

# Familial Counseling: The Paradigm for Counselor- Counselee Relationships in 1 Thessalonians 5



by David Powlison

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We urge you, brethren:  
Admonish the unruly,  
Encourage the fainthearted,  
Help the weak,  
Be patient with everyone.

What paradigm for counseling relationships informs 1 Thessalonians 5:14? Who are these 'brethren' called to patiently admonish, encourage, and help? And who are these recipients of care, described as the self-willed, the disheartened, or the disabled? As we listen to 1 Thessalonians as a whole, it becomes clear that the letter portrays—and calls for—a *familial* paradigm for understanding the 'counselor-counselee' relationship. Older children help younger. Because the needy ones come with different sorts of problems, the wiser ones must be highly adaptable in their love.

Imagine a large family. The children range in age from infants to young adults. Their competencies range from the utterly helpless and dependent (infants and disabled) to those who are able to look after others. Some behave in destructive ways; others are anxious; some have a very limited capacity; others are responsible and constructive. Within the family, care occurs at two complementary levels. The primary responsibility for love lies with the parents. But secondarily, the older children take on active parental responsibilities towards their younger brothers and sisters. The older siblings

act like parents, *in loco parentis*. Though they are still children, they have grown up enough to take on a share of the responsibility and authority of love.

This conception of ministry weaves through 1 Thessalonians. Of course, the parent is "our God and Father" (1:3-4). He has chosen and loved every child in His family. But as they grow up, these children begin to take responsibility for their brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup> Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy are older and wiser brothers, but they act *like* a mother and *like* a father to their brothers and sisters (2:7-12). They show self-sacrificing gentleness and persistence in teaching their siblings how to live and love. They are not quite parents. Their curious role nests within the parent role. Paul and his colleagues acted 'parentally', as parent-delegates on God's behalf. It is a significant nuance.

This is a remarkable paradigm within which to conceptualize and practice counseling. The givers of counsel are responsible older siblings. Those they counsel are portrayed as younger brothers and sisters, who need different kinds of help because of their stubbornness, their fears, and their limitations. First Thessalonians 5:14 is the classic text on the importance of flexibility and adaptability in tailoring ministry to individuals. You do not deal with the willful, the discouraged, and the disabled in the same way. And you must deal

personally. This is a text where preaching and teaching applications are an extension of primary counseling intentions. And that counseling has this familial feel we have noted.

What does this communicate to us about the counseling relationship? In the first place, it arises within familial bonds of commitment and affection. Familial love extends over years, decades, and lifetimes (though a moment or season of active intervention might be relatively brief). For example, this is a letter from afar, written at Paul's initiative. He writes to people whom he vividly remembers and evidently loves, over whom he anguishes. He earnestly prays for them. He hopes to visit again.

Second, this relationship is characterized by freely-given love. Paul and his colleagues even make a point of stressing the absence of financial motives, the abiding intensity of their personal affection, and the fact that they supplied their own financial needs. In approaching the counseling needs of their siblings, these are not fee-for-service parent-surrogates from outside the family: nannies, babysitters, orphanage matrons, mere professionals. These brothers do not act parentally at an hourly rate, but make a deeper investment in those whose welfare is their charge.

Third, those who counsel are overtly siblings of those they aid. Familial counselors and counseled share a common Father, from whom they receive the ingredients of their counsel. The insight into different kinds of people is God's insight. The tailored approach is how Christ variously approaches such people. The content is the Bible's content. The manner is that curious sort of love that an older sibling invests in a younger. There is a unique dual sense of responsibility: first, *for* the brother or sister; second, to the parent.

This familial paradigm resists any paradigm for counseling that would inherently professionalize what happens. This is not an 'expert-client' relationship, based on the former's expertise in supposedly neutral technique and supposedly objective theory. This is that form of love in which you care for your little sister, whether she is bratty, fearful, or retarded.

This article will unpack 1 Thessalonians

5:14 in greater detail. But first, we will set this familial conception against the backdrop of other paradigms for the counselor-counselee relationship. The familial metaphor shows its unique power and beauty in comparison.

### ***Other Paradigms for the Counselor-counselee Relationship***

Over the past 100 years, many paradigms have been suggested for how to conceptualize the counseling relationship. Of course, in every case, one party is designated to act for the welfare of another party. But different counseling models structure the *kind* of relationship by putting different metaphors to work.

The various metaphors to describe intentional conversations are easy to identify. Each draws its dominant motif by analogy to some other arena of human affairs. For example, here are nine paradigms for counseling that have been hugely influential in professional psychotherapy circles:

- Counseling functions in the manner of a *science*. An archeologist of the psyche does research, excavating a person's inner life, offering a technical analysis of the data discovered. The goal is personal insight into psychodynamics.
- Counseling takes its cues from *animal training*. A skilled trainer employs a system of rewards to progressively eliminate undesirable behaviors and shape new, more desirable behaviors. The goal is behavioral alteration.
- Counseling offers a form of *intentional friendship*. A caring, trustworthy friend takes the time to draw out what another person really feels and thinks. The goal is a corrective experience: to feel understood by another, and to find ones deepest instincts and perceptions affirmed, rather than denied and discredited.
- Counseling plays off the metaphor of *team sports*. A coach constructs a game plan for achieving success in life. Coaching is corrective and directive, in helping the player to develop skills to execute each play. Goals are framed in

terms of achieving a mutually desired end.

- Counseling operates like *medicine*. A medical doctor diagnoses the patient's ailment in order to prescribe appropriate medication or other treatment. The goal of a clinical model is either to cure what is pathological, or, more often, to alleviate distressing symptoms.
- Counseling offers *education*. A teacher-philosopher brings the operating assumptions of a student's world-view to the surface, and teaches the learner how to think along different lines in order to make different choices. The goal is reeducation.
- Counseling is constructed by analogy to *technology*. An engineer reprograms the computer, so that different thought routines occur, so that the system does not freeze up or endlessly cycle. The goal is to fix dysfunctional machinery.

analogy, might make some feature of the counseling relationship particularly vivid. But none is adequate to supply the overarching and controlling paradigm. All mislead when they structure the expectations of counsel-givers and counsel-receivers.

Of course, all the paradigms have in common that one party needs help and the other seeks to be helpful. But, to what extent are problems in living fundamentally like a computer malfunction, a scientific mystery, a medical disease, or the need for a supportive friend? When *counseling* problems are in view, none of the metaphors accurately captures what it means to give help to someone in need. Every counseling problem, if you look closely, will invariably have to do with finding help amid our sufferings and our sins. Counseling deals with what helps a person to live well in processing both who you are and what you face. The most accurate word for what counseling does is *ministry*.

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- Counseling models itself on *Hindu discipleship*. A guru facilitates experiences of self-transcendence through teaching meditative techniques to a seeker. The goal is to evoke oceanic experience of oneness and peacefulness.
- Counseling proceeds like *law*. A lawyer is engaged as a consultant to a client, analyzing what has happened, offering an informed judgment about the case, and giving advice about how best to proceed. The goal is to receive judicious counsel about available options to choose from.

Sometimes one paradigm dominates; often some combination appears. No doubt, each of these paradigms has its strong points. Each metaphor evokes a different definition of the help-giver and the help-seeker. Each expresses certain analogies to a biblical model. Each of these nine, as a secondary metaphor and

Every form of counseling operates as a form of 'ministry', whatever other metaphor plays lead in an attempt to redefine the activity as something else. Awareness of the intrinsically 'pastoral' nature of counseling always hovers on the edge of consciousness among those who theorize about human psychology and those who practice psychotherapy. The pioneers—Freud, Jung, and Adler—stated it openly, but strongly preferred medical metaphors to ministry metaphors. They explicitly presented their theories and counsel as scientific, psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and psychotherapeutic. But each of them at times recognized that they were in fact offering secular forms of pastoral care: "Psychotherapy is a secular form of ministry."

### ***Biblical Paradigms for Counseling Ministry***

Scripture teaches a number of complementary paradigms for the counseling

relationship. Each one strikingly differs from the nine patterns we have just described. When put together, they create a comprehensive picture of the counseling relationship. Three complementary motifs have been articulated as characterizing biblical counseling. The familial motif adds a fourth that further enriches the overall picture.

- Counseling serves as one form of *ministry*. It primarily expresses the ministry of the Word of Christ, and, secondarily, the mercy ministry of Christ. Jesus Christ is the Servant of the Lord. A servant of Christ personalizes His truth and love to a person or persons in need of help.
- Counseling looks out for others as one aspect of *pastoral care*. An undershepherd (who is also a sheep) looks out for the welfare of the great Shepherd's sheep. Jesus Christ is the Shepherd of the flock, who lays down His life for us, who watches over us. We are undershepherds, laying down our lives in order to look out for each other.
- Counseling expresses one form of *one-anothering love between peers*. One of God's people aids another through constructive, candid conversation and practical action. Jesus Christ is the one Master and King. We are peers under Him, called to care wisely for each other.

The ministerial, pastoral, one-anothering, and familial paradigms intend to function as primary and orienting visions. They should not be seen as subordinate analogies or mere metaphors in service to some other dominant paradigm. What makes these so different? For starters, they operate with an explicit God-reference. They subordinate the counselor to God, as first and foremost a 'counselee' (a fellow sheep, servant, peer, brother), rather than positing an independent professional expertise. Whatever evocative riches might be captured by one of the other nine motifs, they only come into their own when seen within controlling gaze of these prime biblical paradigms for intentional conversation.

Each biblical motif highlights certain things. The ministry paradigm stresses the act of

servicing the welfare of another. The shepherd paradigm puts a note on pastoral leadership and authority, particularly in the role of providing for and protecting others by speaking truth in love. The one-anothering paradigm highlights how biblical counseling is not so much about expert-and-client roles as it is how peers treat each other with reciprocity.

This article will not repeat familiar ground by which biblical counseling has defined the other three paradigms for wise counseling. We will explore this fourth dominant metaphor for biblical counseling, the familial, that is presented in First Thessalonians. The rest of this article we will unpack implications of this familial model by which God would have us conceptualize and practice the counseling relationship.

### **Core Teaching**

In 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12 Paul adopts the best qualities of mothers and fathers as a defining metaphor for his role as a 'sibling-counselor' who works to change the lives of his younger brothers and sisters. It is no surprise, then that the role of the 'counselee' can be understood in terms of different characteristics of children.

In the pages that follow we will describe four different types of children-siblings-counsees: the relatively mature, the headstrong, the anxious, and the limited. The first category characterizes the Thessalonians overall. The last three categories characterize three particular kinds of problems that 5:14 calls for the mature members of the sibling cohort to address in the others. But all four groups are recipients of counseling. Their needs, naturally enough are different.

Counseling ministry adapts. It is a 'multimodal therapy' with a delightful twist. First, the same fundamental truths describe all of us, so there is no eclecticism theoretically. Second, the different strategies are not selected pragmatically—'different strokes for different folks'. These are not simply items from a large repertoire of possible techniques. They aren't really techniques at all, but are simply different ways of loving appropriately. The different counselor responses reflect the different needs of those counseled as they stand before God.

The next four sections consider four populations in need of counsel, and the differing ways in which each is to be addressed.

### 1. The thriving, responsive child

Who is in view in this metaphor? These are those who can counsel their brothers and sisters. Some of those you encourage, counsel, and interact with are doing well. They are like healthy children, who are growing up into a measure of wisdom. They are the natural leaders in church or small group, the eager students, the growing believers. They are those who understand and live the gracious dynamics of biblical change. This type expresses the overall persona of the Thessalonian church. They have few particular 'problems' to address, but they do need counseling. The call is mainly to the ongoing encouragement that expresses a normal growth curve. Most of this letter is to and about people who are already progressing. But they live in a world in which sufferings occur, in which it is easy to lose your way.<sup>2</sup> They are living together with faith in God and love for each other. Because they trust and know their Father, they show care and consideration for their brothers and sisters. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 is not *about* thriving children, but it is addressed *to* them. It perhaps has in particular view the pastoral leadership, described in 5:12-13 as worthy of esteem (cf. the repetition of 'admonish' in 5:12 and 5:14). But at the same time it is pointedly addressed to all the brothers and sisters because everyone is called to care for unruly, fainthearted, and weak.<sup>3</sup>

How does Paul address his thriving brothers and sisters? Even a constructive, fruitful child needs some forms of ongoing counsel. That is what is going on throughout most of this letter. Almost twenty times Paul says,

You don't need for us to say anything to you about this.

You know this already.

You are already doing this.

You remember this.

You saw this.

Then he talks about it anyway! He tells them what they already know and to keep doing what they are already doing. Each retelling adds something fresh. He offers a new insight or

further implications of what they already know and do. His affirming helps to reinforce them in what is good.<sup>4</sup>

They don't need to be reminded of their own story of how they turned to Christ in faith. But he retells their story anyway, with great affection and detail. He encourages them by telling about their impact on others. He presses on them the future hope of Christ's story, which they might easily forget in the press of current events (chapter 1).

They already know the story of how Paul and his colleagues cared for them with affection and integrity. They know how these brothers made the truth come alive. But he reminds them anyway. The ways they were treated are exactly what he will ask them to do with each other (chapters 2-3).

They don't need him to tell them how to love each other, and how to live responsibly in the litmus tests of sex and money. They are already doing well. But he says it anyway, and urges them to live this way even more (4:1-12).

They don't know some of what happens to those who die, simply because they have not been taught yet. But it's important to know this in order to be able to find and give encouragement. So Paul unpacks a fresh implication of Christ's return for how to face the death of loved ones (second half of chapter 4:13-18). They don't need Paul to say anything about the actual day of Christ's return. But he tells them anyway. He wants them to understand the fuller implications of living in this hope. And he wants them to counsel each other well—even as they are already doing! (5:1-11).

All this is counseling ministry operating in the constructive, instructive mode. It is the joyful kind of counseling: full of gratitude, remembering, mutual appreciation, commendation, consolidating gains. Here is counseling as it seeks to strengthen the healthy children and keep them ever more consciously on track and in the broad daylight of truth.

There are three reasons to do this lively, affectionate, honest ongoing counsel towards those who do not seem to 'need counseling'. First, a growing child must continue to grow. Knowing is not a static achievement, a mere compendium of autobiographical and

theological facts. Doing is not a rote habit. Instead, the achievements of faith—*knowing*—set you on a trajectory of continuing to live out your faith. And the habits of love—*doing*—must become increasingly flexible and intelligent as a person learns how to love and counsel others well. It is no accident that Paul concludes his letter by giving hope for the long fight to grow up: 5:23-24.

Second, every brother and sister, however thriving, is prone to be “moved by afflictions” (3:3). The malice of Satan the tempter and the inevitability of suffering are wild cards in life, even for the healthiest. Any of God’s children can stumble in the midst of temptation and hardship. They can wander outside the lines, lapsing back into moral darkness: unruly. They can forget God, becoming burdened under discouragement and anxiety: fainthearted. They can simply not comprehend certain things: weak. So while Paul clearly enjoys his ministry

counseling ministry (or parenting) is the “fun part,” dominated by joys and growth.

Thriving children are the ones called to put 5:14 into practice. They are the older brothers and sisters given quasi-parental responsibilities. How do they get there? We will examine three aspects of the counsel Paul offers them, thus describing the overall context of 1 Thessalonians. The call of 1 Thessalonians 5:14 does not simply drop down out of space as a random bit of good advice. Let’s consider three aspects of the context.

**a. 5:11-22.**

These four commands come in the middle of a rapid-fire barrage of nineteen straight commands. Paul gives a cascade of directives from 5:11 to 5:22. What is going on here? This is a picture of love in action.

Some of these commands picture that form of love and obedience called ‘faith’. Faith is how our love for God is directly expressed:

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## Spiritual maturity is not an end in itself, but a gift for others.

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with this healthy group of brothers and sisters, he also worries over them, and feels corresponding delight when the report is good (2:17-3:13).

Third, as healthy children continue to grow and to grow up, they specifically become able to counsel their struggling siblings. Spiritual maturity is not an end in itself, but a gift for others. Learning to counsel well takes instruction. The personal example of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (chapters 1-3) illustrates the wise counsel which the more thriving children of God are called to offer those who whose lives are more unsettled: 4:18; 5:11, 12, 14, 15.

Even a thriving child needs input, reminder, encouragement, warning, instructions, and affirmation. So when counseling is understood in the familial motif, then it’s not only about problems and problem solving. It is also about positive growing up in wisdom, and encouragement not to forget, drift, or stagnate. We might say that this part of

Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing.

Give thanks in all circumstances. (5:16-18)

These three pithy commands are a prism splintering the light of faith into a spectrum of three primary colors. They are “the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” They give us a hotlink to the 150 psalms and to every other place where relationship with God is directly expressed (in a myriad hues, tints, and color combinations). We praise and adore God for who He IS. We seek Him in our NEED for redemption from sin and suffering. We thank Him for what He DOES to deliver us. These three basic instincts express the many moods of a living faith. They are the ways in which real life comes to real God.

Counseling tackles impossible problems. It is difficult to admonish the unruly. The oppositional-defiant, addicted, and impulsive continually wander into trouble. It is difficult to encourage the fainthearted. The anxious, fearful, and depressed easily forget and lose their

bearings. It is difficult to help the weak. The disabled, infantile, autistic, demented, and retarded live with markedly limited capabilities. The only form of counseling capable of bearing the true weight of life's problems is counseling that radically centers on the Creator and Redeemer. Counselors who are not worshipers are in over their heads. Of necessity, they will "heal the wound of My people lightly" (Jer. 6:14). God runs His universe in such a way that problems are always greater than the human capacity to devise and implement solutions.

Most of the other commands sketch the face of love in the horizontal dimension. "The will of God for you in Christ Jesus" describes everything 5:11-22 commands. It is a delightful picture. For example, if no one ever repaid evil for evil, and if each of us always sought to do good to one another and to everyone (5:15), this world would be a paradise of goodness. This church was uniquely good at loving. Paul notices, commends them, and is thankful. But he gives them this cascade of explicit instructions so their love will grow more specific, more appropriate, more intelligent.

**b. 5:9f and 5:23f**

The string of nineteen commands is no mere list of moral principles and exhortations. Vivid promises and revelations of the Lord God bookend the call to intelligent love. Here's the logic:

*Promises* elicit faith and hope: God has mercifully given us life instead of fairly dealing us death. (5:9-10)

Therefore *commands* walk out what it means to love, on the basis of such hope. (5:11-22)

*Promises*—and prayers expressing promise—further sustain faith and hope: God will faithfully complete what He has begun. (5:23-24)

God's purposeful grace in Christ frames everything. Where God Himself is at work, the God of peace, men, women and children learn how to admonish, encourage, and hold onto patiently. The promises are electrifying. Take them to heart. Paul's entire letter bursts with how this God in Christ continually moves towards us (hence we move towards Him and

others). These promises make sense of everything that has happened (and 1 Thessalonians recounts many stories). They make sense of everything we are called to do (nineteen straight life-expressing commands). God takes the initiative—hence we take the initiative.

The letter is full of prayers. But where do the prayers mentioned or happening begin and end?! They simply happen in the midst of everything else. Candid joy, frank need, and honest gratitude to God are simply how love for people happens within love for God. The 'prayers'—1:2f, 2:13, 2:19, 3:9-13, 5:23—emerge seamlessly from context and then flow seamlessly back into context. Everything Paul mentions about God, about his own actions and reactions, about the lives of his readers weaves in and out of what he voices to God. Why is this? Because God is on site, at work, and we are alive now in His presence. So, for Paul, talking *about* God, you, and me becomes almost indistinguishable from talking *to* God and you. First Thessalonians captures life in Christ on the wing. 'Prayer' is not a category differentiated from other parts of life. It's how all of life talks out loud about who is here and what is happening and what is needed.

You need the bookends of promise. Within the bookends, all things are possible. Augustine got it right: "Give what you command, O Lord, and command what You will." He commands powerful, effective, flexible familial counseling.

The Word of God typically comes 'incarnated', and the pastor's own story weaves through the entire letter. We witness—sense, hear, experience—Paul's own response to the revelations and promises of God. His "work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus" are obvious throughout. And we witness this man in action, doing the very four forms of love that he commands.

We similarly gain 'feel' for what Paul asks of us by seeing it lived out – explicitly in his life, implicitly (by his description) in the lives of these believers whom he loves and to whom he writes. This is hugely significant.

The rest of this article will focus on the four short sentences in which Paul describes flexible parental-brotherly counsel in 5:14. The familial metaphor richly captures the different

kinds of brothers and sisters that counseling ministry addresses.

## 2. The rebellious child

Who are the unruly? “Admonish the unruly” envisions a child whose life is disorderly. These are the high octane forms of sin: lazy, rebellious, addictive, willful, manipulative, deceitful, impulsive. They live life outside the lines of God’s good purposes. They are self-willed, the archetype of all sin. In this aspect of familial counseling, the issues are clear cut. This sort of counseling is difficult because of hardheartedness, lying, open resistance, and evasion. But in some ways it is the easiest sort of counseling because the problems are clear. Something very specific is wrong. A person’s bitterness, self-pity, and envy come out in every conversation. A man uses pornography regularly. A wife has been committing adultery for two years. A husband inflicts his explosive anger on his family. A teen has been living a double life, going to church on Sunday with his

that has no hope’. He spells out true teaching that profoundly comforts. This example nicely illustrates the kindness and positive direction of admonishment. Even while speaking firmly and clearly about what is wrong, it is even more careful to picture what the right looks like and how the Lord of grace and truth meets us to change us. Loving admonishment never means beating up on people, criticizing them, telling them everything that’s wrong with them. Punitive, accusatory criticism is the devil’s own opposite to Christ-like, redemptive candor.

How do you admonish? When a specific form of unruliness is on the table, the counseling process will tend towards the clear cut, direct, and even dramatic. When Paul said, “Admonish the unruly,” he meant it. When someone gets out of line (and God draws the lines that matter), you should speak up candidly and constructively. When you need to help someone straighten out, talk straight. Spell out right and wrong. Hold out God’s justice, mercy, and

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family, but doing drugs, heavy drinking, and petty crime on the side. You are meant to envision your younger brother or sister who is acting up and acting out.

Specifically, unruliness covers all the particular ways we actively get out of step. We are alerted to these by the sin lists in the New Testament (e.g., Mark 7:21-22; Rom. 1:24-32; Gal. 5:19-21; 2 Tim. 3:2-7), by the Ten Commandments, by the catalogue of the ‘seven deadly sins’ (which are more accurately the ‘seven typical families of sin’). Within 1 Thessalonians itself, Paul sounds notes of admonishment throughout chapter 4. The first half of that chapter gives an example dealing with behavior: he ‘solemnly warns’ about sexual immorality, and calls his siblings to the purity and considerateness of love. The second half of the chapter shows a different aspect of the admonishment aspect of ministry. Paul teaches in a way that brings false ideas and ignorance to light, for example, bringing into view the ‘grief

power. You aim for a breakthrough, a moment of decision, of turning (though the working out of that decisive turning will always take a lifetime.) The sin is obvious (though of course other sins might also be hidden). The counseling approach called for is direct and lovingly confrontational. The analogy is with child discipline. Raise a defined problem directly and deal with it constructively.

Typically, the outcome will be decisive one way or other. The choice point is relatively obvious. A person either turns from sin and embraces God, or turns away from God and chooses to justify their sin. Often the Bible says, “Repent. Turn from the way of death. Turn to the Lord of life, and a new way of life.” When dealing with the human tendency to wander, you usually know rapidly whether someone is going to stonewall you. The counseling may be brief – if the heart is hard. But if a person with unruly tendencies proves to have a soft heart, if when they fall they want to pick up again, then



counseling will extend as long as needed. The Christian life is a lifelong race of repentance, so the discipleship of the unruly will include countless points of turning anew.

At a general level, all of us tend towards unruliness. We walk outside God's lines, out of step God's reality. So admonishment is a general description of all ministry, and a component in all teaching. The leaders in the church are described as "those who admonish you" in 5:12. This is because basic preaching and teaching always holds out the contrast between light and darkness, love and selfishness, faith and fear, obedience and disobedience, humility and pride. What God's people experience as "a good sermon" invariable has an admonishment component: we are brought up short in ourselves, and brought out of ourselves into the comfort of Jesus Christ. By bringing to light our dark tendencies, and showing the light of God's bright purposes, general admonishment is one theme threading through all wisdom and truth.

### 3. The fearful child

Who are the fainthearted (literally, 'small-souled')? These are people who think, feel, and act as if they were all alone in a dangerous world. They approach life as if they were orphans, and are prone to fears, discouragement, anxiety, attempting to prove themselves, attempting to control the uncontrollable. They get disheartened at their own shortcomings and by the hardships they face. They are prone to give up. Do any of those you counsel feel like a failure, feel overwhelmed? "How could God love me?" You are meant to envision your younger brother or sister who is frightened, hurt, or discouraged.

How do you encourage? This is a very different sort of person from the unruly. It calls for strikingly different counseling approach: "encourage the faint-hearted." When Paul says, "Encourage the fainthearted," he means just that. Come alongside tenderly. The word translated 'encourage' emphasizes offering personal consolation and solace in the midst of difficulties. Bring true hope. God is true to His promises. Communicate how God is faithful by what you say and do, by how you say it and do it, by who you are, by how you care. Give strugglers every reason to go forward into life: "God will not forsake you. He is with you." Take

the initiative to come near and stay near to the disheartened. Love does this.

Think of this as counseling primarily in the nurture mode. You usually anticipate slow change. They take more time, and more repetition, so this is slower process. This form of biblical counseling continually encourages with promises, affirmation, perspective, inviting to small steps. Often the Bible says, "Don't be afraid. I am with you. Trust. Take refuge in the Lord, who is a very safe place." Consolation, comfort, and encouragement take the leading role. It aims at small, slow changes (though occasionally a dramatic breakthrough occurs).

Like admonishing the unruly, encouraging the fainthearted works with truth. But they lead with different aspects of truth. This one traffics in God's nearness, and the comfort of human nearness: "He is with you. You are not alone. I know it's hard. I know you hurt, and it seems overwhelming and confusing. God is with us, and He will see us through." There will usually be a secondary aspect of the general admonishing effect of truth. For example, the comfort for the grieving that Paul offers in 4:13-18 may reveal false hopes and hopelessness in the process of being taken to heart. Accurate awareness of personal wrong grows slowly in the context of taking grace to heart.

Scripture gives many specific examples of consolation for discouraged strugglers. In Exodus 6:9 the people could not even listen to God because of their despondency amid cruel bondage. The Lord kept acting to redeem them anyway, and by Exodus 15 they had seen and heard, and were filled with joy. In Psalm 77:3 the speaker feels so troubled and overwrought that he can hardly speak. Through remembering God's powerful lovingkindness, he finds his bearings. In the blazing heat, Jonah becomes faint and overwhelmed with discouragement (Jonah 4:8). God shades him, bringing comfort and restoration. To those who are worn out, burned out, and anxious of heart (Isa. 35:3-4), God brings promises of lush blessing, giving reasons to no longer be afraid. The forsaken wife is grieved in spirit (Isa. 54:6), and God meets her in her sufferings with joyous promises. And those who are crushed in spirit at their sins and sufferings? The most high God comes near to live with them in their lowliness and neediness

(Isa 57:15). Within 1 Thessalonians, Paul offers particular comforts to those who might feel distraught at the death of loved ones (chapter 4:13-18) or in the face of persecution (2:13-20). And to those struggling to stay alert in the battle with sin, he offers tender consolation and hope (5:1-11).

Just as all of us find unruly tendencies in ourselves, so all of us are prone to discouragement. Personalities differ; circumstances differ; the way it comes out differs; the relative intensity or mildness differs. But “there is no temptation that is not common to all” (1 Cor. 10:13). So the personal encouragement of our Lord touches each one of us in our need. God’s promises address the specific content of each person’s sense of fear and dismay

Wise and timely flexibility is the fruit of 5:14. So, you treat a discouraged, anxious child differently from a willful, rebellious child. The analogy to children helps us to think straight.

and truth of God, and can give what is needed.

#### **4. The helpless child**

We’ve seen how different counseling is with the thriving child, the rebellious child, and the discouraged child. Our fourth type is the helpless. Who are the weak? Envision someone who needs ongoing help. They have marked limitations, like an infant or disabled child, someone whose handicaps mean that the possibility or likelihood of significant change is low. They may always need help. They may never have the ability to walk it out on their own. You are meant to envision your younger brother or sister who is a helpless infant or suffers a significant handicap.

Consider the variety of life situations where you are called primarily to hang on to someone: to protect them, to provide for them, to take the initiative in pursuing them, to persevere with them. You will minister to people who are autistic or mentally retarded, who are suffering Alzheimer’s, or are simply elderly and

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## Sometimes with the weak, the greatest sanctification occurs in those who show care, because the sufferers of weakness don’t and can’t change much.

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Paul teaches us to understand our brothers and sisters in terms of their particular struggles, and then to respond appropriately. He never says, “Admonish the disheartened.” To acknowledge personal wrongs is not step one for the anxious. If you primarily admonish them, you only further discourage them. But in the light of facing their fears and troubles, the promises of God become sweet and life-giving. In the same way Paul never says, “Encourage the unruly.” Helping them grasp that God loves them and will not abandon them is not step one for the willful. If you simply offer promises of kindness to the willful, you will only reinforce their impression that God, like you, is a sentimental dupe, and their confidence that they can get away with whatever they are doing. But in the light of facing their sins, the promises of God become sweet and life-giving. A familial counselor, by identifying with each kind of struggle the younger siblings face, should have first hand experience of the multifaceted grace

dying. You will counsel slow movers, or people who have suffered greatly: abused, abandoned, victimized, impoverished. You may value good books; those you counsel may be severely dyslexic or completely illiterate. If you are a parent, you have ministered to infants. You literally experience what it is like to work very slowly and patiently. Perhaps you work with people preoccupied by overwhelming pain, whether the pain is physical or relational.

Sometimes with the weak, the greatest sanctification occurs in those who show care, because the sufferers of weakness don’t and can’t change much. This is part of why our vision for ‘sanctification’ must be corporate, and not only individual (another way that this familial paradigm for counseling argues against the individualism of other models). The “weaker” and “less presentable members of the body” get greater honor, attention, and protection, as 1 Corinthians 12:22-26 puts it. *We grow up together.*

What do you do? “Help” or “hold onto” the weak. Take it literally. Don’t ever let go of people whose capacities are limited. They may need ongoing assistance. They need protection because they are easily victimized. They need help because they are weak. They can’t do life by themselves. They may not even be able to ask for help. Take the initiative to keep on helping those who are limited and vulnerable. Love can do no less. The call to minister to people who lack much potential for change and growth vividly demonstrates why ‘counseling’ ministry must walk hand in hand with ‘mercy and justice’ ministry. When you go to bat for what Psalm 10 calls the oppressed, helpless, needy, misused, abused, poor, and vulnerable... you hold on to them (the literal meaning of the word translated ‘help’). This holding on is the primary, defining activity. You help them, doing them tangible good. You take the initiative. You do practical things that make a difference. You accommodate to their limitations. And in that context, there will also come what we might describe more specifically as ‘counseling’ moments, when the constructive, encouraging, and admonishing word—a simple word—proves appropriate and helpful.

People’s counseling needs are different. The unruly wouldn’t listen and don’t want to listen to wisdom. You persist in speaking clearly, constructively, and to the point. The counseling relationship often contains decisive moments.

The fainthearted are hard of hearing and forgetful. You keep ministering nourishing truth over and over in fresh ways. The counseling relationship usually builds confidence cumulatively.

But the weak can’t even take much in, can’t listen very well, can’t initiate much independent action on their own. They are dependent on outside help. The counseling relationship operates in the permanent mode, aiming for basic life skills of living to God’s glory within the terms set by limited capability.

The weak are also a general category. We are all, by definition and reality, weak. Romans 8:26 speaks of our *weakness*. It does not say ‘weaknesses’, plural. It is weakness, singular, as a comprehensive description of our basic condition of helplessness before the evils of sin and death, and our radical need for help outside

of ourselves. So it is no accident that Jesus commends the “poor in spirit,” those who know their fundamental need for outside mercy to protect, provide, and save. Knowing our fundamental weakness and multiple weaknesses, we realize how much God bears with us and holds on to us. We learn that “grace is sufficient for you, because power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

And all of us will become weak, sooner or later, to a greater or lesser extent. If you live long enough, you will lose just about everything: those people you most love, your productivity in job and ministry, your health, your money, your relevance to what’s currently happening in the world, perhaps your memory and even your mind. And then you will certainly lose your life. Mortality is the ultimate and defining weakness. Most people will not be remembered very long after their death: “The flower fades, and the place it grew no longer remembers it.” There is no trace of a desert flower a month later. The human condition is weakness. Hold onto the weak, as God remembers your frame, that you are but dust, and compassionately holds onto you (Ps. 103).

C. S. Lewis captured this condition of comprehensive weakness vividly in the first chapter of *The Four Loves*:

Man’s love for God must always be very largely, and must often be entirely, a Need-love. This is obvious where we implore forgiveness for our sins our support in our tribulations. But in the long run it is perhaps even more apparent in our growing – for it ought to be growing – awareness that our whole being by its very nature is one vast need; incomplete, preparatory, empty yet cluttered, crying out for Him who can untie things that are now knotted together and tie up things that are still dangling loose.

It is no accident that the most basic of all prayers is *Kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy.

## 5. The patience of childrearing

Finally, “be patient with them all.” All three kinds of people take a lifetime. (The mature also take a lifetime.) Each of the three types can be tough. When you are charged with

caring for your younger siblings, they will inevitably test you. You *yourself* might get frustrated (unruly) or discouraged (fainthearted) or feel overwhelmed at the impossibility of the task (weak).

The unruly keep getting out of line and into trouble. Their problems are rarely solved by a one and done confrontation. The unruly are continually tempted to cross the lines, in one way or other. They have typical sins of impulsiveness and stubbornness, forgetting that God is God, and that He gets first and last say. They often have to be chased down, brought up short, and turned around. When their hearts are fundamentally tender towards God, they receive correction, and remember again. As they grow in self-knowledge, they consciously acknowledge their need for accountability and challenge. Even when they walk away from your counseling ministry (with hostile accusations),

same scale. Just as their capabilities for good are small, so their ability to do evil is limited.

Finally, “Be patient with them all.” Like each of the previous sentences, this simply means what it says. Nothing fancy. Hang in there for the long haul. Persistently love all kinds of people. Never fail to be constructive and merciful, no matter what another person is like. Take the initiative to never give up on anyone. Love is patient.

Patience, too, is not only about ‘them all’, those you seek to help. It is about all of us. “Love is patient” heads the list of characteristics for a reason. And God’s patience with His children is one of His least acknowledged attributes. The fact that this is a communicable attribute that He is more than willing to pass on to us means that ministry to every sort of person will call you to grow in this undergirding characteristic of wise love.

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## Our typical struggles arise because we are headstrong, or easily rattled and disheartened, or simply limited.

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and walk out of your church or must be excommunicated for unrepentant sin, you are still called to be patient. You may get another chance in two years or ten. There’s a long term quality even when things don’t immediately resolve.

The fainthearted are continually tempted to give up. They have the sins of forgetting that God is good, and that God is purposefully in control, that life’s difficulties are going somewhere good. They often have to be drawn out of their unbelief and given fresh hope and fresh encouragement. The fainthearted have a tendency to forget what was so vivid yesterday, and to grow disheartened in the face of the same old pressures.

The weak may never be able to get certain things, and may always need protection and a helping hand. You are in it for the long haul. They have a limited ability to make progress. They take time because they always need to be cared for, covered, provided for. Their sins are the same as other people’s, but often not on the

### *Relative Terms*

We have been talking in ‘types’, as if they existed in pure form. But these categories are meant to shape our thinking so that we approach the tasks of ministry thoughtfully and appropriately. They are not absolute categories. We have already muddied the waters by noting that all of us have all the tendencies, especially with respect to God and our need for Him to do all of 5:14 with us at different times. But it perhaps can be said that each of us tends towards one of these three categories more than the others. Our typical struggles arise because we are headstrong, or easily rattled and disheartened, or simply limited.

At any one time, however, any one of us fits in the shoes of any of these types. So 5:14 is not given so that you ‘type’ a person with a fixed label. View them as functional categories, as ways of thinking about whatever is going on in front of you. These are only tendencies, not fixed definitions. If you use these too rigidly, then someone you’ve typed as fainthearted will

take you off guard in a moment of stubborn willfulness. Or someone you've mentally identified as "unruly" will be grief-stricken and fearful, and you won't adapt.

It must also be said that the same person may quickly morph. Again, the image of children is so helpful. A disabled child (hold on) can be headstrong (admonish), and at other times very disheartened (comfort). A rebel (admonish) may come under conviction of messing up his life and feel hopeless (comfort).

First Thessalonians 5:14 is a passage describing and calling for the flexibility of wisdom. Keep thinking down this path. You realize that even these three 'kinds' of people come in as many variations as there are people. A product line with *three* standardized fast foods—your admonishment shtick, your encouragement promise, your program to hold on—still doesn't capture the flexibility called for in personalizing ministry. After all, no two rule-breakers cross the line in exactly the same places

### *Tendencies of Counselors*

Every would-be helper has certain tendencies and habits when it comes to either challenging or comforting or helping. One way of approaching others comes more easily than other ways.

Some people are natural confronters. They see clearly, and call it like it is. They aim to solve problems, and aim to bring about constructive change. They excel at identifying true and false, right and wrong, loving and unloving. They are unafraid to speak up and speak out, to challenge people who cross the lines. They don't mind taking part in constructive conflict, when others avoid an obvious problem by denial, pretending, and looking the other way. They are likely to define the counseling process as primarily a matter of implementing personal change. Counseling offers reeducation to correct lifestyle flaws. Because God says, "Repent, trust, and obey," the counselor speaks candidly.

Others are natural comforters. Their

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A product line with *three* standardized fast foods—your admonishment shtick, your encouragement promise, your program to hold on—still doesn't capture the flexibility called for in personalizing ministry.

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or for the exact same reasons. The rules of engagement for admonishing provide overall guidelines; but particularizing to the case at hand wrestles in the details. And what about those who lose heart in the face of trouble, intimidation, uncertainty, loss, failure? 'Encourage' is always the call. But people quail in the face of different threats, and they quail in different ways. An eight-year-old girl who has been beaten and betrayed is at sea in a different way from an aged, bereaved man who wonders if his life matters for anything anymore. And of course it is no different in taking hold of the disabled and unable. You take hold of lives in different places. Pre-literate infants are not adult illiterates. Alzheimer's is not Asperger's. Those with a limited emotional range are different from those with limited intellectual capacity. All are weak. You protect in different ways. You adapt your words and actions to the differing abilities and disabilities.

hearts go out to strugglers, to the fearful, anxious, and depressed. They sympathize with the experience of hardship. They are gentle. They are able to identify hopeful things in the darkness of another person's life, and to see how God's promises speak fresh hope. They aim for consolation and hope. They willingly come next to those who feel overwhelmed and discouraged. In attitudes and words, they communicate sympathy to those who feel worn out, who are overwhelmed, who wonder how they can put one foot in front of the other. They are likely to define the counseling process as primarily a matter of consoling those who are hurting, comforting those who have suffered at the hands of others. Counseling offers a caring and attentive ear, consolation, the knowledge that one has not been abandoned. Because God says, "Fear not, I am with you," the counselor comes near.

Still others intuitively identify practical

needs and reach out to help. They naturally hold on to the weak. They are willing to sacrifice. They don't look down on people with extreme limitations. They have gifts of mercy and endurance in caring for people who simply need help over the long haul. Perhaps they participate in a ministry to mentally retarded adults, to street people, in the nursery, with refugees. They care. They keep it simple and keep it up. They get practical. They know the importance of touch and attitude and consistency and constructive routines and simple words. They seek to maximize the abilities of those with many inabilities. Because "the Lord is good to all, and His mercy is over all that He has made," the counselor seeks to do good.

Is any one of these wrong? Is any one of these the only good thing? All three are good. Each is needed in its place. To some degree, each is needed by every person. Probably each of us who does ministry tends towards one of the characteristic forms of helping. It's your gift. But left to itself, it remains unbalanced. That is part of why God has given us 5:14, to keep us from being blinded by our best gifts. We are called to broaden our vision, to work out of our comfort zone. A hammer thinks everything is a nail; a blanket, treats everyone as shivering; a wheelchair thinks everyone needs a lift. But wisdom sees people for what they are and gives what is needed.

In fact, whole churches, denominations, movements, and ministries have tendencies to capitalize on one strength, while ignoring all that is needed. Perhaps your church majors on confronting falsehood and evil, but doesn't do so well with the discouraged or with the victims of social injustice. (If so, your 'admonishing' will likely lack something of the grace and generosity of biblical confrontation. Even the unruly feel pain that God will comfort.) Maybe your church is tenderhearted towards the fainthearted and wounded, but doesn't have the backbone to take on the sinners or to hang in there with the disabled. (If so, even the 'encouragement' will likely lack the substance and truth of biblical tenderness. Even the wounded have sins to repent.) Maybe your denomination is good at stepping up on behalf of the needy in society, but can neither comfort the disturbed nor

disturb the comfortable. (If so, even your 'holding on' will likely lack the heart-searching and heart-transforming power of biblical mercy ministry. Even the weak experience their own sins and sufferings.)

And, of course, patience can fail in any of these situations. We may be patient with the sorts of people who fit our ministry strengths, but impatient with those who reveal our ministry weaknesses. You might give up on the willful people, frustrated that they often won't respond to your kindness, and won't change. You might give up on the troubled souls, burning out because they don't change very fast. You might give up on the dependent people, wearing out because they can't change much. It's good to be aware of strengths and weaknesses, both personal and corporate. It alerts you to where you most need to hear Jesus' voice.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, 1 Thessalonians 5:14 aims to make you familial with your brothers and sisters. Paul pushes you to adapt to varied people, varied conditions, varied struggles. The Lord aims to strengthen what's already your strength—"Excel still more" in the love you've already learned to give (4:1, 9f—and grow you up in the areas of love where you are weak. None of us hits on all four cylinders: admonish, encourage, hold on, be patient. We can learn from others who are strong where we are weak. Learning to do all four well is a lifelong learning curve for each of us and all of us together.

We have to be able to do things that seem mutually exclusive. Because none of us tends to be good at all four, our churches and ministries need to consciously cultivate all four. We will specialize individually, rightly gravitating to certain aspects of Christ's overall ministry. But each of us also should aim to diversify in the skills of love. And all of us put together will express all that is called for as we learn to walk in this familial paradigm for counseling relationships.

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Given what we have seen in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, it is fitting that this issue of

*JBC* focuses on counseling children and their families. Themes from the previous pages find concrete application in the topical articles that follow. You will find these articles rich with first-hand experience. They pay close attention to the many dimensions of human experience and human problems. They are radiant with the Jesus Christ who walks where we walk. They deal carefully with our kind: the unruly, the disheartened, the weak... all who by God's grace might learn to thrive. They manifest the patience that arises from humility and faith.

"Helping the Parents of an Angry Child" equips a counselor to work with parents. A parent growing up into a thriving child of God will learn how to raise an unruly child. Mike Emler and I did not frame this article with 1 Thessalonians in mind. But because patient love continually works with angers, fears, and weaknesses, you will witness the familial mode of counseling in action.

Paul Tripp's "Angry Teens" speaks directly to parents with words of hope, instruction, encouragement, and challenge. It complements the previous article. "The wonderful counselor is working on everybody in every situation—even with angry teens and their families." That is no pious theory. It is a reality walked out in the most broken situations imaginable.

"Counseling the Adopted Child," by Julie Smith Lowe, considers the unique (and common) struggles of adopted children. She richly describes a great diversity of experiences and reactions. She brings the inner world of children into view. And she makes redemption in Jesus speak specifically and appropriately to the points of struggle.

Grief provides a striking case of how human weakness, disheartenment, and willfulness often converge. In "Helping the Grieving Child or Teenager," Judy Blore focuses in particular on the acting out that often erupts in the context of loss and sorrow. It takes realism, fearlessness, and a deft touch to bring truth to bear in the midst of chaos. This article aims to help you keep your bearings.

Finally, we present the transcription of a sermon "It's All about Him" by Ron Lutz from Psalm 96. His opening anecdote is the only child-specific reference he makes. But the grown-up truth that this psalm expresses is

exactly what children of God of any age most need. Why are we here, after all? It is that we might get out of our self-preoccupation and might learn to love. And what is the only true sanity and maturity? It is that we learn to sing the high praises of Him who is truly worthy of glad adoration.

When Paul said, "Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks," he called all the brothers and sisters to live out the realities expressed by all the psalms. We give thanks because God does us good. We pray because we feel need. We rejoice when we see the face of the one we love. Joy is the emotion of reunion and union. Joy is the final word, for when the family becomes family forever. When all the hard roads lie behind, when all the hard work of redemption is complete, then joy is made complete. A crescendo builds towards Psalm 150. So I think it is warranted to say, "Now joy, intercession, and gratitude abide, these three; but the greatest of these is joy." Why should you even attempt the hard, slow things that these articles commend to your attention? "We work with you for your joy" (2 Cor. 1:24). That is the goal of familial counseling.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul uniquely speaks to the church in Thessalonica as brothers and sisters—not as any of the other ways to name a believer in Christ. The word *adelphoi*/'brethren' is used repeatedly in these short chapters.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the references both to distracting influences and to distracting impulses: Thessalonians 2:3, 5, 14-18; 3:1-5; 4:3-8, 13; 5:3-6, 15, 20-22.

<sup>3</sup> "Brothers" introduces 5:12-13, which addresses the whole family. We are to honor those who look out for our welfare, and are to live at peace with each other. "Brothers" then introduces 5:14-15, which primarily addresses the responsibility of those designated to look out for the welfare of the family. As a secondary application, it applies to all the siblings.

<sup>4</sup> "You don't need me to say/write anything": 1:8; 4:9; 5:1. "You already know this": 1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 11; 3:3, 4; 4:2; 5:2. "You are already doing this": 4:1, 10; 5:11. "You remember": 2:9. "You saw": 2:10.