WHAT IS NOUTHETIC COUNSELING?

Jesus Christ is at the center of all true Christian counseling. Any counseling which moves Christ from that position of centrality has to the extent that it has done so ceased to be Christian. We know of Christ and his will in his Word. Let us turn to Scripture, therefore, to discover what directions Christ, the King and Head of the Church, has given concerning the counseling of people with personal problems. The Scriptures have much to say concerning the matter. Perhaps the best place to begin is with a discussion of what I have called "nouthetic confrontation."

The words nouthesis and noutheteo are the noun and verb forms in the New Testament from which the term "nouthetic" comes. A consideration of most of the passages in which these forms occur will lead inductively to an understanding of the meaning of nouthesis.

Nouthetic Confrontation: By the Whole Church

First, whatever nouthetic activity may be, it is clear that the New Testament assumes that all Christians, not simply ministers of the Gospel, should engage in it. In Colossians 3:16 Paul urged:

"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and [for the moment we shall simply transliterate the next word] confronting one another nouthetically."

According to Paul, all Christians must teach and confront one another in a nouthetic fashion. In support of this proposition Paul also wrote (Romans 15:14):

"Concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to confront one another nouthetically."

In both Colossians and Romans then, Paul pictured Christians meeting in nouthetic confrontation as normal everyday activity. He was sure the Christians in Rome were able to do so because they were filled with knowledge and goodness. These qualities equipped them to confront one another nouthetically. So the first fact is plain: nouthetic activity is a work in which all of God's people may participate.1

Peculiarly the Work of the Ministry

But while all Christians ought to engage in such confrontation, nouthetic activity particularly characterizes the work of the ministry. Paul considered nouthetic confrontation a vital part of his own ministry. Incidental remarks in several passages indicate clearly that such activity was central. In Colossians 1:28, for instance, Paul declared:

"We proclaim him confronting every man nouthetically, and teaching every man with all wisdom in order that we may present every man complete in Christ."

Paul's proclamation of Christ involved confronting every man nouthetically. Certainly public confrontation in preaching was a part of Paul's nouthetic activity, but he was engaged also in the nouthetic confrontation of individuals. Colossians 1:28 does not refer primarily to Paul's public ministry, but principally to his private ministry to individuals. This is apparent when he speaks of "nouthetically confronting every man." Paul confronted people nouthetically in the day-by-day contacts of pastoral work. The fullest biblical account of Paul's private nouthetic activity occurs in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. This is a moving scene; they would see one another no more. In his remarks, Paul reviewed his three-year ministry at Ephesus, recalling the past, looking into the future, and describing the present. He warned about problems likely to arise, described the kind of activity in which he engaged while he was with them, and urged them to continue this same work among their people. Verse 31 is an informative statement that most fully describes nouthetic confrontation. His words give us a deep insight into the ministry of Paul in the place where he ministered (as far as we know) longer than any other. In Ephesus Paul carried on not merely an evangelistic but also a pastoral ministry. He ministered to the Ephesian congregation for three years. What did Paul do during that time? He says:

"Be on the alert [i.e., as I was], remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to confront each one nouthetically with tears."

It is important to notice first that nouthetic confrontation took up a fair share of Paul's time if he engaged in it night and day for three years without ceasing. Paul continually confronted people nouthetically. We seldom think about Paul involved in pastoral work. His basic image is that of the missionary, crossing vast territories, sailing across the sea. We think of his remarkable ministry which spread the Christian faith through the oikoumene.2 Of course he was that, but wherever he stayed for any length of time, Paul engaged in the solid pastoral work that is necessary to build up individuals in their faith. He says that nouthetic activity was a prominent part of that work. That is one reason why his letters are studded with the names of specific individuals with whom he became involved very intimately. Paul not only preached in the market places, but he dealt with people as individuals, as groups and as families; and he confronted them nouthetically.

Three Elements in Nouthetic Confrontation

It is important to define nouthetic confrontation precisely. What does the word nouthesis mean? The term contains more than one fundamental element. That is one reason why it is difficult to translate. Traditional translations have vacillated between the words "admonish," "warn," and "teach." A. T. Robertson (in his exposition of Colossians 1:28) rendered it "put sense into." A few of the newer versions (e.g., the New English Bible and Williams' Version) sometimes translate it "counsel." Yet no one English word quite conveys the full meaning of nouthesis. Since it is a rich term with no exact English equivalent, the word has been transliterated in this book. It is probably important to continue to transliterate nouthesis. Since the word has no exact English equivalent, the concepts inherent in the term probably do not exist widely in the English-speaking world. An attempt to bring the Greek term over into English perhaps ought to be made as the first step in endeavoring to establish nouthesis both as a concept and as a practice.

I Nouthetic confrontation consists of at least three basic elements.3 The word is used frequently in conjunction with didasko (which means "to teach"). But in Colossians 3:16 and elsewhere it is distinguished from that word. Nouthetic confrontation always implies a problem, and presupposes an obstacle that must be overcome; something is wrong in the life of the one who is confronted. Cremer says, "Some degree of opposition has been encountered, and one wishes to subdue or remove it, not by punishment, but by influencing the nous."4 Didasko does not imply any problem. Didasko simply suggests the communication of data (teaching); making information known, clear, understandable and memorable. The word didasko implies nothing about the listener, but refers exclusively to the activity of the instructor. The person taught may or may not be anxious to receive instruction. He may pay great sums of money or travel long distances at great personal sacrifice to be taught, or his may be the typical response of the recalcitrant schoolboy, but the word didasko says nothing (one way or the other) about this. On the other hand, the word nouthesis focuses on both confronter and the one confronted. Nouthesis specifically presupposes the need for a change in the person confronted, who may or may not put up some resistance. In either case there is a problem in his life that needs to be solved. Nouthetic confrontation, then, necessarily suggests first of all that there is something wrong with the person who is to be confronted nouthetically. The idea of something wrong, some sin, some obstruction, some problem, some difficulty, some need that has to be acknowledged and dealt with, is central. In short, nouthetic confrontation arises out of a condition in the counselee that God wants changed. The fundamental purpose of nouthetic confrontation, then, is to effect personality and behavioral change.

II The second element inherent in the concept of nouthetic confrontation is that problems are solved nouthetically by verbal means. Trench says:

"It is training by word-by the word of encouragement, when this is sufficient, but also by that of remonstrance, of reproof, of blame, where these may be required; as set over against the training by act and by discipline which is paideia. . . . The distinctive feature of nouthesia is the training by word of mouth."

Trench quoted as evidence, Plutarch's use of nouthetikoi logo I (nouthetic words) and continued: "Nouthetein had continually, if not always, the sense of admonishing with blame," and finally says that the idea of rebuke is affirmed by the derivation "from nous and tithemi" which indicate that "whatever is needed to cause the monition to be taken home, to be laid to heart, is involved in the word."5 So to the concept of nouthesis must be added the additional

dimension of person-to-person verbal confrontation. Nouthesis presupposes a counseling type confrontation in which the object is to effect a characterological and behavioral change in the counselee. In itself, the word neither implies nor excludes a formal counseling situation but is broad enough to encompass both formal and informal confrontation. Nouthetic confrontation, in its biblical usage, aims at straightening out the individual by changing his patterns of behavior to conform to biblical standards.6

Specific biblical instances of such nouthetic activity may be seen in Nathan's confronting David after his sin with Uriah and Bathsheba, or Christ's restoring Peter after His resurrection. The failure to confront nouthetically may be seen in the blameworthy behavior of Eli recorded in I Samuel 3:13:

"You tell him that I will execute justice over his family forever, because he knew that his sons were bringing a curse upon themselves, and he failed to discipline them" (Berkeley Translation).

In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) the word "discipline" is the verbal form enouthetei. Eli's sin was failure to confront his sons nouthetically. He failed to speak soon enough, strictly enough, and seriously enough, to effect genuine changes in them. In I Samuel 2:22 ff. there is, to be sure, the record of one feeble, futile, final attempt made much too late:

"Now Eli was very old, and when he heard everything his sons were doing to all Israel; and how they cohabited with the women who served at the entrance of the meeting tent, he said to them, Why do you behave this way? I hear all the people talk about your misconduct. . . . This will not do, my sons; for what I hear is not a good report. You lead the Lord's people to transgress. When one person sins against another, the judges will do him justice; but when a person sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him? But they would not listen to their father's warning;7 so the Lord was inclined to slay them."

Eli's stress upon "why" may indicate one of his failures as a father. It was not his business to speculate about the causes of his sons' wicked deeds beyond the fact that he already knew that they were sinners. It was his task to stop them. Too great an emphasis upon "why" may indicate an attempt to find extenuating reasons for excusing conduct which otherwise must be described as sinful. Did Eli fail to confront his sons nouthetically in the past because he was always engaged in finding excuses for their bad behavior?8 Eli would have done better to have emphasized the word "what" instead. If he had compared the behavior itself to God's standards, he might have been able to help his boys.

Usual counseling methods recommend frequent long excursions back into the intricacies of the whys and wherefores of behavior. Instead, nouthetic counseling is largely committed to a discussion of the what. All the why that a counselee needs to know can be clearly demonstrated in the what. What was done? What must be done to rectify it? What should future responses be? In nouthetic counseling the stress falls upon the "what" rather than the "why" because the "why" is already known before counseling begins. The reason why people get into trouble in their relationships to God and others is because of their sinful natures. Men are born sinners.

Much time is wasted by asking why.9 The question "Why" may lead to speculation and blame-shifting; "What" leads to solutions to problems. "What have you been doing?" is a very significant question to ask. Having answered that question, counselors may then ask: "What can be done about this situation? What does God say must be done?" Because nouthetic counseling seeks to correct sinful behavior patterns by personal confrontation and repentance, the stress is upon "What"-- what is wrong? and what needs to be done about it? People never understand the why more clearly than when the focus is upon the what. The second element in nouthetic contact, therefore, is personal conference and discussion (counseling) directed toward bringing about change in the direction of greater conformity to biblical principles and practices. Any biblically legitimate verbal means may be employed.

III The third element in the word nouthesis has in view the purpose or motive behind nouthetic activity. The thought is always that the verbal correction is intended to benefit the counselee. This beneficent motive seems never to be lost, and often is quite prominent. For example, in I Corinthians 4:14, Paul uses the verbal form of the word in this fashion:

"I did not write these things to shame you but to confront you nouthetically as my beloved children."

The antithesis in that sentence brings out the tender concern inherent in the term. Because of this element, the term appropriately describes the concern of the parent for his child, and is used frequently in familial contexts. The Septuagint translators evidenced their preference for the word in the relationship of Eli as a father to his sons. The parent-child relationship also appears in Ephesians 6:4. There Paul spoke about bringing up children "in the nurture and the nouthetic confrontation of the Lord." In the parallel passage in Colossians 3:21, Paul warned parents not to "exasperate" their children. In Ephesians he urged, "Do not provoke them to wrath." Even in the most serious circumstances, an unruly Christian is to be "confronted nouthetically as a brother" (II Thessalonians 3:15).
So then, the third element in nouthetic confrontation implies changing that in his life which hurts the counselee. The goal must be to meet obstacles head on and overcome them verbally, not in order to punish but to help him. Cremer wrote, "Its fundamental idea is the well-intentioned seriousness with which one would influence the mind and disposition of another by advice, admonition, warning, putting right according to circumstances."10 The thought of punishment, even the idea of disciplinary punishment, is not contemplated in the concept of nouthetic confrontation.11 Nouthesis is motivated by love and deep concern, in which clients are counseled and corrected by verbal means for their good, ultimately, of course, that God may be glorified.12 As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:28, every man must be confronted nouthetically in order that every man may be presented to Christ mature and complete. These, then, are the three basic concepts in the word nouthesis.

Nouthesis and the Purpose of Scripture

Nouthesis accords quite fully with what Paul says elsewhere about the purpose and use of Scripture. In II Timothy 3:16,

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is useful for teaching, for reproving, for correcting, for training in righteousness."

Here, the same nouthetic goals that Paul had previously stated in Colossians 1:28 seem to be in view. There he spoke about confronting every man nouthetically in order that every man might be presented perfect in Christ. One might say that the Scriptures themselves are nouthetically oriented. In II Timothy Paul indicated that the Scriptures are useful to perfect the man of God, by what might be called nouthetic means (teaching, reproving, correcting and training).

The Scriptures then, are useful for the nouthetic purposes of reproving, teaching, correcting and training men in righteousness. Because this is the classic passage concerning inspiration, its primary purpose often has been overlooked. Paul was concerned to discuss not only inspiration but primarily the purpose of the Scriptures. He argued that because they were God-breathed, the Scriptures are useful for nouthetic purposes.

In the fourth chapter Paul continued this discussion. Based on his conclusions in chapter 3, Paul urged Timothy to use the Scriptures concretely in accordance with their nouthetic purposes. He wrote:

"Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction (II Timothy 4:2)."

Timothy could fulfill that mandate only by using the Scriptures nouthetically. So nouthetic confrontation must be scriptural confrontation. Nouthetic confrontation is, in short, confrontation with the principles and practices of the Scriptures. Paul's words in Colossians and II Timothy pertain to the same matter. In both passages Paul thought of bringing God's Word to bear upon people's lives in order to expose sinful patterns, to correct what is wrong, and to establish new ways of life of which God approves. Since it embraces all of these ideas, the term "nouthetic" seems to be an appropriate modifier for "counseling."13

Nouthetic Involvement

To the Corinthians Paul wrote:

"Who is weak without my being weak; who is led into sin without my intense concern" (II Corinthians 11:29)?

In his third letter, John too showed evidence of nouthetic involvement:

"I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my own children walk in the truth" (vs. 4). 16

Nouthetic counseling embodies involvement of the deepest sort.
There is a prevalent view of counseling which says, "Don't become involved too deeply with your counselee." The image of the ideal counselor according to this view is that of a professional who is stoically clinical, and who maintains a sterile white-coated manner.17 Like the physician's bedside manner, the counselor is sometimes thought to need a couch-side manner. Even though he may feel strongly empathetic inside, ideally he should not respond in any way which might reveal his true feelings. He must never appear shocked. He always must maintain a neutral nonjudgmental posture regardless of whether what the counselee reveals is good or bad. His stance is neutral. He must never express his own feelings or his own viewpoint on the subject. While the counselee is to be wholly open, the counselor must never be known in his total personality. There is a double standard.

Any idea that such neutrality is possible must be dispelled. We shall attend to this matter later. Perhaps it is sufficient to note here that biblical counseling frequently gets so exciting that nouthetic counselors might get up and walk around the room, shout, laugh uproariously and on occasion even shed tears.

Love Is the Goal

What are the goals of nouthetic counseling? In I Timothy 1:5 Paul put it this way:

"But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and a sincere faith."

The word "authoritative" might be added to that translation: "The goal of our authoritative instruction is love." The original word (parangelia) is more than simply instruction; it is instruction imposed authoritatively. The authority of God is presupposed. The purpose of preaching and counseling is to foster the love toward God and love toward one's neighbor which God commands. Jesus summed up the keeping of the whole law as love. Any notion of authority as antithetical to love is inconsistent with Scripture.
Love is precisely man's problem, however. How can sinful man love? Since the fall, in which Adam's sin led to a guilty conscience, hypocrisy, and doubt, it has been impossible for natural men to keep their hearts pure, their consciences good, or their faith unhypocritical. All are born with a warped sinful nature that vitiates any such possibility. And yet love depends upon these very qualities. That is why Paul conditioned love upon the solution to these problems (note: "love from," i.e., "which issues from"). God's authoritative instruction through the ministry of his Word, spoken publicly (from the pulpit) or privately (in counseling), is the Holy Spirit's means of producing love in the believer.

The overarching purpose of preaching and counseling is God's glory. But the underneath side of that splendid rainbow is love. A simple biblical definition of love is: The fulfillment of God's commandments. Love is a responsible relationship to God and to man. Love is a relationship conditioned upon responsibility, that is, responsible observance of the commandments of God. The work of preaching and counseling, when blessed by the Holy Spirit, enables men through the gospel and God's sanctifying Word to become pure in heart, to have peaceful consciences, and to trust God sincerely. Thus the goal of nouthetic counseling is set forth plainly in the Scriptures: to bring men into loving conformity to the law of God.

Authoritative Counseling

But notice that Christian counseling involves the use of authoritative instruction. "Authoritative instruction" requires the use of directive, nouthetic techniques. Technique, and all methodology, must grow out of and be appropriate to purpose and content. The end does not justify the means; rather, it regulates the means. Love will blossom as counselors focus their attention upon purification of the heart, the clearing of the conscience, and the building of

genuine trust. Counseling will seek to reverse those sinful patterns which began in the Garden of Eden. When he disobeyed God, his conscience was awakened, and out of fear, sinful man fled, covered himself and tried to hide from God. When confronted by God, finding that he could not successfully avoid him, he resorted to blameshifting and excuses. In antithesis to running and hiding, nouthetic counseling stresses turning to God in repentance. Instead of excuse-making or blameshifting, nouthetic counseling advocates the assumption of responsibility and blame, the admission of guilt, the confession of sin, and the seeking of forgiveness in Christ. In his dealings with Adam and Eve, God literally did not allow them to get away with what they had done. Adam tried to make a getaway into the woods. But God confronted him nouthetically, in order to change him by words. The relationship between God and Adam had been established on the basis of God's Word, broken by Satan's challenge to that Word, and had to be reestablished by God's Word. God elicited a confession from him. He probed until he got satisfactory answers. God gave hope and promised salvation in Christ.

Notes

The same nouthetic methods were used when God, through Nathan, confronted David and when God, in Christ, confronted Peter after his denial. Christ did not hide in the garden or run from the cross but, open and naked he exposed himself to direct encounter with a God of wrath. He pled for no mercy in that hour, and made no excuses. He did not attempt to cover or protect himself, but rather bore the full brunt of the fury of God in the stead of guilty sinners. Nouthetic counseling rests upon the dynamics of redemption, and reflects this fact at every point. Therefore, its power (as well as its fearful responsibility) stems from the fact that nouthetic confrontation necessarily utilizes the full authority of God.

1) The priesthood of all believers, a biblical doctrine revived in the Reformation, led to calling the minister pastor pastorum (shepherd of shepherds). All believers have a ministry to all others, which Paul says involves counseling, or nouthetic confrontation.

6) Personality change in Scripture involves confession, repentance, and the development of new biblical patterns. None of this is viewed legalistically, but rather, all must be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit. Nouthetic confrontation involves the verbal ministry of the Word. All such ministry is made effectual by the power of the Spirit alone.

8) Perhaps the word "why" is used only rhetorically in this passage, as it is in other places where information is not actually sought (cf. Genesis 4:6). But in any case, the point is that Christians do not have to ask the question; they already know why fallen human nature acts sinfully. God has revealed clearly why sinful acts take place. Such knowledge justifies nouthetic confrontation.

17) Frieda Fromm-Reichmann wrote: "Freud taught that, ideally, the analyst, as nearly as it is possible, must be a blank to the patient." Cf. "Advances in Analytic-Therapy," Interpersonal Relations, Patrick Mullahy, ed., (New York: Science House, 1967), p.125. Laurence Le Shan agreed: "One cornerstone of therapy has been that the therapist's personality must come into the picture as little as possible. This view held he should be a 'faceless mirror,' essentially 'silent' as a human being" op. cit., pp. 454-463.