Helping the Good Shepherd

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An Ethic of Relationships

One brief way of describing the change which has taken place in me is to say that in my early professional years I was asking the question: How can I treat, or cure, or change this person? Now I would phrase the question in this way: How can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his own personal growth?

—CARL ROGERS, “BECOMING A PERSON,” 1956

DISCUSSION OF THE RELATIVE MERITS of Rogerian methods dominated the postwar pastoral counseling literature and was driven mostly by the worrisome nature of Rogerian theories. Even though the earliest advocates of Rogerian therapy and the ethic of self-realization had tried to frame them in Christian terms, tying them to familiar themes such as marriage and democracy and the action of the Holy Spirit, talking so much about self-realization and autonomy made some pastoral counselors uncomfortable. It sounded selfish and it put them in an awkward position—non-directive therapy undermined their moral authority and, not surprisingly, they did not necessarily want to let go of that authority. The argument about the legitimacy of Rogerian therapy played out most prominently in the context of a discussion about marriage, divorce, and sex. It was a logical beginning point for the discussion, since marriage had been claimed by Rogerians as the ideal context for self-realization and was also historically a subject on which ministerial authority had been undisputed. Champions of the non-directive method painted the consequences of directive therapy in baleful terms, while more directive counselors complained that non-directive therapy did not work. The majority of pastoral counselors struggled to find some middle ground that more often than not led them to a style of counseling that bordered on the manipulative.
To combat the sense that too much autonomy was dangerous and to remodel their relationship to their parishioners without returning to pre-war moralism, pastoral counselors began to explore in greater detail the significance of the therapeutic relationship and then to articulate an “ethic of relationships.” They relied particularly on the theology of Martin Buber and Paul Tillich. Both placed authentic relationships at the center of their thinking. In the evolving liberal moral sensibility, the individual’s needs continued to be paramount and the individual’s freedom to make choices remained sacrosanct; but in this newly developing ethic of relationships, the individual was also responsible for how those choices would affect other people.

Marriage and Ministerial Authority

Discussion of the role of ministerial authority in counseling centered on marriage, divorce, and sex for a number of reasons. Perhaps most obviously, everyone was talking about marriage in the 1950s. Academic and public discourse in general buzzed with talk about the soundness of marriage in the United States and the social utility of marriage. Given their ongoing concern about professional status, pastoral counselors could hardly ignore the discussion. The drive to promote marriage originated, among both pastoral counselors and their secular colleagues, in part because the institution seemed to be under assault. Two facets of 1950s life led pastoral counselors to believe that the institution of heterosexual, monogamous marriage needed to be defended. First, they pointed to Alfred Kinsey’s two works on human sexuality. Almost every article that pastoral counselors wrote about sex in the 1950s, especially early in the decade, began with a reference to the Kinsey Report. One pastoral counselor devoted an entire book to the subject. Kinsey suggested that married Americans were much more sexually active in illicit and adulterous relationships than anyone had ever imagined. Pastoral counselors did not dispute Kinsey’s findings, but they did fear that his data would be used by the average American as a rationale for sexual license and that adulterous relationships would undermine the very foundations of American marriage. Second, ministers perceived, as did many social analysts of the period, a rise in the number and social acceptability of divorce.
Even if their professional colleagues had not been worried about marriage, divorce, and sex practices, however, the topic would have been important to pastoral counselors because they saw the oversight of these areas as one of their traditional responsibilities. And here it becomes apparent why a discussion of marriage might engender a discussion of ministerial authority. An assortment of articles reminding ministers of the church’s historic role in regulating marriage, divorce, love, and sex appeared regularly in the journal *Pastoral Psychology,* and most of the how-to books published for pastoral counselors took a similar stance.4 Not incidentally, most pastoral counselors took the Bible as their starting point and believed that it provided ample evidence that the church (and by extension the minister) had a mandate to foster and preserve marriage. Thus, when theologian Carl Michalson argued for the importance of marriage because it was “the continuous analogy for the deepest relation in life, the relation between God and man,” he pointed to the Old Testament, with its metaphor of Israel as the bride of God, and to the New Testament, with its similar image of the church as the bride of Christ.5 Given these assumptions, pastoral counselors thought it was logical to claim what they perceived as their historic right to offer their parishioners guidance and direction on these matters.

**The Promise of Non-Directive Therapy**

When pastoral tradition encountered the self-realization ethic, a host of troubling questions arose: What was to be done when the parishioner, in search of self-fulfillment or personal gratification, exercised the very autonomy Rogerian pastoral counselors celebrated and chose to divorce or to pursue an illicit affair? If happy marriage provided the ideal avenue to self-realization, how could divorce—the antithesis of marriage—also provide a means to self-realization? And where did the pastoral counselor’s primary obligation lie? Was it to promote marriage or to promote autonomy? What direction or advice was the pastoral counselor permitted to offer in the context of non-directive therapy? The answer to that last question, of course, was “None.” Pastoral counselors found themselves in a situation in which their authority was being challenged in an area where it had once seemed unassailable.
Almost every pastoral counselor experienced some degree of ambivalence with regard to the new theory and method. Attitudes toward non-directive counseling among pastor counselors generally fell along a spectrum. At one end were those with the least ambivalence, chief among them Seward Hiltner and Carroll Wise, who championed the counselee’s autonomy. They launched an aggressive campaign to convince other ministers that the counselee’s autonomy was paramount and that the non-directive method was the ideal approach to counseling. They couched their argument for a non-directive method in terms of professional survival, a familiar strategy for those who had come to counseling through CPE. When it came to questions of marriage and sex, this group tended to be more tolerant of counselees who chose to divorce.

While non-directive ministers were willing to renounce their own authority on moral matters, they were not suggesting that their parishioners seek advice elsewhere. They clearly opposed advice of all sorts and resisted the idea that consulting the right “expert” (whether minister or psychiatrist) would solve a counselee’s problems. As a corollary, they argued against both a specific standard of Christian behavior that could be enforced by the minister and a specific standard of “normal” behavior that might be enforced by a psychiatrist or psychologist. This made sense, given their conviction that the “inner resources” of the counselee were more reliable than the advice of the best expert. Any sort of judgment or evaluation made by the minister or the psychiatrist was rendered useless in this view.6

In order to persuade their colleagues to adopt the method they believed would most effectively protect counselee autonomy and respect the counselees’ inner resources, Rogerian-influenced pastoral counselors focused on the problems associated with offering advice or direction. As the centerpiece to their argument, they argued that World War II had changed Americans’ moral standards and that American clergy had to respond effectively or lose their constituency. They pointed specifically to young men who were far from home and young women whose husbands were gone from home for long periods of time, both of whom found themselves sometimes in situations that caused them to rethink their moral and ethical standards.7 Non-directive counselors insisted that, in the wake of such changes, American churchgoers would resist...
old-fashioned moralizing and avoid pastoral counseling if they thought they were going to get a lecture—no matter how desperate they might be for help.8 They believed that, in order to entice parishioners to seek ministerial counsel, ministers would have to avoid the kind of counseling that one minister described as a combination of “ordering, forbidding, exhortation and exposition, cheering up and reassurance [and the] use of moral and religious authority.”9 Otherwise, as parish minister Samuel Miller predicted in a 1948 article in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, they would find themselves perceived by their parishioners as “dominating,” possessed of little insight into themselves, and “conventional” in their views.10 Non-directive counselors were convinced that, in a postwar climate of moral contingency, a directive approach would result in dwindling numbers of parishioners.

Proponents of non-directive counseling framed their argument against directive counseling not only in terms of its professional consequences for ministers but also in terms of its consequences for counselees. They asserted that directive counseling almost always sent the intimidated parishioner scampering from the room and could be a roadblock to spiritual and emotional growth and even, in some cases, a threat to the physical well-being of the counselee. Most non-directive counselors opposed directive counseling because they believed that its methods prevented the counselee from achieving insight, personal growth, and self-realization specifically by undermining the possibility for full self-expression. Counselees unable to express themselves fully would never be able to tap into their inner resources and, hence, resolve their difficulties, or so the argument went. Non-directive counselors insisted that even if the counselor happened to stumble onto the “right” interpretation of the counselee’s behavior or the “right” advice, the result would be a counselee who was overly dependent upon the counselor, again blocking self-realization. Encouraging dependence on the counselor violated counselee autonomy and constituted yet another failure in the eyes of non-directive therapists.11

Some counselors argued that, at its worst, the directive methodology was dangerous and could have irrevocable consequences for a counselee’s life, especially when the counselor attempted to force a particular standard of behavior on a distraught human being. To impress upon his readership the dangers of a directive method, Earl H. Furgeson, parish minister at Harvard-Epworth United Methodist Church and later faculty
member at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., described in somewhat melodramatic terms the case of a man who sought counsel from a minister regarding a divorce. He received the proper lecture from his minister about the evils of divorce and the position of the church on the matter. The man then went home, killed his wife, his two children, and himself.\(^{12}\)

Those pastoral counselors who were least ambivalent about the non-directive method refused to allow the specter of divorce to undermine the principle of counselee autonomy or the importance of self-realization as a counseling goal. While they decried the necessity of divorce, they acknowledged that occasionally it represented the best option. The work of Seward Hiltner illustrates the ideas of those pastoral counselors who persisted in seeing the goal of self-realization as crucial. In a 1952 article titled “The Protestant Approach to the Family” (as elsewhere in his work), Hiltner stated unequivocally that the “personal fulfillment” of the individuals in a family was paramount. As an example, Hiltner pointed to the alcoholic father who provided financially for his family but not emotionally and hinted that divorce might be the only way to protect the members of the family.\(^{13}\) Hiltner, and those who shared his beliefs, argued that each marriage had to be considered individually, that some of those marriages were redeemable and others were not, and that sometimes divorce was necessary for the parties’ emotional growth and at other times divorce had just the opposite effect. The context of the individual situation needed to guide the counselee’s decision. This approach suggests the moral flexibility that resulted from placing the emphasis on the individual’s needs. In a framework in which individual autonomy, the counselee’s inner resources, and self-realization were primary, ministerial authority and the minister’s obligation to regulate marriage were deemed less important. The more committed a pastoral counselor was to these Rogerian goals, the less likely he or she would be concerned about ministerial authority. Carroll Wise was another outspoken advocate of the non-directive method. When he described marriage counseling, he insisted that successful pastoral counselors gave their counselees “complete freedom” to arrive at their own solutions even if that meant they chose divorce.\(^{14}\) Wise seemed little troubled by questions about a ministerial obligation to regulate marriage and discourage divorce.
The Problems of Non-Directive Therapy

The spectrum of views among pastoral counselors regarding non-directive counseling ranged only from those who embraced Rogerian ideals eagerly to those who acknowledged their value but were less enthusiastic. Very few pastoral counselors in the 1950s opposed non-directive counseling completely. The majority of them struggled to find a middle ground on the subject. These counselors argued that the non-directive method was not the only legitimate approach to counseling, and they resisted indiscriminate application of the new method while refusing to dismiss it completely. These doubters were clearly on the defensive—responding to the promoters of the new method rather than drawing the boundaries of the debate.

One difficulty for those who were ambivalent about the new method was the all-or-nothing approach taken by its advocates, the more zealous of whom proposed carrying the “counseling attitude” (by which they meant the principles of the non-directive method) into every aspect of the minister’s work. Many ministers believed that applying non-directive theories to every situation would prevent them from offering moral instruction even outside the counseling setting. Even strong supporters of the non-directive approach, like Earl Furgeson, wondered how average parish ministers could reconcile their role as preachers, in which they sought to bring “sinners to conviction and repentance,” with their role as counselors, in which they were expected to accept their counselees without judgment. More troubling still were purists among the non-directive pastoral counselors who discouraged introducing religious resources, such as prayer, during the counseling session except at the instigation of the counselee. Protestant ministers saw prayer as their field of expertise and wondered at the legitimacy of a counseling approach that limited its use.

Many doubters of the approach resisted the ban on offering advice in the interest of counselee autonomy. They insisted that directive counselors also respected their counselees’ autonomy, that sometimes parishioners came to their ministers seeking advice, and offering advice was not necessarily wrong. Unlike their non-directive counterparts, who feared that counselees would flee if they were given too much advice, these pastoral counselors feared that their parishioners would go elsewhere if their
ministers refused to give advice. Moreover, they worried that if those parishioners did go elsewhere, they would get poor-quality advice. They believed that some social science professionals were equating statistically normal behavior with morally acceptable behavior. In a 1948 editorial, *Journal of Pastoral Care* editor Rollin Fairbanks listed works he considered guilty of such an attitude. Among them were Kinsey’s report on male sexuality and Robert Frank’s book *Personal Counsel.*

The concern was that people would look to these secular sources to guide their moral decision making. Specifically, some pastoral counselors worried that non-directive counseling failed to give counselees a distinctively religious perspective on moral issues. Fairbanks, who feared that pastoral counselors had allowed themselves to be influenced too much by secular thinking, wondered, “What, then, is our pastoral canon: happiness or ‘adjustment,’ or obedience to a revealed theocratic norm of behavior?”

Fairbanks’s call to adhere to a divinely ordained standard of moral behavior went largely unheeded by advocates of the non-directive approach.

Those ministers who sought to preserve what they saw as their vocational obligation to promote a “theocratic norm of behavior” and simultaneously to meet their new obligation to promote parishioner autonomy recommended a new role for the counseling minister. In a 1947 article in which he explored the relationship between minister and psychiatrist, Fairbanks suggested that the pastoral counselor might serve legitimately and effectively as a “moral expert” rather than a moral authority. For those who echoed this idea, the distinction between moral expert and moral authority was crucial. Fairbanks viewed the moral expert as someone who knew a great deal about what constituted moral behavior and about what the church considered acceptable but did not necessarily give advice in the manner of more directive counselors. In his 1951 book, *The Christian Pastor,* Wayne Oates, a leader in the Southern Baptist pastoral care movement, made a distinction between the two approaches when he suggested that there was a difference between pastoral counselors who “spoke with authority,” which meant their opinion was respected because they knew what they were talking about, and the kind of counselor who told people how they ought to live.

In his article, Fairbanks offered an example of what he envisioned as the role of the moral expert. He described the case of a woman who was
referred by her psychiatrist to her minister because she insisted that she
wanted a divorce but could not obtain one because her church opposed
such action. The psychiatrist believed that her therapy could not pro-
gress unless she talked to a minister. In the course of two interviews, her
minister informed her that in some cases her church did permit divorce.
According to Fairbanks, once she understood her church’s position, she
“discovered” that she was using her church laws to disguise her own
ambivalence about seeking a divorce. In Fairbanks’s view, the minister
had not exercised his moral authority, because he did not tell the woman
whether she should divorce. Instead, he acted, in essence, as an inter-
preter of the church’s standards of Christian behavior.

Unlike their non-directive counterparts, these pastoral counselors did
not think their parishioners were deserting traditional moral standards
as a result of World War II. Rather, they saw parishioners wanting to
maintain what they viewed as Christian standards and desiring the aid
of their ministers in that task. In another illustration Fairbanks offered,
a recently married couple had gone to a psychiatrist because they were
unable to consummate their marriage. The psychiatrist told them that
the wife was hostile toward men and recommended that the husband
seek sexual satisfaction outside of the marriage. Because of their reli-
gious beliefs, the young couple deemed such an action unacceptable, and
so they approached a minister, assuming that he would provide counsel
that would not violate their moral standards. The minister met their
expectations and agreed with them that the psychiatrist had erred.

Many of the ministers who took the middle ground to which Fair-
banks and Oates gave voice were practicing parish clergy who under-
stood the complexities of everyday existence but who were also funda-
mentally orthodox in their theology and their understanding of ministerial
obligations. They saw divorce as a challenge to God’s law and to the
historic teachings of the church, but they realized that the realities of life
sometimes required a more forgiving and flexible stance. These pastoral
counselors relied upon an eclectic mix of counseling methods, and they
preferred avoiding the divorce question entirely whenever possible. To
that end, they combined the non-directive approach with guidance and
advice and advocated a kind of counseling intended to guide and educate
so that counselees could then make wise choices for themselves. They
assumed that individuals who were thoroughly prepared for marriage
would be less likely to divorce—a view shared, not incidentally, by some of their parishioners. In a 1959 issue of Pastoral Psychology, the editors published a letter from a disgruntled parishioner who complained bitterly of his pastor’s failure to offer premarital counseling and who found himself, as a result, trapped in a marriage that was, he declared, “a tragically poor match.”

In their attempt to walk a fine line between ministerial authority and counselees’ autonomy, these occupants of the middle ground sometimes resorted to a style of counseling that can only be described as manipulative. In their least subtle approach, pastoral counselors cheerfully maneuvered their counselees into choosing the “correct” course or maintaining the “right” attitude. Lutheran minister Luther Woodward, in a 1950 Pastoral Psychology article, suggested that the counselor make “seemingly casual suggestions” or offer “diagnostic” information to the counselee. The aim, of course, was to avoid an openly directive stance even while encouraging the counselee to abide by the standards of the minister or to accept the minister’s interpretation of the situation.

Premarital counseling provides an example of a more nuanced approach to the same end. The work of Roy Burkhart, pastor of the First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, illustrates the technique of pastoral counselors who appreciated the virtues of the non-directive method but were reluctant to abdicate their role as moral arbiter. Burkhart’s strategy involved designing a program for his church that helped him to follow members of his congregation in every aspect of their lives. The couple who married at First Community entered a “Mr. and Mrs. Club” immediately. Upon expecting their first child, they enrolled in a Tuesday night fellowship group of expectant parents and participated in group therapy that gave them access to a wide variety of community professionals, including doctors, psychiatrists, and social workers. In addition to classes offered especially for couples, Burkhart’s church provided prayer circles, house churches, and personal counseling upon request. All these activities, including Burkhart’s Sunday morning sermons, focused on fostering marriage and family life. In this way, Burkhart could support, in principle, the idea that counselees should be free to make their own choices; but because his parishioners were so thoroughly educated to his way of thinking, he could rely on them, in times of marital crisis, to make choices of which he would approve.
Several of the major figures in the pastoral counseling movement shared Burkhart’s ideas about the importance of a thorough premarital education for marriage. Paul Johnson, a Methodist seminary professor at Boston University School of Theology, played a prominent role in the growth of clinical pastoral education in the Northeast and helped to found one of the first independent pastoral counseling centers. Johnson advocated “lifelong” preparation for marriage and stressed the important role that parents and the church community played in teaching children how to love, which, in Johnson’s view, was the best preparation for marriage. Johnson, like Burkhart, believed that the most effective premarital counseling was preceded by comprehensive premarital education conducted by family, minister, and church community. He insisted that a few hours of premarital counseling just prior to the wedding were insufficient.

Embracing a comprehensive plan of premarital education did not require a wholesale desertion of the non-directive method. In fact, precisely the opposite was true. To consider their premarital counseling a success, most pastoral counselors believed they had to devote some time to allowing the couple to just talk. Most ministers assumed that the gentle and permissive atmosphere created by non-directive methods was most likely to elicit a discussion that would lead a couple to a greater understanding of their own expectations and behavior. Pastoral counselors assumed that this kind of open discussion allowed their counselees to learn some of the skills they would need for a successful marriage. For instance, when Foster Williams described the ideal premarital counseling program, he argued that good premarital counseling (i.e., non-directive) should teach the couple how to talk “freely, without strain” to each other, to face their relationship “realistically,” and to develop problem-solving techniques.

Because of the way they framed their discussion of premarital counseling, however, pastoral counselors perhaps hid from themselves the extent to which they were still acting as moral arbiters in the lives of their parishioners. For one thing, they used the terms “premarital counseling” and “premarital education” interchangeably and acted as if the information they provided to prospective couples was entirely neutral. The information that they believed could legitimately be supplied in a premarital interview included everything from instruction with regard to the church’s
understanding of marriage to sex education. Most pastoral counselors agreed, too, that the minister should at least mention topics such as finances, in-laws, and children.

The clergy hoped that premarital counseling would resolve the apparent contradictions between the demands of a non-directive approach and the more traditional demands of the minister’s role. Instead, the same dichotomy that appeared elsewhere occurred in premarital counseling. Pastoral counselors who were more directive in their approach tended to give greater prominence to the minister’s role as premarital instructor, and ministers who were more non-directive tended to stress the importance of allowing the couple to “just talk.” We see the persistence of this dichotomy especially well illustrated in a 1952 issue of Pastoral Psychology in a monthly feature called “The Consultation Clinic,” in which subscribers submitted questions for publication in the column and specialists in the field of pastoral counseling attempted to provide answers. The May 1952 issue addressed a letter from a parish minister who was clearly bewildered by the implications of the non-directive method. Congregationalist minister Richard Zoppel of Bridgeport, Connecticut, wrote, “It would be interesting to me to know how your readers or Advisory Board use non-directive counseling in pre-marital talks with young people. . . . So often I find myself ‘telling’ them what they should do. I am wondering if others find this a problem.”

Two of the respondents represent opposite ends of the spectrum. At the time, David Mace was a professor of human relations at Drew University. Mace was British-born and spent his early professional life as a Methodist minister in England before coming to the United States. A substantial portion of Mace’s career was devoted to the study of marriage, sex, and family and to counseling in that field. From 1960 to 1967, he was executive director of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, before going on to a position at Wake Forest College as professor of family sociology. He published both academic and popular pieces including contributions to Women’s Home Companion, McCall’s Magazine, and Reader’s Digest. Russell Becker, ordained in the United Church of Christ and, at the time, a member of the Federated Theological Faculty at University of Chicago, offered contrasting advice. Becker had completed a Ph.D. in theology at University of Chicago in the late 1940s and worked at Carl Rogers’s counseling center while
completing a dissertation on the implications of Rogerian theory for a “Christian Doctrine of Man.” Becker moved from University of Chicago to a position as professor of psychology at Kalamazoo College, in Michigan, and later became minister of pastoral care at Glenview Community Church before going, in the early 1960s, to Yale Divinity School as an associate professor of theology.33

Both authors rejected a strictly authoritarian approach to counseling, but Mace stressed the importance of the minister’s “knowledge, experience, and conviction,” while Becker promoted the importance of the minister’s attitude, calling for one of “acceptance, understanding, and warm personal interest.” Mace responded to Zoppel’s question by suggesting that Rogerian therapy was not always appropriate. Ideal conditions for non-directive counseling were when the counselee approached the therapist with a problem he or she wished to solve. Premarital counseling, in Mace’s judgment, did not meet these basic characteristics. For one thing, the minister initiated counseling, and, for another, premarital counseling did not address a specific problem. According to Mace, this freed the counselor to use an entirely different approach—one that stressed instruction and guidance and the minister’s role as representative of the church. Mace thought that the minister should begin by making certain that the couple understood the demands of marriage and the nature of Christian marriage. He argued that counselors could offer advice and instruction, if they did so in a manner that was “sweetly reasonable and persuasive” and did not press the minister’s views upon a resistant couple.34 Mace shared with many pastoral counselors a concern that if the minister did not give guidance and instruction, the message of the church would be lost. Worse, non-directive therapy raised the specter of a constantly shifting standard for moral behavior. To ministers like Mace, respecting the parishioner’s opinion in a non-directive approach seemed to imply that if the parishioner chose to challenge the church’s standards, the minister had no recourse but to agree.35

Russell Becker, on the other hand, in answer to the question raised by Zoppel, suggested that the principles of non-directive therapy were sound and useful even when the minister gave guidance or instruction.36 The central principles of non-directive therapy, according to Becker, required that the counselor maintain a “deep and reverent confidence in the re-
sources for self-responsible living which are providentially available to all” and that the minister view each parishioner as “a person in his own right, [who] has a frame of reference or perspective on things which is uniquely his own.” Describing the implications of this perspective for the counseling session, Becker indicated that when he counseled couples who were about to marry, he began by expressing his own belief in the importance of marriage and in the importance of talking about potential trouble spots. He then raised a specific issue such as housing or money handling. Once he had raised the issue, however, he allowed the “locus of responsibility” to shift to the couple. That is, he allowed the counselees to take the discussion in the direction they deemed necessary. Becker did not ignore the importance of the minister’s role as guide and advisor. He encouraged counselors to raise questions about “the wife working, money-handling, children, contraceptive information, variation in sexual expectations of the male and female, difference in temperaments, relationships to the in-laws, church relationship, and so on.” He saw a greater danger in ministers’ attempting to force their view on counselees than in failing to adequately defend the interests of the church or to enforce standards for moral behavior. As a result, he emphasized respect for the counselee’s opinion to a greater degree than did counselors such as Mace.

The Pervasiveness of Non-Directive Therapy

While it is perhaps too strong to say that advocates of the non-directive method won the debate, it is not too much to say that the principles they promoted had become firmly embedded in the pastoral counseling theory and practice by the end of the 1950s. Pastoral counseling literature about divorce counseling reveals the nature and extent of the trend. Early in the 1950s, pastoral counselors rarely considered divorce except in the context of discussions about premarital counseling, and then almost always in terms of prevention. By the end of the decade, however, pastoral counselors were devoting more time to discussing divorce counseling than premarital counseling. In those discussions, pastoral counselors seemed to have accepted divorce as a reality and to focus on addressing strategies for meeting the needs of divorced Christians. The entire September 1958
issue of *Pastoral Psychology* explored how to provide effective counseling and a welcoming church environment for those Christians for whom divorce had become an inescapable reality.

More to the point, however, pastoral counselors in their discussion of divorce tended to highlight the importance of that warm and accepting environment upon which non-directive therapists placed such a premium. After nearly a decade in which non-directive therapy had played a role in their thinking, pastoral counselors were little tempted to resort to admonishment or calls for repentance from their counselees, as had John Sutherland Bonnell in the prewar years. Bonnell himself had made a remarkable shift that further underlines the extent to which non-directive principles had made inroads, even among the ministers most likely to cling to what they saw as their historic obligation to be moral arbiters. Bonnell, the pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, who had in his 1938 book *Pastoral Psychiatry* described his enthusiastically directive approach to counseling, wrote an article printed in the September 1958 issue of *Pastoral Psychology* about counseling divorced and divorcing parishioners. The tone was considerably more subdued than his earlier work, perhaps the result of two decades of facing the realities and practicalities of parish life. In any case, Bonnell began by pointing out that saving a marriage was not the only or even the primary objective of the counseling pastor. He then listed what he viewed as the priorities of the counseling pastor, starting with providing the counselee with the opportunity for insight and self-understanding and moving toward reintegrating the parishioner into the life of the church.39

**The Ethic of Relationships**

Parallel to and simultaneously with their ongoing discussion of the limits of autonomy and the minister’s role, pastoral counselors had been engaged in another discussion—about ways to mitigate the effects of unlimited autonomy without returning to the moralism of an earlier day. The conversation resulted in a rethinking of the meaning of Christian community. It began, however, as a discussion about the importance of the therapeutic relationship. Initially, Rogerian pastoral counselors had argued that it was the free expression of feelings and emotions that
healed counselees. Consequently, they stressed the necessity of using proper technique to elicit the counselee’s real feelings. This concentration on method in turn led to the criticism that non-directive counselors cared more about proper technique than about the counselee. In response to their critics, non-directive counselors acknowledged that good technique did not necessarily yield the best results, and they insisted that the counselee could experience healing only when a loving relationship had been established between counselor and counselee. In a 1952 book devoted almost exclusively to a discussion of flaws in technique, Seward Hiltner stated that technique was not enough. The counselor was not, as Hiltner phrased it, a “mere bit of machinery,” nor was the counselee. Indeed, Hiltner claimed that counseling was not a process at all but an “interpersonal relationship” in which two people concentrated on “clarifying the feelings and problems of one.”

Perhaps the most thorough articulation of the centrality of the therapeutic relationship came from another of the central figures in the growth of pastoral counseling, Carroll Wise. Wise described the relationship between counselor and counselee as the “essential therapeutic element.” He explained that, because “faulty” relationships injured people emotionally in the first place, healing could only occur within a healthy relationship to a third person. Wise argued the traditional Rogerian position that counselees had to feel accepted and that once they felt accepted they had to feel free to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of censure. He reasoned further, however, that counselees who had expressed themselves openly could then believe that their counselor viewed them as equals. In Wise’s opinion, that experience of the relationship, rather than the simple expression of feelings or even the sense of self-acceptance, served as a “potent curative force in [the counselee’s] personality.” Wise described the love he believed ought to develop between counselor and counselee as a “profound intangible Christian resource.”

Wise saw that love between the counselor and counselee as a Christian resource because counselees who experienced the curative powers of a therapeutic relationship would evaluate themselves in positive terms, and individuals who could see themselves in a positive light would feel a concurrent sense of wholeness between themselves and God. The necessary foundation for experiencing wholeness in a relationship with God,
he maintained, was first to experience wholeness in a relationship with a human being. In Wise’s opinion, the two experiences were inextricably bound.

According to pastoral counselors, such a construction of the therapeutic relationship had important implications for the parishioner’s relationships to other people. Pastoral counselors turned to the ideas of scholar and cultural critic Martin Buber about the “I-Thou” relationship to bolster their argument for the importance of a pastoral therapeutic relationship. Buber believed that troubled relationships resulted when people treated one another as objects rather than as individuals who had their own experiences and needs, that treating people as a means rather than as an end caused broken relationships. Buber called for authentic relationships between individuals and God as a means to authentic relationships between human beings. Pastoral counselors expected that when counselees experienced the I-Thou relationship (being treated as a “subject” or person, not an object or “thing”) in counseling, they would be able to apply it to other relationships. They theorized that people who had experienced God’s love in a counseling relationship and felt a resultant sense of security could risk loving others and could afford to treat each friend and family member as a person rather than an object, as a “Thou” rather than an “It.”

Carroll Wise articulated a similar sentiment. He believed that experiencing love in counseling freed the counselee from those forces that inhibited the “natural” human capacity for love and affection. Once freed, counselees could love not only themselves but others. In a 1952 Pastoral Psychology article, Wise clarified what he meant by “love.” He did not see love as some vague, “mushy” feeling toward others but as a willingness to take responsibility for the welfare of others. He believed that if parishioners knew what it felt like to be loved, they would, in turn, know how to love. He was convinced that pastoral counselors played a crucial role in teaching counselees what it felt like to be loved.

In this perception, the therapeutic relationship provided a starting point for moving the focus away from the counselee’s obligation to behave according to certain standards of behavior and toward the counselee’s obligation to other human beings. Albert Outler, a theologian who spent the majority of his career at Southern Methodist University’s Perkins School of Theology, coined the term “ethic of relationships” to
describe the moral philosophy in which relationships were the standard for behavior. Pastoral counselors used the phrases “ethic of relationships,” also called the “ethic of responsibility,” and “responsible freedom” interchangeably. “Responsible freedom,” the term Seward Hiltner preferred to use, kept the counselee’s freedom central while restoring the concept of individual responsibility. Whatever the term, the guiding assumption in the ethic of relationships was that personal freedom had to be circumscribed by the needs of others. For instance, Hiltner, in the context of discussing Christians and sexuality, suggested that freedom was good only to the extent that individuals used their freedom to “expand personal relatedness.”

In theory, ministers who subscribed to a theory of responsible freedom were supposed to worry not so much about their parishioners’ behavior as about how that behavior affected relationships. The most avid supporters of a non-directive approach feared that espousing the ethic of relationships might be interpreted as an attempt to undermine counselee autonomy and to return to moralism. As a result, they devoted a fair amount of discussion to explaining how the ethic of responsible freedom differed from conventional Christian morality, and they went to great lengths to show that the ethic of relationships was the “true” morality. Proponents of responsible freedom argued that such an ethic could be distinguished from conventional morality because it derived from inside the individual rather than being imposed by society or the church. Seward Hiltner used Paul Tillich’s term “theonomy,” in which ethics originated from the individual’s relationship with God rather than from a law or code that was imposed from the outside. In his 1953 Sex Ethics and the Kinsey Report, Hiltner argued that theonomy was the fulfillment of autonomy. Theonomy, according to Hiltner, was the radical doctrine of Christian freedom. Christ freed the individual from the “desires of the flesh” and from the law. And, in an Augustinian twist, Hiltner insisted that people who truly loved God could do as they pleased, because for these people true pleasure came from doing the will of God. Albert Outler, in Psychotherapy and the Christian Message (1954), expressed a similar idea in slightly different terms. He argued that when individuals responded “from the heart” to their relationship to God, “justice” became not “an abstract calculation of rights” but a “constant and personal concern for the neighbor’s well-doing and well-being.”
Episcopal Theological School theologian Joseph Fletcher expressed a similar sentiment when he suggested that the ethic of responsibility differed significantly from the “contractual” nature of conventional morality. Contractual morality assumed the attitude of, as Fletcher phrased it, “If you do something for me, I’ll do something for you.” In contrast, biblical virtues—faith, hope, and love—required nothing in return and assumed that human beings were an “end” not a “means.” True biblical virtues, Fletcher observed, grew as the fruits of a self-determining person capable of I-Thou relationships. Fletcher is probably best known for his writing on bioethics, beginning with *Morals and Medicine* (1954), and for his book on situation ethics published in the 1960s. The ideas for those books took shape in the context of pastoral counselors’ discussion of the ethic of relationships. However, Fletcher took those ideas in a direction most pastoral counselors could not and would not go.

Buber’s I-Thou construction proved useful also for protecting the autonomy of the counselee. If they viewed their counselees as subjects rather than objects, pastoral counselors would have to insist, as did Fletcher, that every individual should be viewed as a person of integrity with “a moral quality of his own.” Hence, counselees had rights: “the right to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ . . . the right to self-determination, the right to be themselves, to choose . . . to be a Thou and not an It, a subject and not an object.” Moral decisions, Buberians insisted, should be based upon “self-decision” and “self-choice.” This was the familiar language of autonomy. Buber’s theology, however, assumed that the reference point for ethical decisions was the needs of others rather than the rights of the individual. In the ethic of relationships, people had a responsibility to care for one another, and love for others was the natural consequence of having learned to love and care for oneself.

In the framework of Buber’s ideas, treating other people as objects or as “Its” constituted moral failure or “sin.” Seward Hiltner described the nature of sin in Buber’s terms by using the example of illicit sexual relations. He suggested that the sin in a man’s lusting after a woman was in his failing to view the object of his lust as a whole person. Lust, observed Hiltner, was the sin of “rejection of personal relationship.” It involved the “use” of a person as though she were not a child of God. The theory of the ethic of relationships as developed by pastoral counselors restored the possibility of community among autonomous individuals.
In articulating an ethic of relationships, pastoral counselors addressed the heart of the postwar liberal dilemma: How was it possible to maintain a sense of community, obligation, and personal integrity in a society where individual freedom was so important? It is a question that has become more pressing in recent years as American culture has increasingly fragmented. In the early 1950s, however, when pastoral counselors took up this question, they were unlikely to find secular sources echoing their concerns. Most popular discussions of community were framed in terms of fears of homogeneity, which was seen as a threat to individuality, rather than in terms of creating a richer or better community experience. Of course, one of the problems with community was that it was potentially regressive, threatening to limit the free choice of the individual. The ethic of relationships offered a refurbished ideal of relatedness.

Theology, then, rescued pastoral counselors from the worst implications of psychological autonomy. In the trenches of the parish, however, where theology had to be worked out, pastoral counselors had to deal with what their parishioners wanted and needed. Many of those parishioners were women, and issues concerning gender, as much as psychology or theology, shaped the direction of pastoral care and counseling.