involved in the counseling session. The pastor could ask some staff member to stay in the office until the counseling session is over. Deacons can be alerted to

potential problems. Staff members can inform the senior pastor of counseling concerns. And the pastor should have a clear glass window in his office door. All of these things can be accomplished without violating confidences.

#### **Step #4 Use spiritual resources in all counseling sessions.**

The pastor is a spiritual leader. Neglecting spiritual resources would be a tragic dereliction of duty. The pastor should always pray with his counselees. He should use the Bible as his primary resource. These simple, yet profound, practices will show the counselee that the pastor depends upon God—not counseling tools, or his own talents or abilities.

#### **Step #5 Do not make counseling the top priority.**

A pastor is not a professional counselor. He is called of God to shepherd (feed and guide) the flock of God. This will result in the spiritual maturity of God's people (Eph. 4:11,12). Therefore, biblical pastoral counseling must be done within the context of a pastor's other duties and responsibilities. A counseling ministry should be the outgrowth of his preaching/ teaching ministry.

A pastor should prepare himself to effectively minister to people both in private counseling and in public preaching. He should also take specific steps, such as the ones listed above, to avoid destroying his ministry through an improper counseling relationship.

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