

# Counseling & Biblical Guidance Policy at Faith Baptist Church

As you undoubtedly know, we live in a therapeutic age. There are various “schools” of psychological and psychiatric counseling and therapy, various medications, and various reasons offered for all of them. We also live in a time in which this cultural norm has affected the Christian church. Sadly, this has led sociologist Christian Smith to identify American Christianity as “moralistic, therapeutic deism,” in which the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself” (Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005]).

Because of the culturally conditioned churches of our age, Christians also have certain assumptions and expectations of the church and its office-bearers when it comes to counseling. Because we are not immune to the conditioning of our culture and because of our congregation’s ever-growing needs and expectations, the leadership believes it is necessary to offer some guidance to clarify what you can expect of us, what we expect of individual members, and what we expect of the congregation as a whole in terms of counseling.

## Counseling & Guidance

We first want to offer some clarity on the word “counseling.” We all use this word but it means so many things to so many people, as you no doubt know. We wish to make clear how we understand this term with the following:

1. When we as pastors and leaders speak of “counseling,” we make a **clear distinction between “professional counseling” and “biblical counseling/guidance.”** The former is professional because it is a vocation of this world that requires education, training, and oversight within its given field. It is an enterprise that deals with the ordinary areas of life such as communication, finances, family matters, etc. The latter is guidance because it deals with spiritual matters in the day-to-day lives of Christians. As one writer has said, biblical counseling is “nothing other than the private preaching of the word to those whose need is so great or whose thirst so unquenchable that they need more of the same” and, “Counseling cannot be about anything if it is not about faith and the heart and the Spirit of God.”

2. **We do not believe that all counseling problems** we encounter in this life **are the result of some particular sin.** While we agree that because we live in a sinful and fallen world (Gen. 3; Rom. 8:18–25), and therefore can say everything is a result of this fallen state, we also agree with our Lord, who rebuked this attitude in his disciples—who asked about a man born blind, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”—“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents” (John 9:2–3).

3. We believe that **some Christians at times do need the help of psychologists and psychiatrists** who have been professionally trained and are competent in their field and **who also share their Christian worldview.** In God’s providence and common grace or kindness to the fallen world, there are many ways a Christian may engage in a noble vocation by studying the human brain and psyche. As pastors and leaders trained in spiritual counseling, there are also limits to what we know and what we are able to offer. While we can offer spiritual counseling as well as common-sense advice for problems we all face, we may need to refer you to a professional counselor if we believe we cannot completely and/or adequately offer the help you need, especially if you need medical attention. If we need to refer you beyond us, we will always seek to refer you to a Christian who is trained as a counselor. We will also continue to be a part of the conversation

between you and a counselor as your overseers. We will work with a counselor to assess your needs and with you to put into practice their godly advice.

## The Christian

So what does this mean for the Christian? What do we as your pastors and leaders expect of you, as an individual or family?

1. **Christians should not feel ashamed** because they feel depressed or are clinically depressed and therefore believe they need either professional counseling or biblical guidance. We wish to reassure you that because of the dreadful effects of a world fallen into sin, which affects all of our lives, we all need help in one way or another, to one degree or another. As your pastors and leaders, we want you to know that we care for you. Although we may not have all the right answers all the time and we may not even be competent to help you in a given situation, **we are committed to getting you the professional counseling, biblical counseling, or biblical guidance you need.**

2. Christians need to **take greatest advantage of the means God has provided** for the strengthening of their “faith, hope, and love” (1 Cor. 13:13). God has ordained both public and private means of grace to assure us of his love for us and to further his work of sanctification in our lives.

*Public Means.* Sanctifying the Lord’s Day as holy (Ex. 20:8–11) is chief among these means. The last of the great Reformed confessions, the Formula Consensus Helvetica (1675), concluded its teaching on the nature of Scripture, eternal election, the covenant of works, the imputation of Adam’s sin, and Christ’s satisfaction with practical words such as: “Let it also be required: we not only hand down sincerely in accordance with the divine Word, the special necessity of the sanctification of the Lord’s Day, and also impressively teach and fervently urge its observation.” Not only did God promise the Israelites a rich blessing for their sanctifying of the Sabbath day (Isa. 58:13–14), which was also evidenced in the early church’s joyous life together (Acts 2:42), but we have observed as your pastors and leaders that the more Christians set this day apart, assemble for divine service in the morning and evening, and take part in the full public life of the church by hearing the preaching of the Word, celebrating the sacraments, publicly confessing their sins and receiving public absolution, joining in the public prayers of intercession, as well as giving and receiving genuine Christian fellowship, the better it is for the vitality of their souls.

*Private Means.* God also desires that we take what we receive in public and make use of it in private throughout our week. As the Canons of Dort say with regard to reading and meditating upon Scripture, the God who began his work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel “preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the Sacraments” (5.14). We expect that Christians will take advantage of God’s means by reading Scripture daily, praying in private and as families daily, enjoying Christian fellowship weekly, and by being involved in Christian service as able as means by which their heads, hearts, and hands are being used to the glory of God and their good. As the apostle Paul said, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8).

3. Christians need to be **training and disciplining their minds and bodies** as an outworking of their sanctification. For example, Paul contrasted bodily training and spiritual training in 1 Timothy 4:7–8. In contrast to various false doctrines, Paul said: “Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to

come.” It is important to note what Paul does not say here. He does not say bodily training is utterly useless or futile. In contrast, of course, to eternal life and its eternal value, bodily training is not as important. Yet it “is of some value.” And while it may not profit “for the life to come,” it does profit us “for the present life.” We expect Christians to be working on bringing the entirety of their lives—thoughts (2 Cor. 10:5), words (Eph. 4:29), and deeds (1 Peter 2:11–12)—into conformity to Christ since we are to offer our all to him as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2).

## The Congregation

We would also like to offer some guidance as to what all of this means for us as a congregation. Since we are a local manifestation of the body of Christ, what happens to one of us affects all of us (1 Cor. 12:26).

1. **Recognize** that while **the church** is God’s ordained organization and organism for bringing salvation to the world (Matt. 16:13–20; 1 Tim. 3:15) it **is also a messy place**. Be aware that there are weaker and stronger brothers and sisters among you (Rom. 15). This means we should not be surprised to learn that, “even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of [...] obedience” to God in this life (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 114), and that “blemishes cleave even to the best works of the saints” (Canons of Dort, 5.2).

2. **Be an encouragement** to your brothers and sisters in the church. Our members who are strong must be willing and ready to strengthen the weak; our members who are weak must be willing and ready to seek out godly brothers and sisters in the congregation with whom to seek advice, receive support, and with whom to pray. Our constant prayer and expectation is that the Holy Spirit would move among us to make the biblical descriptions of the first century church to be true of us also:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col. 3:12–16).

Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (1 Thes. 5:13b–14).

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load. One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:1–10).

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12–13).

## The Leaders

What is the role of your leadership, that is, the ministers of the Word of the leaders, in the counseling process?

1. As a reminder, **there is much confusion** in our day about our role. All too often our modern culture has caused us as Christians to think of ministers and leaders as professional counselors, even personal life coaches and therapists. We exhort you not to impose worldly expectations upon the church but let the Word guide your thinking about us.

2. **We do not believe** it is the biblical calling of the minister of the Word **to engage in long-term, therapeutic and biblical counseling**, especially if there are **medical issues involved**. We want to be honest and recognize the limitations and legitimate calling of the minister of the Word (pastor) to be a servant of the Word. **Ministers of the Word**, then, are just that, “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). He is **called to “preach the Word”** (2 Tim. 4:2) by expositing and applying it to his people both **in public and in private** (Acts 20:20). The minister, therefore, is equipped to give biblical, spiritual counsel by explaining and applying the Word of God. Along with the leaders, ministers are called “to shepherd the people of God in the Christian life, giving guidance and counsel in all things needful.” This means that the ministers as well as the leaders are not called to be professional counselors, although each individual minister and/or elder may have more or less education and training in this field.

3. **Any member that requests to meet** with a pastor and/or an leader for any reason **will be met**. If a member requests ongoing counseling that may be beyond that office-bearers’ abilities, he will consult with at least one other leadership member to make an **evaluation** of whether there is a **continuing biblical counseling** need or whether the needs are such that a **referral** to a professional, Christian counselor is necessary. As was said above, if we do refer you to an outside professional Christian counselor, this is not the end of our work with you. We will be involved with you and the counselor to oversee and follow-up on what you need. We as a leadership are also committed to providing diaconal assistance to individuals and families who need counseling but cannot afford it.

## Disclaimer

Thank you for taking the time to read our Counseling and Biblical Guidance Policy and allowing Faith Baptist Church to serve you in this time of need. Each pastor on staff and leader in the Care & Counseling Ministry at Faith Baptist Church ministers under an oath of confidentiality. The information learned and the contents shared in each session will be protected by and treated with ministerial-privacy. Pastors and Care & Counseling Ministry leaders at Faith Baptist Church reserve the right to inform the proper authorities if they believe information has been shared or a circumstance has been observed that reveals a person is in immediate physical danger from someone or themselves. The pastor or leader reserves the right to end a session or discontinue sessions as he/she deems necessary.