

Counseling Seekers for Repentance

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Something that came to my heart some time ago that really speaks of what Grace Life Church and particularly our missions arm called Anchored in Truth Missions is all about and that is that the glory of God is everything. Being glory of God focused has to be an intentional thing. You don't wait until you feel it. Now it's good that we feel it and the Spirit helps us but the Bible says that whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God and it doesn't even need to be said that the church should be committed and intentional about the glory of God. The glory of God is everything and God is most glorified through his church and whatever else happens, he is glorified through your individual life, your family life and all things should bring him glory but when the church is most truly the church God is most glorified on earth and even in the perfect state, the eternal state that's coming, he will continue to receive glory through his church. The glory of God is everything. God is most glorified through his church. For the church to bring him the glory he deserves, the church needs revival and reformation. This revival and reformation is going to be difficult. It will cause suffering on the part of God's shepherds but the glory of God is worth it.

That's what we're all about. That's where we are. There are 1,001 good things to be about but that is the thing God's about and we ought to get in on it with God. When we are asked by many, many brothers and many, many people, "Do a conference and share what God has blessed at your ministry and bring in sound preachers," and so we decided to do that three years ago and one of the things we were committed to do was this conference must be application intensive. We do not need another intellectual theorizing conference about great doctrine. Now don't misunderstand me, I think that has a place but we want to look at how do we live out the doctrines we claim we hold? Because if we are not living those doctrines out particularly in the bride, the church, then I believe we're hypocrites and I'm where Brother Jano is. There are so many things that we lack in our local church here, so many things we are still learning. It is just astonishing how ignorant you can be. I'm serious. I've been here almost 30 years. I was a reformer the day God saved me almost. I just had the gear in me to see the church reformed to more biblical health and little did I know that the greatest work God had to do was on me before he could use me to help anyone else or any church. Then you keep growing and you keep learning and you keep growing. Isn't it true? Reformed but always reforming.

But we can help one another and so with that commitment that we want to take sound doctrine and focus on, discuss, exhort, challenge each other, how this can work out in the local church. With that conviction and heart before us, I want to talk about counseling seekers. Counseling seekers and I'm going to do this in the context of the present church environment and it'll piggyback and build on what Brother Jano shared with us. Didn't Brother Jano help us? A lot of us are too extreme; we get out of balance. You've been over here in error and you react against it and you go to the other side and then you've got to be pulled back into more balance and he so wonderfully pointed that out to us. But more specifically, I want to talk about counseling seekers because if we're talking about the wonderful grace of repentance, that leads naturally to, "Well okay, what comes next? We preached that, we taught that and now we have to know how do we function as far as those true repenters who are genuine converts being incorporated into the body and matured and sanctified and go on to glorify God?"

Let me begin with some introductory thoughts. Unless I get chastened and reprov'd for going over my time again, I'm going to watch it more closely. The problem with the counseling seekers in modern evangelicalism today is that most really don't do any or it's extremely minimalistic so we want to discuss some approaches to counseling those who are awakened and perhaps convicted of sin and need Christ.. They're not yet converted but I want to tie into that group. Also those who believe they have come to genuine repentance and faith and are requesting baptism. How do we deal with these people? What are some basic things we can encourage each other about? Well, my first response is always chapter and verse, "What saith the Scriptures?" Oh please, brothers and sisters, don't divide over extrabiblical subjective preferences. There is enough in the Scripture that we'll never live out to start being divisive over what some lady or some gentleman thinks is their wise interpretation of things. But we can go to the Scriptures and find adequate guidelines to follow to give us God's mind on who is converted. Now, I do not mean with perfection. There will always be some tares among the wheat but God forbid through our sloppiness, laziness and negligence we encourage tares among the wheat.

Let me begin first of all by attempting to answer a question that has been posed to me through the years as people learn that we are quite more thorough and we take more time before we baptize people. In Southern Baptist circles that's been frowned upon because it makes your numbers go down and there is a great numbers idolatry in evangelicalism today. We were at the pinnacle of numbers idolatry here many, many years ago when we got a lot of applause for that and credit for our big numbers of growth and baptisms and so when we began to lay the Scriptures out and more thoroughly look at, "What saith the Scriptures?" concerning true conversion, our numbers went down and we started being criticized. Here's the first question I want to answer that came out of that spirit of criticism. Someone would say, "Well, no man can judge whether a person is saved or lost." Have you heard that? "Who are you?" But what these people seem to imply is that they are saying, "Now if he's prayed a prayer and meant it and says he's saved, then that's enough. Take his word and baptize him." For example, I knew of a pastor who basically had a system where he preached and appealed to people to walk to the front if they wanted to be saved. There was typically about five minutes of counseling and after five minutes of counseling, they stood before the people that very day and he would say,

"Have you asked Jesus to save you?" The person would say, "Yes." "Do you believe that he did?" "Yes." They were immediately baptized.

Well, let me say this: we are not priests, we do not possess the authority to bring men to God or to pronounce one saved or lost. That's not our authority and that's not what we're saying. Well, what then are we? According to the Scripture, we are under-shepherds. We are in effect stewards over another's property. It's his church. Matthew 16:18, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Jesus said, "I will build my church." As a side note: he was talking to an individual there when he said, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church." You only have one of two options here, brothers and sisters: either Roman Catholic theology is right and this is some special super-spiritual man who is the first pope or he's a leader among equals. He is no more authoritative than any other apostle but he had the gifts of leadership that made him stand out so that the Lord addressed him specifically though generally he was talking to all of his leaders and, of course, that's where we are. But Jesus said that he will build the church. The point is: we get the privilege of getting in on the building with Christ and this is a sobering responsibility. I remember very distinctly in my sanctification as a pastor when I literally began to tremble over the responsibility I had for the souls of those people who sit under my ministry. I'm going to tell you, that will get you over numbers idolatry very quickly. In Southern Baptist life as young preachers, you're just geared and impacted in literature and sermons and everything is to grow the biggest, grow the biggest, and now my spirit is, "Oh God, I don't want to answer for the souls that are under my ministry now."

It's a sobering responsibility and God has called men as elders or overseers or pastors of his church and he builds his church through the ministry of these men but not on these men. I told this to my own congregation and it is my heart if I know my heart: I want to so preach Christ to my people that they love me more but need me less. Now think about that, brother. I so give them Christ that they love me for it increasingly but they're less committed, attached and dependent on me personally.

The historical Baptist position and I'm not a great historian but I do love reading church history and Baptist history, but if you'll study Baptist history I believe you'll find this is accurate that in our historical past, a person is presented before the church for baptism and then, of course, church membership when the church pastors are satisfied that he has experienced the new birth. I can literally give you some church business meeting minutes from a long time ago, I mean longer than 75-100 years ago and it was somewhat common in those days that if you were joining the church, someone would come up or the pastor would have you come before the congregation and the pastor would say, "Okay, in our business meeting today we are adding members now and John comes today to join the church by experience." When I first read that I said, "What? What is experience?" and then they would go on to explain, "We have counseled with him with an open Bible and we are convinced based on not our discernment but what the word says about conversion, that this brother has experienced the new birth evidenced by repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." I loved that when I saw that. My second question was: why don't we do that anymore? They were using the same Bible. Why so different today?

So this is the responsibility that we have today and it should lead us to considerable prayer, humility and trembling for much is at stake. The soul of the seeker is at stake. If you run them through the process or you're not thorough and careful, you can give them an incredible false assurance. "Well, Jeff Noblit counseled me. Jeff Noblit baptized me." And if they're not converted, their blood is on your hands. The health of the church is at stake. We ought to be passionate about the health of the church. We ought to be passionate about the purity of the church. And our churches are packed full of the unconverted today. Will be ever be perfect? Absolutely not but we ought to do the best we can. Now listen: always with love, always with humility and compassion in our tone but we ought to do the best we can. The soul of the seeker is at stake. The health of the church is at stake. And most importantly, the glory of God is at stake. He has determined to most glorify himself through his church and if we fill the church full of people who are obviously by their lives and fruit not his, he is shamed in the community.

Acts 2:47 says, "praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." So our responsibility as God's under-shepherd is to use the Scriptures to discern who is and who is not being added to the church by the Lord. The church growth movement doesn't get that. They think God's leaning on them, indebted to them and dependent upon them to build the thing for him because Jesus is in heaven wringing his hands, hoping somebody will accept him. No, that's not our job. The Lord adds to his church. We get in on the process with the Lord making sure we are in harmony with the Lord as he adds or does not add to his church. The Scriptures, the pastors and I mean that plural, discernment and the congregation's agreement are the means of concluding if one is genuinely converted and therefore a candidate for baptism.

Now, we never say, "We declare he's saved." That's not what we mean. What we say is, "According to God's word, to our best discernment, he's converted and therefore a candidate for membership in the church." It was common in smaller churches and perhaps there is a smaller congregation here and that's still the process where a man would come for membership in the church and the church floor was opened up for you to question him. Literally. I had an old pastor tell me that when he was a boy in Kentucky, this would've been 75-80 years ago, he said it was common. A man would stand down there and another man would speak up and say, "Joe, two years ago I know you helped old Jim Jones over here with his moonshine still. Are you still doing that?" Just honest and open and he'd have to say, "No brother, I repented of that. I love Jesus now. I'm doing that." "That's all I need, brother. I love you and I'm glad you're here. You've got my vote." I mean, it's congregational government. I believe in congregational government; the ultimate authority is in the congregation. The congregation once they identify God-called elders should honor those elders but the ultimate authority is the congregation. Now if you have a different form of government, I understand that and we'll wait for you to progress in your sanctification. But my point is: there was an effort, it wasn't quick and slick and full of gimmicks to get them to the waters. That's a blasphemy.

So our job basically is not to declare one saved or unsaved but to guide the seeker on biblical authority to understand what the Lord has done or has not done in their lives. Using biblical authority, we speak with Scripture to declare them saved. Matthew 16:19, the Lord is speaking to Peter right after he said, "You're Peter and upon this rock I'll build my church." He says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Again, he's either the pope or a leader among equals here. "And whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Was he saying this is uniquely Peter's role? No, he means the church leaders of the day with this new revelation, I believe that includes the New Testament, the authority of God given to them whereby counseling with those who believe they've become the Lord's, they can declare what heaven has already decided. "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven. Whatever you loosed on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." That's what the Greek actually says.

So by following Scripture and examining candidates, we can find heaven's verdict on that soul. It's not our verdict, it's heaven's. Are we going to be perfect at it? No, but we ought to do the best we can. As a matter of fact, if you'll study old church policy manuals they'll talk about binding and loosing. They don't mean any of this exaggerated, unbiblical stuff that's going on in modern charismatic circles about binding and loosing. What they'll be talking about is church leaders discerning is a man still left bound in sin and therefore not a candidate for membership or has he experienced the new birth and therefore God has loosed him from his sin and therefore he's free to become a member in the church? So when they say, "It's not a person's job to judge if another person is saved," there is truth in that but what they really mean is it's just a quick hoop jump and they ought to be let in and that is us abrogating the clear command of our Lord to be unfaithful under-shepherds as he builds his church.

Another question that sometimes come to those of us who are striving to do the best we can is this one: "But people saved in the book of Acts were immediately baptized." Let me just give a few thoughts on that. First of all, we don't know for absolutely sure from the text that that's the way it was. In other words, there's no direct statement that immediately after they were saved, they were baptized. It's just not there. Now, yes it seems to imply that it was quite quick but we don't know that there wasn't some efforts to spend some time with the converts inquiring of them and counseling them about their experience before they were baptizes.

Secondly, this was a time of unusual outpouring of the Spirit of God. Now listen to me: when there's an unusual move of the Spirit of God things are different. It wasn't typical week in, week out preaching and some people coming later and asking about their souls, etc. This was unusual. I mean, there were tongues of fire coming down on the apostles. They were speaking other languages and the people of the other languages could understand them. Now, when that's happening in your church, you can know real quick when somebody's getting saved. All I'm saying is you need the context of a section of Scripture to help you understand how to do things. Jonathan Edwards, who I assume knew more about awakenings and revivals and unusual moves of the Spirit of God bringing men and women to conversion than perhaps anybody in the last several hundred

years says in one of his books that during rare seasons of unusual outpourings of the Spirit, conversions are more quickly discerned. In those settings, it's easier to discern if this is genuine conversion but most of the time, it's not easy to discern, at least quickly.

Thinking about the cultural context of this setting. This is a Jewish culture, a culture radically opposed to the doctrine of Christ and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the context of rugged persecution. I'm talking about the early chapters of Acts. It was not the culture of culturally acceptable easy believism. It's very different from our present culture. As a matter of fact, if you were to confess Christ and be baptized in Jerusalem in this day, it's probably more akin to us putting you on a jet airplane and taking you to the town square of Tehran, Iran, getting a loudspeaker system and blaring out to everybody who we can get their attention and saying, "This man is here today to denounce Mohammed and pledge loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ as King, Lord and Savior of his life," and then baptize you in that context. I would tell you: people who want to quickly be baptized in that context are probably genuine converts. That's the context of the early chapters of Acts. We know they suffered greatly and many were martyred for professing faith in Christ.

So you can't pull Acts out of its cultural context and put it in today's church unless you pull the context with it. Of course, the historical context, I've hit on this. It was not the obvious God disgracing issue of millions of professing Christians who never attend church. The church age was just starting. Church membership rolls were not gloated and bloated. It's a radically different thing. Our context today is much, much different so when people say to me, "Well, yes I understand what you're doing but I think we ought to keep getting them saved and getting them baptized really quick," even though they have hundreds and thousands of people on their rolls that never even attend church and they baptize all of them. My point is: no, that's not what we need to keep doing. We need to go back to a more biblical, even historical context and practice for seekers. A baptismal service where there is obviously little or no understanding or passion is a grave dishonoring of the God who can truly make men new creations. Baptismal services ought to be rich and meaningful.

I want to talk just a minute about discerning awakening, conviction and conversion. Here's where I am a pilgrim that is learning. I just have so much to learn here but several years ago as God began to change my heart about these things, I realized I was not a good doctor of souls. I was not very skilled at talking with men and women and boys and girls and using the Scriptures to discern, "Is this person just awakened about spiritual things but not yet truly converted? Is this person awakened and possibly convicted about sin but yet not to true conversion? Or is this person really genuinely converted by the working of the Spirit of God?" Ask the staff, no one else could counsel for those several years not because I was better than them, I needed to learn myself and I would read the old timers and read old Baptist policy manuals and read Jonathan Edwards and read Spurgeon. I read everybody I could about conversion and how they would practice it and I would try to learn and discern myself. I came to an awakening myself and my awakening was that I had baptized hundreds if not a few thousand who gave good evidence of awakening but not good biblical evidence of conversion.

Let me give you a picture of awakening. Hebrews 6:4-6, "For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted," now the Greek word here literally means just a taste, not a swallowing. That's significant. "tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame." I know there are huge theological debates about this verse. I have 6-7 messages. They're in the bookstore if you want them on this section. But let me say this to you: if these people are genuinely converted and they've fallen away, they can never be converted again. That's what the text says and I believe without a question or doubt in my mind, this verse is saying there are people – listen – that they've tasted something that's real but they're not yet converted. The Spirit of God has done some work but it's short of conversion work and in that state of beginning to genuinely realize some of the preciousness and the wonders of the cross and of the Savior and that state where the Spirit has done some preliminary work in their heart and in that state where they've tasted some of these things but they're not yet truly converted, then they fall away because they never were fully converted.

Brothers and sisters and especially brothers who are pastors in churches, you must wrestle here. Souls are on the line. The glory of God is on the line. The health of the church is on the line. It's not an easy job. That's one of the reasons why Brother Jano preached with such passion about this nit-picking, fault-finding spirit that comes into our churches. Do you know what we're wrestling with? We ain't got time to fool with your silly, subjective preferences. This is important work we're wrestling with. Mark 4:3-8, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road," unconverted, "and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up," they had some interest, they showed something, "because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop." Another one that gave some good evidence but it wasn't true conversion. Then the last one, verse 8, "Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." There was some lasting fruit. Now be careful: some had thirty and some sixty and some a hundred but there was some lasting fruit. My point is these people were awakened and perhaps convicted but short of conversion.

I heard John MacArthur say a while back and I'm so glad he said this because this is where I am. He said, "If I didn't believe in the doctrine of election, I'd leave the ministry. That doing the best I can, I know I'll fail some at this process of discerning is this just awakening and not conversion? So I have to rest. Lord, I'll do the best I can by the leading of your Spirit, following the authority of revealed Scripture and if I fail, praise your name, you're sovereign and your sheep are going to get home." Now brother, if you're an arminian, how do you sleep at night? How in heaven's name can you put your head on the pillow and think the souls of men are ultimately in your hands? I'm going to

tell you, it's absolute schizophrenic bipolar craziness. If I didn't know my God ultimately ruled over this. Amen? Brothers, are you with me? How in the world?

It doesn't mean that I'm not heart-broken. Do you know what our elders have been doing the 2-3 weeks leading up to this conference? Wrestling and losing sleep over two church discipline issues that I didn't want to deal with. This conference is enough to kill three men. Somebody didn't like this. Somebody didn't like that. Somebody has a problem with this. Unless God intervenes, I will have to stand here and bring before the church next week probably the man's name who I love dearly who has abandoned his marriage and his children and his wife and you wonder, "Lord, when I baptized him, did I do it right? Did I do it right?"

Let's be more careful. As I said in the earlier message, in the old camp meetings in the south, some of the old timers when the guys would come and weep over their sins, they'd say, "Leave him alone. Let him pray it through." Brother David Miller, he's old, he probably remembers some of that. Here's what I'm going to say: these guys weren't reformed, Brother David, they just knew the Spirit had to work. Look, I don't mind working with arminian brothers if they're good arminians, if they believe the Spirit of God's got to do a work. Study some of John Wesley's stuff. I could work with John Wesley. John Wesley is more Calvinistic than a lot of arminians today for sure. They asked John Wesley, "Why do you keep saying you must be born again?" He said, "Because you must be born again." If the Spirit of God don't do it, it doesn't do anything. Brothers and sisters, it's good to let them labor and yearn. "Yeah," some momma says, "but my baby is troubled." Let him be troubled, he may make it to heaven! Don't give him a false assurance and send him to hell. It may break their heart and keep them awake and lose weight just wrestling with their sinfulness before a holy God but if they break through to Christ, all of hell can't get them back. They're going to heaven.

Conviction is the next one. Now I'm not saying this in any sense as an absolute but there is usually a season of awakening. I don't know, the old boy just starts coming to church and he wasn't interested before. He shows up at a small group men's class and we put heavy, heavy emphasis on ministry in small groups. Upwards to 95-98% of our membership is active in small groups at least to a degree. That's hard to do when you run close to 1,000 unless you work very hard at it. Our small groups are evangelistic, they're always trying to reach others to come in and study the Bible with them. Then all of a sudden the boy starts coming to a small group. We've been knocking on his door and inviting him and trying to share the gospel for years and it has never interested him but all of a sudden he's interested. I mean, God starts working. Then awakening often leads to the next stage and that's conviction. All of a sudden they start seeing something they've never seen. In John 16:8, "And He, when He comes, will convict," the scholars says you can say "will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

So the Spirit of God starts working and a soul goes beyond just starting to have an awakened interest in spiritual things but they're starting to sense something of the weight of their sin. I'm going to hurry here but the sinner, if it's Spirit wrought conviction, they usually begin to see themselves as corrupt, not just their actions. "It's my nature that's

against this holy God. My desires are against him. My inclinations and affections are not right." Now, they're not going to say it in those words but when you explain to them from a text of Scripture those truths, what they'll do is say, "That's me." I call that the amen of the Spirit. So don't you think a guy's got to come in and articulate like some of our baptismal candidates articulate. Those guys have been in the word with us. They may not understand. I didn't know what the word "conviction" meant when I was converted at age 19. I had come from a non-Christian background and a non-Christian home. God had radically converted me but if you had come up to me after my glorious conversion in my car driving back to college and said, "Did you come under conviction?" I'd think, "What kind of farm equipment are you talking about ran over me?" I'm serious. I would not have known what that meant. But once you open the Bible and talk to me about conviction, I'd say, "Yes! Yes, that's happening in me."

So they have the affirmation of the Spirit as you show them the truth about conviction and sin and depravity and losses but they'll sense that their personal nature is sinful, they'll sense that their motives are sinful. Romans 3 talks about our throat being an open grave, our tongues keep deceiving. Our motives are deceptive. We're all about us and we're all about pride and we're all about advancing ourselves and some of that actually slips in and lingers on too, doesn't it? But they'll start sensing that about themselves and their behavior they'll sense is sinful also, of course. Ephesians 2 says "we're dead in trespasses and sins in which we formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." Before we're converted, we're sons of disobedience. Our deeds are wrong and we begin to be convinced, "Yes, I've done so many things that are wrong." Now I'm not saying if a person is genuinely under Spirit wrought conviction they can explain that but when I go to Ephesians 2 and teach and explain it, they start lighting up. "Pastor, yes. Pastor, that's me. Yes, I feel that." I'm going to tell you it's the most fun thing in the world to get to counsel with people that the Lord is working on and you need to know, do your best discernment based on the authority of the word of God and that's why you must know good doctrine because you must know what to show them and what to teach them, what the Bible says about sin and conviction.

Then there's conversion. I'm skimming so very much. Conversion is that rising of faith within the heart, that faith in Jesus Christ. You've heard this before but it's not an intellectual assent, it's a belief in God and it's a belief that his Son Jesus Christ is their only hope and their only remedy. You know, today we have so many who have an intellectual sentimental belief in God and belief in the Bible. "It's just sort of a tradition. My people believe this and my forefathers believed this," and they have the same kind of emotional intellectual affirmation of the Bible and God as they do the Constitution of the United States. It is not Spirit wrought conviction or conversion, it's just sentimentality. It's not the real thing.

Christ becomes the object of their faith. He becomes the treasure to their soul. It involves the whole man, the understanding of their mind. They don't have to understand everything. I'm concluding six years preaching through Ephesians and then Hebrews and I can't tell you how much I've learned about the gospel that I didn't know before I

preached through those books so they're never going to know everything but they have to have a basic understanding of the mind, about Christ and about his atoning sacrifice and about their sin.

Then there's the affections of the heart. We never baptize anyone who just sort of flatlines and just kind of talks monotone about these things. We want to see something from the heart. You've got to be careful, not everybody is emotional the same way. We're not saying that but the affections ought to be real. Then the intentions of the will has to be there. "Pastor, I want to serve God. I want to be in a small group." Do you know what I've found? If you get a church full of truly converted people, they're easy to pastor. If you ask David Young, our small group director, every year we look for people to sign up and serve in small groups and it's kind of humorous because a lot of people come to our church or maybe they've watched us on the internet and they're excited about it. They come here and they find out how we minister here and about 2-3 years, they says, "This is hard work. This is tough." Well, go somewhere else and play. This is about the church here. If you're not going to work and serve in small groups to serve your brothers and sisters in Christ, go somewhere else and do whatever you do. But almost without exception, he'll come to me and he'll say, "Look at all these people who filled out cards and said, 'Whatever I can do, I'll do it. Wherever I can serve, I can serve. Wherever you want me, put me.'" And usually every year we have more qualified men who are willing to serve than we have places to put them. When you have a church full of converted folks, it gets easier to pastor.

You might ask, "Well, how did you get there?" Well, so far it's taken 30 years and that's a word to you pastors about stop running around from church to church. Put your feet down. Stand on the word of God. Be humble. Be compassionate. Don't fight battle that comes but some battles you have to fight and you say, "I'm not leaving. You might fire me but I ain't leaving until then." And you might be surprised what God might do and you might be like Jeff Noblit. Staying there a long time might show you that you had to learn more than they did but at least you can all learn together, all repent together and all grow together. Maybe in the end, God will let you pastor a church that the world looks at and says, "God had to be doing that. You can't explain that with slick programs and neat personalities. God must be doing that."

Well, my point is: you've got to take into your understanding as you're counseling people there is a difference between awakening and just being convicted and genuinely converted. Am I supposed to be through right now? I'm going to go a little bit long. Please forgive me but I'm going to go a little bit longer. Let me talk a little bit about the actual counseling. You see, what's going to happen is I'm not going to get to the invitation system. It's at the end. I really want to get there. The actual counseling session. Let me talk about that for just a moment and what I want you to get when I talk about the counseling session itself, here's what I want you to get: well, that wasn't anything special. No, because what we do has been around 2,000 years. Any neat new program that's unique is not biblical. We need to try the old stuff. It hasn't been tried yet. You might try preaching the true gospel for 6, 8, 12, 30 years and see what God might do. Do you know I've got people in my church and I'm not exaggerating, I believe they would die for me

and I don't mean they make an idol out of their pastor, they just love me. And some of them used to hate me. You say, "That's right," again because it's right. I'm serious. They hated me. My point is: some of them have been converted. That's my point.

I'm serious. It is just wonderful when you get to stay a long time. Listen to me: I would have run a dozen times and God wouldn't let me. Do you know how he wouldn't let me? Nobody else wanted me. I'm serious. I'm not just preaching to be humorous. I'm serious. God wouldn't let me go and I had to get in this pulpit for years and at times it took every bit of energy in my body to stand up here again and look at people face-to-face that I knew hated me but I kept preaching it and kept preaching it and kept preaching it and kept preaching it. My point is in saying all of that was: the things we use in the actual counseling session are the same things the Apostle Paul used and the same things Bunyan used and the same things Spurgeon used and the same things Whitefield used.

The Bible does not give us a four step process. It just doesn't. You don't have, "Okay, I checked this off, I checked this off. Alright, they're ready for baptism." It doesn't work that way. And almost everybody we counsel, we go a different direction just kind of discerning where they are and what they need. I mean, generally we always start with sin and the Scripture says to address sin but there are different things. It doesn't happen a lot but sometimes there is a person and because of their upbringing or whatever, they never, ever feel like they could ever be anything and sometimes, it's rare, but you have to look at them and say, "Listen sister, everything you've told me in 6-8 hours of counseling with an open Bible is that the Spirit of God has regenerated you and you love and treasure Christ. You're converted." Now, I don't do that much because they need to tell me they're converted. Amen? But there are some rare cases where you have to help affirm them but that should be rare. But there's not a specific four step process. It's not clever methods. In counseling the seeker, we're on a mission with God. He awakens and he convicts and he converts and we discern.

We must strive to be a tool in his hand. Here are three essential components of the counseling session: 1. The Scriptures. Open the Bible. Use the Bible. I'm not saying it was wrong or evil but you don't need Campus Crusade's train. You know, the engine is the gospel, faith is the car and the caboose is feelings. Because I don't know if the feelings need to be way back there. Last I checked, when God breaks you about your sins, feelings are up there pretty high. That was helpful and I thank God for Campus Crusade but I'm just saying those things are helpful but don't feel like you have to have those things. The Scriptures.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit. Here's what I'm going to tell to you, now listen to me: you better pray and believe the Spirit will work. Most of us don't believe it. You've got to preach and counsel believing the Spirit of God wants to use the word of God to convert men's souls. You must have faith and not unbelief. Look, if there's anything on earth God wants, it's to finish his church and he's going to finish his church by converting individual sinners to become new creatures in Christ Jesus and he so ordained to use weak, worthless, puny, faltering, blundering vessels like us so that all the glory and the

confidence would be in him. But you need to believe the Holy Spirit will work through the word of God.

Thirdly, you need a knowledgeable counselor. I'm not saying great knowledge. I'm not saying extensive knowledge. But there must be enough knowledge of the gospel, of course. There must be some knowledge to discern, "Is this awakening or just conviction? Not yet conversion?" There has to be a knowledgeable counselor. Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ," so you've got to know enough of the word of Christ. The counselor first of all, must know the gospel and he'll never know it all but you must know the gospel. He must know that God does the saving. He's not looking for some little formula to trap the guy into a decision. He must know that he himself is expendable. "This isn't about me. It's not about my ability. It's not about my persuasive personality. I'm expendable. God does the saving."

And lastly, not essential but you ought to have some tools available. We do things like we have cds of sermons, evangelistic sermons we'll hand out. If they're not settled and we'll say, "Go home and listen to these." We have booklets and some things we've put together with Scripture that we'll have them go home and study through. So some of those things can be helpful. Why would we give them sermon cds? Why would we give them booklets that explain Scripture and explain salvation? Why? Because faith comes by hearing. Sure, we want them in church every time the doors are open but let's give them all we can give them. Evangelism should not be giving the minimal amount of truth to all people but the maximum amount of truth to all people.

Four essential activities. I talked about three essential components now four essential activities in the actual counseling session. Press upon them their lostness and their condemnation in sin. Press it upon them. Use the Scriptures and say, "Do you see this? This is what the Bible says about you." Teach them that.

Urge them to run to Christ in faith. Oh, I just want to say this so strongly: you must never wait to see if they're convicted before you tell them to turn to Christ. You tell them to turn to Christ because the Bible tells you to tell them to turn to Christ. Now yes, we should look for conviction to see if they're truly converted for baptism but you tell them to go to Christ because all men need to go to Christ. Don't become a hyper-Calvinist who waits to discern if they're the elect before they witness to them. You urge them to come to Christ. The warrants of faith is the gospel. You give them the gospel and say, "You must come to Jesus Christ." And if they come, he drew them and they're the elect. But you don't know who they are. You know, it's an amazing thing: the more people we go to their doors and we knock on their doors, the more people we personally witness to, the more people we bring in, the more people we urge to come to Christ, the more elect we find. It's just the most amazing thing. Do you know why some of our reformed churches are still 75 in attendance? It's not that you're so holy and you're so pure that we want to stay small because you need to get a heart for souls. You can say, "Lord, I'm going to tell so many the gospel that some of them have got to be elect." Urge them to come to Christ.

Look for the witness of the Spirit while using the Scriptures. Look for the Spirit to bring understanding and heart feeling about the truths of sin, lostness, wrath deserving condemnation, forgiveness, pardon, cleansing, rest. And generally speaking, not absolutely but Romans 8:16 says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God." That's what you're looking for and though I gave you an exception earlier when I said sometimes you have to tell a person, that's rare, very rare. Almost without exception what we say is, "I can't tell you you're saved. Here's what the Bible says. You must tell me and convincingly." Listen, the power of God comes into a person's life making them a new creation and they can't tell you something's changed?

I was counseling with a lady a while back, her name was Angela. She'd been coming to church here a long, long time and she was troubled. She just sat down and we talked for a couple of hours and looked at some Scriptures and I would just come back and I'd say, "Tell me, do you sense the weight of your sin?" Or "Do you know you're a sinner." She said, "Well, yeah, kind of. I do," but there wasn't that convincing. I gave her just several things we call "helps" and sent her home and said, "You study these Scriptures and you just get before God." Two weeks. She'd take an hour here, two hours there. The Lord was dealing with her and she'd study the Scriptures and study those study helps and study the Scriptures, study the Scriptures. Then after two weeks, here was her testimony to me when she came back in. She said, "Pastor, all of a sudden I saw my sin like mountains before me." That's not flesh. That's the Spirit of God. I mean, her conviction was so strong but she'd already turned to Christ too so she was joyous but broken, both of them.

Another lady we baptized recently. Maybe it's because ladies are more expressive, I don't know but this lady was troubled and again we couldn't come to a resolution and we talked for a while and we sent her home and she got in the word of God and she came back a couple of weeks later and we sat down and she said, "Last night I walked the floor all night long fearing the wrath of God and now I know Christ." That's what I mean by you've got to tell me you're converted. Listen: if they can't tell you God's changed them, where are they going to get the strength and the power to carry a cross out there in the world that hates them? If we've got to go and run them down and twist their arm, use gimmicks and manipulation to get them into baptism right quick, are they going to have the power to stand when hell comes against them at the school? In the office? In the neighborhood? Generally speaking, if you go to this church you get ridiculed at the office, the school and the neighborhood. So we've got to know there's something in there other than you to keep you strong, to keep you going.

So press upon them their lostness, urge them to run to Christ, look for the witness of the Spirit and give them some homework like I just expressed and described to you that we give those people homework. Now, we have some helps that we use. I'm going to skip everything. I was going to talk about children and the unique challenge children are and the altar call but let me just go to these helps and I'll be through. We have a sheet that I have adapted from an old Puritan by the name of Thomas Boston where you can ask yourself questions based on biblical truth to see if you have spiritual life. We've found that very effective and we can get you that. We have a tract that I've written that we'll often get them to study that tract and go to that tract. As I said, cds and sermons. We have

various booklets we hand out. A lot of you have some of these. There is nothing special about any of this. What we do also is after we're comfortable they have experienced the new birth, we give them a series of sermons on cd about baptism and they have to fill in the blanks as they listen to the cds because we want them to go to those baptismal waters understanding what they're doing, that among other things, they're pledging allegiance to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We give them sheets of verses to study over and then we give them a guideline with Scriptures of how to write out their testimony and I suppose, guys, if you all would at the Anchored in Truth desk just put a notebook of paper, if you'll put your name and address, probably your name, we probably have addresses, no you'd better put it all. We'll just send you a packet free of charge and you can just have all of it and as long as you don't sell it, we don't care.

My goal in sharing this is not to impress you and not to tell you that we've arrived. If you talk to me a year from now, I'll tell you, "Hey, we've learned something else. We were doing this wrong," and that ought to be our process to do the best we can for the glory of God in counseling seekers. We must put our theological doctrine into practical practice.

Let's pray together.