PRACTICE OF COUNSELLING [LECTURE II]

by Prof. H. Hanko

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It is one thing to have a clear grasp of principle but quite another to put principles into practice. It is always dangerous to act except on the basis of principle. It is dangerous to entrust the cooking for a family to one who does not know the difference between sugar and arsenic. It is dangerous to entrust your malfunctioning car to one who does not know the difference between a carburator and a spark plug. It is dangerous to entrust a man, no matter how great his zeal, with the responsibilities of the office of elder who does not know that Hezekiah is not a book of the Bible.

But principles which are well-known and not practiced are also worthless. In various branches of learning, people who have heads full of principles but no ability to practice them are called eggheads. In the church such people are said to be fools and the danger of dead orthodoxy is a continuously lurking evil.

To be able to apply principle, to put principle into practice requires what Scripture calls wisdom. Wisdom is a spiritual gift which is earned on the cross of Calvary and which is given to the people of God. And, if any man lack wisdom, James tells us, let him ask of God Who giveth to all men liberally.

No one, least of all I, can tell you what to do in every circumstance which requires counselling. We can draw the lines, define the problems, spell out the general methods of solution. But if you lack wisdom, you must ask of God.

I. The Problems Requiring Counselling.

We speak of problems which require counselling. In fact, we have defined counselling as the bringing of the Word of God to bear upon the entire behavior of the child. Before we speak of more problem-oriented counselling, however, I wish to make some general remarks.

There are three thoughts which come to mind in this connection.

In the first place, there is what may be called *preventive* counselling. There is, in fact, little counselling which is more important than this. In the Church of Christ, if the ministers are faithful in their calling to preach the Word and if the elders do their work according to the commands of Christ, there is a great deal of preventive counselling which takes place which anticipates problems and warns against them before they actually begin to trouble the life of the believer. To use one example: when young people are to be married, ministers of the Word usually spend some time with these young couples to point them to their calling, to warn them of dangers that lurk on the path of their married life, to suggest positive programs in harmony with the Scriptures which will enable them to cope with problems which arise before they get out of hand.

This type of counselling must also be done in the school and the classroom is the ideal situation to put this into effect. As soon as a child begins school and throughout his years in the halls of learning, the child must be impressed repeatedly with his positive calling as a student; he must be warned of the dangers which he will face in that calling, and he must be shown what must be done to prevent problems from arising. It simply is a fact of life that the counselling which has to be done after problems arise is counselling which is far more difficult. Preventive counselling is essential.

In the second place, there is greater room, especially in our high school, for vocational counselling. I have found many times that this is somewhat lacking and that it creates serious problems for the young people of God's covenant. While this must be done in connection with the parents, nevertheless, a great responsibility rests upon the school in this respect. Young people must be compelled to face the question: What does God want me to do in life? And the child must be helped to answer that question so that young girls, e.g., are properly impressed with the joys of motherhood in the sphere of God's covenant; so that not simply earning money, dating and marrying, and getting a job so as to

buy the things of life are paramount in a child's thinking; so that a child is impressed with the glory and dignity of every kind of work if it is done to the glory of God; so that a child knows that he must prepare himself for his place in God's kingdom wherever God calls him to serve.

In the third place, counselling must be done with the students who have no problems. They are in school to study, to enjoy their schooling, to walk as children of God's covenant in their relation to their teachers and their peers. This becomes especially critical in the sadly deteriorating moral climate of our Christian schools. Those who love the Lord and find their delight in His commandments must be encouraged in their efforts. They must be pointed to their responsibilities to be witnesses to the truth—also in school. And they must be helped so that they can be the ones who determine the spiritual atmosphere in the school.

Things have changed over the last decade or so. Everyone knows that every school has always had its problem children. But for many years these were in the minority. They were shunned and excluded by most of the students. And the moral climate of the school was determined by those who were faithful to their calling. But this has all changed. Today, in many instances, the balance has shifted. Not the God-fearing students but the wicked students determine the moral and spiritual climate of the schools. It is of critical importance that this be changed. If it is not changed, we will lose our schools and they will cease to be the instruments of faithful and Godly covenant instruction. But this can be changed only if we encourage continuously those students who fear the Lord to exert to the utmost of their ability their good influence in the school.

And this brings up a problem which stands unique among problems. There is a growing number of children, in the minority in school, who have serious problems in the classroom and in their relationships with their classmates because they will not do what the others do. They will not swear. They will not tell dirty jokes. They will not cheat in class. They will not go to parties where there is dancing and drinking. They will not engage in mocking the teacher and speaking evil of their fellow classmates. But as a result of this, they are ostrasized and mocked, isolated in the classroom and from the fellowship of their fellow students. This, in itself, creates problems for them which are serious to the point of nervous breakdowns.

It is this type of situation with which we have to cope. And

an important area of positive counselling becomes clear to us. I have wondered from time to time, if, especially in our high school, it would not be possible for the young people who are spiritually minded to come together two or three times a week on a voluntary basis and under the supervision of a teacher, for mutual devotions, to discuss their mutual problems, to read Scripture and study it briefly, and to help and encourage one another in their calling.

But we must turn to specific areas of counselling; i.e., counselling of specific problems.

There are different ways in which to categorize problems. Fennema, in his book, *Nurturing Children in the Lord*, speaks of all problems as pursuit of wrong goals, and then proceeds to categorize them as follows:

1. Desiring attention
   —being a nuisance - active form
   —by laziness - passive form
2. Questing after power and superiority
   —through rebelliousness - active form
   —through stubbornness - passive form
3. Seeking revenge
   —through violence - active form
   —through passivity - passive form
4. Accepting real or imagined inadequacy - through an attitude and demonstration of hopelessness. (p. 136)

Jay Adams categorizes problems as they arise in relation to the school. He speaks:

> of problems (1) children bring into the school milieu, (2) problems that grow out of the school milieu and hopefully, as they learn to carry over biblical patterns by extension (3) problems that arise after leaving the school milieu. (*Competent to Counsel*, p. 255)

The committee suggested a different classification on the basis of the age of the child. They spoke of problems which arise in kindergarten through fourth grade and mentioned: establishing friendships, subordinating one's own needs to the needs of the group; getting along with peers; problems in coping with wicked behavior in others. In grades 5 through 8 the problems are especially those of self-discipline, the forming of exclusive groups, idolatry especially in hero-worship, dress, boy-girl relationships. In grades 9 through 12 the problems are

especially boy-girl relationships especially on the level of dating, conflicts between relationship to authority and growing independence, dealing with sin in one's elders, especially parents, and making truth internal.

Another classification could be suggested. Following somewhat the lines laid down by Adams, we could, e.g., classify problems as those which arise out of the home, which group would include such problems as wrong attitudes in the home which are carried over into the children in school, marital problems which affect children, problems of discipline in the home which had bad effects upon children and problems of alchoholism and drug use among members of the family which carry over into children. The second category would include problems which arise in the school and would include problems with studies or problems with peers. The third group would be problems which arise out of one's relation to the church which would include spiritual apathy and lethargy, an antinomian attitude, questions concerning the confession of the church, and such like things.

It is evident that none of these classifications is satisfactory. In a certain sense, the different classifications overlap, look at problems from different points of view and cut across each other. Each classification has its advantages and disadvantages, but the real difficulty is that problems simply refuse to be categorized. This is partly because problems are as infinitely complex and the human personality as varied as the complex relationships of life. And this is true partly because every problem is unique, for there are never in life two problems which are exactly alike.

What must be stressed however, is the fact that all problems arise, for one reason or another, because of sin. It is not only sin in general which creates problems, but specific sins which create specific problems. And it is this viewpoint which we must consistently maintain if we are to be effective in the area of counselling.

II. Methods.

We turn now more specifically to the methods of counselling.

Although I have spoken already of the qualifications of the counsellor, it must be stressed here once again that God will use only that teacher who is a godly and upright person. A counsellor must himself have learned the requirements of discipleship, i.e., to deny himself, take up his cross and follow the Lord. A counsellor must be one whose treasures are in heaven, for where

a man's treasures are, there will his heart be also. A counsellor must be himself a student of the Scriptures and a man of prayer who has learned to live in fellowship with and in dependence upon his God. And all this requires constant, unceasing, courageous and even ruthless self-examination. No teacher can expect to teach a child that which he himself has not learned at the feet of Jesus. Without this, efforts to counsel will not only fall upon deaf ears (Physician, heal thyself), but such counselling will do untold harm, for it will make a mockery of a righteous walk. We must learn to root sin out of our own lives if we are to lead others in a holy way.

In counselling students, the teacher will face many reactions to his efforts in the individual child. Broadly speaking, there are, of course, only two reactions possible. There is a positive reaction when those who are confronted with the problem of their sin, respond to counselling, speak freely of their problems, eagerly seek help, cooperate with the teacher and earnestly strive to bring change about in their lives. But there is also a negative reaction. And this negative reaction can come in various forms. The teacher may confront someone who is totally unresponsive. He does not say anything at all, or perhaps limits his responses to a few mumbled words. There are students who, when confronted with sin, begin to argue about points of doctrine in an effort to get the discussion directed into other channels. I have had those, e.g., who were more interested in discussing whether the approach which I had adopted was not, in fact, Arminian and who made a considerable point of it that they were and wanted to remain Reformed in all their confession. There are others who enjoy a counselling session because it gives to them an opportunity to play intellectual games. They try, some with considerable skill, to make such discussion a chess game in which each must try to outwit his opponent. There are still others who are insolent, who attempt to cover up their sin or who simply do not care about their sin one way or another. In pride of spirit, they take the attitude: "You can say all you please; it makes no difference to me."

Somehow the teacher must break through all this if he is to be successful in counselling. Central to this effort to break through the barriers is the importance of reaching the will. No counselling will ever have positive results unless the will is reached and a person wills to change according to the Scriptures. There is implied here a certain doctrine of the primacy of the will. From the viewpoint of the intellectual life of the person, there is

no question about it that the intellect is primary. In fact, the functioning of the will is dependent upon the intellect. Nevertheless, from a moral and spiritual point of view, the will is primary as the deepest impulse of the life of the child. God works in such a way that the person, an accountable creature before Him, always functions willingly. The whole truth of responsibility rests upon the foundation of the controlling power of the will. When God, according to our Canons, accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works in them true conversion, "he not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by his Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; he opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead, he quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, he renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions." (Canons III & IV, 11.)

It is for this reason that central to all counselling is the Word of God. This follows from the nature of the case. The Scriptures teach that all problems are rooted in sin. The solution to the problem of sin is the Word of God as it reveals Christ. That is the means of grace which God uses and it is only through that Word which He works. It is the power of the Word to enlighten the mind and renew the will. This lies totally beyond our power. No counsellor ought ever to engage in counselling without relying totally and utterly upon that Word. He must come to counsel with the Bible in His hand. Take your Bible with you or stay home.

We must remember, however, that the Scriptures must be specifically applied to our life. This also, it is true, can be overly emphasized. I recall when a relative of my wife's, her mother in fact, was in the hospital, that, while we were visiting her, the chaplain of the Holland Home came to see her. She was very distressed and confused and it was difficult to reach her. I was interested in what the chaplain would say and do. Much to my surprise, he read a vew verses from Romans 4 which dealt with the doctrine of justification by faith and dealt with that in a very objective way. As he read the passage to my mother, he made a few comments about this doctrine as he went along and made little effort to apply it specifically to her. After praying, he left and my mother-in-law's comment was: "What a wonderful visit

that was and how much he helped me.'' I learned a lesson there which I hope I do not readily forget.

Nevertheless, the Scriptures must not be applied without thought as to how the Scriptures specifically address the problems of life. If a student is being counselled by a teacher concerning the problem of the sin of cheating, it would not be advisable, generally speaking, to read to such a student the narrative of Paul's shipwreck. All the while however, we must remember, on the one hand, that we do not always know the deeper problem which a student has and, on the other hand, God knows that problem better than we and better than the student himself. And God can use His own Word in a surprising and wonderful way—if we put our trust in that Word.

As we seek to apply that Word to the specific problems which students face, the following may well serve as guidelines.

We ought, where possible, to prepare before hand so that we can choose that Scripture which seems to us most appropriate to the situation. It is well to begin every session with a student with Scripture reading and prayer. This will have the effect of reminding the student from the very outset that we are, in our discussion, going to be guided by the Scriptures and by them alone. In choosing that Scripture which seems to us appropriate for the situation and in our further use of Scripture, we must, if we are to bring that Word to bear on specific problems, know and understand the child as much as possible. We must know all that there is to know about him personally and in all his relationships of life. We must know the kind of child he is, the kind of life he leads, the kind of influences which direct his life and govern his walk. And to know the child, we must learn all we can about the child before he ever gets into a situation where he requires counselling. We must learn this by observing the child, by watching him in his activities, by understanding as much as possible his home, his friends and his church. But above all, we must do this by listening. We ought to listen, however, with the heart as much as with the ears. Rarely will a person actually tell us what his problem is—sometimes because he does not want to talk about his problems and partly because he does not understand himself what they are. The way to listen with one's heart is to put one's self, as much as possible, in that person's place so that we hear what that person has to say with love, with sympathy, with understanding.

But in all this it cannot be emphasized enough that our complete reliance must be on the Word. We ought to understand

that this is very difficult to do. There are a number of reasons why this is so difficult. Surely, one danger which tempts us away from the Word is our own tendency to be enamoured with "the tricks of the trade". We are so deeply inbued with the principles of psychology that we do not want to abandon them. And it ought to be understood that there is also an element of pride in all this. The counsellor has a certain amount of power over the counsellee. This can very well be a dangerous thing. It is not at all difficult, e.g., to persuade a person who is so overcome by his problems that he can scarcely think straight, that his problem is of such a kind—when in fact there is no element of truth in this at all. But this leads to pride of the worst sort. And the way to avoid this is to trust in the Word. Further, we are sometimes tempted to forsake the Word because God works through His Word in His own way and at His own time. And sometimes it seems to us that the Word is not solving the problem because it is taking far longer than we think it ought. Sometimes there is resistance to the Word from the counsellee partly because the Word hurts so badly when it comes to us to condemn us of sin and partly because the counsellee wants, sometimes desperately, to avoid the changes in his life which the Word requires. In such situations we could easily be tempted to try other approaches in the hopes of breaking through. And then again, the Word has its negative effect. It is, also in the hands of the teacher, a savor of life unto life and a savor of death unto death. We can very well repeat what Paul says in this connection: "And who is sufficient for these things?" We do not like to see this negative fruit. And we think that, in our superior wisdom we will accomplish what the Word cannot do.

But the Word is the only power which we have.

Fennema (*op. cit.*) speaks of counselling as including confrontation, confession and covenanting. A person must be confronted with his sin, must be brought to confession and must, through covenanting, be brought to alter his life in conformity with the Word of God. This is a correct analysis, but it must be remembered that only the Word has the power to do this. A student must be confronted with the Scriptures. It must be brought forcibly home to the student that we all, with one accord, must bow before the Word of God regardless of what that Word requires of us. There must be no equivocation, no excuses, no rationalization, no efforts to dodge the demands of the Scriptures. The Word speaks and there is no alternative but to listen—or, go to hell.

This Word will, and that is its amazing power, bring to confession. Confession includes sorrow for sin because, through the Word we learn that our sin has been committed against God's holy law. Confession must be an acknowledgement of sin to those who have been offended by our sin. If we sinned against God—as always we do—to God must confession be made. If we sin against our teachers, to our teachers must confession be made. If we sinned against certain of our classmates, to them must we express our sorrow. And if our sin is public in nature, before the whole student body must we make confession. "Confess your faults one to another," James says, "and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." There is no other way to healing than this. Scripture prescribes it. We have no choice but to follow Scripture's directives. But that same confession includes also a determination to forsake the way of sin. This must be done with the help of the counsellor and guidance and direction and encouragement is essential. But there is no confession without this. And through it healing will come to all who are under the influences of and effected by such sin.

It is well to remember in this latter connection that the child who has sinned needs to be reminded of the emphatic truth that no righteous and holy walk is possible apart from Christ. There is great need among us to emphasize that we must learn to live in Christ and out of Christ. We must learn to walk in fellowship with Him, to rely upon Him and His cross, to be consciously led by His Spirit, to express in all our walk that we are a part of His body. Apart from Christ we are weak and helpless and will certainly fall into sin. In the awareness of this, the student must be instructed and encouraged to make spiritual exercises a part of his life. Bodily exercise, after all, profits little—although our present generation seems to think it is the only thing that counts. But to exercise one's self unto Godliness is far more valuable than any bodily exercise can ever be. Such spiritual exercises include especially the Scripture reading and prayer of personal devotions. Every child in the school must be encouraged to begin a daily program of Scripture reading and prayer. It is surely an indisputable axiom that such a child who reads his Bible and prays will also be able to cope with the problems of life and solve them as they appear as sent by God

III. The Role of Discipline.

Our discussion would not be complete without a discussion of discipline. We will not be extensive on this subject, for last year

Prof. Decker and Mr. Lamm Lubbers conducted an entire mini-course on this matter. But a few remarks are necessary.

In the first place, we must recognize in counselling that there is a two-fold seed in the church. There are elect seed and reprobate seed, and both often come to manifestation early in life. In connection with this, we do well to remember that God's Word will have positive effect only upon the elect seed of the covenant, but that it will have a negative effect upon the wicked.

Two points must be made in this connection. The first is that the Word of God will have its effect. It may not always operate with the speed and clarity with which we hope it operates. But it is not our purpose which is important, but God's. God always accomplishes His purpose in the preaching of the Word. The result will be that the working of that Word will also show us what we ought to do. Elders in the Church, when they are called to discipline the wayward, always make it a practice to go with the Word to a person as long as he will still listen. Perhaps he will not immediately receive that Word and perhaps there will be no immediate evidence of repentance. But they must continue their work until such a person refuses utterly to listen to that Word any longer, or until he repents of his sin. And that will come. The Word hardens or saves. It will do one or the other. The same is true of counselling.

You may object and point to the fact that it is possible for a young person especially to walk for a long time in a way of sin and only after a long time to come to repentance. There is no doubt truth to this. But I need also remind you that discipline is also the God ordained way to bring to repentance, and we must not be fearful of using it.

This needs to be stressed. Our schools are in very great trouble. The moral and spiritual atmosphere is more and more being determined by those who will not walk in the ways of the covenant. The situation is getting so bad that some of our teachers have told me that they have simply given up with discipline. They will teach as best they can, but to try to exercise discipline, to try to do something about the prevalent sins, is something which no longer concerns them for it is similar to banging one's head against a wall. If we continue in our present course, we are going to lose our covenant schools. We may hide our heads in the sand and act as if these problems do not exist. But that will solve nothing and the dangers will become all the greater.

About these things we must do something.

Fundamental to our understanding of this matter is a recognition of the fact that the child, no matter what his age, is ultimately responsible for his own conduct. It is true that there are many forces acting upon the child which make him do what he does. And an understanding of these forces are essential also to help the child find his own way through the tangle of problems. But ultimately, before God, each child is responsible for his life and for what he does. He may not, finally, put the blame upon the home—even if the home is a decisive factor in all this. He may not blame peer pressures for his wicked course of action and for the sins which he commits—even though peer pressures are probably one of the strongest of all forces acting upon a child. Nor may he, in some kind of antinomian sense, blame his own old man of sin. Every child is responsible before God. He is responsible for all that he does. This must be impressed upon him with urgency. But, and equally important, he is also responsible before God for the conduct of his peers. This too is a responsibility which he cannot escape. And, even beyond this, he is responsible for the reputation of the cause of Christ and, particularly, of the school where he is a student, before the world. When David confessed to Nathan his sin of adultery and murder, Nathan assured David that his sins were also forgiven. But Nathan also told David that the sword would never depart from his house. There was good reason for this, for, as Nathan reminded David, David had, by his sins, given occasion for the enemies of God to blaspheme. The sword which remained in David's house was a constant reminder to those who were inclined to blaspheme that God does not deal lightly with sin—even when those sins are committed by His own people.

Thus surely, when we bring the Word of God in every counselling situation, we must also continuously remind those with whom we discuss these things that Scripture is very emphatic about it that true happiness and joy can only be found in the way of obedience to God. And there is the unfailing promise of mercy for sin and grace to help in time of need.

But the opposite is also true. And it is this negative aspect that we so often forget. Our Heidelberg Catechism (L.D. XXXI, 84) reminds us that the preaching of the Word brings the promise to the contrite that all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ's merits; but also that it is a testimony to all unbelievers, "and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God, and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted; according to which testimony of the

gospel, God will judge them, both in this, and in the life to come."

We must learn to exercise more stringent discipline. This must be done in connection with and with the cooperation of the home, if possible. But if this cooperation is not forthcoming, then it must be done apart from the home, and, indeed, against the express wishes of the home. No teacher or administrator must be put into the position of defending to irate parents an act of discipline. The discipline which is administered must be a reflection of the same discipline with which God chastises and punishes us. And if parents object, they must be referred to the school board who ought to learn to stand behind the teachers and who can enforce the disciplinary requirements which will preserve the integrity of the school and the covenantal character of Reformed education. But the Church must also learn to discipline. We have tended to shy away from this on the grounds that only confessing members of the Church can be disciplined. But I do not find that distinction in the Scriptures. Rather, Scripture emphasizes the fact that any rebellious child who will not hear the admonition of his parents must be brought to the elders who will exercise the proper discipline. We must understand that there is no place in our schools for those who will not walk in the ways of God's covenant.

A great responsibility falls therefore upon you. It is greater than it ever has been because of the deterioration of our homes. This is sad, but a reality that needs to be faced. The school can and must exert its influence upon the child—an influence which, under God's blessing, will have desirable effects. God has called you to this. Do you have the grace? the courage? the wisdom? May God give it to you.

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Who should pay for Christian Schools?

"There is a growing tendency for Christian day schools to become schools only for the well-to-do, for the upper middle class. At this point the structure of the humanistic public school has been more Christian than that of the Christian school. The citizens of the state pay taxes so that their neighbor's children may be educated. But citizens of the Kingdom often say, "Let the parents pay for the Christian schools; it's their responsibility!"

(Quoted from a talk by Robert L. Atwell, pastor of
Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Westfield, N.J.)