

## Too Quick To Seek Counseling

How many who seek professional help are overlooking resources for healing that God has already provided?

by Fran Sciacca

We are immersed in an epidemic of emotional pain.

Everywhere we turn, we face someone who is hurting deeply or who has just emerged from some intense personal trial. A survey of a local adult Sunday school class revealed that fifty percent had been, or were currently, in therapy.

Words like *dysfunctional*, *codependence*, and *syndrome* are no longer the esoteric language of trained professionals. They permeate and even dominate common conversation among Christians. According to William Kirk Kilpatrick, membership in The American Psychiatric Association quadrupled from 1965-1990.

Yet a Christian friend who is also a professional counselor once told me that many of the clients she sees don't need to be there. Why, then, do they go?

Before we look at four reasonable explanations, let me say that I don't deny the legitimacy of professional counseling. In fact, I believe whole heartedly in it for two reasons.

First, solving some people's traumas is harder than unscrambling an omelette. Organic and congenital disorders can elude an untrained eye and might even be compounded by a foolish diagnosis of a purely *spiritual* problem where there is a physical problem as well. Many believers with hypoglycemia are, until properly diagnosed, exhorted to the point of exhaustion by well meaning Christians exhibiting "zeal without knowledge."

Second, the psychological profession tends to be a theological wasteland, not unlike many of the natural sciences. A committed Christian who serves well in that field can be a vessel of God's light and grace in an otherwise dark quarter.

So there is a need for solid biblical counselors, and some Christians with some problems really need to go to them. But what about the large number of Christians who are in therapy for no legitimate reason? Why do they go?

There are four key reasons: loss of reliance on Scripture, presumption of personal incompetence, lack of accountability in the Body of Christ, and the drive for self-improvement. Let's look at each one more closely.

### LOSS OF RELIANCE ON SCRIPTURE

Many Christians deprive themselves of the power and joy of firsthand encounters with the Spirit of God in the Word of God. Instead of studying and feasting on Scripture itself, they settle for

dependence on rapidly multiplying forms of vicarious study (Christian radio teaching, the telechurch, audio and video cassettes, etc.). They live a secondhand life, leaning on someone else's convictions, someone else's study, someone else's joy.

But vicarious learning never can produce the confidence in God's competence that comes from personal familiarity with Scripture. One psalmist wrote, "Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors. . . . I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes" (Ps. 119:24,99).

An almost ubiquitous Bible verse at Christmas time proclaims, "And he will be called *Wonderful Counselor*" (Is. 9:6, emphasis added). Jesus announced the coming of the Holy Spirit into His followers' lives as "another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:16,17, emphasis added). Paul wrote that the Scripture, breathed out by God, "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be *thoroughly equipped* for *every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, emphasis added).

Yet how many Christians diligently search Scripture and fervently seek Scripture's God *first* for comfort, insight, and guidance when they are troubled? Them seems instead to be a growing loss of confidence in the relevance and

authority of Scripture as first resort for counsel.

God intended from the very beginning that *He* should be our primary counselor, our source of diagnosis, insight, and guidance. And the primary vehicle of that ministry of God is the Scripture. Paul affirms this in Romans 15:4: "*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*"

God's primary purpose in providing the Bible is of course for us to know Him, because Scripture reveals Him. But a secondary purpose is insight, encouragement, and guidance—the elements that comprise counseling.

Our frenetic culture crowds out sufficient time to reflect on the revelation of God in Scripture. I vividly recall the direct-mail marketing ploy of one publisher: "Most Christians don't have time in their busy schedules to sit and mad the Bible. But now you can take God's Word with you whenever you go!" The brochure promoted the Bible on cassette, but it captured the problem succinctly: we don't *read* God's Word.

For too many, time alone with God has become just another scheduled event on the daily treadmill. We *listen* to Scripture while we run, commute, or pay the bills, instead of *reading and studying* scripture while we meet with God.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the chasm widens between us and the Author of Scripture. Eventually many Christians, deprived of spiritual nourishment, cease believing in the Bible as a source of comfort, insight, and direction. In desperation, they seek professional help as a replacement for the irreplaceable.

## **PRESUMPTION OF PERSONAL INCOMPETENCE**

Our world overflows with information. One computer advertisement even shows a manager drowning in a sea of paperwork to convince people that they can't survive the information glut without computerized information management. Data management has become a lucrative career.

Sadly, many people grow to believe that because they can never know *everything*, they can never know *enough* about *anything*.

But fear not! A new breed of individual arises—the specialist! He is here to remind us that we cannot be competent in anything outside our own narrow specialties—but he will gladly assist us in his own field of expertise.

Thus modern man is convinced that he cannot care adequately for his finances, his marriage, his children, his business, or—above all— himself! After all, he doesn't specialize in those things; he specializes only in what he does on

the job. For everything else in life, he needs the help of an expert.

So, when a child has problems, a marriage stagnates, or someone at mid-life begins to question his whole direction in life, we feel pressure to seek professional help.

Does it have to be this way?

Recently a Christian radio station ran an ad for a Christian counseling center. The ad dramatically portrayed problems with in-laws, a child getting poor grades, and low self-esteem as *crises* demanding *professional* help. Thus a Christian counseling center committed to strengthening people unwittingly contributed to the steady drumbeat of the age of the specialist: "You can't stand on your own two feet. You need professional help. You can't stand on your own two feet . . ."

Even more tragic than our belief that we aren't competent to handle our own everyday problems is the still more entrenched belief that we can't substantially help each other.

My wife and I once spent an evening with a couple whose marriage was in trouble. Both are highly successful college graduates. But, like many couples, they had been in therapy individually and jointly for two years. Now, they told us, their marriage was *over*. Therapy hadn't helped—and if it hadn't helped, what could?

Jill and I looked at each other, wondering if we had gotten in over our heads this time. But during dinner, we assumed there that God wanted to glorify Himself in their weakness. We explained to them how we go on a weekly date to talk, pray, and listen.

They both panicked: "What do you talk about for an entire evening?!" But, with some coaching, they tried it. Now, a year later, they date each week and their marriage pulsates with life and hope.

Why did the counsel work? Not because Jill and I were experts, but because we were faithful to Hebrews 10:25: "*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" Jill and I merely acted in obedience.

A weekly date isn't a foolproof success formula for every troubled marriage, but the point is clear: God *has* equipped us in Christ to "keep one another on our feet."

## LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Modern Western culture practically defies the individual. Sadly, the Body of Christ is strongly influenced by that culture. We have become like ancient Israel during the period of the judges: "In those days Israel had no king" —and hence no human authority holding people accountable to God's standards—

"everyone did as he saw fit" (Jdg. 21:25).

The results were social disintegration and horrible moral decay that repeatedly brought God's judgment.

When we begin to think of ourselves as little gods and our culture reinforces that view, we soon forget that as believers we are "*members together of one body*" (Eph. 3:6) in which "*each member belongs to all the others,*" not merely to himself (Rom. 12:5). Instead, we swallow whole hog our culture's insistence on an unqualified "right to privacy." This attitude permeates the church so deeply that many boards of elders fear litigation if they ever exercise church discipline.

A short time ago I asked a close friend if he would hold me accountable for a couple of areas of my life that I simply could not control on my own. His response saddened and stunned me: "Fran, I'm just not into keeping tabs on people. I think that's too legalistic." Yet Hebrews 3:13 makes mutual accountability more than a suggestion: "*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today [i.e., as long as there is still time], so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*"

The Lone Ranger mentality fosters the attitude that *my* Christian life is none of *your* business, when in fact, since we belong to one another, our lives *are* each other's business. When one suffers, we all suffer, and when one triumphs, we all

triumph (1 Cor. 12:26). This means our rejection of help, or refusal to help others, hurts not only ourselves but others also.

Refusing to be held accountable by our brothers and sisters for living by God's standards, and to hold them accountable in turn, contributes to our rush to professional help in two ways. First, it means we don't get the support, guidance, correction, and encouragement we need, and we don't give them to others. So our quest for holiness suffers.

Second, we fear revealing our weaknesses to our brothers and sisters, and so we turn to detached professionals for help. In this context, a therapist becomes a safe, neutral third party, much like the priest who used to hear my confession as a Catholic youth. He was separated from me by a thin veil so that even though he knew my personal moral failures he was kept a safe distance from my day-to-day existence. Confession was always cathartic, but rarely therapeutic.

## **THE DRIVE FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT**

Self-improvement is the idol of the eighties. Almost half of the top twenty video titles purchased are fitness workouts. We eat cereals we hate because they supposedly reduce our risk of getting cancer. We wear clothing that almost glows in the dark to convince ourselves that we're serious about jogging. We are surrounded by people

who are *working on* one thing after another.

And what do Christians do in the age of self-help? Many of us see therapists because, whether we recognize it or not, we think of sanctification as an archaic biblical word for self-improvement.

But God's program for our lives is not self-improvement. Instead, it is *selflessness*.

John the Baptist captured the ultimate purpose of human existence when he said, "He must become "mater; I must become less" (Jn. 3:30). Sanctification and self-improvement are not synonyms. In fact, in some cases sanctification demands that what we want to improve about ourselves be left the way it is.

Paul's description of his life in 2 Cor. 12:1-10 illustrates this radical truth. What his "thorn in the flesh" was is beside the point. What is clear is that what Paul wanted *out* of his life God wanted *in* it for the purpose of producing humility, which breeds dependence on God.

Paul alluded to this principle earlier:

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal*

*body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*" — **2 Cor. 4:7-12.**

Today we might call these fragile "jars of clay" "cracked pots."

Is it possible that in some cases God actually *wants* cracked pots, vessels with flaws, to confirm the divine source of the gospel, to make it clear that what we accomplish is not by our might, nor by our power, but by His Spirit (Zech. 4:6)? Is it possible that there are some weaknesses in your life that God has no intention of correcting—ever?

This isn't an excuse for sin, but it is a truth of Scripture. None of us will ever be perfect in this life—not morally, not physically, not intellectually. And it is a confirmation of the grace and power of God that He works His marvelous will with such imperfect tools.

## **A WAY OUT**

These four problems, then—loss of reliance on Scripture, presumption of personal incompetence, lack of accountability, and the drive for self-improvement—underlie much of the present notion that professional help should be a Christian's first resort when facing difficulty. If these assumptions have become unconscious convictions in your life, there is a way out.

First, if your devotion to God's Word has waned, you can restore it. Purpose today to begin afresh.

A study guide might provide the structure and direction you need to recultivate your familiarity with and confidence in the Bible. But most of all, ask God to make His Word your first counselor. Don't let a study guide or any other tool become a substitute for the Bible itself. Spend time *alone* with God.

Second, if you feel incompetent, ask God to send you someone whom you can help. Be alert, be available, be attentive. Hurting people are all around you.

In fact, a healthy alternative to self-improvement, with all its focus on self, is to pour yourself out in service to others: "If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (Isaiah 58:10).

Is someone in your fellowship grieving the loss of a spouse or child? Perhaps your neighbor has lost his job? *Give* of yourself and you may discover that your "light will rise in the darkness." *You'll* be encouraged!

Third, maybe you've developed a Lone Ranger approach to the Christian life. People love, inspect, and appreciate you, but they're never allowed to "look under the mask" at the real you.

I finally found a group of men who do for me what my friend refused to do—holding me accountable to deal with two areas of my life that God has made clear

to me need attention. I am excited because I finally have hope for victory.

You don't have to have a group to hold you accountable. My wife is more private than I am, so she prefers to meet with one other woman each week for Bible study. They hold each other accountable for specific areas God has revealed need to change. It's also an excellent way to assume that they both spend time regularly in the Scriptures.

Finally, perhaps you realize that you've become so preoccupied with self-improvement that you've become self-centered. Striving for personal perfection has made you ignore others' needs.

A wise Christian once told me, "Strengthen your strengths, and bring your weaknesses up to a tolerable level." Good counsel! God promises to reveal areas needing attention if we focus on knowing him and "the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10,15).

Instead of getting all wrapped up in self-improvement, ask God to show you what you can do to help the hurting people around you. Find a way to do something with your gifts. Creatively seek to minister, and God will minister to you!

Some people do need professional help. Counseling does have a role in God's economy. But in Christ we can all be competent to help others, confident that He can help us, and assumed that God can use "cracked pots."