



10. Becoming Sexually Involved With a Counselee

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The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at jcraig@northernlightcc.com.

Case Study

Pastor Eric Leach was young, capable, and known for his ability to make people feel warm and welcome. But unlike his former college roommate and seminary classmate Pastor Rich, Pastor Eric *thrived* on the tension of board meetings, late night counseling sessions, and church conflict. Crises made him feel needed and alive.

Pastor Eric made church work seem effortless. Visitors were amazed when he called them by name the second Sunday they attended. Long time members appreciated how he remembered their birthdays and anniversaries. Everyone enjoyed his lively, practical sermons and 24-7 availability. One new member spoke for the whole church when she said “My first Sunday here, I felt as if I had known him all my life.”

Pastor Eric’s wife had a very different view. She knew him to be a self-centered chameleon who changed colors whenever the phone or doorbell rang. She deeply resented his erratic schedule and counterfeit concern for others. And she was particularly incensed when he used their marital and family problems as sermon illustrations, soliciting sympathy and making himself seem super-spiritual. Though they appeared in public as a happy couple, their marriage was an empty shell.

Emily was a bright, reasonably attractive lady with a history of abusive relationships. She was drawn to Pastor Eric’s thoughtful sermons and self-assured personality. He seemed open, transparent, and kind—exactly the opposite of her emotionally absent, verbally abusive husband. After church, she approached the pastor and asked quietly—almost apologetically—if she could come in and discuss a personal problem. Pastor Eric took her hand and warmly assured her it would be his pleasure to meet with her.

During their first counseling session, Emily complained about the lack of affection in her marriage. Pastor Eric listened intently and sympathetically. He also asked her to share intimate details of her sex life, assuring her that he needed this information to make an accurate assessment of her marital satisfaction. Emily was a little uncomfortable at first, but quickly found she enjoyed the attention of such a sensitive, caring man. At the end of the counseling session, which stretched to nearly three hours, Emily confided, “For the first time in a long time, I feel affirmed. Can I come back?” Pastor Eric beamed “Of course you can! I’ll look for you the same time next week.”

Pastor Eric looked forward to their meetings. He loved the way she asked deep questions, laughed at his jokes, and affirmed his feelings. He began to see Emily as an ideal companion. When he “let it slip” that he was having trouble recruiting a Vacation Bible School director, she volunteered to organize the program. On his birthday, she surprised him with a gift certificate to have his



seminary diploma professionally framed. Pastor Eric exclaimed "I can't believe your husband treats you like he does. He is the luckiest man in the world, and he doesn't even know it."

During one of their longer appointments, Pastor Eric asked if he could share some personal things about *his* marriage. Emily agreed, feeling as if she were on hallowed ground. The young pastor confessed that he and his wife had not been physically intimate in more than a year. He described his mate as a frigid, bitter shrew who rejected his every attempt to love and encourage her. "I counsel others about their problems, but I haven't been able to solve my own" he admitted with tears. Emily took his hand and spoke firmly "You have been here for me. I'm here for you, too." They walked out into the darkened parking lot together. Before she got in her car, she stepped close and kissed him on the cheek. He took her in his arms and they kissed. "That never happened" he said in a quiet, yet threatening tone.

Over the next few weeks, the two met frequently outside the office. Stories began to circulate. Larry, the church board chairman and one of Pastor Eric's most loyal supporters, conferred with him privately to discuss the rumors. Pastor Eric laughed and calmly denied any wrongdoing. Relieved, Larry responded, "I have an idea. Just give me a copy of your business calendar, and I'll make a few phone calls and prove you were not where the busybodies say you were." Pastor Eric was trapped. He knew his business calendar was loaded with hospital and nursing home calls he had never made. Struggling not to appear defensive, he said coolly "No, I cannot do that. Who I see is confidential. You will just have to trust me."

The rumors continued. Two board members threatened to resign and leave the church if nothing was done. At the next board meeting, Pastor Eric read a carefully parsed letter in which he confessed to having become "emotionally involved" with a woman in the church. He refused to reveal the woman's name and strongly denied having sexual relations with her. Some believed him. Others insisted he was lying and should be fired. A church split seemed likely.

After hours of debate culminating in a 5-4 vote, the board asked Pastor Eric to resign and leave town immediately. To console the young pastor's supporters and provide incentive for him to leave without splitting the church, they also voted 9-0 to provide a positive letter of recommendation, agreeing to say nothing of his "emotional involvement" to potential employers and to carry his health insurance.

Pastor Eric accepted the deal, cleaned out his office, and vacated the parsonage the next day. Always the forward thinker, the young man had already lined up an interview with a church several hundred miles away. Armed with the glowing letter of recommendation and a touching story of why he felt "called" to the new pastorate, the winsome minister moved to a larger church offering a better salary package and a low-interest loan for a new home.

The Problem

Sexual involvement with a client is a serious violation that invites civil and criminal penalties as well as professional sanctions. Clearly, the *responsibility* for maintaining godly boundaries and the *blame* for violations belong to the counselor.



Sexual involvement with a counselee includes any conversation or behavior that is appropriately shared only with one's spouse. Specifically, sexual involvement may be defined as:

1. Conversation geared to gratify the counselor's sexual desires. This includes unnecessary prying into counselee's sex life, unnecessarily detailed discussion of sexual fantasies, and intimate compliments concerning the counselee's beauty or sexual appeal.
2. Emotional intimacy in which the counselor confesses personal/relational problems and invokes the counselee's sympathy and concern. This includes "sharing" intimate details of one's own marriage, sexual fantasies and desires, and "I wish I had married someone great like you" regrets.
3. Touch that leads toward the gratification of sexual desires. This includes full frontal hugs, romantic handholding, kissing, and other behavior leading toward full sexual intimacy.

Sexual attraction has more to do with emotions and character than outward physical appearance. An ordinary-looking woman with a history of abuse and a desperate need to be needed can be infinitely more attractive than a classically beautiful woman who is valued and secure. Likewise, an ordinary-looking man with a reputation as a "bad boy" or "thug" can be more sexually interesting than an exceptionally handsome man who is mature and self-controlled. In each case, the former sends out powerful, provocative vibes of vulnerability, availability, and excitement, while the latter communicates purposeful preoccupation and disinterest.

Christians who want to do any form of counseling should ask, "What kind of person is likely to tempt me? What mix of looks, temperament, and personality do I find most attractive? What kind of person could fly under my radar? In what kind of situation would I be most vulnerable?" No one is bulletproof. No one can afford to be arrogant.

The Solution

Understandably, pastors worry about the rumors and false accusations that can come with counseling ministry. Some take extreme measures to protect themselves, like leaving the office door open during counseling sessions, refusing to hug or even touch a counselee, never meeting more than once with someone of the opposite sex, and counseling only with a witness present.

These techniques hurt people by treating them like villains, denying their legitimate needs for privacy and confidentiality, and discouraging them from seeking help in the first place. Worse, such measures provide an *outward appearance* of moral propriety—a useful tool for those who simply go outside the office to arrange romantic rendezvous.

Churches can and should take sensible measures to prevent the appearance of impropriety. For example, the counseling office can be located in a public part of the building, though preferably not the busiest part. A small window can be cut in the office door and covered from the inside with a sheer material so passersby can see someone is in the office but not who is in the office. And reasonable counseling hours can be posted and followed.



Preventing the appearance of evil is one thing. Preventing the occurrence of evil is another. Church-centered caregivers obsessed about the former would do well to worry more about the latter. Here are twelve principles for avoiding problems that work every time they are tried.

1. *Invest time, energy, and money in your marriage and family relationships.* Healthy relationships do not eliminate the possibility of illicit involvement, but certainly make it less likely.
2. *Invite the counselee's family members into the counseling session.* When a person complains about an insensitive spouse, invite the spouse in. If the spouse refuses, spend time in each session discussing ways to encourage him/her to come in. If the counselee is single or divorced, bring in another family member to help monitor a healing plan. Facilitate healthy relationships outside the counseling office rather than trying to meet the counselee's relational needs inside the office.
3. *Avoid detailed discussions about a counselee's sex life.* These are almost always unnecessary. Counselors should ask themselves "Why do I want to know this information? Is it really designed to help my client, or to entertain me?"
4. *Spend time discussing how your counselees sabotage their relationships.* Ask divorced people to confess how they aggravated the problems that broke up their marriages. Bring objectivity to the counseling session and avoid becoming uncritically sympathetic.
5. *Don't invite hugs, especially with those who have been sexually molested or abused.* When a counselee reaches out for a hug, give an unmistakably non-erotic shoulder hug. Practice on your grandmother.
6. *Establish and publish a clear scheduling policy.* See counselees in a professional office only, and politely refuse to meet elsewhere. House churches and new congregations that do not have their own buildings can rent or borrow office space from another church or business.
7. *Ordinarily limit sessions to about one hour.* When the time is extended, make sure this is for the client's benefit and not your own. Reserve later evening sessions for couples and families.
8. *Politely refuse romantic and unusually expensive or personal gifts.* When in doubt, check it out with an older colleague or supervisor.
9. *If counseling is a major part of your ministry, buy regular supervision from an experienced counselor.* Discuss your temptations and weaknesses with your supervisor, and create a strategy for avoiding the situations in which you are most likely to lose your head.
10. *Refuse to share intimate details about your marriage.* Don't switch roles by confessing your personal problems or soliciting sympathy.
11. *Help counselees who credibly report sexual abuse to take appropriate legal action, even if it is against another pastor.* The ministry is not a club where culprits agree to run interference for each other.
12. *Refer when you feel yourself slipping.* When a counselee seems inordinately attractive or provocative, refer to a professional counselor.



Pastoral Teaching Tip

What does it mean to “lust after” someone and thereby commit adultery in the heart? I used to think it referred to the urges a man feels as he looks at an exceptionally beautiful woman, or the sensations that intrigue a woman who meets a particularly attractive man. I was wrong.

In Mathew 5:28, Jesus gives his Sermon on the Mount, a strong message that distinguishes his views from those of competing rabbis. When he addresses the sin of lust, he uses the word *epithumia*—not just a desire, but literally an “above-desire”. This refers to something that is higher than a wish or a want. Ironically, the only other place Jesus used the word is in Luke 22:15, where he tells his disciples how badly he wanted to share a last Passover supper with them. Seen in a non-sexual context, the meaning becomes clearer. Jesus did not have an urge to eat supper with his disciples, not was he simply intrigued with the idea. He wanted it enough to take specific steps to make it happen.

Luke 22:8-14 tells us how Jesus selected his closest disciples, Peter and John, and instructed them specifically how to make the arrangements. It is easy for modern readers to miss the significance of these verses. I live in Indiana, so I’ll put it in terms a Hoosier can understand. Getting a private banquet room in Jerusalem and arranging a catered meal or roast lamb and all the trimmings a week before Passover would be harder than getting a hotel reservation in Speedway the night before the Indianapolis 500, or securing a suite at the RCA Dome the day before an AFC divisional playoff game, or booking a room at the Brown County Inn during the second weekend in October. IMPOSSIBLE! Jesus did not simply want to be there. He planned it. He called in all his markers. He went all out because he believed it was worth it.

Now take the word back into a sexual context. A man’s heart may skip a beat when a gorgeous girls walks by, and his head may spinning as he imagines making love to her. But if he sends his best friend to get her address, then cashes in his IRA to buy a car to drive by her home until she agrees to take a ride with him, his desire has moved to a higher level. Likewise, a woman’s whole body might tingle as she talks to a winsome hunk, and she may drift into a daydream of how it might feel to be caught up in his strong arms. But when she asks her best friend to find out where he likes to eat lunch, and spends her last dime on a sexy outfit she thinks will lure him to her table, her longing has become something more.

Jesus is not condemning those who feel sexual desire. He is confronting those who are making plans to act immorally on that sexual desire. Some of the rabbi’s of his day would legalistically judge, “Well, if a man plans the act, but never gets to go through with it, then he is not guilty of sexual sin.” Jesus righteously contradicted this nonsense, essentially saying “If he has planned to do it, he has already done it in his heart.”