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"COUNSELING FOR THE EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS OF JEWISH BELIEVERS"

Jewish believers have emotional problems. Not all of us, but most of us! This initial thesis may be hard to choke down, but the reality of life and ministry tell us otherwise. From time to time, in the throes of spiritual warfare, we suffer casualties. We may go through the day-to-day activities without a wimper, but in reality, we are the "walking wounded." Pain, distance, alienation, bitterness, depression, etc.--these are the symptoms of emotional problems. We may not necessarily be ready for the "funny farm," but we are really hurting. And this may be a greater problem especially for those of us in "the ministry." For we face an even greater onslaught, a greater pressure, a greater stress, than the "ordinary" foot soldier. And for most of us in spiritual leadership, our emotional problems are hidden away from those to whom we minister and serve. We fear that by exposing our emotional stresses and strains, either in our own individual lives or our marriages and families, we may push some of our beloved brothers and sisters right over the precipice. But the truth is that we are the ones facing potential danger and destruction. We are like the giant bull elephant hanging over the side of a cliff, with his trunk wrapped "securely" around a daisy!

PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS

Before discussing counseling for the emotional problems of

Jewish believers, let us begin with three preliminary assumptions. First, all biblically-based counseling must take place within the context of "disciple-making." Our Wonderful Messianic Counselor (Isa. 9:6) has left His people with a "Great Commission":

And Jesus came up and spoke to them [the eleven disciples], saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

This Commission has never been revoked; it is applicable "even to the end of the age." It is in view of this Great Commission "to make disciples" that the Apostles labored to bring every believer to spiritual maturity (Col. 1:28-29), as well as to equip each believer for the work of service or ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). Therefore, "disciple-making" must be the context for all effective biblically-based counseling.

A second preliminary assumption is that all biblically-based counseling must reach the "total person." Emotional problems do not merely affect the emotions, they often touch our physical and spiritual lives as well. The Messiah Himself "grew" as a total person: "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). In other words, He "matured" in four spheres: the mental, the physical, the spiritual, and the social. The Apostles aimed at the sanctification of the total person (1 Thess. 5:23-24). We must be

careful to not compartmentalize people, so as to isolate a so-called "emotional problem" from the rest of their lives. Causes and effects are often blurred when we ignore the "total person."

And a third preliminary assumption is that the process of sanctification (i.e., the Christlike transforming work of the Word and the Spirit) is a lifelong process. There is not one shred of biblical evidence that a believer will attain perfection or sinlessness in this life (cf. 1 John 1:5--2:2; etc.). In fact, one of the evidences of a maturing child of God is his growing (and painful) awareness of how far he falls short of the glory of God! In and of himself, he despairs; in Christ, he rejoices (Rom. 6--8; etc.). This is a perilous tension at best, requiring constant balance, lest we perish due to guilt or recline due to pride. Therefore, since we all face this lifelong process, emotional problems are an ever present possibility. We are vulnerable. Spiritual vigilance is the watchword of the day!

SUBJECT OVERVIEW

As we approach the subject of "Counseling for the Emotional Problems of Jewish Believers," an overview should prove to be helpful. Having briefly discussed three preliminary assumptions, we will proceed with the following format: (1) A Biblical Definition of Counseling; (2) A Team Approach to Counseling; (3) Areas of Caution for Messianic Counselors; (4) Areas of Concern in Jewish Believers; and (5) A Select Bibliography.

A BIBLICAL DEFINITION

How can we define "biblical counseling"? What makes this form of counseling unique from all other forms of counseling? (It is surprising that with all of the books currently available on Christian or biblical counseling, how few really deal with any basic definition.) The following is a suggested definition:

"Biblical counseling" is the Spirit-directed application of biblical truth, within the context of the family of God, in order that the individual may grow up into Christlike maturity, resulting in the glorifying of God.

This definition involves six related facets: (1) A Divine Agent ("the Spirit-directed application . . .")--The Holy Spirit works in both the counselor and the counselee through a grace-orientation and a prayerful dependence. (2) A Divine Content (" . . . of biblical truth")--The Word of God (the Holy Scriptures) is inspired by God and totally adequate for life transformation (2 Tim. 3:16-17), and it is the final authority for both counselor and counselee. (3) A Divine Context ("within the context of the family of God")--The family of God (i.e., *ekklēsia*) is God's new creation for the mutual ministry of encouragement, accountability, and spiritual gifts, available to both counselor and counselee. (4) A Divine Process ("in order that the individual may grow up . . .")--The process of growing up into maturity involves time, effort, and change. The major mark or goal (*telos*) of maturity is love for God and for our neighbors. "But the goal (*telos*) of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). (5) A Divine Intent

(" . . . into Christlike maturity")--Christlike maturity results in spiritual unity or oneness (John 17:23; 1 Cor. 2:14--3:3), messianic service or ministry (Eph. 4:11-16), and theological discernment (Heb. 5:11-14). This type of maturity does not come easily, it proceeds slowly through trials (James 1:2-4) and suffering (2 Cor. 12:7-10; etc.). And finally (6) A Divine Result (" . . . resulting in the glorifying of God")--The ultimate and final result in the entire counseling process in doxological, to glorify our living God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 1:6,12,14; Phil. 1:9-11; 1 Thess. 2:12; etc.).

It might be helpful to go back to the third facet of our definition ("the family of God") since it is often overlooked. There is a definite context to the counseling process; it is God's new society, His new creation, the Church, the family of the living God. At the moment of saving faith, the new believer is born into the family of God, he becomes a child of God (John 1:11-13; 3:1-18; etc.). We are to pray for our brothers and sisters (Eph. 3:14-19; etc.) and to do good to all men, "especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). Spiritual leaders are spiritual parents to those whom they lead, with the gentleness of a mother and the stability of a father (1 Thess. 2:7-11). Spiritual leaders are not only to be good family men (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; etc.), they are to create a family atmosphere in the assembly of believers. Paul admonished Timothy (and all spiritual leaders down through

the centuries): "Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

In summary then, concerning our suggested definition, it must remain a divine process throughout. The Lord certainly will use His faithful servants, but ultimately it is His process and His glory. If He removes His grace from the counseling room for one second, we are doomed to failure. Therefore, we must be dependent and obedient servants of God.

THE TEAM APPROACH

One of the main failures today in the field of Christian or biblical counseling (whether in a professional center, a church or parachurch ministry) is the "one-man-show." This, of course, is a part of the much larger problem within the institutional church--"the Lone Ranger Syndrome," the Senior Pastor Cultural Mold, the Hired Gun Syndrome, the Personality Cult, the Messiah Complex, etc. This flies directly in the face of clear biblical mandates for multiple church leadership (i.e., a plurality of qualified men), shared ministry, and the service of spiritual gifts. We elevate leadership, the Lord Jesus elevates servanthood.

With the multiple emotional problems facing believers today (especially Jewish believers), a team approach to counseling is the wisest route to take. Over the years I have come to realize my strengths and my weaknesses. In order to compensate for my

weaknesses and to minister best to those in need, I have tried to surround myself with other qualified servants of God: medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, lawyers, accountants, etc. We work as a team in order to help people deal with their problems, such as emotional and psychological problems, marriage and family problems, legal and financial problems (e.g., from family budgeting to corporate suits, etc.), etc.

How do you put together such a team? Where do you find these kinds of qualified men and women? Ideally, they should come from within your own ministry. Why not challenge a young doctor, nurse, or lawyer in your congregation or mission to become involved? Establish a training program or center to give spiritually mature people the type of biblical training that will help them minister effectively in a team approach to counseling. Feed them good material (books, magazines, tapes, videos, seminars, conferences, etc.). When they have finished the material, debrief with them. Probe with questions, suggestions, challenges. Ask God to raise up a team of servant counselors (cf. Luke 10:2; Acts 20:28; etc.).

If you can't find these kind of servant counselors within your own ministry, then visit your community. Ask the chamber of commerce for a list of doctors, nurses, lawyers, etc. Visit them and share your vision and need. They may be believers and they may not be. Perhaps you will get a chance to lead them to the Lord. Find out if they are sympathetic, indifferent, or hostile to your approach to biblical counseling. Will they work

with you or against you? If you refer them needy people, what will they charge? Do they have a sliding scale for those with real financial needs? What are their religious values, their experience with specific kinds of problems, their techniques, their chances of success? You must be the final evaluator of the team you put together. You are responsible for God's people within your sphere of ministry. Many a believer has been destroyed over a period of years under the authority of unprincipled counselors (both outside and within the church!). We must not allow a Jewish or non-Jewish believer to come under the sway of a counselor with a personal bias against the things of God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14-16; Phil. 4:6-9; etc.).

What kinds of problems should we refer to other members of our team? This all depends on our own gifts, training, expertise, and available time. To give you an example of the kind of referrals that I have passed on over the past twenty years or so, I list the following kinds of problems: (1) substance abuse (drugs, alcohol; etc.); (2) eating disorders (compulsive, anorexia, etc.); (3) sexual addictions; (4) sexually transmitted diseases; (5) sexual dysfunction, sterility, birth control; (6) change of life/menopause; (7) child molestation, rape, child or wife abuse; (8) teen age pregnancy, illegitimate pregnancy, abortion; (9) some divorce cases (legal problems), children of divorce, "fallout"; (10) mental retardation; (11) widowhood, death, etc.; (12) senior citizens, geriatric problems; (13) financial/budget mismanagement;

(14) suicidal tendencies; (15) ongoing depression; (16) some kinds of demonic oppression; (17) psychosomatic illness; (18) vocational guidance; (19) legal disputes/suits (church, business, etc.); (20) some personality disorders; etc.

Obviously from a list this long, I have worked hand-in-hand with certain members of the team, sometimes on a regular basis and sometimes on a sporadic basis. It is also extremely important that during the counseling process the counselee be channeled into a regular time of corporate worship, a small fellowship group, as well as his own personal devotional time. These biblical factors all work together with the counseling process to restore a person back to sound mental health.

AREAS OF CAUTION

It is important now to reflect briefly on some areas of caution for messianic counselors. These areas I have observed over the past several years and they are more closely related to counseling Jewish believers in their emotional problems.

First, guard against paternalism, that overt power control over the total lives of counselees (or others in our ministry). We are not "spiritual gurus," dispensing our pearls of wisdom to spiritually and emotionally handicapped people. A "messiah complex" only leads to enslavement rather than the liberty that comes from the Lord.

Second, do not rely on so-called "charismatic" miracles to solve all of your problems or your counselee's problems.

"Push Button" Christianity reflects more of our culture, with its

insatiable desire for instant gratification, than a true biblical view of godly sanctification and holiness.

Third, avoid "the demon-behind-every bush" syndrome. This is the counseling philosophy that demands, "When in doubt, cast it out!" Not all problems in the life of the believer (even the Jewish believer) are demonically caused. Most of us would not recognize a demon even if he came up and bit us on the nose! The believer wages spiritual warfare on three fronts: the world (1 John 2:15-17), the flesh (Rom. 6--8; Gal. 5:16-24), and the devil/demons (Eph. 6:10-20). We contend with the fallenness of nature (i.e., the world), the fallenness inside of us (i.e., the flesh), and the fallenness of the invisible spiritual world (i.e., Satan and his demons). Each front demands a different posture toward the attack (see Timmons's book Chains of the Spirit, in the bibliography): (1) the world--"renew" (Rom. 12:1-2); (2) the flesh--"reckon" (Rom. 6:11ff.); and (3) the devil--"resist" (Eph. 6:10-12; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:6-9). Most of the emotional problems of Jewish believers do not relate to demons. They do not need to bother us, we are so caught with the "deeds of the flesh" and the "cares of this world."

Fourth, be careful of playing the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of your counselee (or others in your ministry). Some believe that Law #1 of the Four Laws is: "God loves you and I have a wonderful plan for your life!" We try

to determine what school he should go to, who he should marry, where he should live and work, when he should blow his nose, etc. At best, this is selfish manipulation, and at worst, it is satanic idolatry. We are not called to conform people to our own image, but rather the image of the Messiah! Learn to release people into the life of the Spirit and the will of God. Help them become independently dependent upon the living God, not some temporary, cheap substitute (e.g., you, me, or some other TV evangelist, author, or seminar speaker, etc.). Trust me--the Word of God is sufficient to lead a person into the will of God (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). God's plan and purpose liberates. Our's stifles and destroys! There is always some so-called "teacher" or "prophet" out there ready to rip off our people, especially our vulnerable counselee!

Fifth, stay away from ministry and mission competition, the "one-up-manship" game. "My daddy's better than your daddy! My mission's better than your mission! My ministry's better than your ministry!" The point is not me and my mission or ministry, it is my counselee and his needs. What's best for him? Where can he best grow and serve? Is someone else better equipped to help him? Elitism begins when all the power and authority is invested in the one or the few. When a cult-like atmosphere reigns in a ministry or mission, people take a backseat to power. A perverted sense of loyalty boxes people in and fear drives them rather than love. This reaches its ultimate distortion when someone feels "called" to another ministry or

mission. If this does not meet with the "official" approval of the gurus in charge, then rejection and ostracism are sure to follow. Ministry competition has crippled another servant of the Lord, perhaps for life! I am personally aware of several Jewish believers who are working through their own emotional problems (some of them for a number of years), problems generated not from without, but from within the Messiah's Body. They were "bounced" out of the ministry when God called them in a new and exciting direction. The only problem--it did not meet with the approval of their "cult-like" leader.

And finally, sixth, help Jewish believers find their primary identity with the Messiah and His mission in the world, not primarily with a Jewish narrowmindedness. Jewish bigotry has crept into the work of God in our day and age. The Apostle Paul was very Jewish of very Jewish, yet he became "all things to all men," that he might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9: 19-22). God has called all of us, including our Jewish counselees, to become men and women of "all seasons." When being Jewish outweighs being a disciple of the risen Lord, the cross of Christ is struck down, leaving us clinging merely to a star of David.

AREAS OF CONCERN

We conclude with some areas of concern in counseling Jewish believers. What are the areas that are unique to Jewish believers that can lead to emotional problems? Most of these problem areas we can deal with, some may need a team approach.

The following areas of potential problems for Jewish believers are merely suggestive, not exhaustive: (1) family reaction and/or persecution; (2) rabbinic and/or psychiatric deprogramming; (3) identification problems--Who am I now as a new believer? (4) biblical versus cultural "Jewish experience" (i.e., majoring on the minors); (5) Jewish holidays, customs, etc.; (6) relationship to the state of Israel; (7) handling disappointment and discouragement (both from outside the Body of Messiah as well as from within); (8) biblical authority structure (i.e., leadership/submission priorities); (9) "novice" leadership (cf. 1 Tim. 3: 6); (10) mission and ministry recruitment, competition, and dismissal; (11) "the testimony circuit" (without any discipling in his life); (12) relationships to predominantly gentile culture and churches (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-22); and (13) marriage and family problems (e.g., unsaved mate, children, etc.). Plus, (14) the desire for further biblical training and education (e.g., where to go, how to finance, where it will lead, etc.). We could add to this list all of the problems stemming from one's pre-conversion lifestyle (e.g., relationships, drug/alcohol addictions, sexual addictions/diseases, divorces and separations, mental or nervous breakdowns, prison records, joblessness, physical health problems, social misfits, etc.). *plus Holocaust-related problems.* All of these problems (and others) come sweeping right into the believer's new life.

The task of counseling Jewish believers in their emotional problems is overwhelming. But with God and His grace we are up to

it. May we be counted worthy of such an awesome and privileged responsibility. The Lord Jesus said, "Tend My lambs. Shepherd My sheep. Tend My sheep" (John 21:15-17). The Apostle Peter said, "Shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Peter 5:1-4). It is an evidence of our love for the Messiah, a love that He will one day reward! "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21

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