

Who is Counseling Our Women?

by Debi Pryde

My grandmother firmly believed the modern practice of men counseling women was leading to an epidemic of good pastors becoming vulnerable to both physical and emotional adultery. As a young woman, I thought she was exaggerating the issue, so I never really took what she said too seriously. Many years later, I think she was wise to something that is, indeed, proving to be extremely dangerous to both men and women.

People often expect their pastors to perform services that, frankly, men should not have to provide. Sometimes pastors themselves wrongly believe God has commanded them to provide these services to women. Most are well meaning, good men who have assumed this kind of one-on-one work is part of being a good shepherd to the flock God has given them. There are others who belligerently assume this responsibility without a healthy fear of their own vulnerability and without regard for what is truly in the best interests of trusting women who need more than a few words of help and encouragement. We have forgotten that God has made a provision for women's counseling. The provision is the ministry of mature Christian women who are qualified by virtue of their experience and testimony of faithfulness to the Word over a period of years.

In Micah 6:4, God said to Israel, "*I brought thee up out of Egypt and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.*" God tells us it was *He* who sent Moses and Aaron—but notice that He also sent *Miriam!* God did not give Miriam equal authority with Moses—nor was she given the responsibility to rule or preach to Israel. What then, was her function? Personally, I believe God gave Miriam the ministry of teaching, counseling, and leading the women to practice godly principles of womanhood as well as to observe the very intimate details of the ceremonial laws pertaining to women. God used the ministry of Anna, who prophesied the birth of Jesus, the ministry of Lydia, who gathered women together to pray, the ministry of Dorcus, who compassionately met the needs of poor widows; and He continues to use countless other women who have had hearts for the Lord and burdens for others. In Heaven, their successes and failures are not measured by their popularity or the size of their ministries—but by their obedience or disobedience concerning what God instructed them to teach and to whom God called them.

In Titus 2:4-5, Paul instructed Pastor Titus to assign the responsibility of teaching and counseling the younger Christian women to the *older and more spiritually mature* women. God never commanded women to preach or teach the Bible in the same way the pastor is to do. That was not Miriam's, Lydia's function, or Dorcus' function. Nor is it to be that of Christian women today. Rather, older, more mature women are commanded to teach, counsel, and encourage the younger to apply Biblical principles in their personal lives and, in particular, to their responsibilities in the home. God has a specific ministry for all mature Christian women, and specific topics vital to Christian womanhood that they are to teach to the younger Christian women in particular. For the most part, the Scriptures seem to indicate that this teaching and counseling ministry should be one-on-one, but certainly, it also includes teaching groups of women who meet together for encouragement and instruction.

Years ago, mature Christian women fulfilled an important function in the church body—they provided wise counsel and godly instruction to other women. According to my godly grandmother who is now with the Lord, a pastor did not commonly counsel a woman on a long term basis without her husband or his wife present. For a woman to confide the details of her personal life to a man was considered improper, and so, in matters that pertained to a woman, she would seek the counsel of another woman in the church who had a reputation for wisdom and godliness. Pastoral counseling behind a closed door with only the pastor and female counselee present was actually not common until after the practice was made acceptable by psychologists and therapists. Today, women have been so conditioned to accept the psychologist/counselee model that they no longer question the propriety or consider the dangers of confiding highly personal information to a man. I had never thought much about it myself, until I became involved in women's counseling and saw first hand the dangers of this one-on-one arrangement. I believe we need to re-examine what we're doing in relation to women's counseling needs, and to rethink the way our women are routinely counseled.

After becoming involved in a teaching/counseling ministry several years ago, I became concerned about the wisdom of men listening to the kind of information women routinely seek from a counselor. I honestly couldn't even imagine a man hearing what I was hearing, let alone offering the kind of personal advice and direction women often need. Still, there didn't seem to be a better alternative, so I dismissed my concerns. After all, I reasoned, most women do not even know a female counselor they could confidently confide in, let alone one who could skillfully apply Scripture, as well as practical knowledge, to her needs. Over the years, however, I continued to talk with women, and continued to become more concerned about what I was hearing. I talked to pastor's wives who were heartbroken after discovering their husbands had become sexually involved with counselees. I talked to young women, who were confused by a pastor's affection. I talked to other women who were guilt ridden about sexual involvement with their counselors or fantasizing about their doctors. It was then that I couldn't help remembering my dear grandmother saying, "These preachers are asking for a heap of trouble counseling women alone in their offices."

As a women's counselor, I know that emotional intimacy is the doorway through which even a good woman becomes attached to and sexually aroused by a man. I also know that even godly men are aroused by the intimate descriptions and helplessness of female counselees. So why do we ignore all the warning signs and disregard the Biblical provision God has given to meet women's counseling needs? And why do we make ourselves vulnerable to all kinds of unnecessary temptations? What man or woman who became emotionally or sexually entangled through counseling with the opposite sex ever thought the situation was dangerous before the entrapment? What's so distasteful about requiring a woman's husband or the counselor's wife to be present if her counselor is a man? And what's wrong with making it an honor for women to grow older and more mature spiritually so they can be useful in a counseling ministry to women and thereby relieve godly pastors of this task?

I believe we are reaping the results of neglecting to encourage and train mature Christian women to fulfill their God-given ministry to the younger women. This failure has led not only to the acceptance of men counseling women alone, but also to unscriptural relationships that have opened the door to immoral behavior. The legitimate ministry God has given to spiritually qualified Christian women who have godly marriages and faithful children has been rendered obsolete. Christian women, without right recourse, are increasingly resorting to women's programs, Bible studies, and self-help books that are laced with pop psychology. In an effort to hear women address their needs and give Biblical solutions, these needy women are often turning to psychologists and Christian radio broadcasts that offer a confusing mixture of Christianized psychology. Tragically, this confusion and lack of discernment is leading women and their families *away* from the sufficiency of God's Word, not *towards* confidence in Christ!

For all the information out there on everything from exercise to sexual dysfunction, women lack the instruction and counsel that truly relies on the wisdom of God's Word. The Scriptures say, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." (Hosea 4:6) Our young women are too often floundering spiritually and destroyed for lack of knowledge, not for want of experts or even preaching, but for want of the application of Scripture to their specific problems and perplexities. Though we have a plethora of Christian books offering solutions, the ability to apply the Scriptures to life's problems is scarce. Young women need mature, godly mentors they can go to for counsel when their problems require help to solve. It's no wonder they secretly turn to the world's psychologists as often as they do. If a modest woman is uncomfortable going to her pastor, or a godly pastor sees his addressing personal issues with a woman as improper, to whom do they turn for help?

We desperately need older women in our local churches who are mature in their spiritual walk and who can provide Biblical instruction for younger women. We need older women who can counsel and teach women, helping to equip them to build godly marriages and families. Sadly, however, the older ladies are often no more skillful in the Word than the younger women. Some have "retired" from church work and are no longer faithful in their local churches. Others quietly come to church and are never encouraged to assume a teaching or counseling ministry to younger women even though they are well qualified and spiritually gifted. Instead of using faithful and mature Christian women to counsel and teach, churches often use the younger women who have not yet raised their families or acquired experience and skill in Scripture application. Still others have resorted merely to providing women's craft classes, exercise clubs, or fellowship with no spiritual instruction at all.

Christian women can find craft classes and exercise programs outside our local churches—but the world cannot possibly give them help for the true needs of the heart! The local church alone has the responsibility and ability to fulfill our women's need for encouragement and Biblical guidance in their daily living. This ministry is all the more crucial in light of the fact that society is relentlessly undermining the Biblical structure of the home and discouraging women from placing a high priority on their spiritual well-being, mothering, and home-building. Many thriving, exciting, and popular women's

ministries are built on what women want, and what they think is important, rather than on what God has commanded women to teach and do. Just as Saul attempted to do God's work apart from God's plan, thinking God would be pleased, so many of us are attempting to please God on our terms, rather than His. Like Saul, we tend to focus on the results of our efforts, while God focuses on obedience, faith, and faithfulness born out of a desire to love and please Him. How often we sacrifice what is right for what is good.

God says in Micah 6:4, "I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam." Miriam made a grave mistake in assuming God gave her equal authority with Moses, and in so doing, she sinned and marred her influence and ministry. But it was God who called and prepared Miriam to a specific ministry among women, just as he called and used Dorcus and Lydia. My heart's prayer is that more pastors will consider training qualified women to take over a portion of the pastor's work with ladies—women who are willing to work under a pastor's authority and direction, and who are willing to learn the skills they need to counsel women effectively. I sincerely believe it would be a blessing to godly pastors, a blessing to the women whose gifts would be utilized, and a blessing to needy women who would benefit from a female counselor. This arrangement might also begin a new trend that would protect many good men and women from the destructions of adultery.

From *Guiding Principles For The Biblical Counselor*, by Debi Pryde, pp.11-14