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Strategic Pastoral Counseling

9. Ellen: A Five-Session Case Illustration

This chapter walks through a full five-session pastoral counseling case to show the earlier principles in action. Ellen, 31, comes for help after an abortion, guilt over it, and news that surgery will end her ability to have children. Each session is presented with running commentary explaining what the pastor did and why. It demonstrates the three stages of strategic pastoral counseling: building an alliance and identifying the focus, working through the feelings, and ending well.

Key takeaways

- Session 1 — build the working alliance. The pastor mostly listens, offers empathy (not sympathy or reassurance), lets Ellen pour out her guilt, anger, and sadness, and together they agree the focus: her guilt and her experience of God. He sets a firm five-session limit.
- He gently exposes Ellen's distorted view of God. She experiences God only as law and high standards, with no grace or forgiveness. Counseling here does proclamation through dialogue, not preaching.

- Ellen's spiritual and family history matters. A peaceful childhood faith was replaced at age 11 by rigid rules; her father was harsh and never satisfied, her mother emotionally withdrawn. She learned love must be earned.
- Session 2 — untangle the feelings one at a time. The real problem isn't God's standards but Ellen's demand that she herself be perfect and never need forgiveness. She confesses, and is told forgiveness is already hers to accept, even if feelings lag.
- Sessions 3-4 — grief work. As guilt eases, sadness over the lost pregnancy and hysterectomy surfaces. The pastor names each separate loss (childbearing, body, innocence, self-image), normalizes her grief, keeps her options open (adoption), and refuses to treat the surgery as God's punishment.
- Session 5 — termination and looking ahead. The pastor connects her anger at her husband to unresolved anger at her father, urges her to see her husband realistically, adjust her expectations, and forgive. Marital problems are named as beyond the five-session focus; he ends on time and offers referral.
- The pastor keeps the agreed focus but flexibly follows real feelings; he refuses dependence, assigns homework tied to the next session, and hands hard problems (the marriage) off to a marriage counselor.

Passages worth keeping

“I see your feelings of guilt not as a sign that God is punishing you but as a sign of mercy... his forgiveness is there for the taking.”

The pastoral reframe that turns guilt into an invitation to grace — the case's turning point.

“Its potency does not lie primarily in the technical interventions of the counselor but in the person of Christ and the healing, sustaining, and reconciling power of his Spirit.”

States where the real power of pastoral counseling comes from.

How it connects

The case shows the incarnation lived out in counseling: the pastor represents Christ by receiving Ellen, and her healing hinges on moving from a God of law she must satisfy to a God of grace she can receive.

Scripture referenced

- **1 John 1:9** -- Confession and God's faithfulness to forgive — the ground for assuring Ellen.
- **John 10** -- Jesus as the Good Shepherd; homework to reshape her image of God.
- **Psalms 23** -- Experiencing God as gentle shepherd, contrasted with her law-only God.

- **Genesis 3** -- God clothing Adam and Eve — God acts redemptively toward sin, not punitively.