

Preface

All couples have conflicts. This is normal. Conflicted couples are those who regularly fight over issues without arriving at a mutually acceptable resolution. Unable to successfully negotiate the emotional difficulties of their relationships, conflicted couples experience unhappiness in their marriages, often for many years. Some couples divorce, which creates significant personal and social disruption for all involved. But individuals who choose to stay together unhappily rather than divorce can also develop problems that may not appear as marital conflict. Such problems may manifest in physical, emotional, or social dysfunction in one of the partners (for example, depression or alcoholism) or in issues with their children. The inability to manage marital conflict can have an impact on a couple's immediate and extended family, their congregational relationships, their life of faith, and, cumulatively, on the whole of society.

A Unique Approach

This book is a guide for trained pastors, laypersons, and pastoral counselors in the theory and practice of counseling couples experiencing severe marital conflict. The uniqueness of this book lies in its use of a family systems theory developed by American psychiatrist Murray Bowen as a way of understanding marital conflict and what it means to function pastorally with conflicted couples. What I present is based on Bowen's seminal text *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York:

Jason Aronson, 1978) and my many years of experience employing Bowen's system in my own practice.

The approach to working with conflicted couples I present does not involve getting partners to experience and express their feelings to one another, although this will happen. It does not involve the pastoral counselor being deeply empathetic and expressing warmth and support for the couple in their struggles, although couples may experience this. It does not involve teaching couples a variety of communication skills and other problem-solving strategies for running a successful relationship, although a couple's skills will undoubtedly improve in these areas. Nor does it involve directly teaching them what our faith says about marriage and the good life, although I believe the couple will become clearer about these things.

The counseling approach offered here is not a simple, quick fix for marital discord. It is about creating an atmosphere in the counseling situation where people can think more clearly for themselves how they want to be in relationship with one another, based on their personal beliefs, values, and commitments. A counselor who acquires the skills described in this book will discover them to be useful not only in counseling situations but in the whole of pastoral ministry.

Although based on Bowen theory, what I present here is not necessarily how Dr. Bowen would have functioned. Rather, it represents my best effort to understand the practical applications of his theory within a framework of pastoral counseling. The outline of this book is simple. Part 1 looks at what Bowen theory says about the context and nature of marital conflict, the various ways it manifests in families, and how Bowen theory concepts apply to the emotional process involved. Following an overview of the counseling relationship, part 2 addresses the practical application of the theory to conflicted couples, with verbatims recounting my work with one couple. Part 2 will make little sense without first understanding part 1. Indeed, without a proper understanding of the theory the practice would be impossible to implement.

A Particular Audience

This is a book about providing pastoral counsel to couples in emotional conflict. I am speaking primarily about married couples, and I

am referring primarily to marital conflict, but the principles are applicable to helping any two people (or more) who are experiencing conflict within a close emotional relationship. Although I speak of two people, a dyad, this is really a book about the powerful networks of close interconnections known as emotional systems within which all of us live—often unaware of the pervasive and powerful influence of these connections.

The counseling approach I present includes respecting the individuals we counsel and their concerns, but also the people with whom they are closely connected and the quality of their relationships with those people. This book is about honoring and being respectful of and concerned about the well-being of whole families or the whole system in which the partners of the couple are embedded. When we respect their families, we show the ultimate respect for the counselees.

By “pastoral counselors,” I refer primarily to ordained pastors and priests. But I do not mean exclusively ordained clergy. Many laypeople provide pastoral care and counsel to others. As I use it here, pastoral refers to a theologically informed attitude or intent in counseling rather than the counselor’s professional designation, qualifications, and type of training. Marriage and family therapists, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, as well as the neighbor next door can be pastoral.

There is, however, a difference between pastors who do counseling and pastoral counseling as a profession. I regard someone trained and certified by the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) as the ultimate example of a pastoral counselor. Ongoing supervision is essential to being a consistently good counselor. Simply being a good pastor or a caring person is not enough. Certification within a professional organization like the AAPC means recognition by other professionals of one’s level of expertise, offers a more objective evaluation of one’s gifts, and indicates the growing edges in one’s efforts to help others. It is irresponsible and unethical not to have training and supervision in place if pastors want to provide regular counseling to their parishioners. It may make them legally vulnerable as well.

In a nutshell, effective couple counseling requires a practitioner who:

- has a good theoretical grasp of how emotional systems function;
- sees the complex systemic whole and not just the individual parts;

- brings a lower level of anxiety to the conflictual situation;
- defines a self by maintaining his or her own thinking about system functioning, without needing to teach or convince others of its truth;
- maintains a level of differentiation and remains neutral within the normal counseling triangles that will exist;
- is not swayed by the individually oriented diagnosing and analyzing around him or her, that goes with the human condition;
- does not change that way of thinking when under pressure from others; and
- still connects emotionally with all the other parties involved.

Most pastors do not have a lot of time for counseling and must limit the number of counseling sessions they offer a couple. Furthermore, most pastors lack advanced training in counseling, which means that they cannot take on the more difficult and complicated cases. This is especially a problem in rural areas where pastors are often the only resource available to persons in need of counseling.

The Bowen family systems theory can be helpful to pastors with limited time and training in working with moderately conflicted couples on a short-term basis (up to ten sessions). Even a single session with a person trained in Bowen theory will be helpful to many counselees. People presenting with much more difficult and intense conflict will need to be referred to a professional counselor for reasons of time if not expertise (except of course in settings where the pastor is the only resource available).

People who have had some training in the Bowen theory will be able to make the best use of this book. For those who do not have training, I strongly encourage them to seek out a postgraduate training center where they can receive more didactic and practical training in the theory. Many such centers work with a distance-training model, so one does not have to be physically close to a center to get the training, and phone supervision is usually available. I especially recommend this additional training for full-time pastoral counselors. Pastors who work in a setting where financial resources are limited may be able to get denominational money to help with training and support. I give a list of training centers in the Bowen theory in appendix 2. Full-time pastoral counselors and pastors who have more time to give to coun-

seling will be able to make use of the approach described here on an in-depth, longer-term basis.

Based on the idea that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, the goal of this book is to provide a consistent and comprehensive way of understanding human emotional functioning, including our own functioning and acts of caring. It is my hope that this book will provide pastors with a way of thinking and an ability to offer effective counsel to others even when they find themselves in highly unusual marital circumstances—as we often do.

A Pastoral Perspective on the Counseling Relationship

As Christian pastors, we are interested in spreading the gospel message. We see this as a primary calling in life. We also have a calling to care for others. Clergy of other faiths have some similar concerns within their faith framework. There are many ways available to us for communicating the gospel and expressing care. There is a scale of communication of Christian content in which variation depends on the degree of pastor-focused initiative around the message versus a person focus:

1. *Preaching* is very pastor/message centered.
2. *Teaching* is somewhat more interactive.
3. *Pastoral care* tends to be more of a listening office for the pastor.
4. *Pastoral Counseling* is even more person or family centered.

There is a form of counseling that is more focused on communicating the content of faith. I would call it “Christian counseling” rather than pastoral counseling. It sees counseling as an opportunity to evangelize and preach or teach the gospel. In its crudest form it tends to say, “Jesus is the answer to all of your life problems.” It can be much more sophisticated than this but the message will be the same in this type of counseling. Counselees tend to be seen as getting better or not based on how accepting they are of the message. I once had a person come to see me who had been to a Christian counselor. I do not know what the counselor actually said to her, but the message she got was, “You won’t

get better until you eat and drink of the body and blood of our Lord.” She did not think that helped.

The kind of counseling I am talking about is not seen as an opportunity to verbally proclaim the gospel or even to teach it. I hope that I am living the gospel in how I relate to counselees, but that is usually as far as I go. I do not normally use faith words to interpret my behavior. This is generally how pastoral counselors, as defined by the AAPC, see their activity. It is counselee focused and works in relation to their concerns. While we clearly see the theological dimensions of what we do, we do not have a specific verbal message to proclaim. It is a form of caring that is based on action and not verbal message.

Notes to the Reader

Although I am retired from pastoral counseling, I write about my work in the present tense. This is simply to provide a greater sense of immediacy and less cumbersome sentences involving the past tense. At points throughout the text I use the word *we* when I could just as easily be talking about counselees. I do this whenever I think the information pertains to us as fellow human beings who may also share in the issue being discussed.

The case histories are all composites of various counseling situations and the identities of counselees are protected; however, they represent what actually happens in counseling and are, in this sense, true.

Acknowledgments

My deepest appreciation goes to those who gave of their time and interest to read and comment on this manuscript: Douglas Anderson, Randy Frost, and Michael Fogel. Their comments and suggestions were most useful in making this a more intelligible and useful book. I also thank Susan Johnson and her editorial staff at Fortress Press for their hard work in making this book more accessible to readers. Of course, any shortcomings are totally my own.

I also wish to thank all of those couples who were willing to open up their lives to me and engage with me in learning about how

marital conflict functions in their relationships. They demonstrated a level of courage and commitment to their own development that was admirable.