

THOUGHTS ON THE WORD “ADMONISH”

i.e. *NOUTHETIC CONFRONTATION* – by Jay E. Adams¹

“Now...I must tell you something about the biblical idea of nouthetic confrontation
[i.e. what it means to *admonish*].

“Fundamentally it means this: God using one man to confront another verbally about something that God wants changed for the benefit of the individual who is confronted. Many of the persons that Paul confronted doubtless would be labeled mentally ill today... Let us then see what God has said about nouthetic confrontation.

- 1) “**The first element in the word *nouthesia* involves the idea that there is something wrong in the counselee’s life that God wants changed.** That means that known sin in the lives of the members of the church must not be winked at. It is a responsibility of those who have the rule over the flock to lead the sheep in the paths of righteousness as the Great Shepherd has directed. That will often involve confronting them when they wander into the paths of unrighteousness.
- 2) “**The second element in the word is that the change is attempted by use of appropriate verbal means in personal confrontation.** The idea of personal counseling is clear. The counselor does not attempt to change the person he is confronting by manipulating him in some behavioristic fashion, but he does so by personal counseling, by a verbal confrontation, by sitting down and talking through his problems with him. Hopefully to reach biblical solutions to them. He uses verbal confrontation and a verbal methodology; that is to say, a *counseling* methodology. Talk, the psychiatrist’s methodology, was not given to him but was ordained by God for the work of the ministry. Yet it is talk of a specific sort. *Nouthesia* is plainly directive counseling; it involves the application of biblical principles to concrete life situations.
- 3) “**There is also a third element in that word: the confrontation takes place in order to change the man for his own benefit; for his own welfare.** There is the connotation of loving concern in this word; the New Testament never loses sight of that element in the word. You see it emerge where the term is used in familial contexts. For example, this element is prominent when Paul told the Corinthians, ‘*I do not write these things to shame you but to confront you nouthetically as my beloved children*’ (**I Cor. 4:14**). When he talks about the disciplining of a brother, he urges, ‘*Do not look on him as an enemy, but confront him nouthetically as a brother,*’ or, ‘*as you would confront a brother*’ (**II Thess. 3:15**). And in that family context in Ephesians after he has instructed children to obey their parents, he addresses their fathers with these words: ‘*Bring them up in the nurture* (*‘discipline,’ or ‘training,’ as the word *paideia* means*) *and the nouthetic confrontation of the Lord*’ (**Eph. 6:4**) ...**And so the word occurs in these warm contexts, showing that it carries the idea of concern for the other person.** Even in **Acts 20:31** that note also is sounded strongly when Paul says, ‘*I did not cease to nouthetically confront each one with tears.*’ The deep involvement of Paul for each one of these believers, the personal attention and ‘*the weeping with those who weep*’ is apparent. The words ‘*each one*’ occur not only in Acts, but also in Colossians (cf. **Col. 1:28**) ...**Counseling must be done in love, and love must be ‘in the truth’ (II John 1; III John 1).**”²

¹ All of this material with the exception of that appearing in brackets [] is taken verbatim from Jay E. Adams, *The Big Umbrella and Other Essays on Christian Counseling* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1972), pp. 12-14. Note: most italics in the original, bolding, underlining & colorizing added. –Mike Edwards, Bible Baptist Church, Madison, Ohio, 2017 (revised Feb. 2019)

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“ Now the reason I have brought the word *nouthesia* over into English from the Greek New Testament instead of simply translating it ‘*admonish*’ or ‘*counsel*’ or ‘*warn*’ or ‘*instruct*’ or by some other term, is because **none of these words in English has the depth and fullness of meaning that is inherent in the Greek term. So far as I know, there is no English word that adequately expresses the three elements in the Greek word *nouthesia*.** It seems important to note that whenever you do not have a word for the thing, usually you do not have the thing itself. Where you do not have a word to describe an activity adequately, it is normally because you are not engaged in pursuing it. Indeed that seems to be the fact in this instance... **We rarely see this kind of confrontation of church members; overwhelming concern for people that compels us to go to them and talk to them in order to change their lives is virtually nonexistent.** We know little about nouthetic confrontation in our society... true biblical nouthetic confrontation rarely exists.

“And so, what I’m saying is that you [Adams was speaking to pastors] have greater opportunities than you may think... The very concept, put into practice, could make your ministry flower. The possibilities and opportunities that nouthetic activities offer for the edification of the saints are as unlimited as the need is great.”³

YOU HAVE GREATER QUALIFICATIONS THAN YOU MAY REALIZE.

“**Look... at your qualifications [i.e. as a pastor] for the work.** What training, for instance, is really best for the task of changing men’s & women’s lives? Medical training? Psychiatric training? Training in some clinic or theoretical school of psychotherapy in New York or Washington? University training in psychology? **Think—what is the best training and background for the work of changing the lives of other people? I maintain that a good [Bible] background is the best education for the work of changing lives...** When we give a man the tools (Greek, Hebrew, hermeneutics, exegesis) so that he can study the Word of God for the rest of his life and find out what this Book has to say, **we are giving him the background that he needs for counseling as well as for preaching...** the fundamental ideas, concepts and principles of God’s Word...these are needed to help people with personal problems...

“**People whose marriages are all mixed up need to know how to live *before God*. Parents and children at odds need to be brought together *in the Lord*. **Apart from the Word of God (and the God of the Word) such goals can never be attained.****

“**What are the fundamental qualifications for such work?** Well, if you look at the passages that talk about nouthetic confrontation, you will discover what those qualifications are. In **Romans 15:14**... Paul speaking to laymen in the church at Rome, says that they are ‘*competent to counsel,*’ or ‘*capable of nouthetically confronting one another.*’ He says he believes this ‘*because I am convinced that you are full of goodness and filled with all knowledge.*’ In **Colossians 3:16**, where he talks about ‘*nouthetically confronting one another*’ as well as ‘*teaching one another,*’ he speaks again of being filled with the knowledge of Jesus Christ: ‘*Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.*’ There he adds a third element: ‘*with all wisdom.*’ These verses mention three things that qualify one for nouthetic activity: ***goodness, knowledge*** and ***wisdom***. These are the three fundamental qualifications of a man who is going to confront others in order to change their lives:

(cont.)

³ Adams, *ibid*, p. 14, most italics in the original.

- 1) “He needs (first of all) to know God’s Word well: the Word of Christ must ‘*dwell within him richly.*’ He needs to be ‘filled’ with a knowledge of the Scriptures. I do not know of any university training in clinical psychology, or of any psychiatric institute that attempts to fill a man with such knowledge.

“Knowledge has an experiential side that must not be missed; it is to ‘*dwell within him*’; i.e., become a living, vital part of the fabric of his being. Unfortunately, seminaries have not always stressed this fact.”

- 2) “Secondly, the nouthetic counselor needs to be *full of wisdom.* Wisdom means (among other things) the practical application of that knowledge; the ability to apply a truth found in the Scriptures to a man’s life at the place where he lives. Wisdom brings the Word of God to bear upon problems in pertinent and relevant ways. **Again, it has an experiential side that says something about the man who possesses it (cf. James 3:13-18).** [*“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you. Let him show...”*]
- 3) “Thirdly, there is the essential quality of *goodness.* The word goodness probably does not refer so much to the goodness of the life of the counselor (though that certainly is involved in it and behind it) as it does to his *goodness of attitude toward others.* **It is this quality that in loving concern motivates a pastor to take the time and make the effort to seek out God’s answers to the problems of another.** Such goodness toward others continually gets him involved in another person’s life *for his good.*

“Those are three basic qualifications that the Scriptures require of a counselor. Those are also basic requirements of a good minister of the Word. Certainly no man should be in the ministry unless he has those qualifications; which is to say that if a minister is not qualified to counsel, he is not qualified to minister.

“To summarize: It is essential to have a *knowledge of the Scriptures* in order to evaluate man’s problems and to discover God’s solutions to them; to become wise in the ability to deal with counselees in personal confrontation (note the use of ‘wisdom’ in a similar connection in Colossians 4:5-6); to have *goodness of heart* to motivate one to engage in the difficult task of confronting another and to condition his attitudes in doing so).

- 4) “There is a *fourth* qualification that must be mentioned because it is the most basic of all and stands as **bedrock beneath the first three.** In Galatians 6:1 Paul says that if any brother sees another caught (or possibly catches another) in sin, he must restore him. **This commandment is directed to those ‘*who are spiritual.*’** Picture a brother whose life is badly messed up. For all practical purposes he has ceased to function vitally as a member of the Church. Paul does not say that he may be referred to an unsaved psychiatrist or to an unbelieving marriage counselor for help. Indeed, he explicitly forbids Christians to obtain help from those who know nothing about Jesus Christ; **the brother must be helped by another Christian:** *‘Ye who are spiritual.’* ...So what Paul is saying in Galatians 6:1 is, *‘You in whom the Spirit dwells must be the ones to restore your brother.’* This prerequisite is a fundamental factor that disqualifies all but Christians.”⁴

⁴ Adams, *ibid*, pp. 15-19, italics in the original.