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BIBLICAL COUNSELING SERIES:
CRISIS COUNSELING

Fireside Reformed Baptist Church
in Elizabethtown, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Counseling Series
FROM CARING CHRISTIAN TO COMPETENT COUNSELOR

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PART 1

WHY GRIEF COUNSELING?

When you look in the letters of the New Testament, you might be surprised to find that most of them are a response to a church crisis. In thinking through some of the issues that are addressed, there are crises of heresy (Acts 15:1-33), apostasy (Gal 1:6-11), congregational division (1 Cor 1:10-16), lawsuits (1 Cor 6:1-8), fighting (Jas 1:4-13), disorder (Jas 3:16), death (1 Cor 11:30), persecution (1 Pet 1:8-17), gossip (Jas 4:11-12; 1 Peter 2:1), and sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1-12). Frankly, the list can go on much longer. When a crisis occurs, there is often an accompanying grief. As believers in the local church are called to care for one another, minister to one another, and help each other attain maturity in Christ. Knowing how to grieve with each other while orienting each other to the Scriptures, to Christ, and to our future hope is an essential task in a healthy and mature church (Eph 4:11-12).

The Need for Grief Counseling Training

By definition, a crisis is not something routine or common. It is a time that is characterized by intense difficulty, danger, or when a difficult or dangerous decision must be made. A crisis is not the road itself, but a critical or difficult turning point in the road. Why then, when there are few turns in the road this important, should we take the time to consider how to counsel others through grief and crises? Grief is similar. Typically, grief and crises are cohorts. Grief is also a deep and poignant distress. Grief, by definition, is not something that is common to daily life.

However, just because grief is not common to a person's daily life, grief is

helping others through grief common to the pastoral life. It is, after all, a primary function of ministry. And although you may not be an elder in your church, you are a member of your church – and every member ministry is the biblical model of healthy church (Eph 4:11-14). So, you are called not simply to bear your own griefs, but the griefs of others (Rom 12:15; Gal 6:2).

Grief is inevitable. Jesus suffered grief, and we will too. The prophet Isaiah wrote of a Savior who is to come. He was “a man of sorrows” and “acquainted with grief.” The Isaiah assures us that “surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:3–4). Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies. The Scriptures tell us that he wept over the city of Jerusalem. He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. But the hope and comfort we are given is that Jesus, who is acquainted with our grief and sufferings (Heb 4:15), walks with us in our crises and grief (Ps 23:4). Since grief is inevitable in a fallen world, who better with to walk through it with than Jesus? That’s where the local church comes in: you function as the heart and hands of Jesus, and biblical training helps to better function as Christ’s hearts and hands.

Grief happens in critical moments. As noted in the opening section, many of the letters of the New Testament are written during critical times in the life of a church; times where time was of the essence. In the same way, we should seek training to competently utilize God’s word to counsel people through grief because timing is critical during a crisis. A crisis that is not addressed in a timely manner could turn into catastrophe.

Next, let look at the grieving process and see how counselors can those in grief find comfort in Christ through Christ’s body – the local church – which are the tangible hands and heart of Jesus Christ.

PART 2

REGOGNIZING THE PHASES GRIEF

When you look in the letters of the New Testament, you might be surprised to find that most of them are a response to a church crisis. In thinking through some of the issues that are addressed, there are crises of heresy (Acts 15:1-33), apostasy (Gal 1:6-11), congregational division (1 Cor 1:10-16), lawsuits (1 Cor 6:1-8), fighting (Jas 1:4-13), disorder (Jas 3:16), death (1 Cor 11:30), persecution (1 Pet 1:8-17), gossip (Jas 4:11-12; 1 Peter 2:1), and sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1-12).¹ Frankly, the list can go on much longer. When a crisis occurs, there is often an accompanying grief. As believers in the local church are called to care for one another, minister to one another, and help each other attain maturity in Christ. Knowing how to grieve with each other while orienting each other to the Scriptures, to Christ, and to our future hope is an essential task in a healthy and mature church (Eph 4:11-12).

The Grieving Process

As we seek to mature in our desire to grow from caring Christian to competent counselor, we need a practical map of the task will be helpful, and it can be seen in a threefold process. First, the caregiver moves the situation out of panic, severe alarm, and loss of control into a calmer, steadier, and less terror-stricken state of being. Second, the caregiver mobilizes assistance for the grief-stricken person. Third, the caregiver works out plans for the long-term care of the stricken person(s) and provides spiritual support, continuing guidance, and encouragement.

¹ Jay E. Adams, *Coping with Counseling Crises: First Aid for Christian Counselors* (Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2024), 1.

Phase 1: Initial Shock

There are many metaphors for describing the initial shock a crisis. Blindsided, hit by a bus, kicked in the gut – these are all ways of expressing the body and soul's physiological response to crises and grief. And although people experience grief in different ways, there are common patterns that are helpful to observe. Often people are at a loss of words. They may not be able to speak or may not want to speak.

Phase 2: Numbness

Personally, I have come to think of numbness, in a way, as a special grace of God – an unexpected grace. Numbness is a coping mechanism that God gives us so that we can continue functioning – an anesthesia, if you will. It is God's way of allowing us to deal with the pain, suffering, and grief in small doses. Taking in everything at once could simply be overwhelming. The emergency surgeon, after so many surgeries, is no longer shocked at the extreme injuries that come through his operating room. It is not that he doesn't care, is that God has built into us a numbness that is can be used as a grace to serve others. When numbness sets in, those grieving may feel wrong. Like they should be crying, but they can't cry anymore. Like they should be grieving, but there's nothing left inside them.

Numbness can serve as the small and gracious anesthetic that allows us to deal with pain in intervals. To observers – it may seem like those who are no longer grieving are incredibly composed, when in fact, it is simply that they are numb. They may be struggling on the inside. Yet, in the same way those who are grieving should not feel a pressure exhibit a certain degree of composure; they also do not need to feel pressured to exhibit a certain degree of grieving.

Phase 3: Fact or Fiction

When experiencing and processing grief, it is not uncommon for a person to think they hear, feel the presence, or maybe even see the person they've lost. They

might hear their loved one's voice, only to turn and see that it was the voice of a nearby child that sounded like their loved one who was calling out "Dad! Dad!" There could be a creaking of some old floorboards in the house, but it sounds like their loved one is in the home with them.

This is a common aspect of the grieving process. Married couples will swear that their beloved spouse is with them. Sometimes, they will speak into the air and have conversations with them. Christians may feel ashamed or guilty of talking about instances like this, feeling that it is something more like the occult – as thought they were communicating with the deceased. These instances are something like the "phantom pains" felt by amputees. Their recovery from a loss of an appendage is accompanied by an itch or sensation from a limb that is no longer there. They may even get up and walk, forgetting that they no longer have two legs. The process of grieving can involve the struggle between reality and fantasy – a protracted process in which the one grieving will struggle with the fiction that their loved one is still with them, and the fact that they are not.

Phase 4: The Flood of Grief

For those who are grieving, there can be certain things which can bring about an unexpected flow of grief. Even after initial shock has worn off, and even though the grieving person may have had several days, weeks, or even months to help process their grief, a memory, a location, an anniversary, or anything that may be a reminder of the event can trigger a river of emotions.

River of emotions. Fittingly, grief has been compared to a flowing river. We cannot try push our grief and make it go faster and attempts to dam our emotions up and hold them back are unwise. Eventually the dam will break, and the force of released grief may cause harm. Like a river, it is best to let our grief flow at its own pace. It may be helpful when grief needs to be released to have a room in the home that is off-limits

to all visitors during the days of heavy traffic from loving friends and caring church members. Providing a safe, private haven during those periods of intense grief allowed us to be genuine when we did meet and greet others.

A father shared the story if his son suddenly and unexpectedly passing away. Weeks later, he made it around to calling his son's employer to collect the personal belongings still in the office. The phone kept ringing, and then it went to voicemail. It was the voice recording of his deceased son. The father hung up the phone and wept. You can encourage the person grieving that when events like this happen, to continue to allow themselves to grieve. This is a part of the process, and they are in the process of healing as they look to Christ for comfort and hope.

The flood of grief, triggered by things often unexpected, almost always takes those who are grieving by surprise. When we think we are finished grieving, or have run out of tears to shed, even months or years after loss has set in, there may be a moment or a memory that the reality of our loss causes that river to flow again.

Phase 5: Memories

A significant mistake someone experiencing grief can make is not talking about their loss. While the initial silence and simple presence is appropriate during the initial stages of grief, those who are mourning can significantly hinder the healing process if they simply refuse to talk. At some point, the silence is deafening. As a person who is seeking to provide healing and comfort, don't automatically assume mentioning the deceased person's name is off limits. While some may think talking about the deceased person may cause too much pain, it may unintentionally create an atmosphere where the deceased person is never talked about, which stifles healing.

Phase 6: Recovery

It is important to distinguish that recovery from grieving does not mean that life continues as if the loss is no longer experienced. In this final stage of grieving, many

have referred to it as “the new normal.” Biblical counseling helps others learn to live life with the loss by leaning on, trusting, and finding hope in Christ.

The new normal looks different for different situations. Sometimes father loses his son, but that same son was a husband. So, the daughter-in-law has a different connection with the family of her deceased husband. There is still a love for her, but the relationship is changed, there is a new normal – now she is a *daughter-in-love*. The mother and father-in-law still love her, care for her, and visit. But their new normal is now different. This situation would be like the one found on the book of Ruth. Naomi and Ruth were not related by blood, but they were related by law – Naomi’s son, Mahlon, was married to Ruth. Then Mahlon dies, but Naomi and Ruth’s relationship continue via a new normal. Biblical counselors can help walk alongside the loss and help those that are grieving build a healthy relationship.

How to Care Through Grieving

As biblical counselors we seek to grow in recognition of the grieving process so that healing can be facilitated, it is important to remember that it is not simply knowing the phases of grief or “being there” for someone. Our perspective does not provide comfort simply because we are present, but that Christ is present. We can recognize each phase of grief and seek to imitate Christ and point and care for those who are grieving as Christ did. Next, a practical and simple framework of caregiving can help biblical counselors be the tangible heart and hands of Jesus.

PART 3

THE PHASES OF CARE GIVING

When we respond to care for people experiencing a crisis or grieving, it is helpful to have a framework regarding the process of our task to help the grieving progress through their grief. I believe a threefold progression is a helpful framework without overthinking your efforts.² The first phase is to bring the crisis and grief under control and bring the one who is grieving into a calmer and more even state mind. Second, the counselor seeks to mobilize ministries and ministers. Third, the counselor seeks to work out long-term plans or goals for the person(s) grieving, provides spiritual support, guidance, and encouragement.

Phase 1: Crisis Control

A person who has just heard that their spouse wants a divorce, or they have lost a loved one in an accident, or they have lost a child, can express extreme agitation, emotions, or say things. This is not necessarily bad, because it is far better than expressing passivity or indifference to a crisis. During the critical moments of response, a few principles can be kept in mind to help with the ensuing grief, bring them to a calmer state of mind, and be the heart and hands of Christ in a critical moment.

Go to the scene. As soon as you hear of the crisis, go to the scene of the situation as soon as possible. It is important to remember at during the first stage of a crisis; words of wisdom or theological insights are not what is most needed. Even true things can be unhelpful if the timing of those truths is significant off (John 16:12). Job's

² Wayne E. Oates, *Grief, Transition, and Loss: A Pastor's Practical Guide*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Fortress Press, 1997).

friends are the classic example of speaking foolish words to him amid his grief. But one thing they did allow was for a period of silence and their presence to be felt by Job before they spoke to him (Job 2:13). You may be able to offer counseling by suggesting they inform people that they don't have to have anything helpful to say, but just being there and offering a hug is helpful.

During this time, it is not deep truths or words of wisdom that are most timely, but simple words of comfort and presence are that most fit the circumstance. However, it is still helpful to think about and even formulate what you are going to say. In other words, have an idea of what you are going to say before you arrive so that you don't unintentionally say something that may cause more pain. You can say something like, "I wanted to come as soon as I could and be with you during this difficult time." Think of some comforting words and practice them beforehand.

Offer your presence. You can allow the grieving person to cry on your shoulder while still using prudence and being respectful of personal boundaries. As they are crying on your shoulder, you may have the opportunity to guide them to a nearby chair. Sometimes this is necessary because their body may be weak or trembling. There is also the possibility of fainting from shock, so moving to a seated position could be done for safety as you are comforting them. If they faint, call for medical help. Some people may experience a medical emergency – such as a heart attack – during times of extreme shock.

If it is necessary for us to leave the person grieving, then you could arrange for another trusted brother or sister to take your place. Special friends or close family tend to be more helpful and trusted during these times. You may be able to find out, or may already know, who that might be and coordinate to have them when a protracted presence is helpful for the person grieving.

Hear their grief. The person grieving may say things like, "Why?!" or "This is not fair!" or "Why did God allow this to happen?" It is important to know they are not

specially asking you questions so that you can answer them and take away their pain immediately. These questions are ways to express the grief they are feeling. If the person is expressing their grief in a loud voice or crying loudly, you can help to calm them by speaking in a quieter and more soothing tone. Just saying quiet and calm things like, “we are here for you,” answers the need they are most desirous of in the moment.

Pray. Your individual, or a gathering of brothers and sisters in a time of heartfelt prayer, led by you, places the crisis and grief into God’s hands and brings his presence into the situation. This is probably the most calming thing you can do.

Phase 2: Mobilizing Ministers & Ministries

The church is Christ’s body that functions as his heart and hands to support and sustain in times of crisis or grief. However, they do need to be notified. While those who are initially responding to crisis and grief take care of the immediate needs, the larger family of brothers and sisters in Christ are a major part of sustaining and ministering to those in need.

Ministers. People experiencing crises, shock, or grief need practical help. While experiencing a crisis or processing grief, people tend to put the more mundane things in life to the side such as the dirty dishes in the sink, or the overgrown lawn that needs to be mowed, or the pets that may need to be fed because of a protracted stay in the hospital. Mobilizing brothers and sisters in Christ during grieving or crisis help to maintain order during a time of confusion and chaos – it helps them be the tangible hands of Christ. This is where the wisdom of God is manifest through deacons, who either coordinate meeting these needs, or meet the needs themselves (Acts 6:1-15).

Ministries. Ministries, such as meal-trains, benevolence, or childcare, can also function like deacons during these times while elders, counselors, or faithful members focus on the ministry that is needed in the moment. It is helpful to be aware of the ministries in your church so that they can be utilized, if need be.

Phase 3: Continued Counseling

Typically, a considerable amount of support and number of people are eager to help during the initial days of the crisis and grieving. Biblical counselors seeking to walk with people grieving should be prepared for protracted care. It is careful to note that although the counseling process may be a long one, different phases have different intensities. The initial phase is the most intense, while the continued counseling phase requires less intensity and frequency.

How are they doing?

Are they able to sleep enough?

Are they living alone or is someone with them?

We are continuing to think about them and pray for them?

Are they seeking out fellowship in the church to fill the void of their loss?

Are they attending church?

Face to face meeting may not be helpful, but after a certain amount of time passing, a face-to-face meeting may not be necessary. A prayer over the telephone may be appropriate and gives an eternal context for the day-to-day working through of the losses or new burdens the person is experiencing.

Fellowship with other church members is an undergirding grace. The fellowship of believers incarnates the teaching of the Apostle Paul in II Cor. 1:3- "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in affliction with the consolation with which We ourselves are consoled God."

PART 4
SUMMARY

When we respond to care for people experiencing a crisis or grieving, it is helpful to have a framework regarding the process of our task to help the grieving progress through their grief. I believe a threefold progression is a helpful framework without overthinking your

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