

The Good Shepherd Institute: Christ's Gifts for Healing the Soul
Concordia Theological Seminary
Ft. Wayne, Indiana
November 7, 2000

THE ART OF SPIRITUAL EVALUATION:
A Framework for Understanding the Health of the Soul and Its Cure
By Harold L. Senkbeil

Fad or Opportunity?

As the Third Millennium of the Christian era begins, the church and the world appear steering by paradoxically different courses – in many ways, the culture seems more spiritually inclined than the church. One common characteristic of postmodern society is a fascination for what goes by the name of “spirituality.” It’s as if the spiritual dimension of human experience has been newly discovered; suddenly matters of the soul and spirit have come back into fashion. Spiritual exercises long ago relegated to the dusty closet of antiquity are now enthusiastically embraced by a spiritually thirsty public. Just the other day a young twenty-something told me excitedly about discovering a new book that had opened up new dimensions of spirituality for him. His new found mentor? Meister Eckardt, the great mystic of the thirteenth century. Almost overnight, the age of reason is losing its iron grip on our culture. Since the late Middle Ages our western world has never known a time of such wide fascination with spiritual realities beyond range of sensory investigation. Unfortunately, the new spirituality craze unfortunately seems to be more focused on experience than truth. Perhaps that is why little if any of the popular trend toward “spirituality” is informed by Christian orthodoxy and the classical tradition of the pastoral care of the soul.

Equally tragic is the church’s seeming ambivalence toward the cultural doors now standing wide open. Since the Enlightenment, the church has been busily selling its spiritual birthright to the world. The church growth movement has depleted the spiritual resources of the church still further. Rather than serving as stewards of the mysteries of God, today’s spiritual gurus seem intent instead on the business of selling God to self-fixated customers, using worldly tools borrowed from the social sciences and the advertising and entertainment industries. The transforming power of God’s Holy Spirit operating through His Word and the Holy Sacraments has faded significantly in the church’s understanding of its own identity and mission. Self improvement defined both morally and psychologically has gradually taken the place of the care of the soul in the church’s life and work.

What is Soul Care?

The present study is offered in the conviction that Soul Care must once again become the focus of the church’s life – not merely out of faithfulness to God and His Word, but also out of compassion for the number of broken and wounded human souls increasing everywhere. With western culture in intellectual and moral freefall, the devil, world and flesh have mounting impact on the spiritual health of human beings. More and more

people approach the fellowship of the church not merely bearing spiritual scars, but open wounds. The tragedy of marital and family decay, sexual and emotional abuse, chemical addiction and bondage, emotional handicap and paralysis force us at this juncture in the church's life to look carefully toward a recovery of the faithful and effective traditions of spiritual care.

Eugene Peterson deplors the secularization of pastoral care, which has nearly wiped out consciousness of the cure of the soul among pastors and parishioners alike:

If pastors become accomplices in treating every child as a problem to be figured out, every spouse as a problem to be dealt with, every clash of wills in choir or committee as a problem to be adjudicated, we abdicate our most important work which is directing worship in the traffic, discovering the presence of the cross in the paradoxes and chaos between Sundays, calling attention to the "splendor in the ordinary," and, most of all, teaching a life of prayer to our friends and companions in the pilgrimage.¹

What he means by "directing worship in the traffic" is helping people to see their daily lives in this world as a continuation of the church's earthly pilgrimage toward her heavenly home – finding health and strength for the ailments of the soul in the gospel and sacraments publicly proclaimed and administered and shaping the faith and practice of every member of the body of Christ in the world.

Jay Rochelle, in his introduction to Bonhöffer's *Spiritual Care*, identifies three components in the care of the soul:

1. Invocation – meditation and prayer; calling God into our presence by Word and by prayer.
2. Revocation – the exposure of false gods and exorcism of demons "by which we construct false selves apart from the sustaining word of God."²
3. Evocation – conversation aimed at awareness of God's presence in a person's life; reaching below the surface of a constructed ego for the soul – the person who is named by the Word.

Bonhöffer reminds us that the pastor as a physician of the soul is not the source, but the agent of soul care.

Caring for souls is a proclamation to the individual which is part of the office of preaching. It is not a matter of "spiritual direction"; Asmussen's concept is misleading. In confidence that God alone cares for the soul, the preacher conducts spiritual care. "Spiritual direction" is carried out on a place between two people, one of whom subjects himself to the other. Spiritual care, on the other hand, comes down "from above," from God to the human being.³

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, "Curing Souls: the Forgotten Art," in *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 65.

² Jay C. Rochelle, Introduction, *Spiritual Care* [Bonhöffer] (Fortress Press, 1985), p. 26.

³ Dietrich Bonhöffer, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

For the purposes of this study, “spiritual care,” “cure of the soul,” and “soul care” will be used interchangeably to refer to that pastoral practice whereby the healing ministrations of God’s Holy Spirit working through gospel and sacrament are brought to the individual sin-sick soul. This is not to set aside the central and ordinary means by which the health of the soul is addressed: public preaching and administration of sacraments in the Divine Service. Rather, here the focus on the pastoral care of individuals will consciously seek to guide the pastor in attending to the genuine needs of the soul who comes for help. Frequently the stated needs of an individual result from misdiagnosis or self-prescribed solutions that have little or no connection with the actual condition of the soul before God.

I. What is Spiritual Evaluation?

The pastor as curate of souls, like the Good Shepherd, has his eye on the flock. He is always concerned: 1) to feed them properly, 2) to defend them against danger, 3) to heal their diseases. He is ever alert not merely to guide the sheep into good pasture and defend them against predators which threaten to snatch and destroy them, but also he seeks lost sheep, bears up those who are weak, and binds up the wounds of the sick and injured.

The care of the flock and the care of the sheep overlap in this: that what the pastor does for the whole he does for each. Spiritual evaluation has its place in feeding and defending the sheep, but it is central to their health and healing. A physician of souls must learn the skill of identifying and evaluating spiritual ailments if he is to help the soul find health and healing in God through the medicines of His word and sacrament.

Physical pain usually indicates a bodily ailment. Spiritual and emotional pain, however, can indicate either spiritual health or spiritual malady. Distress of soul, for example, is the natural result of sin, and in the healthy soul such spiritual distress always accompanies repentance, teaching the sinner to despair of self and find life in the Gospel alone. Spiritual “pain” in such circumstances is actually an indication of spiritual health:

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ...Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. [Psalm 51:2-3, 7]

On the other hand the same symptom can easily indicate alienation from God due to impenitence:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. [Psalm 32:3-4]

The faithful soul also experiences distress because of the ungodliness of the wicked:

I say to God my Rock, “why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?” Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. [Psalm 42:9-11]

Likewise spiritual distress is a healthy response to abuse at the hands of enemies:

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted. [Psalm 77:1-2]

Listening to the Heart

Since distress of soul is common to so much of human experience, the first step in spiritual evaluation involves listening. The faithful shepherd of souls knows that if he is to guide the sheep under his charge safely through the perils of this world on their spiritual journey, he must have the God-given grace to listen with two ears: with one ear he listens to the heart of his parishioner, but the other ear is tuned to higher frequencies: with that ear He listens to the Word of God and with his own heart he seeks the will of God. In this way the curate develops the art of spiritual conversation, allowing the soul to unburden itself in the presence of someone whose care surpasses mere human compassion: *Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.* [Acts 20:28] Such spiritual listening therefore transcends empathy; the goal is to evaluate the health of the soul and to provide such nutrients and cures as its maladies may suggest. Bonhöffer writes: “The proper end of all this (spiritual) conversation is confession, the shortest and simplest form. Then distress will no longer be the topic of conversation but sin.”⁴

By Word and By Prayer

If bodily ailments are frequently complex in origin, spiritual disease is even more complex. Therefore the physician of the soul proceeds cautiously, with much prayer. His primary tool in both evaluation and cure is the Word of God. He begins in a catechetical manner. The sin-sick soul must be instructed by the Word of God if it is to find language to give voice to its complaint. Having lost a Biblical worldview and Biblical categories, most persons describe their maladies in emotional or psychological terms. Lovingly the curate teaches the vocabulary of spiritual care, so that the soul can be led to more insightful self-examination – thus better prepared to divulge the shame and/or confess the sin that lies at the core of all spiritual illness.

The heart struggling under the impact of sin needs the bright light of the Word of God to illuminate the condition of the soul. The clarity of that Word discloses what would otherwise remain hidden. *The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.* [Psalm 119:130] Wounds of the soul, no less than wounds to the body, often need to be lanced; in this case the Word of God serves as scalpel before it serves as balm. Penitents must be warned that the truth of the condition of the soul is painful to the new man and devastating to the old Adam; rarely is spiritual care a pleasant experience. Much ugliness is often uncovered in the process; all is laid bare by the power of the living God.

The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. [Hebrews 4:12]

⁴ Bonhöffer, p. 35.

Because of the very nature of spiritual care, both pastor and penitent must have reverence and humility before the Word of God if the soul is to find genuine healing, otherwise the entire process would be avoided as invasive inquiry into personal matters. Pastors must hold such private conversations in strictest confidence. The seal of the confessional extends beyond the narrow confines of Individual Confession, embracing also the spiritual care which not only identifies the maladies of the soul but often also surfaces underlying sin to be confessed.

Still, the physician of the soul is no spiritual voyeur. He will not pry into matters that lie beyond his authorization. He has no authority beyond that given him by Christ Jesus the Lord of the church; he bears but one office: preacher of the Word of God. The two-fold impact of that Word as Law and Gospel is the pastor's continual concern; he will sacrifice neither for the sake of the other, for as both are kept in tension God the Holy Spirit does His curative work. The pastor knows his sole remedy lies not in the process of the articulation of sins, but rather in the forgiveness of sins. Therefore his sole interest in hearing confession is that he may pronounce absolution in the name of God the Holy Trinity.

Body, Soul, and Spirit

The pastor is not a psychologist nor physician. His single charge lies in the arena of spiritual evaluation and the cure of the souls entrusted to his care. Still, those souls have minds and bodies. Often, spiritual evaluation can be profitably enhanced by pertinent information regarding the person's physical or mental health. Both have profound influence on the soul's condition.

The mind and body are the instruments through which the soul manifests itself in time. Therefore the care of souls cannot be practiced in the deepest sense if either the spiritual or the psychological aspect of man's nature is emphasized or cultivated at the expense of the other.⁵

II. When is Spiritual Evaluation Appropriate?

Current parish life seems to have pastors so busy running the organizational structure of the congregation that they have little energy to devote to spiritual care. Consequently, parishioners have learned to seek out their pastors only in great emergencies, usually prefacing their contact with: "Pastor, I know you're busy, but..." What follows is usually a request for counsel or advice in dealing with a difficult situation. Few contemporary Christians consciously seek care for the soul, though they are more than willing to attend to their bodily health.

Pastors who take seriously their responsibility for soul cure will find opportunities present themselves at every turn: in teaching, preaching, catechesis, sick calls, and requests for counsel. Even mere requests for advice may present opportunities for spiritual conversation. Spiritual conversation can lead to instruction, instruction to repentance, and repentance may open the door to confession, absolution and healing.

⁵ Gote Bergsten, *Pastoral Psychology: a study in the care of souls* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), p. 31.

Spiritual care is not a one-time confrontation. The faithful seelsorger follows the thread of the cure of the soul through each and every contact with his parishioners throughout their lifetimes.

Likewise, the faithful pastor will find occasional opportunity for direct communication with his parishioners regarding spiritual evaluation and cure. Substantive changes in life vocation (marriage, birth of a child, death of a parent or spouse, etc.), physical or mental illness, hardship, success, and many other situations in life present unique occasions to explore the health and healing of the soul. Likewise, requests for doctrinal instruction or desire to explore more deeply Christian piety and the spiritual disciplines are similar opportunities. Crisis situations, or circumstances which lead the parishioner to say: “Pastor, **I can’t** stand this, do this, understand this...” present open doors for spiritual evaluation and cure.

III. What is the *Process* of Spiritual Evaluation?

The pastor who seeks to learn the art of the cure of souls begins cautiously and humbly; he must have the heart and soul of John the Baptist: *I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom.* (John 3:28-29) The pastor, while compassionate and empathetic to every soul, consciously remembers that the soul is pledged to Another. The pastor is not a suitor for the soul, he comes to the soul as a friend of the bridegroom. No love but Christ’s will unlock the bondage of sin and heal the sin-sick soul. Therefore the pastor’s goal in soul cure is to bring the soul to Christ and Christ to the soul. His every word, gesture, and act in dealing with the soul is on behalf of the heavenly bridegroom: *He must increase; I must decrease.* (John 3:30)

Gregory Great in his monumental manual on pastoral care writes:

For that man is an enemy to his Redeemer who on the strength of the good works he performs, desires to be loved by the Church, rather than by Him. Indeed, a servant is guilty of adulterous thought, if he craves to please the eyes of the bride when the bridegroom sends gifts to her by him.⁶

The continuing conversation

As the pastor enters into the process of spiritual evaluation he knows, therefore, that the relationship he enters into with a baptized believer is an established relationship. Christ has been conversing with this soul by means of His Word and Sacrament ever since He claimed it for Himself in baptismal waters. The pastor knows therefore that he comes late to the conversation; he must take time to learn what has gone on in the past before he moves the conversation ahead. Hence the pastor listens carefully; he takes the pulse of the soul, listens to its respiration and the beating of its heart before he ventures to speak. And when he speaks he knows he must echo the healing words of Jesus Christ, the chief Bishop and Shepherd of souls.

Eugene Peterson suggests a helpful posture in pastoral conversation is to regard it as one in a series of meetings between the soul and God.

⁶ Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care* (trans. Henry David, New York: Newman Press, 1950), p. 75.

The cure of souls takes time to read the minutes of the previous meeting, a meeting more likely than not at which I was not present. ...Like one who walks in late to a meeting, I am entering a complex situation in which God has already said decisive words and acted in decisive ways. My work is not necessarily to announce that but to discover what he is doing and live appropriately with it.⁷

Medical charts are indispensable for physicians of the body. Physicians of the soul are interested in the history of the soul's care as well. Therefore spiritual evaluation begins with questions designed not so much to discover what previous pastors have done as to discover what spiritual ailments are chronic in this soul, what pressing temptations of devil, world, or flesh are impinging on the soul's health, and what God has been doing about it.

When a person seeks pastoral care these factors are rarely uppermost in the person's mind and heart. Yet such things must be discovered if healing is to begin or continue. Therefore the pastor begins, after friendly small talk, with a gentle opening question, such as "How can I help you today?" Spiritual care begins in earnest once an issue or request is presented for pastoral attention.

Spiritual evaluation is best understood as a two-stage process. First, the pastor seeks to understand the presenting symptoms in view of the over-all health of the soul. However, the pastor who knows the sole remedy for sin is the forgiveness of sins will see this stage as merely preliminary. The heart and center of the care of the soul is the absolution of the sinner in the Name of Jesus Christ. Bonhöffer writes:

The goal of all spiritual care is the confession that we are sinners. This confession actualizes itself preeminently in the confessional. So the confessional is the essential focus for all spiritual care. The invitation to confession is the invitation to become a Christian.⁸

Individual confession and absolution, long now abandoned through generations of neglect, is once again surfacing in the public consciousness of the church. The increasing impact of godlessness and wickedness in our culture will increasingly drive us toward its recovery in the decades ahead. Still, for most people at this point in history, the practice is regarded as a novelty and with some suspicion. Therefore the pastor must proceed carefully and slowly, helping the soul to comprehend the realities hidden behind the forgiveness of sins announced in the Name and stead of Jesus Christ by His called servant. Through careful catechesis, the soul can be led to trust this Word as *valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself*. (Small Catechism) This, however, may be a long-range goal; it takes some time for most souls to be led to seek this form of spiritual care.

To begin with

Therefore preliminary spiritual care is designed to increase the soul's sensitivity to sin and grace, to Law and Gospel. Once sin is identified, it can be confessed. As long as it

⁷ Peterson, p. 61.

⁸ Bonhöffer, p. 60.

remains hidden, it continues to fester. “Sin creates detritus in the soul. The serpent must stick its head out of its hole in order for it to be clubbed.”⁹

Pastoral inquiry regarding spiritual disciplines is one way to begin spiritual evaluation. “How frequently do you worship?” “How often do you pray?” “What do you pray about?” “What happens when you worship?” “When you pray?” The goal of such questions is not so much to establish existing patterns of piety as to uncover dimensions of spiritual health. The soul that removes itself from public worship and private prayer is in jeopardy. The life-giving means of God’s Holy Spirit are the vehicles of the soul’s salvation and prayer is its respiration – that is, what the soul receives from God in His Word it breathes back to Him in prayer. Shallow respiration is therefore a possible indication of spiritual malady. Fear or dread of God often masks the defilement of wickedness, which must be brought into the light of day if the soul is to be cleansed and made whole.

On the other hand, infrequent or shallow prayer can also indicate spiritual ignorance, not necessarily sickness. The healthy soul desires, like the disciples, to be taught to pray. Therefore in the course of the care of the soul the faithful curate will see that his parishioners learn new dimensions of prayer.

Naming the enemy

The uneasy soul often assumes its problem lies in external circumstances; the truth is usually closer to home. *The heart is desperately wicked above all things.* (Jeremiah 17:9) While the faithful shepherd of souls listens patiently to a litany of unsettling circumstances, he is ever alert to signals which betray the unique temptations of the situation which war against the soul. Issues of idolatry, false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice are the true enemies of the soul. These must be disclosed if the soul is to find health or healing.

First the bad news

The confession of sins means the death of the old Adam, who always protests that he is too young to die. That is, sick souls rest securely in their sins, justifying the anger, lust, or envy harbored within the heart on the basis of external circumstances. Like all addicts, sinners assume they need their sins in order to live – not realizing that in actuality such sin is poison to the soul. Giving up such sin in confession is therefore often a painful process. The faithful shepherd prepares the soul for such pain, helping the sinner to see that shame is the expected sensation at the exposure of a soul stripped of its excuses. He also prepares the soul to don the royal clothing of Christ’s own righteousness bestowed in the absolution - pronounced in Christ’s stead and by his command.

The conscientious pastor will be eager to emphasize the sacred vow of silence he has taken regarding confession. New penitents can hardly bear the shame of articulating their confession, and they must be led to see that their confession will be held in strictest confidence. Furthermore, the confessor will impress upon the penitent that the confession will have absolutely no bearing on their future relationship. It is Christ

⁹ Bonhöffer, p. 63.

who hears the confession through the pastor; the pastor consciously sets such sin out of mind and heart just as Christ has buried that sin in His grave.

The soul that desires healing must be tenderly instructed in the art of self-examination, just as preventative medicine teaches patients to identify potential signals of heart disease or cancer. Self-examination is conducted on a grid with two points of reference: God's Law and one's own vocation. Every Christian is subject to every command of God, but those commands take on different nuances in light of the unique situation in life to which the Christian is called. Therefore the soul must be led to see its multiple vocation (son, daughter, husband or wife within the family) (employer or worker on the job) (preacher or hearer in the church) before it can effectively examine itself on the basis of each of the Commandments. Such rigorous self-examination is an art learned all life long, but leads to greater health for the soul as sin and its effects are laid bare before God for His healing and salvation.

The walking wounded

Just as physically injured persons seek the highest measure of health given their injury, so it is with the spiritually wounded. The physician of souls seeks to guide the soul to the greatest measure of spiritual health possible given the damage done by sin and its aftermath. The curate must remember that grievous damage can be done to the soul by the sins of others as well. Here presenting symptoms of rage, despair, or shame often mask deep wounds inflicted by physical or mental abuse. Intensive spiritual therapy building on the baptismal bath of regeneration, holy absolution, and the sanctifying effect of the most holy blood of Christ in His sacrament move the victimized soul toward healing, hope, and recovery.

It must be remembered that while the heart and center of the faith is justification by grace through faith for the sake of Christ, souls defiled and polluted by their own or others' sins find their health and healing not merely in justification by grace, but also in sanctification by grace. That is, the pastor must help such shame-filled hearts to see that their holiness rests not on what they have done nor on what has been done to them, but on who they are in Christ Jesus, whom God has made not merely our redemption and righteousness, but also our *holiness*. (1 Corinthians 1:30)

The Spirit's Power

It is not for nothing that the church's ordination rites include the prayer for the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier. For He is the promised Paraclete who brings to the church on earth all the good gifts sent forth from God the Father and earned by God the Son. "All that the Father has is Mine," said our Lord. "Therefore I told you that He will take from what is Mine and give it to you." This is the essence of the cure of souls. This is what the called ministers of Christ do by His Divine Command: they deliver all the good gifts sent forth from the Father and the Son by means the gospel preached and the sacraments administered in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, whom we confess to be both LORD and Giver of Life. *Vivificantem*: He who fills with life: the Life-giver. The health of the human soul is found in the very life of God. And while we share already now in that life of God by the sacred means of the Spirit – the gospel preached and the

sacraments administered – we see here below but dimly, through a glass darkly. The fullness of His glory face to face lies in the glorious future of all the sons of God. Here below on planet earth we have no continuing city, but we are looking for the city that is to come – the city with foundations, whose maker and builder is God.¹⁰

It is not for nothing that our catechism teaches eschatology under the third article. For while the source of our salvation is God the Father and the foundation of our salvation is God the Son, the application of our salvation is God the Holy Spirit. The direction of our salvation is definitely from top on down. While like the citizens of Babel we insist on climbing up to God, God shows His love in this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. While we cannot go to Him, He has come to us. This is the direction of our salvation, and this is the direction of our sanctification as well. As the Son was made incarnate not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God, so also the sanctifying Spirit makes holy not by making us more like God, but rather enlightening us with His gifts – that is, bringing God to us, making us partakers of His heavenly holiness¹¹ through His earthly means. Therefore He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.

So for now the Holy Spirit continues to forgive sins in this Christian church, but on the last day He will raise up me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers. This is not only most certainly true, but this truth I would suggest is the context in which we need to work for the cure of souls in the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made us overseers.

Sinners, you see, are forever trying to justify themselves. They frequently come to their pastors asking him for indulgences. They want divine blessing on human pride. We ought not to blame them, for we, too, live in a world saturated by choice and in bondage to self. We know the temptation from our own bitter experience. However, a faithful *seelsorger* does not give what a soul wants, but what that soul truly needs.

Broken and contrite hearts

It ought not to surprise us therefore when troubled parishioners ask us to sanctify their sin. Kindly, but firmly we must lead them to discover that while God does not indulge sin, He does forgive it. He takes the pieces of our broken hearts and builds them new again. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart He does not despise. He brings down rulers from their thrones but lifts up the lowly. While He sends the rich away empty, the hungry He fills with good things.¹²

Therefore in the spiritual care of the perplexed, the faithful shepherd will not answer the first question asked, because the first question is usually not the real issue. While the presenting symptom may well be what brings the hurting soul to a spiritual physician, the true malady usually lies elsewhere. And unless you know the real malady, you cannot bring healing to a sick soul. Like our Lord before us, we will not be made judges of civil

¹⁰ Hebrews 13:14; 11:10

¹¹ Hebrews 12:10

¹² Luke 1:52-53

law. He dealt with the man seeking justice from his brother in the matter of his inheritance by leading him to deeper waters; He showed him vividly that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.¹³ Man's wisdom is not God's wisdom. While the rich man in Christ's parable appeared wise from an earthly point of view, in actuality he was a fool because though he was good at storing up things for himself, he was not rich toward God.

Malady and Medicine

Therefore amid the spiritual bankruptcy of this fallen world, it is the special joy of all the called servants of God to bring eternal riches to every broken and contrite heart, to bring the medicine of immortality to penitent sinners in a dead and dying world. This is why we not only guard and guide the sheep, but we teach them as well. We teach them how to examine themselves before the judgment seat of God so that they confess their sins and receive absolution from His called servants. This is the heart of spiritual care. The creation of a pure heart and the renewal of a steadfast spirit in the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name is the restoration of the joy of the soul's salvation.

IV. Desired Outcomes of Spiritual Evaluation and Cure

The old adage "confession is good for the soul" is only partially correct. The therapeutic effect of Confession is not in getting something off one's chest, but in ridding the soul of sin through the absolving power of the Gospel. Through the process of spiritual evaluation the self-constructed ego is set aside as a pseudo image and the true self emerges: a soul plagued and polluted by sin, but created ever new in the image and likeness of Christ by the re-creating power of the Gospel and Sacraments.

Such a renewed and enlivened soul finds new meaning in suffering as the process by which God is at work to identify the false gods and belief systems which lie at the heart of every sinner. Suffering therefore becomes not an unfortunate glitch in God's marvelous plan, but rather the sign of the cross – the mark of His saving love.

Above all, spiritual care enables the soul to grow in spiritual understanding by means of the sanctifying Spirit of God. For the living and abiding Word of God is the sword of the Spirit by which sin is laid bare and by which all the assaults and ploys of the Evil One are fended off.

The faithful shepherd of souls, therefore, seeks to grow not in human wisdom but in the true charisms of the Spirit – i.e. skills in identifying the ailments and cures of the soul and ministry to sick and broken souls by means of gospel, sacrament, and prayer. For if God's created gifts are sanctified by Word and by Prayer¹⁴, how much more the souls of men He made in His own image? The pastor seeks not to impress his parishioners with his great learning or personality, but to humbly grow in grace, to comprehend always more and more of the length, height, depth and width of God the Father's love in Christ Jesus His Son, to learn to listen with God's own heart to wounded, sin-sick souls, and

¹³ Luke 12:15

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 4:4-5

only then to speak. But when an experienced seelsorger speaks, it is not with words of human wisdom, but *in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words*. (1 Corinthians 2:13) Such skills are not taught in the classroom, but learned from meditation on the Word of God, through much suffering, and in fervent prayer.

Rev. Harold L Senkbeil, STM
Elm Grove Evangelical Lutheran Church
10/27/2000