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Strategic Pastoral Counseling

7. The Strategic Pastoral Counseling Model

This chapter lays out an explicitly Christian, brief counseling approach for pastors. It defines seven marks of the model and explains why each matters. The core claim: a pastor can offer real, holistic, spiritually-focused help within five sessions if the counseling is structured and focused.

Key takeaways

- Strategic pastoral counseling is brief and time-limited — a suggested maximum of five sessions, based on research showing 87% of pastoral counseling already fits in five or fewer.
- Four principles govern it: the counselor is active and directive (not passive), the relationship is a partnership of pastor, parishioner, and God, it focuses on one specific problem, and time limits are firmly kept.
- It is holistic — addressing behavior, thoughts, and feelings together, not just one, because Scripture treats persons as a unity.
- Homework between sessions (reading, journaling, behavioral practice) keeps momentum; the Bible and devotional books are valued resources.

- It is church-based: the congregation supports the counseling and its people (support groups, mentors, friends) share the load, keeping counseling short-term.
- It is spiritually focused — listening for 'the story behind the story,' the person's relationship and response to God, assuming God is already active in their life.
- It is explicitly Christian: aiming at wholeness through Christ, using prayer, Scripture, and theology sensitively, and relying on the Holy Spirit as the true Counselor.
- Setting limits (five sessions, standard session length, appropriate referrals) is not coldness but responsible, God-ordained care that prevents dependency.

Passages worth keeping

“If they are looking for the presence and activity of God in a person's life, they will—with the assistance of God's Spirit—find them.”

Captures the model's spiritual focus: counselors find what they look for, so look for God.

“The best a pastor can accomplish by condemning sin is neurotic feelings of guilt, which are a poor substitute for genuine conviction of sin.”

Why the pastor stays non-judgmental — conviction is the Spirit's work, not the counselor's.

How it connects

The whole approach rests on Augustine's 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee' — human restlessness is a spiritual longing, so even 'mundane' problems like depression or marital conflict carry spiritual weight the pastor learns to discern.

Scripture referenced

- **John 14:26** -- The Holy Spirit is the true Counselor and brings Christ's teaching to mind.
- **Matthew 10:19-20** -- The Spirit gives words to say — applied to the pastor's anxiety in a session.
- **John 16:8** -- The Spirit, not the pastor, convicts of sin.