

# TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

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## WHO ADVISES THE ADVISORS?

by Gary North

One of the critical problems facing every pastor is his position as a counsellor. Because religious questions necessarily encompass every area of human thought and action, members of a congregation believe that they can come to their pastor for comprehensive spiritual counsel. They want advice in very specific areas of their lives. They generally resent specific preaching from the pulpit which would single out sins on their part, since this is interpreted as "meddling" by the preacher in things that "are no concern of the church." But when the results of these sins become painful or even dangerous to the continued prosperity of the sinner, he is ready to seek spiritual counsel. He wants answers from the pastor. Sometimes, he expects pain-free answers that would enable him to prosper from the evil practices he had previously relied upon to make his profits. But in any case, he expects the pastor to provide explicit advice.

There are many ways for pastors to avoid giving relevant advice. They can claim ignorance. They can claim that a professional counsellor is advisable. They may try to answer in generalities. Or they may even try to come up with some solutions, possibly drawn from biblical examples, or from their own personal experience, or from something they read in a long-forgotten textbook. But one answer is almost never given: "I'm sorry, but this area of life is outside the realm of religion. There are no specifically religious guidelines here. Just do what feels good, or makes a lot of money, or what seems safe."

This is a strange phenomenon. Pastors see their calling as shepherds of their flocks, which implies that their congregations are made up of sheep, which is just exactly what Christ said. The trouble is, the pastor may be a sheep in some specific area of life, or many: economics, business practices, management, medicine, philosophy, or whatever. Yet pastors are supposed to have specific answers in counselling sessions. Pastors everywhere are getting involved in counselling, yet the problems of millions of Christians are extremely specific. Pastors may initially think these problems are confined to a narrow range of traditional "religious" specialties: marriage problems, drinking problems, gambling problems. The answers are easy here, at least on the surface: "Love your mate." "Stop drinking." "Stop gambling." They work hard to help these people solve their problems, but the problems are presumed to have specifically biblical solutions.

### Interconnected Problems

The problem with this traditional approach to problem-solving is this: things are not always what they seem. A couple's sexual problems may relate to the family's finances. The in-law problem may relate to some long-forgotten incident in the past of one of the marriage partners. The drinking problem may relate to a business problem. This interconnection of problems is increasingly recognized by pastors who have a smattering of knowledge of modern psychology,

but modern psychology normally provides no long-term solutions. This is one reason why the books of Jay Adams have become popular; he seems to have concrete biblical approaches to solving these complex psychological problems.

However, the pastor finds it difficult to admit that he hasn't the slightest idea about the solution to some specific counselling problem. The same pastor who cries out from the pulpit that biblical law has no authority in this dispensation, and/or that the dominion covenant (cultural mandate) of Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 9:1-7 has been abrogated in New Testament times, has to come up with the answers. These answers are necessary precisely because the problems involved in the fulfilling of the dominion covenant cannot be escaped, and the solutions must be in terms of God's law or some other law. Pastors who decry "social preaching" in the pulpit are then asked to come up with social counselling in private. They are compelled to come to grips with specific personal and family problems in private, even though they may deny the legitimacy of coming up with answers from the pulpit.

One reason why counselling has become so popular among pastors is that the focus of modern life is increasingly internal. As men have attempted to abandon the responsibilities of external dominion, they have increasingly turned inward. The liberal churches whose pastors spearheaded politically liberal causes in the 1930's through the late 1960's are now getting involved in marital counselling. One Methodist pastor in (predictably) San Francisco has begun to produce explicit sex films for marital counselling. Ten unpaid volunteer couples perform in these films, and the pastor has vowed to increase the number of such films, despite complaints from the denomination's hierarchy. In fact, he plans to make them available on videocassettes, thereby cutting the sales price by two-thirds, "for home use and for anybody who wants to use them." (*New York Times*, May 18, 1980)

Rushdoony commented on this shift in perspective, from the external world to inner troubles, in an appendix to *The One and the Many* (1971), "Observations on the End of an Age": "The increasing prominence of psychology is an important sign of the times. When man becomes a problem to himself, psychology comes into its own. As man's inner problems grow, his ability to cope with the outer world and its problems declines. Thus, a psychology-oriented age is an age of decline, unsure of itself, and incompetent in the face of responsibilities" (p. 368). When men no longer believe that they can control the events around them, they begin to seek solutions to problems of the inner life, where they still have some minimal hope in being able to conquer. Their innate pessimism concerning external victory, in time and on earth, results in a pathological concern in achieving stability and success in the only arena in which victory might be possible, the arena of the human spirit, narrowly defined: family, local church, personal habits, etc.

This dream is self-defeating, since the things of the spirit cannot be divorced from the day-to-day responsibilities of life. This is why Jay Adams' counselling approach is successful: It gets people to begin to devise better habits in their daily lives. Depressed people are told to pray and work. Unloving people are told to display affection. People with problems of sexual lust are told to avoid daydreams concerning the forbidden sexual partner, and to focus such thoughts on the marriage partner. They are also told to avoid familiar situations that lead to such thoughts. Everything is geared to bringing responsible living patterns into the forefront, and these necessarily involve the outer world. It is true "reality therapy." It presumes that there are specific, concrete applications of biblical rules of action that can enable a person, through the grace of God, to overcome evil habits.

### Theonomy

R. J. Rushdoony's book, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973) and Greg Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (1977) take this "reality therapy" one step farther. They argue that the daily practices of life cannot be divorced from social, political, economic, and cultural affairs, and that any attempt to reform one's life in terms of concrete biblical law will necessarily lead to solutions of fallen society's rebellious law-order. In other words, it is not possible to confine the application of biblical rules to the home, the local church, or the small family-operated business. Biblical law knows no boundaries; where there are men, they must make moral decisions. Where there is a moral decision, there is a foundation of moral action. It will be biblical or anti-biblical, but it will guide the decision-maker. The problems of the spirit lead, step by step, to the problems of society.

The pastor who engages in counselling cannot arbitrarily build a theological fence around the congregation. He cannot say: "Your problem is, by definition, confined only to your immediate family. Any biblical solutions must therefore be limited to issues relating to your thoughts and, at most, your immediate personal relationships with others whom you meet on a face-to-face basis." Such theological fences have gaping holes in them. The man's problem may be guilt, and his guilt may stem from his political support of some evil man (consider converted Nazis after World War II), or from his actions as a communist revolutionary, or his drafting of legislation leading to compulsory wealth redistribution. Who can say "Thus far, and no farther," in a counselling session? Who can say, "The Bible has answers for only these types of problems"? **Yet tens of thousands of pastors say this, implicitly and explicitly, every Sunday, when they step into their pulpits. They deny the responsibility of Christians to overcome the world. They deny that biblical law applies to the realms of life, and that it serves as Christian man's tool of cultural dominion. They teach their congregations to reject biblical law. They teach their congregations that no external victory is possible, in time and on earth. And then they cannot understand why members of their congregations are lining up for "spiritual" counselling, the same way humanists among the general population are lining up in the outer offices of the psychiatrists. They cannot understand the obvious: without God's law, and without hope of victory, men go crazy.**

Pastors who preach a theology of external defeat, and who preach a theology which rejects the specifics of biblical law and morality, are creating enormous burdens that they are increasingly being forced to bear. They are creating whole congregations of people who cannot rely on themselves. Christian laymen are not self-reliant precisely because **they have no foundation to stand on—no self-confidence concerning the**

earthly value of their contributions in life, and no confidence concerning the basis of right and wrong. They cannot fight life's battles because their pastors have disarmed them. They are an army which has received no basic training, which provides no code of command, and which has prohibited the use of any ammunition larger than .22 shells. Their weapons have been issued, and the ammunition enables them to shoot no farther than three pews to the rear. That's where they aim, but the enemy is at the gates of the city.

Are churches torn up by internal dissension? What would you expect? That's about the only battlefield which supposedly is open to Christian action. Are families splitting up daily? What would you expect? That's the only other battlefield which is considered "on limits" for Christian action. The energies of Christians are focused on those targets that the pastors have announced as valid. Men devote their energies on those areas of life in which they can expect victory. If they are told that victory is limited to the local church and family unit, then that's where the battles will be fought. Energies, especially the energies of conflict, will be concentrated on local battlefields instead of in the battlefields of the world at large. **Nobody wants to get shot down on a battlefield where victory has been officially prohibited.** If Korea and Vietnam proved nothing else, they proved that no-win wars are unlikely to be won, and people who are told that they are required to fight on such battlefields in order to "lose like heroes" tend to act like cowards. Or if they don't, those who are drafted for the third and fourth no-win wars will.

### Where Are the Non-Coms?

Pastors who believe that an effective pastorate involves effective counselling had better be prepared to face the whole gamut of human problems. They had better prepare themselves to provide comprehensive answers, concrete answers, biblical answers to problem-burdened Christians. This is why the average pastoral library on spiritual counselling is mostly useless. The principles of pastoral counselling are provided in the Bible, but the applications are as broad as the world. Men who do not read any longer, or who read only books and articles written by other narrowly trained, narrowly focused counsellors, are creating enormous problems for themselves. They do not know enough to counsel their parishoners concerning the proper places to go in a search for correct answers. They have put blinders on themselves by denying the comprehensive nature of the dominion covenant, and they find themselves called upon to handle problems far beyond their own self-imposed intellectual limitations. They have not trained up deacons and elders who are masters of their "secular" callings. They have no network of Christian problem-solvers who operate within the framework of biblical law. They have denied the existence of concrete answers to specific problems—biblical law—and they find themselves alone, with no trained specialists to ask for guidance. **They have no one to go to for expert information, and they wind up way over their heads in the counselling room.** Their theological presuppositions have created a generation of stumbling sheep, and they have reduced the supply of expert laymen who are willing and able to step in and help provide biblical guidance in life's specific callings. Pietistic theology has led to overburdened pastors, for pietism is a theology for an army devoid of non-commissioned officers. We have an army of recruits, draftees, second lieutenants, and half a million captains who think they should be promoted to general. An army without trained non-coms is an army familiar with defeat.

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