

The Role of the Church in Counseling

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Introduction:

A. The key way that God has designed for believers to change and grow is through the mainstream discipleship ministries of the local church.

1. God has not designed the Christian life to be lived in an individualistic way.
2. The N.T. clearly teaches that the Christian life is to be lived in the context of the body of Christ, with the clear emphasis of the N.T. being upon the local body of believers, not the church universal.
3. Even the personal spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study are more effectively developed through the teaching and accountability of the local body of believers.
 - a. The very goal of those disciplines is to bring forth fruit of ministry in and through the body.

B. Counseling is directed at believers who are not moving forward through the mainstream discipleship ministries of the church.

1. They have become “beached” by some life struggle.

C. The goal of counseling is to get the believer back to the place where he is growing and ministering through the local church.

D. In fact, the N.T. calls into question the salvation of someone who claims to be in Christ but has no desire to be involved with the people of God.
1 John 4:7-12,19-21.

E. The clear implication of all of this is that counseling, apart from the context of the total ministry of the body, will be completely ineffective.

I. REASONS THAT INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHURCH IS VITAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN.

A. It is a command of God to every believer. (Heb. 10:25).

1. To be unfaithful to the local church is to live a life in disobedience to God.

2. If a person is unwilling to submit to God's authority in this most basic of commands, in what other areas is he/she unwilling to submit to God?

B. Involvement in the church helps prevent backsliding and doctrinal error.

1. We need other believers to spur us on in our walk with Jesus. (Heb. 10:24).

2. We need other believers to admonish us when we become wayward or complacent. (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1).

3. We need the ministry of the church and elders to help us stay biblical in our doctrine. (1 Tim. 4:1-15; 2 Tim. 4:1-5).

C. Involvement in the church brings us under spiritual authority and accountability. (Heb. 13:7,17).

1. The authority that Christ has delegated to the local church and her leaders is a powerful tool in helping people who struggle with difficult sins.

2. The counselor who seeks to minister apart from the authority of the local church lacks important resources to bring accountability to bear on the stubborn counselee.

D. Involvement in the church provides the Christian with access to a fellowship of believers to encourage him, pray for him, edify him through the use of spiritual gifts, and come alongside him in time of struggle. (Gal. 6:2; Rom. 12:5-8, 10-13, 15).

1. The context in which a believer grows and is built up to Christlikeness is the body of believers. (Eph. 4:15-16).

E. Involvement in the church provides the Christian with access to opportunities of service which are important to spiritual development. (Eph. 4:11-12).

F. Involvement in the church provides the means in which the Christian may enter into worship of God and receive instruction in God's Word in the corporate context.

1. Congregational worship is more like Heaven than private worship. (Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 5:11-14).

2. "The highest worship of God is the preaching of the Word." (Martin Luther)

3. Public proclamation of the Word is commanded by God and edifies the body. (1 Tim. 4:13,16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; 1 Cor. 14:3-4,26,31).

II. INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHURCH IS ONE OF THE "MEANS OF GRACE" THAT GOD HAS ORDAINED AS THE TOOLS FOR CHRISTIAN GROWTH.

A. "By 'the means of grace' I mean five main things: reading the Bible, private prayer, meeting with other Christians for worship, taking the Lord's Supper, and keeping the Lord's Day holy. These things God has graciously appointed either to bring us to faith in Christ or to help us make progress as Christians. Our spiritual condition will largely depend on the way in which we use them." (J.C. Ryle, *Walking with God*, pp. 12-13).

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B. To attempt to counsel while not incorporating the use of the "means of grace" into the process is to seek to help the counselee change without the use of the primary tools God has provided for growth.

C. Requirement for holding the private counseling sessions ought to include regular attendance at the public services of the church.

1. Explain to your counselees the "means of grace" and why they are essential to growth and change.

III. KEY STATEMENTS ON THE CHURCH BY DONALD WHITNEY. (Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church).

A. "Christians who do not attend church are usually the most

unbalanced Christians. The difficulty, however, is that they don't realize it. It is not easy to detect when your [own] Christian life is unbalanced. Others can usually detect a lack of balance in us better than we can see it in ourselves. That's another reason that it is crucial for us to attend church. The Lord uses His body, the church, to protect us against the common temptations that lead to imbalance." (p. 25).

B. "In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus set up an accountability system.

When a professing believer starts living like an unbeliever, those in the church who know it are to confront him in love about his sin....If you aren't part of the church, it has no authority over you and cannot do what Jesus said to do. Unless you join the church, your independence places you outside of the way Jesus wants things to happen." (p. 50).

C. "Emotionally healthy people crave community. God made us with that desire and we seek to satisfy it in societies of all sorts....

Spiritually healthy people---Christians who live in faithful response to the Word and Spirit of God---have found the community everyone is searching for. They have found it in what the Bible calls *fellowship*. Fellowship is the community for which

God customized us. Curiously, however, some Christians are tempted to think that they can remain spiritually healthy apart from breathing the fresh air of biblical fellowship." (pp. 147-48).

D. "He does not *save* us through fellowship; *saving* grace comes only through the life and death of Jesus Christ. But He does give us *sustaining* grace---spiritual strength for Christian living---via *koinonia*. And God's *koinonia* grace is not a duplicate of any other kind of His grace. Since God gives grace and strength through fellowship, without fellowship you will be a spiritual weakling, fantasizing in private about your spiritual prowess, but powerless when it really counts." (p. 153).

E. "Christians wither without fellowship. One reason is that *koinonia* encourages us to practice those Spiritual Disciplines that promote spiritual health....Many discount *koinonia* but zealously practice certain Spiritual Disciplines in isolation, such as Bible study. Inevitably, however, they are spiritual eccentrics, hardened in other ways. They may carom from church to church like a lopsided pinball, smiling but never softening to share in the life of the body. Or with a face hardened by bitterness they may be long-nosed and sharp-tongued toward the "organized religion" of the church. Rejecting communion with the people of

Jesus, they do not become more like Jesus.” (p. 155).

F. “If you have ever read the book of Acts, you know it is impossible to imagine the members of the church in Jerusalem *not* gathering to pray with each other. This was Christianity in the New Testament.” (p. 165).

G. “If congregational or small group prayer isn’t part of your Christian life, there’s a problem. Private-only prayer is not New Testament Christianity....If you are unwilling to pray with others, you are too independent spiritually.” (p. 174).

H. “In 1 Timothy 3:15 the Spirit of God guided the apostle Paul to describe the church as “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth.” The church, including the expressions

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of the church locally, is like a pillar that supports something above it. And that which the church lifts up is the truth of God. God created the church and gave it the responsibility to elevate His Word. So anyone who is not learning in the church distances himself from the only pillar in the world which upholds the indispensable truth of God.” (p. 179).

I. “We are not dependent upon the church to tell us what the Bible means. But this is not the full picture. The balancing truth to this is that if we do not learn with the church we are likely to drift into erroneous, individualistic interpretations of Scripture. Increasingly we will find ourselves at odds with the established teaching of the Bible and more frequently objecting to others, ‘Well, that’s *your* interpretation!’” (p. 185).