FEATURED ARTICLES

JBC: Renewing Our Mission
David Powlison

Listening to Prozac… and to the Scriptures:
A Primer on Psychoactive Medications
Michael R. Emlet

The Pastor as Counselor
David Powlison

COUNSELOR’S TOOLBOX

Seeing Relationships through the Eyes of a Child
Julie Lowe

LIVES IN PROCESS

BOOK REVIEWS
The mission of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling (JBC)* is to develop clear thinking and effective practice in biblical counseling. We seek to do this through publishing articles that faithfully bring the God of truth, mercy and power to the issues that face pastoral ministries of counseling and discipleship.

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THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURED ARTICLES

2 JBC: Renewing Our Mission
   David Powlison: From the Editor’s Desk

11 Listening to Prozac…and to the Scriptures:
   A Primer on Psychoactive Medications
   Michael R. Emlet

23 The Pastor as Counselor
   David Powlison

COUNSELOR’S TOOLBOX

40 Seeing Relationships through the Eyes of a Child
   Julie Lowe

LIVES IN PROCESS

47 To God Be the Glory (Not Me)
   Anonymous

51 Stomping among Lilies
   Chris Carter

BOOK REVIEWS

54 The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy by Susan M. Johnson
   Winston T. Smith

57 Hurry Down Sunshine by Michael Greenberg
   Edward T. Welch

59 Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders by Anna C. Salter
   Julie Lowe
We at CCEF are delighted to relaunch the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (JBC) after a four year hiatus. We have been quietly working toward this day. You may be new to CCEF and JBC, or you may know us well. In either case, I hope that this opening editorial will give you a fruitful way to frame what you are reading. Why are we doing what we do? What are our core commitments? What are we trying to accomplish? I will discuss six things:

- our new delivery system
- our readers and potential readers
- our writers
- our mission
- our underlying convictions about Christian growth
- how JBC’s mission will be fulfilled

Each of these orients you to what JBC seeks to accomplish.

**Why are we publishing online?**

The most obvious change to JBC comes in our delivery system. I do not go gaga over new technologies. I love a chalkboard for teaching, and I love to hold the book I am reading. But we are living in a new age technologically. It is clear that JBC’s purposes are hugely aided by instantaneous, worldwide, digital communication.

During our first thirty years of publishing, this journal depended on three durable things that originated in the late Middle Ages: the technologies of printing press and papermaking, the human skills of page layout and typesetting, and the ferrying operations of the postal service. These technologies, skills and services were and are costly in time, labor and money. For example, international delivery to our subscribers around the world was always slow, erratic and expensive. Now it becomes as easy as poking your head into the office across the hall. Even printing and shipping to North American addresses was expensive and time-consuming. Our income never covered even these hard costs. The countless days and weeks of writing and editing were underwritten by the generosity of donors to CCEF and by writers who cared about communicating content. We still won’t cover all our costs: website management is not cheap, good editors are essential, writers invest their lives, and someone pays for the time invested. But greatly reduced production and delivery costs bring JBC far closer to fiscal soundness.

**Who are our readers?**

A changed delivery system is the means to a desired end, not an end in itself. JBC exists to serve our readers, men and women who desire to counsel more wisely and more effectively.

By coming online and becoming easily available, we will reach countless new readers.

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David Powlison (M.Div., Ph.D.) teaches at CCEF and edits the "Journal of Biblical Counseling."
Paid subscriptions for JBC were strong in years past. From 450 subscribers in 1991, we grew rapidly to 3,000 subscribers in 1995, and continued between 3,000 and 4,000 until our hiatus in 2007. Those are healthy numbers for any publication with “The Journal of” in its name!

But we often asked ourselves, How might our readership increase by an order of magnitude—or more? How can we reach 30,000 people? Or 300,000? A digital delivery system allows us to reach almost any person anywhere in the world.

For example, I’ve read that there are more than 500,000 pastors in the United States alone. What if even one pastor in five caught a vision for how everyday pastoral conversations can become richer, truer, more purposefully biblical and more helpful? And how many millions of pastors worldwide read in English, or through the work of translators can similarly benefit, growing more skillful in the cure of souls? JBC can help pastors.

And JBC has always reached many others besides pastors. Our readership includes missionaries and vocational biblical counselors (like our own faculty and staff!). It includes elders, ministry-minded laypersons, small group leaders, and people active in prison ministries and crisis pregnancy centers. It includes professors of practical theology, campus ministry staff, and students in college and seminary. It includes Christians working in mental health professions. It includes thoughtful strugglers—all of the above, and many others of God’s children who simply want help to grow faithful. Whoever wants to bring thoughtful, caring Christian faith to bear on life’s problems is a potential reader.

The change in our delivery system allows any current reader to forward a link to family, friends and colleagues all over the world. Someone else can immediately benefit from an article that you think might prove helpful. It also allows people everywhere to happen upon us when they do a simple internet search.

Who are our writers?

JBC depends on writers. In this relaunch issue, each of the writers serves on the CCEF faculty. But over the years, like-minded outside authors have contributed over half of our content. We invite and will solicit new submissions. Perhaps you or someone you know and respect will contribute an article, book review, interview, sermon, or other item that serves our common mission.

What does it take to write words worth reading and pondering? What makes something written worth taking to heart and putting into practice? From the author’s side, it takes time and labor. But more than that, it means taking the time to notice how people work, how God works, and how the two come together—both within the pages of Scripture and in daily lives. You must think long and hard about what you see, hear, read, experience and do. It takes love for others and honesty about yourself. It takes patience—all good things take patience. It takes humility before Him who is always true. It takes asking for help from the only-wise God who is always at work in his beloved children, who always gives wisdom to those who ask. It takes learning how to write. Good writing is as challenging as good listening. Clear writing is as difficult as clear thinking. Writing well is as wisdom-intensive as teaching, preaching or counseling well. It is as hard-won as living a good life.

Pray for God to give wisdom to those who write.

What is the mission of the Journal of Biblical Counseling?

CCEF works and prays to restore Christ to counseling and counseling to the church. JBC serves this mission as a publishing ministry of CCEF. Why is this mission important? Why does it take work to restore Christ to counseling and counseling to the church? Let me set the stage by describing the issues at stake.

Why restore Christ to counseling?

The wider counseling world views Jesus as irrelevant to understanding and addressing people’s deepest personal and interpersonal troubles. He might as well not even exist. Whoever he is, whatever he did, whatever he is doing, whatever he will do, and however he does it—it’s all intellectually and practically insignificant. The Jesus Christ of the Bible does not appear in self-help books, in classrooms, or in the licensure of mental health personnel. He apparently has no traction when it comes to the problems that break down lives and break up
relationships.

But we believe that true, life-explaining insight into people necessarily involves thinking Christianly. Loving, lasting help necessarily involves practicing ‘counseling’ as one aspect of consciously Christian ministry. The deeper you gaze into what actually goes wrong with people—the weight of our sins and sorrows—the more clearly you see that Jesus Christ is essential to making it right.

Why restore counseling to the church? The wider counseling world views the church as mostly irrelevant to resolving people’s troubles. At best, churchy communities and religious practice might offer auxiliary support services for clients who happen to be religiously-oriented. Churches can be only incidentally useful to someone else’s agenda.

But we believe that the message and life of the body of Christ connects to the core of what is going on in disturbed relationships and in disturbed, disturbing people. Christ’s church is necessary—life-or-death necessary—for all people, whatever their current religious or irreligious orientation. This doesn’t mean that churches are islands of paradise on earth. Sinners and sufferers inhabit churches. In fact, the better a church is, the more broken people will be drawn, and the more problems will be present! But Jesus came, comes and will come to build his church, his ekklesia, a people who gather in his Name.

Because the contemporary counseling culture has little use for Christ and his church, we need to swim against the tide. But there is another reason why we are called to this mission. Distinctively Christian content regarding counseling problems and procedures is a rare commodity within the church. The balance sheet of our collective wisdom over the past 150 years shows a shared weakness when it comes to understanding and remediating what goes askew in our emotions, thoughts, behavior, motives and relationships. Our weakness in the cure of souls has paralleled the rise of many God-bereft understandings of human nature and many Christ-suppressant cures. Most churchly initiatives toward counseling have been heavy borrowers from whatever points of view currently prevail in the culture. Those initiatives are well-intended. The impulse to provide counseling comes from seeing and feeling human need, and sincerely wanting to help. But without a distinctively Christian vision, good intentions easily meander away from what Christians believe. It is astonishingly easy to be co-opted by another gaze and to slide into serving a different set of intentions—unwittingly. JBC aims to help change the balance sheet.

Reflecting on the sweep of church history, G. K. Chesterton once remarked, “At least five times the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died.” His comment applies to counseling as much as anything else. The church meanders, but our God brings us back. When counseling wisdom goes MIA from the church, then Christian faith skims over the surface of life. Faith might augment the lives of the relatively stable, but the really broken people—troubled, troublesome, overwhelmed by troubles—are invited to turn elsewhere. But God is faithful to restore us. Scripture’s DNA carries the genetic material needed to create a comprehensive ‘psychology’ and ‘psychotherapy.’ The God who sees and acts teaches the deepest understanding of people, of what goes wrong, of how we are refashioned right. The God who intervenes brings the deepest cure of souls, and teaches us how to help in the refashioning.

The message and life of the body of Christ connects to the core of what is going on in disturbed relationships and in disturbing people. Think first-person. Do you ever find yourself irritable or anxious, discouraged or confused, grieving or aggrieved, driven or escapist, demanding or guilty? Do you ever find yourself in conflict with another, intimidated by someone, off-putting to other people, disappointed by family and friends, frustrated with coworkers? In other words, you and your relationships are disturbed and disturbing. You and I are fundamentally like every other human being. The church of Jesus Christ is pointedly called by God to comfort the disturbed—and to disturb the comfortable, that they, too, might be comforted with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. JBC aims to contribute to the church’s collective counseling wisdom. We the people can become a community characterized by the most loving care and the wisest cure unto the
faith, hope and love that reveal God shining in dark places. We can learn to counsel more wisely and effectively.

What does it mean to counsel wisely? Wisdom begins with and orients to ‘the fear of the LORD.’ It is shaped at every point by awareness that all human beings—both counselors and counselees, whether conscious or unconscious—live or die vis-à-vis this true God. No other counseling models start here, so they never get there. Their controlling vision, without fail, orients to some variation on living more successfully vis-à-vis oneself. But our readers want to counsel more wisely.

What does it mean to counsel effectively? Effectiveness is defined by concrete results. In casting vision for what a person is meant to become, Scripture always points us in two directions: whole-hearted trust in the God of mercies and whole-hearted love that considers the best interests of other people. Easy to say, hard to do. No other counseling models even say it. Some form of enlightened self-interest is the highest good they can imagine. But our readers want to counsel more effectively.

What are CCEF’s underlying convictions about Christian growth?

To prove faithful, JBC’s content must bring to life the basic truths of Christian faith. Our writers must say something worth saying. That something comes in the genre of pastoral application. It must be rooted and grounded in Scripture. It must be rooted and grounded in human experience. It must bring truth to life—lived and bring life—lived to Him who is true.

Basic Christianity is our core content. More specifically, we focus on change process (in individuals and relationships) and counseling process (in the relationship between counselors and counsel-receivers). How is it that any person comes to rest basic hope on Jesus Christ? How does any one of us turn, no longer leaning so hard upon the heart’s instinctive opinions, longings and self-will? Having sprouted new life, how do we grow up, learning our faith by heart, becoming more skillful in love? Having become personally fruitful, how do we grow into generative leadership, able to guide the up-and-coming generation? How do we hand the baton to those who will keep running into the future?

Basic Christianity recognizes a development process both in individuals and in groups. Maturing life progresses from new birth to generativity. I will describe this process as unfolding in stages.

The Christian life begins with knowledge, however dim, partial and groping our initial intimations. You hear a message of something—Someone—wondrous, imperious, incomprehensible yet down-to-earth. God—us makes himself known. Whether almost imperceptible or stunningly dramatic, he reverses your whole modus operandi. He upends the-way-things-are, putting himself at the center of all things. He rewrites the script of human life, changes the meaning of our inner struggles, re-interprets our outer troubles. He is revolutionary, radical and threatening—yet utterly inviting. Articulate Christian faith offers the only coherent understanding of the way things are. Who is this God who IS, who intervenes—by whom all live, whose eyes search all hearts, whom all are meant to love wholly? What is this mix of beauties and perversities that characterizes all lives? What is the significance of all sufferings and all delights? Who is this Jesus Christ, only Savior of humankind, full of mercies? Who is this Lord before whom all will bow with either joy inexpressible or bitter shame? What did he do? What is he doing? What will he do? How can each and all know him? You hear a message: Someone wondrous, imperious, incomprehensible yet down-to-earth is speaking to you.

You take him to heart. You listen closely. Knowledge leads to assent. You come to agree, whether your assent is hearty or halting. This… God…is…true. By mercy, blinded eyes see. Deafened ears hear. A closed mind opens. A hardened heart softens. A deadened man lives. Everything good comes true. Let me key this to the opening lines of Psalm 103:
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. (Psalm 103:2-5)

Everything sad and wrong is coming untrue. Amen. You shift your weight. Knowledge and assent lead to trust. Bless the Lord, O my soul! Fear this Father of mercies. You need him, turn to him, seek him. You take refuge in him, listen to him, hope in him. You obey him, follow him, love him. You join the company of our Father’s beloved children.

What next? You commence on a lifelong process of discipleship. You grow up in faith, grow up in love, grow up in wisdom. This is a long, hard teaching-and-learning process—a lifelong reeducation for one and all. Our faithlessness, lovelessness and foolishness continually contradict our progress. Sometimes headway is negligible. We stagnate, or regress, or even hurl ourselves back into darkness. Nevertheless, God resolutely makes us disciples of Jesus. In your life and in mine, this on-scene Holy Spirit works daily, on a scale of years and decades, over a lifetime. In the life of the people of God, this on-scene Holy Spirit works daily, on a scale of decades and centuries, over millennia. Our education in the ways of God, our formation in his image, occurs both formally and informally, both intentionally and unwittingly.

In some manner or other, discipleship bears fruit in service. Becoming somehow good, we become good for something. We become more skillful in ministry, learning to consider the interests of others. We learn to put God’s particular gifts to work, fulfilling—more or less—his calling and our intended purpose. By his persevering mercy, we increasingly fulfill his express calling and so find our true purpose in life.

In learning to serve, we learn to lead. The coda in any maturing process is giving guidance to others so they serve and lead. Good leadership is generative, and ultimately self-effacing. We grow into various leadership roles that enable others to thrive. Good parents, mentors, teachers, coaches, managers, pastors, writers, organizers, entrepreneurs, counselors and friends take responsibility for nurturing a rising generation. And they take their hands off, sooner or later, and let others grow up into leaders.

Knowledge, assent, trust, discipleship, service, guidance. The actual process is never tidy. Life never follows an orderly protocol, never goes by the book, step to step to step. Ego, or fear, or confusion, or structural blind spots (in our hearts, in our cultural context, in our church culture, in our functional theology) slow us, stymie us, threaten to overthrow Jesus’s way with us. But he will have his way with us. When we see him, we will be like him, one and all, no spots or blemishes, no inner or outer contradictions. And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Where counseling is biblical, then the fragrance, tempo and tonality of basic Christianity will be omnipresent and accounted for.

How will JBC’s mission be fulfilled?

How does collective counseling wisdom grow? The trajectory is analogous to those stages of Christian growth that we have just considered. We can describe the process that unfolds when any one of us awakens and then matures into the wise love that makes for good, biblical counseling. These same stages also describe the process we go through together. Speaking truth in love, we grow up (Eph 4:29).

First stage: we hear—some of us for the first time—that the church has a significant counseling calling. The church of God has a huge stake in helping people with problems. What other business are we in?! We are called to bring wise love and true wisdom to bear in the lives of others. The eyes through which the Lord interprets personal struggles and situational troubles are so different from the eyes with which other counseling models see things! We had better be about counseling.
Our Father engages people with such different intentions from how other counseling models proceed! We are meant to counsel according to how he sees and proceeds.

The fruition of such a vision may seem like a hazy dream. Your church may currently be doing a poor job of counseling, or counseling through deviant eyes, or abdicating the task entirely. But as you hear how a Wonderful Counselor intends to form his people into... well, into pretty-good counselors—and getting better all the time—it makes you stop and think. Until we become aware that something might exist, we can’t envision participating. Participation becomes a possibility when something rises above the horizon. I hope that you hear the call.

Second stage: we agree that the vision is desirable. The church not only could become good in counseling, we should become wise and fruitful in counseling ministries. Our God calls us to grow up in this area of ministry. Sometime you might want to read Ephesians 3:14–5:2 through the eyes of the question, “What does this imply about mutual counseling ministry?” Every sentence carries weighty implications. Hearing that it is possible to counsel in biblical wisdom—that God wills us to do so—leads to assent and commitment. I hope that you say, “Yes, this should be so. I may not yet understand exactly what it will look like, but I agree it ought to happen.”

Third stage: we personally embrace and embody the vision. This is the decisive step, the sine qua non. Scripture teaches you how to understand your deepest struggles and your best gifts. God shows you how to face your heaviest troubles and how to respond to your greatest blessings. The Lord’s vision of our actual sins and sorrows, of our actual graces and felicities, is the true understanding. The Lord’s way of engaging broken people in a broken world is the only truly loving engagement. You and I take all this to heart. As we take it to heart, we enter into the lively dynamics of transformation portrayed in psalms, proverbs, prophets, histories, gospels and epistles. You enter into God’s counseling process for yourself. You live as his child, learning his ways.

God’s take on things increasingly becomes yours. You come to live in reality, leaving the shadowlands behind, forsaking the virtual realities. Whatever the configuration and severity of your personal problems, you come to understand yourself in a new light. This personal embrace registers something very significant. I am not committed to “biblical counseling” because it is a theory that I happen to find persuasive, or because one killer Bible verse turned the lights on. I am committed because God tells the truth about me, about my world, about the Father, Savior and Friend who has taken me to heart and takes me in hand. And I come to know any other human being—you, my fellow struggler, my brother or sister—by the same light in which I am coming to know myself.

The fact of personal embrace and embodiment is not some subjective oddity unique to biblical counseling. There is something essentially autobiographical about every counseling model ever proposed—Freud, Adler, Jung, Wolpe, Rogers, Frankl, Gestalt, Glasser, Yalom, biomedical psychiatry, MFT, CBT, ACT, DBT, EFT... or any eclectic combination. Model-builders are believers. They live the doctrines and ethics that their models teach. Each theory and practice bears witness to its author’s core personal faith. Any ABC theory and XYZ therapy invented a hundred years from now will similarly testify autobiographically. Future models will necessarily interpret and reconfigure humanness according to where the author stands personally. Then, as now, if that interpretation is not true to Scripture and Christ, it will play false to human experience. If that reconfiguration is not true to Scripture and to Christ’s very image, then it will prove false to humanness. In reshaping what is misshapen, it will still misshape. In my commitment to biblical counseling, I bear witness to how I understand life and to how I live. I hope that you enter into the call to biblical counseling as simply one outworking of your call to live in Christ.

Fourth stage: we seek out training, teaching, mentoring, supervision. Maturity always involves an educational process, a discipleship. Read books, talk with others, take classes, give it a try in practice, get feedback. If you are humble, you grow wiser. Your comprehension grows in scope and depth. Your skills in loving develop more relevance and flexibility. We rarely grow to understand anything without...
conscious application. Many of you will steadily read good articles or books, attend conferences, pursue distance education. Some of you will form discussion groups. Some of you will enter a graduate program for systematic study in biblical counseling. Some of you will take part in training in your church. I hope that you seek out the sort of learning appropriate to who God has made you and how he intends to put you to work.

Fifth stage: we become good at counseling. Excellent, in fact. This is a *sine qua non*, like stage three. Regrettably, it is possible to enthusiastically embrace ‘biblical counseling’ as an idea (stages one and two), even go to school to learn more (stage four), while still remaining inept at doing it. But the most accurate synonym for ‘counseling’ is ‘wise love,’ and wisdom is not inept. Wise love makes a huge difference in other people’s lives. The receiving and giving of wise love makes a huge difference in your life. Genuine care, a searching question, sympathetic understanding, a timely and true word of God, practical aid, patience in the process—these are life-giving.

Here’s the bottom line: you must become better able to help people. Skillful help embodies a divine paradox. All genuine life-transformation in another is the direct work of the Life-giver, Shepherd of his sheep, Father of his children. So you pray. At the same time, this living God willingly uses us to give life to each other, to shepherd each other, to nourish, protect and encourage each other. So you work. Skill takes time and experience. Skill calls you to the humility of always learning from and leaning on your God. It calls you to learn from and lean on others who are wise. Skill bears fruit. It sweetens and brightens the lives of other people. I hope that you pursue the goal of becoming good at counseling.

Sixth stage: we develop as leaders. Counseling wisdom is a communicable skill. It must be communicated to others, spread around, passed down the generations, developed further. God will raise up three kinds of leaders.

Other people will become leaders by their ability to contribute to intellectual progress. Biblical wisdom must always be sharpened and developed. It is fashioned by engaging new problems, meeting new threats, interacting with new contenders, identifying new places where our collective wisdom needs to grow. It helps all of us when someone can put familiar truths into unfamiliar words, pointing out unexpected implications. It helps all of us when one of us stands back and reflects on what we are all doing, and then points out both our strengths and our weaknesses. It’s so easy for any of us to stagnate or get into ruts. We need to be refreshed, to extend the range and depth of what we understand to be true. Will God call you to contribute to the research and development work that refreshes ministry? Will he call you to push the envelope so that we all become more faithful to the God who speaks and acts?

Still others will become leaders by their skills as entrepreneurs and managers. Counseling needs a home. The care and cure of souls calls for organizational structure, institutional development, delivery systems, support staff, financial underpinning. All ministry costs time and money, and occurs in a context. Leaders with gifts in start-up and in administration are able to create, maintain and re-create appropriate structures and support systems so that counseling skills are best used. Will God call you to help build healthy churches
or healthy parachurch ministries, so the body of Christ can deliver the goods of good counseling to people in need?

I hope that many of our readers become such leaders. I know that Christ purposefully calls us to grow up into such. He gives both the gifts and the discipline of life experience to equip us for his purposes.

Whether you are first considering the possibility of ‘biblical’ counseling, or flourishing already as a leader, or somewhere in the middle, I trust that the articles that follow will nourish your wisdom. As you read, let me encourage you to take the next steps:

- Commit yourself to be an active reader.
- Print out a hard copy of any article you intend to read carefully. (I like the web for how efficiently it distributes JBC. But I don’t like it that the web tempts us to read things that take thought without actually holding them in our hands!)
- Read with pen and highlighter in hand. Take notes in the margins. Listen hard to what the author is saying and talk back.
- Talk with someone else about what you are thinking, and about how your church might become better at counseling.
- Forward a link to someone else if you think an article will prove helpful.

Most of all, may each of us live our lives within God’s reality.

* * *

In the editorial you have just read, I call us as Christians to speak our ‘native language’—the ‘language’ of Scripture—when it comes to counseling. The only alternative is to let other ‘languages’ control our discourse and practice. I believe Scripture speaks explicitly and foundationally to counseling matters—defining problems, setting goals, orienting practice, formulating solutions. We who believe the God of Scripture want to think the way he thinks. We who believe in Jesus want to practice according to the ends and means that he pursues. This positive call is foundational.

But that positive call did not explore how Christ’s call gives us a standpoint from which to engage and converse with other points of view. Yes, the secularized psychologies and psychotherapies are the language and culture that have historically controlled discourse and practice. The two easy responses to this are either gullibility or suspicion. It is very easy to yield to their authority claims and unwittingly convert. It is equally easy to see their errors and go on the attack. It is very hard to engage those with whom we differ in the variety of ways that comport with redemptive ministry. To assert a fresh ‘psychology’ and ‘psychotherapy’ that conforms to Christian faith does not mean we stop talking with other views. Instead, it creates the possibility of a meaningful conversation.

When I understand how Christian faith expresses a comprehensively different world view, this actually gives me a way to learn from anyone and everyone—without converting to their worldview. Christian faith gives a way to disagree constructively with a contrary view, bidding persuasively for another’s conversion. There are ways to assert our distinctives while speaking meaningfully to people with whom we differ. Christians and non-Christians do not exist in parallel universes. We inhabit the same universe, and face the same human experiences. We can talk about…everything, in a genuinely two-way conversation. I can listen and learn even while working intently to persuade.

The articles and book reviews that follow set forth and build upon a positive Christian vision. But, secondarily and in different ways, each also engages in the ongoing conversation between Christian faith and the cultural surround. I trust that you will learn something about how we learn, and how we critique, and how we reinterpret, and how we engage the views and practices that surround us, seeking to bring others to bend the knee to the Lord before whom all will kneel.

Michael Emlet’s “Listening to Prozac… and to the Scriptures” updates the answer to a perennial question. What is the relationship between biblical counseling and the use of psychoactive medications? Historically, biblical counselors have sought to walk what Emlet calls the “wisdom tight-rope,” not acquiescing to claims of medical panacea but also not denying that medications can sometimes serve as a helpful adjunct to primary pastoral care. Emlet articulates this tight-rope in a fresh way. He grapples with hard cases and hard questions, and he resists easy answers. He invites us to humility, caution and balance about medicines—while asserting strong convictions about the cure of souls found in Jesus Christ.
My article “The Pastor as Counselor” tackles a very different but no less perennial question. Pastors preach, lead and administer—should they also counsel? I have long thought that the biggest roadblock to establishing rich counseling ministries in churches is not the power of the secular mental health system. It is that pastors are too often trained to see counseling as a distinctly secondary and even optional aspect of overall ministry. I seek to cast a bright vision for how counseling operates as one of the primary aspects of ministry. This vision is significant for non-pastors also. You will find this article orients you to the basics and distinctives of biblical counseling.

In our “Counselor’s Toolbox,” Julie Lowe walks through how to use an information gathering tool that will help you work with children. Children are concrete. They reveal their experience, thoughts and feelings expressively, not abstractly. Counselors who expect those they counsel to be able to talk about what they are going through can unwittingly misfire with children. “Seeing Relationships through the Eyes of a Child” seeks to remedy a common failure.

We are pleased to introduce our “Lives in Process” section with two stories, “To God Be the Glory (Not Me)” and “Stomping among Lilies.” The opening editorial spoke of how significant it is when the Bible’s vision of life comes to control the terms in which you understand and live your own life. These two stories illustrate the discipleship process that characterizes the Bible’s cure of souls.

Three book reviews round out this issue of *JBC*. Each of these books tackles a topic of contemporary relevance: a popular new approach to psychotherapy, an individual’s severe breakdown and its effect on the family, and a problem at the intersection of counseling and criminality. Perhaps the most common and misleading caricature of ‘biblical counseling’ is that it always keys to a specific proof-text from the Bible. None of these three reviews keys the discussion to a proof-text, but each of them brings biblical insight to bear on a contemporary issue.

Winston Smith evaluates a book on Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). EFT is one of the hot new third-generation behavioral therapies. The first generation was all about behavior and reinforcement: Pavlov, Watson, Skinner and Wolpe are old familiar names. The second generation, arising in the 1960s, added cognition and stoic philosophy: Aaron Beck and cognitive behavior therapy remain the stock-in-trade of behavioral medicine. This newest generation adds emotions to the picture, and considers people in relationship rather than in stoic isolation. Smith assesses both the provocative strengths and the underlying shortcomings of EFT.

*Hurry Down Sunshine* is a father’s memoir of his daughter’s disintegration into mania. Ed Welch explores how a story, whatever its underlying presuppositions, can inform us. This story in particular can help us to better understand a profound human struggle. It challenges us to more clearly demonstrate how a biblical worldview engages phenomena not found in the pages of the Bible.

Julie Lowe reviews a book on how to identify sex offenders and set up effective barriers against predatory behavior. The subject matter is daunting: “This book is not for the faint of heart.” But the need for understanding and action is real. Sexual predation frequently occurs in churches and other ‘safe’ places, as this book discusses and as current events make plain.

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2 For CCEF’s statement of faith, mission statement and a brief history, see www.ccef.org/ccef-history-theological-foundations-and-counseling-model
What Do You Hear?
You’ve been working for six months with a counselee who struggles with serious depression and anxiety. After walking alongside her in her suffering, you have together identified ways in which her perfectionism and her mistrust in the goodness and mercy of the Lord contribute to her anxiety and depression. She is slowly making progress. You see her more consistently using the Psalms to move toward God to voice her fears and disappointments. She is less hypercritical of herself and others. Then, over a one-month period, you see remarkable change. It’s like she’s coming out of hibernation. She shakes off her sluggish spirituality before your eyes. The Word comes alive to her in new and fresh ways. She has a growing excitement to serve others. Her depression and anxiety lessen week by week. You rejoice! And then she tells you that four weeks earlier she saw her primary physician who prescribed Prozac, which she has been taking since.

So, how do you view her change now? Are you disappointed? Thankful? Confused? Do you change your counseling approach? Should you be more proactive in recommending an evaluation for medication, particularly for those counselees who seem “stuck” or are making slow progress? Do you prayerfully consider going to medical school so you, too, can prescribe Prozac?! Another counselee comes to you for help with longstanding obsessions and compulsions. He has been on six different medication combinations in the past, none of which have significantly improved his struggle. He is discouraged about his lack of progress and about the twenty pound weight gain and frequent headaches he has experienced over the last six months on his latest medical regimen. Where do you begin?

A counselee notes on his intake form that he is taking Tegretol, Zoloft, and Abilify for a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. He is interested in coming off these medications and wants your advice before he returns to his psychiatrist. More specifically, he has developed the conviction that he should, with God’s help, be able to live medication-free. How should you proceed? What information would you want to know? Should a life characterized by robust faith and repentance make medication unnecessary?

These vignettes show that familiarity with psychoactive medications is a must for counselors. We live in a time when more and more problems in living are attributed to brain-based dysfunction. Medication is touted as an important (if not the most important) aspect of treatment within the psychiatric community. In popular street-level understanding, it is THE
treatment of choice.

Christians remain divided on this issue. Some would say that medication is usually appropriate, viewing it as a “common-grace” tool to relieve mental suffering. Others are more cautious, recommending medication only in more severe situations. Still others decry the use of psychoactive medication as a “cop-out,” when a basic posture of gospel-centered obedience is all that is really necessary.

As Christians, we can’t just “listen to Prozac”; we need a biblically-based philosophy to guide the use or non-use of medications. We need to know not only the “what” and “how” of psychoactive medication use, but also the “why” or “why not.” And we need strategies. How should we proceed in difficult cases like those mentioned above?

To that end, I have several goals in this article:

• to familiarize you with the basic classes of psychoactive medications,
• to review what we know about the mechanism of action and efficacy of such drugs, and
• to discuss a biblical approach to psychoactive medications.

Classes of Psychoactive Medications

The term “psychoactive” medication refers to those chemical substances that are designed to enter the brain tissue from the bloodstream to cause changes in mood, thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Most any medication, at high enough doses, can have psychoactive (side) effects (e.g., a certain high blood pressure pill may cause drowsiness or impaired ability to concentrate). But my focus is on those classes of medications designed to have effects on the brain.

Let me summarize the various classes here. Antidepressants – are probably the class of medications we are most familiar with. Early antidepressants, developed in the 1950s and 60s, such as Tofranil (imipramine) and Elavil (amitriptyline), are still used today, but have been overshadowed by the “SSRIs” – selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—such as Prozac (fluoxetine), Zoloft (sertraline), Paxil (paroxetine), and Celexa (citalopram), which were released in the late 1980s. Other antidepressants with varied chemical compositions include Wellbutrin (buproprion), Effexor (venalafaxine), Remeron (mirtazapine), and Cymbalta (duloxetine). No one sub-class of antidepressants has proved more effective than another and newer antidepressants are not more efficacious than older ones, although they do tend to have less sedative side effects than the older antidepressants.

Mood Stabilizers – are used to treat bipolar disorder. These are also called “anti-mania drugs.” Lithium, discovered in 1949, has been the gold standard within psychiatry for many years. But it is associated with potentially dangerous side effects, so it is less likely to be used as a first-line agent unless the person has a more severe presentation. More likely are medications that initially were used for seizure disorders but were observed to have a mood-leveling effect. These include Tegretol (carbamazepine), Depakote (divalproex) and Lamictal (lamotrigine), to name a few.

Antiobsessionals – are medications used to treat obsessions and compulsions. Many of these are the SSRIs I noted earlier, along with Anafranil (chomipramine). Notice that many medications, particularly the SSRIs, have multiple potential uses authorized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Right away that tells you that these medications are less like “smart bombs” that work with laser precision, and more like conventional bombs with widespread effect on systems of neurotransmitters in the brain. This lack of specificity reminds us just how little we understand the neurobiological component in psychiatric problems.

Psychostimulants – have been used since the 1950s to treat the symptoms of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These include Ritalin (methylphenidate), Concerta (the sustained release version of methylphenidate), Focalin (dexamethylphenidate), Dexedrine

We need a biblically-based philosophy to guide the use or non-use of medications.
(dextroamphetamine), and Adderall (mixed amphetamines). Because they are stimulants they have the potential for abuse if not used as prescribed.

Antipsychotics – are used to treat the symptoms of psychosis, including the hallucinations and delusions characteristic of schizophrenia. The older antipsychotics, used since the 1950s, include Thorazine (chlorpromazine), Mellaril (thioridazine), and Haldol (haloperidol). Due to very severe side effects, some of which are permanent, these drugs were limited in their use.

However, the creation of a new generation of antipsychotics has led to more patients being treated, particularly bipolar patients whose mania has features of psychosis. These newer antipsychotics, which are essentially equal in efficacy to the first generation antipsychotics, include Risperdal (risperidone), Zyprexa (olanzapine), Geodon (ziprasidone), and Abilify (aripiprazole). Early research suggested the second-generation antipsychotics had fewer side effects. More recent research suggests the potential for equally serious but different kinds of side effects when compared to the first-generation antipsychotics.4

Anxiolytics (anti-anxiety medications) – are used to treat the symptoms of anxiety. Historically, physicians have used a subclass known as benzodiazepines for treating anxiety and panic. These included drugs such as Valium (diazepam) and Librium (chlordiazepoxide), and more recently, Klonopin (clonazepam), Ativan (lorazepam), and Xanax (alprazolam).

The problem with the benzodiazepines, when used regularly and over the long term, is the potential for tolerance, dependence, and withdrawal. Tolerance means that your body requires more of the drug over time to get the same effect. Dependence is your body

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### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Drug</th>
<th>Used to Treat</th>
<th>Examples of Available Drugs*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-depressants</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Tofranil, Elavil, Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Celexa, Wellbutrin, Effexor, Remeron, Cymbalta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood Stabilizers</td>
<td>Bipolar Disorder</td>
<td>Lithium, Tegretol, Depakote, Lamictal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-obsessionals</td>
<td>Obsessive Complulsive Disorder</td>
<td>Anafranil, Zoloft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psycho-stimulants</td>
<td>Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)</td>
<td>Ritalin, Concerta, Focalin, Dexedrine, Adderall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-psychotics</td>
<td>Schizophrenia, psychosis, hallucinations, delusions</td>
<td>Thorazine, Mellaril, Haldol, Risperdal, Zyprexa, Geodon, Abilify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiolytics</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Valium, Librium, Klonopin, Ativan, Xanax, Zoloft, Paxil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypnotics</td>
<td>Insomnia</td>
<td>Ambien, Sonata, Lunesta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Many of these drugs are available as generics. Basic drug information is available at www.PsyD-fx.com
but now physicians choose newer drugs such as Ambien (zolpidem), Sonata (zaleplon), Lunesta (eszopiclone), and others that have less addictive potential.

Although I mentioned some specific concerns above, it is important to note that side effects are common with each of these classes of psychoactive medications. Drowsiness and weight gain are very common. Sexual side effects, such as decreased libido and the inability to experience orgasm, may be as high as 60% in the SSRI sub-class. As we will see later, the potential benefits of using medication might outweigh the costs, including side effects: so simply note at this point that these are not benign agents. They may help, but they can also harm—hence their regulation by the FDA!

**Do Medications Treat a “Chemical Imbalance”?**

Now that I have familiarized you with the basic categories of psychoactive medications, let’s tackle the question, “How do they work?” Are they treating “chemical imbalances”? This is certainly the lay understanding, as fueled by biologically-oriented psychiatry and pharmacological marketing. But do psychoactive drugs correct imbalances in body chemistry?

To answer that question, I need to give you a crash course in basic neuro-anatomy. Don’t worry, if you were an English major, I’ll make it painless! In the brain there are billions of nerve cells (neurons) that communicate with each other via chemical substances called neurotransmitters. In simple terms, the sending cell releases neurotransmitters into the space between it and the receiving cell. The receiving cell has receptors for the neurotransmitter and is activated when the neurotransmitter binds to it. Following activation, the neurotransmitter is released from the receptor site. Then it either: 1) is taken back up into the sending cell to be repackaged and used again, 2) remains in the space between the neurons, or 3) gets destroyed. Scientists have discovered over 200 neurotransmitters. Some that you may be familiar with are serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. The theory is that psychiatric problems result from an imbalance in, or a dysregulation of, neurotransmitters in certain parts of the brain. For example, some conclude that depression results from a deficiency of serotonin, so treatment involves using psychoactive medications to address this deficiency. The impact of these treatments is often vividly portrayed in pharmaceutical ads in before and after schematics of the patients’ brains. But what do we really know?

First, since we are unable to measure neurotransmitter levels in the brain of a person being treated with these medications, we cannot scientifically prove that these drugs are responsible for any changes in the person’s symptoms. Note that this is very different from other medical diagnoses. For example, for hypothyroidism we can directly measure a low amount of thyroid hormone, or for diabetes we can directly measure a high amount of glucose in the bloodstream. Treatment of both conditions will lead to direct changes in blood measurements. But because we cannot measure neurotransmitters, we cannot make the same kinds of conclusions about the impact of the psychoactive medication on the person’s symptoms.

Second, we do not know exactly how these medications work in humans. What we do know is how these medications work in test tubes with animal brain tissue and this research is then extrapolated to humans. This, in and of itself, is appropriate for testing hypotheses, but it cannot tell you what is actually going on in the human brain. Listen to what even a very biomedically-oriented scientist, pharmacologist Stephen Stahl, has to say:

In general, contemporary knowledge of CNS [Central Nervous System] disorders is in fact largely predicated on knowing how drugs act on disease symptoms, and then inferring pathophysiology [i.e., what’s wrong physically in the brain] by knowing how the drugs act. Thus, *pathophysiology is inferred rather than proved* [emphasis mine], since we do not yet know the primary enzyme, receptor, or genetic deficiency in any given psychiatric or neurological disorder.\(^5\)

Here is an example from the description of a specific drug. The *PDR* (Physician’s Drug Reference) describes Zoloft (sertraline) this way: “the mechanism of action of sertraline is *presumed* [emphasis mine] to be linked to its inhibition of CNS neuronal uptake of serotonin.”\(^6\)
In other words, Zoloft may impact the neurotransmitter serotonin in the human brain as it does in basic laboratory research, but we’re not certain. Nor are we exactly sure how this might translate to an antidepressant effect.

This is important: if neuroscientific and psychiatric researchers acknowledge the current limitations of biomedical hypotheses regarding the origin of psychiatric symptoms, how much more should we as biblical counselors acknowledge the complex nature of these struggles, taking into account underlying spiritual, biological, relational, situational, and societal-cultural factors!

So, at best we can say these drugs modulate, or change, neurotransmission in some way, and that seems to be associated with symptom reduction in a statistically significant proportion of those tested in clinical drug trials. But, are these drugs treating a chemical imbalance? We don’t really know—maybe. We know they seem to alleviate symptoms in some people but do not exactly know how. Our knowledge is incomplete. However, by pointing out that the level of actual knowledge we have about how these drugs work in the brain is limited, I’m not saying we should avoid such medications. I’m saying that if we do use them, we should be aware of what we really know. We have much to learn and a cautious optimism is in order, not an unbridled and uncritical enthusiasm.

**How Effective Are Psychoactive Medications?**

Space precludes an analysis of each class of psychoactive medications, so let me focus primarily on the use of antidepressants since it is the class you will encounter the most frequently. First, remember that a drug cannot come to market unless the FDA approves it, based upon the results of clinical drug trials. More specifically, a study medication has to beat a placebo by a statistically significant margin to be considered effective.

So, how well do antidepressants work? Compared to placebo they have been shown in published studies to help in mild, moderate, and severe depression. Realize that the “placebo effect” in clinical studies is not uncommonly 35% and even higher. This shows the power of belief: if I think a treatment I’m receiving may be effective (whether it is or is not) it is more likely to have that effect. The higher the placebo effect, the more the active drug must demonstrate its effect in order to be considered superior to the placebo.

Take for example a clinical drug trial of 200 depressed patients, 100 of whom receive a new antidepressant and 100 of whom receive a placebo. The standard protocol for such studies is “double blind”—i.e., neither the patients nor the researchers know who has the active medication vs. the placebo, so as not to bias the results. Let’s say 35% of the placebo group responds favorably with reduction of their depression (= the placebo effect) and 70% of the active drug group responds favorably. Looks good, right? But remember a component of that 70% could be the power of belief (a placebo effect of the active drug) and another component could be the actual biochemical effects of the drug itself. So, at the end of the day, of those 100 patients who got the active drug, 30% did not respond, 35% may have responded by virtue of a standard placebo effect, and 35% may have responded due to the actual effects of the drug itself. We should conclude that overall there seems to be a modest drug effect, but it’s certainly not a “chemical cure.” And these studies ultimately say nothing about how an individual person will or will not respond when given an antidepressant. At this point there is no way to predict who will respond best to which treatment.

We can also ask if medications are more effective than counseling for depression. Individual studies have revealed that even in moderate to severe depression, although medication might bring more rapid improvement compared with counseling, counseling was equal to medication at four
months of treatment. Note that the degree of effectiveness of the psychotherapy may well depend on the counselor’s experience/expertise. There is also evidence that cognitive therapy is superior to medication in preventing relapse once medication and/or counseling is discontinued. Other studies seem to show that the combination of counseling and medication may be superior to counseling or medication alone.

It is important to remember that not all psychiatric symptoms are created equal. I have been highlighting treatment for depression, which is quite variegated in its presentation. Other problems, such as the psychotic symptoms of schizophrenia or, in some cases, the mania of bipolar disorder, definitely respond better to medication than to counseling. However, a multi-faceted approach that includes counseling and other social interventions is still in order once psychosis has stabilized.

So, what should we conclude from all this information, particularly with regard to antidepressants? They do seem to work—that is, improve mood and other symptoms of depression—in some people, some of the time, but they certainly are not the “silver bullet” that some make them out to be. Even if we conclude that medications are or might be effective for a particular person, they comprise only a part of the total approach to the person. Secular research shows the critical importance and efficacy of psychotherapy as well.

Medications may well change neurotransmission at microscopic levels; they certainly are associated with change in the pattern of brain activity at “macroscopic” levels on “live action” brain scans such as positron emission tomography (PET scans) and functional MRIs (fMRIs). But then secular forms of counseling such as cognitive behavioral therapy have “proven effective” as well. In that sense, both medication and counseling are “biological” treatments—medication directly so, and counseling indirectly so. How much more so should we expect brain activity patterns to change with the embrace and actualization of gospel-centered counsel!

A Biblical Evaluation

We have assessed the secular data on the use of medications, but how should we assess the use of medications from a biblical perspective? First, remember that we exist as body-spirit creatures. We are simultaneously body and soul. There’s never a time we’re not spiritually engaged. And there’s never a time we are not bodily engaged. This means that attention to both physical and spiritual aspects of our personhood is mandatory in ministry. What biblical-theological truths provide guidance? Let me discuss some things I keep in mind as I consider the use of medications.

You might call this “walking the wisdom tight rope” because you will see that the biblical approach balances different priorities.

It is a kingdom agenda to relieve our suffering; it is a kingdom agenda to redeem us through suffering.

When the kingdom comes in Jesus Christ, you see God’s heart with regard to suffering in two ways. First, it is God’s design to relieve the suffering that arose as a result of the fall. Consider how Mark 1 describes the activities of Jesus’ ministry: teaching, exorcisms, healing those with various diseases, prayer, and cleansing a leper. Peter put it this way to Cornelius:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and . . . he went around doing good and healing all those who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:38)

Clearly a mark of the in-breaking kingdom is relief of suffering. Relief of suffering is a good thing! As the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs says, contentment is “not opposed to all lawful seeking for help in different circumstances, nor endeavoring simply to be delivered out of present afflictions by the use of lawful means.” I believe medications can certainly be one of those lawful means.

You see a second strand of teaching in the New Testament: God’s design to redeem the experience of suffering for believers because of their union with Jesus, the Suffering Servant. Paul calls this “the fellowship of sharing in [Jesus’] sufferings” (Phil 3:10). By virtue of being in Christ, God is at work in the midst of our suffering, conforming us to the image of Christ. This is the very gateway to experiencing his resurrection power and glory (cf. Phil 3:10-11; Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4; 2 Cor 1:8-9; 1 Peter 4:12-13; James 1:2-4). So, while relieving suffering is
a kingdom priority, seeking mere relief without a vision for God’s transforming agenda in the midst of suffering may short-circuit all that God wants to do in the person’s life. Another way of saying this is we should be glad for symptom relief but simultaneously look for the variegated fruit of the Spirit: perseverance in the midst of suffering, deeper trust in the Father’s love, more settled hope, love for fellow strugglers, gratitude, and more.

Medications are a gift of God’s grace; medications can be used idolatrously.

I believe it is right to view the development of psychoactive medications as a good gift from God. As such, we should receive them gratefully and humbly, not forgetting who has given the necessary wisdom to scientists and physicians to discover such remedies. He is the One who promises to uphold you with his righteous right hand (Isa 41:10).

Sadly however, I have met people who are better evangelists for Prozac than they are for the living God. Rather than viewing medication as simply one component of a full-orbed God-centered treatment approach, they view it in almost salvific terms. By definition, this is idolatry: investing ultimate power and help in something other than our triune God. If a counselee believes that what really matters is fine-tuning the dose of Paxil, and finds discussion of spiritual things superfluous or irrelevant, that’s a problem. How the person responds when the medication works—or doesn’t work—reveals the basic heart posture before God. Thanksgiving and a more fervent seeking after God in the wake of medication success says one thing; a lack of gratitude and a comfort-driven forgetfulness of God says another. A commitment to trust God’s faithfulness and goodness in the wake of medication failure says one thing; a bitter, complaining distrust of his ways says another.

Too much suffering can be “hazardous” to spiritual growth; too little suffering may be “hazardous” to spiritual growth.

This might be considered a corollary to my first point. What do I mean here? Simply this: in the midst of intense suffering, whether it stems from the body or from other sources (relationships, life circumstances), there tends to be a greater temptation to become embittered and angry. Witness the counsel of Job’s wife, “Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). As we’ve seen, it’s not a bad thing to seek deliverance from intense suffering; the psalmists ask for it all the time in the midst of their grief.

At the same time, a lack of suffering may bring the temptation to simply forget that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). This was part of the problem God’s people experienced once they entered the Promised Land; their dependence on him waned in the midst of material blessing (Deut 8:10-14; Judg 2:10-12).

Here’s another way of saying this: God-centered contentment is elusive in want or in plenty. Neither situation is the “ideal” for spiritual growth. Paul highlights this in Phil 4:11-13. He learned “the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” He looked to the strength of Christ in all situations. So, don’t be too quick to cast off suffering as though immediate relief from trials is the only good God is up to. And don’t think it’s more “spiritual” to refrain from taking medications, as though character refinement through suffering is the only good God is up to. We don’t choose our suffering in some masochistic way; yet we are called to a life of walking in the footsteps of our suffering Savior. Christ teaches us a cruciform and dependent lifestyle.

A person can have wrong motives for wanting to take medication; a person can have wrong motives for not wanting to take medication.

Often, the most important issue in the use of medications is the attitude of the person to whom you are ministering. It’s not that psychoactive medications in themselves are either “good” or “bad.” Rather, it’s how a person views and handles this potential treatment that makes the difference. I’ve had counselees who want a referral for medication immediately without really wanting to examine their hearts and lifestyle. I’ve had counselees who resist the recommendation to consider the use of medications for self-oriented reasons. Let me elaborate on these two scenarios.

What are problematic reasons for wanting to take medication? The first is a demand for immediate relief coupled with doubt about the benefits of looking at potential underlying issues. I remember meeting one time with a
young man who came in with a recent history of anxiety associated with public speaking. Some of the things he said pointed to underlying fear of man/fear of failure—much to work with from a gospel perspective! But he was not interested in counseling. He was not interested in a gospel perspective on his struggle. Rather, he had made an appointment for the sole purpose of obtaining my recommendation for a provider who could prescribe an anti-anxiety medication.

A second questionable motive for wanting to take medication involves caving into the pressures of others. Family and friends (and counselors!) may push for medications due to their own discomfort in seeing the suffering of their loved one. Sometimes the pressure reflects a selfish desire to have their loved one back to normal so that life would be easier for them.

What problematic reasons exist for not wanting to take medication? Resistance to medication can be an issue of pride and self-sufficiency: “I should be able to do this without medication.” Or the more spiritualized version of this: “I should be able, by trusting God more, to do this without medication.” Another reason could be fear of man: “What would people think? ” Yet another concern is shame: “There’s something seriously wrong with me if I have to take this medication.”

Many people sincerely want to grow in Christ in the midst of their mental suffering and simply wonder about the pros and cons of medication. Many rightfully wonder about the potential side effects of using medication. These thoughtful counselees remain open to starting—or not starting—medication, which is a wise posture before the Lord.

Using medications may make it more difficult to address moral-spiritual issues; not using medications may make it more difficult to address moral-spiritual issues.

Scripture treats us as unified beings, having both spiritual and bodily aspects. Given that we are fully integrated, body and spirit (heart/soul) creatures, it is not surprising that bodily “treatment”—sleep—impacted your spiritual life. The heart issues of grumbling and irritation have become less prominent. That’s not necessarily a bad thing; we are called to be wise stewards of our bodies. But in a time of “plenty” (sleep-wise), we shouldn’t forget our sinful tendencies toward anger and complaining that were revealed in our weakness. At the same time, we don’t “invite” greater bodily stress so as to provoke our own hearts! This is our Father’s business, “mingling toil with peace and rest.”

How does this relate to the use of psychotropic medications? Improving someone’s symptoms (of anxiety, for example) doesn’t necessarily address the underlying fears and desires that may be present. Might one feel better? Yes. Again, this may not be a bad thing in itself, but does the person retain the zeal to address the revealed heart inclinations now that those propensities are less visible in day-to-day life? Is there a commitment to address the situational factors that contribute to the experience of anxiety? In my experience, more mature believers do indeed remember what they saw in the mirror and continue to take their soul to task in thought, word, and deed (James 1:23–25). They do recognize the importance of assessing and changing contextual factors. But I have also had counselees who, after improvement in their symptoms, assume no further work is required.

Conversely, there are situations, albeit more extreme, when a failure to use medication...
may make it more difficult to address a person’s spiritual life. I counseled a young woman in a demanding graduate program who presented with insomnia, depression, severe anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. While her suicidal thoughts rapidly waned by simply airing them with me, her other struggles did not. She could affirm intellectually the promises of God, but it was like her soul was coated in Teflon; the truths of Scripture seemed to slide right off. While this disconnect is true for all of us to some degree it seemed particularly prominent for her.

After several weeks, I saw how much her ongoing exhaustion from the insomnia was part of a vicious cycle. On the one hand, you could say that her insomnia, which was anxiety driven, was a fruit of her fear and unbelief and so that should be the primary target of ministry. On the other hand, you could say that her bodily exhaustion was making it much more difficult for her to respond in a faith-filled way. Both are appropriate avenues for ministry. In the end I thought that evaluation for a short-term course of sleeping medication might be beneficial to break the negative cycle she was in. In fact, that was the case. As she slept better, it wasn’t as if her problems magically melted away; she still struggled with anxiety. But she was able to internalize spiritual realities and truly begin to engage with God, addressing issues of perfectionism, legalism, and fear of man, which were root causes of her anxiety and despair.

Think of it this way: using medication in select situations may be analogous to calming the surface waters to allow for deep-sea exploration. You can’t have a diving expedition if there is a gale on the surface of the water. Situations in which such “calming” might be helpful include (but are not necessarily limited to) the hallucinations and delusions of psychosis (whether associated with schizophrenia or mania) and severe or unremitting anxiety or depression, particularly if associated with suicidal thoughts and plans.¹⁹

Can taking a medication actually assist in sanctification? Yes, in the same way that adequate sleep can assist in sanctification! It’s not that you can buy holiness in a pill, but using medication in certain situations may help set bodily conditions that allow for a greater spiritual flourishing.

Putting It All Together

What have we seen? The scientific witness is mixed. While psychoactive medications may help a certain percentage of individuals, the benefits do not rise to the level touted by pharmaceutical companies. In addition, these medications are associated with significant side effects. In depression, working with a trained counselor is at least as effective as medication and may confer a longer-term protection against relapse. Biblically we have seen that gospel-centered ministry targets both the somatic and moral-spiritual aspects of life, and that both relief of suffering and perseverance in the midst of suffering are consistent with God’s design. We also noted the interdependence of body and spirit. Given these scientific and biblical perspectives, what should our practice in counseling be with regard to psychoactive medications?

I hope you have seen there is not a clear-cut “right” or “wrong” answer. There is no universal “rule” we can apply to all people at all times. There is no simple algorithm. Rather, the use of these medications is a wisdom issue, to be addressed individually with counselees. There will always be a mix of pros and cons, costs and benefits to carefully consider. We must ask, “What seems wisest for this particular person with these particular struggles at this particular time?” Most often, addressing the person’s suffering and sin takes place without the use of medication. Yet, in some cases, after asking that question, we will lean toward more directly addressing potential bodily causes and correlates of the person’s struggle by recommending an evaluation to consider the use of medication. Notice how I phrase that—“recommending an evaluation to consider...” I’m not mandating. I’m not making a definitive recommendation. I’m simply suggesting that medication be considered as a part of the holistic approach to the struggle.

I’m most likely to recommend an evaluation for medication when any of the following occur:

- symptoms are severe and unremitting,
- symptoms are not abating despite engagement with the counseling process, or
- there is a high risk of suicide. ²⁰
I encourage you to develop a relationship with a trusted and wise psychiatrist who shares your strong biblical convictions and is able to provide consultation for these kinds of decisions. Such a person may or may not exist in your locale. Well-trained, clinically-savvy psychiatrists whose practice is governed by a robust biblical worldview are indeed few and far between! A family physician or internist with extensive experience in the use of psychoactive medications may be another option. The point is that we biblical counselors don’t make these decisions on our own; close communication with medical providers is essential.

Often enough, people come to me already on medications and the choice to start or not start them is a non-issue.\textsuperscript{21} Usually they’ve realized that medications do not solve all their problems. They need help to reconcile conflict, or to walk in faith not fear, or to address any of the multitudes of other problems that bring people to counseling. There’s plenty to discuss apart from talking about the utility or non-utility of their medication. Whether on medications or off, the goal is always to help a person grow in love for God and for neighbor.

Let me illustrate with an orthopedic analogy. I liken the use of medications to the use of crutches, and I don’t mean that in a pejorative sense. A person can experience many different injuries to the legs that don’t require a set of crutches. He may have visible pain; he may have a limp initially, but the problem is self-limited with forms of treatment other than the support of crutches. Here I might think of milder experiences of depression, anxiety, and OCD, for example, where medication (like the crutches) might not be needed.

Others require crutches to assist them after experiencing a more significant injury or surgery. They use them for a season while their bodies recover. Here I might envision a fairly severe postpartum depression or severe panic attacks treated by a brief course of medication. Still others have a more significant disability and may need to use crutches for an extended time or perhaps for life, if the disability is permanent. Here I think of problems such as schizophrenia and severe bipolar disorder, which seem to have a more significant brain-based etiology and long-term use of medication seems warranted.\textsuperscript{22}

Then, there are times someone may be relying too much on his crutches and it actually impedes progress. I experienced this as a teenager when I broke my ankle. After the cast was removed I was told to bear weight ‘as tolerated.’ But I didn’t tolerate it very well! I continued to use my crutches for an extended time because putting weight on my ankle caused pain. At my follow-up visit, my orthopedist told me to throw away the crutches and learn to bear weight, despite the pain. It was hard work, but I learned again to walk without the aid of crutches. The bottom line is that all musculoskeletal problems are different and it takes wisdom to know when the additional support of crutches is necessary and, if so, for how long. The same is true of psychoactive medication.

The analogy is imperfect, of course. It’s easier to determine if someone can walk unaided or not. It’s far more challenging to assess what a person can or can’t do in the midst of emotional suffering. We see through a glass far more darkly than we realize. We will always struggle to find a wise balance between attention to the spiritual and physical aspects of our personhood. Sometimes in retrospect we’ll judge that we should have recommended the possibility of medications earlier. Other times we will conclude that we jumped the gun and that medication wasn’t the wisest choice after all. But we can be sure that whether medication is part of the total ministry approach or not, God sovereignly acts, and “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph 3:20). He will accomplish the redemption that he has begun in us.

To conclude, let’s return to the opening examples and see how this “wisdom” framework might look in action. What about the woman experiencing depression and anxiety? Certainly we should rejoice in the remarkable changes in her life! But can we say why she has changed? No doubt the Prozac could be having brain-based biochemical effects that have catalyzed her spiritual growth, given the mysterious interface of body and spirit. Or she could be experiencing a placebo effect from the Prozac. Or the Prozac isn’t really doing much, but God has himself intervened in his providential timing in a new and deeper way. At the end
of the day, I remain unsure about the ultimate cause. But my goals would be the same for her: rooting her security in Christ’s righteousness in a way that pushes against her perfectionism, turning to God as an ever-present help in the midst of anxiety, and moving outward in love toward others. I wouldn’t make a huge issue of the medication right now, although I might inquire about her decision to see her primary physician. Did she feel that progress was too slow? Did family or friends urge her to go? What is her understanding about the utility of the Prozac?

At some point in the future, should her spiritual growth be sustained and her depression and anxiety remain at bay, I would suggest her physician consider discontinuing her medication. It’s not that the ultimate goal is being off medication—conformity to the image of Jesus Christ is! But there’s no indication at this point, by virtue of severity or chronicity of her struggle, that she would need to be on medication long-term. In fact, the progress (albeit slow) she was making prior to the medication bolsters that hope.

The second counselee is experiencing the reality that medication is not a panacea for his obsessions and compulsions. For him, not only has medication not helped, its side effects have hurt him. While I’m dubious about the benefit of continuing his medical regimen, I would not recommend that he discontinue the medication(s) on his own. Instead, I would suggest he speak with his physician about suspending the medication temporarily and see how he fares. If I were concerned about the quality and experience of his treating physician, I might recommend a consultation with a trusted psychiatrist. But apart from any decisions about medication, there is much work to be done in addressing his obsessions and compulsions from a gospel-centered framework.

Lastly, how would I approach the man who has the bipolar diagnosis and wants to discontinue his medications? I want to get a better idea about the nature of his struggle over time. When was he diagnosed? How severe were his symptoms? Did he have psychotic features? Has he had recurrences either on medication or off medication in the past? How compliant has he been with his medications? Has he ever been hospitalized? The more severe and recurrent his problem—and here I might get input from his family and friends—the greater the concern I would have about discontinuing medication.

In addition, I want to understand why he believes God wants him to be medication-free. How has he come to that decision? If the man chooses to discontinue his medications he will need close monitoring and follow up. I would want to work closely with his psychiatrist, as well as with other members of his family and church community.

Some Concluding Thoughts

We are body-spirit creatures. We should not be surprised that a physical treatment such as medication may be associated with symptomatic and perhaps more substantial change in people’s lives. Medication can be an appropriate and even necessary part of someone’s care, depending on the specific nature of a person’s struggle.

Yet, we must admit a great deal of remaining mystery about how psychoactive medications actually work in the human brain. We take care to remain balanced in our assessment of the efficacy of medications. We neither exalt them nor disregard them. Even if we do view medication as a potential piece in a comprehensive ministry approach, we always seek to bring the riches of Christ’s redemption to bear upon people’s lives. Sinners will always need mercy, grace, forgiveness, and supernatural power to love God and neighbor. Sufferers will always need comfort, hope, and the will to persevere. Ultimately, these blessings are found not in a pill bottle…but in the person of Jesus Christ.

2 The adjectives “psychotropic” or “psychiatric” are synonyms for psychoactive. These terms can be used interchangeably.

2 The adjectives “psychotropic” or “psychiatric” are synonyms for psychoactive. These terms can be used interchangeably.
The ongoing disagreement within psychiatry itself regarding how to understand and classify mental disorders shows the insufficiency of a purely biological orientation to causation and treatment of psychiatric symptoms.

If I know I am getting a placebo—an inactive substitute—I will be less likely to respond favorably; the placebo effect declines. If I know I am getting the active drug, it is more likely to work; that is, the placebo effect (even for the active drug) is boosted. “Blinding” the study participants seeks to avoid this bias. Of course, if I experience side effects because I am on the active drug, I may conclude that I am taking the study medication, which also biases in favor of the drug.


Cognitive or cognitive-behavioral therapy is the most frequently studied method of counseling.


As believers we hope not only for symptom reduction but also for tangible growth in love for God and love for people. Improved mood may correlate with these things, but not necessarily!


I could look at the places in Scripture where attention to the body is explicitly mentioned as a focus of “treatment”—e.g., passages include 1 Kings 19 (God “prescribed” sleep, food, and water for Elijah) and 1 Timothy 5:23 (Paul urged Timothy to take some wine for his stomach ailment). However, it is my assumption that the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection (among others) demonstrate the critical value God places upon our bodily constitution. Therefore, my starting presupposition is that the body is an appropriate “target” for ministry, just as our moral-spiritual disposition clearly is. So my focus will lie on other aspects of biblical truth that inform the use or non-use of medications for the Christian.


These extreme cases are more clear-cut. But we live a culture that doesn’t tolerate any hint of “rough seas” but yearns for the comfort of glassy calm waters. This contributes to the overuse of psychoactive medication in some who only want a quick fix rather than tasting the fruit of persevering through choppy waters.

My goal with a seriously suicidal person is to stabilize the person first, with medications or even with hospitalization if necessary, then begin to work through the particular problems in living.

This is generally because they have seen their primary care physician who has prescribed such a medication, but they may have already seen a psychiatrist as well. The majority of psychoactive medications—particularly antidepressants—are prescribed by primary care physicians.

Understanding the causes and classification of mental disorders is another topic in itself, although closely related to the subject at hand. The trajectory of modern psychiatry has been toward the biological, fueled in part by the apparent success of psychoactive medications. Thus, diagnosis and treatment go hand-in-hand.

Most psychiatrists recommend a 9-12 month course of an antidepressant before discontinuing it.

A new onset of “super-spirituality” may in fact be a warning sign of mania!
The Pastor as Counselor

by David Powlison

This article is written to pastors—but it is for anyone interested in counseling. If you are not a pastor, you will overhear ways of seeing, thinking and conversing that give fresh shape to your counseling, too. Listen in. The dots do connect directly to you. I hope that you find this vision illuminating and heartening. If you are a pastor, I hope that the message speaks relevantly, not only to your 1:1 conversations, but with an impact that nourishes your preaching, teaching and leadership as well. All readers will find, along the way, that this article is actually an introduction to biblical counseling philosophy, methodology and process.

During eras when church life has been vibrantly responsive to Scripture, pastors have counseled well and wisely. They have understood that their pastoral calling includes a significant ‘counseling’ component. The faith proclaimed and practiced in congregational life also finds a natural home in conversational life.

Pastor, you are a counselor.

Perhaps you don’t think of yourself that way. (And perhaps your people don’t think of you that way, either.) Perhaps you don’t want to be a counselor. But you are one.

Perhaps preaching, leadership, and administration keep you preoccupied, and you do not do much hands-on pastoral work. It can easily happen. Many pastors don’t make and take time for serious talking with people. In effect, they are counseling people to think that most of us don’t need the give and take of candid, constructive conversation. This absence of engagement, whether intentional or not, communicates that the care and cure of wayward, distractible, battered, immature souls—people like us—can be handled by public ministry and private devotion. The explicit wisdom of both Scripture and church history argues to the contrary.

Perhaps you are a poor counselor. Are you shy, tentative, passive? Are you aggressive, controlling, opinionated? Do you sympathize with strugglers so much that you have trouble shifting the conversation into forward gear? Do people feel you don’t listen well and don’t really care, so they don’t find reasons to trust you? Do you talk too much about yourself—or too little? Are you too folksy, or too clinical?

Unlike Proverbs, do you moralize, unhinging advice from deeper insight and deeper reasons? “Read your Bible... Just get accountable... Have your quiet time... Get involved in a ministry.” But proverbs point to the fruits of grace, not the means of grace. They never moralize. They press us with deep questions about what we most trust or fear. They present the God who actively gives wisdom to those who ask, and who continually intervenes in the consequences of our choices. They attune

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us to notice what voices persuasively bid to mislead us. Wise, moral behavior is thus located amid the heart’s motivations, the workings of God, and the significant influences around us. The counsel has more ‘texture’ than we might imagine. Life-or-death moral decisions populate the proverbs.

Unlike Psalms, are you pietistic? “Just pray and give it all to Jesus. Pray this warfare prayer and claim back your inheritance from Satan. Learn mindfulness and listen for the voice of God in your inner silence.” But the psalms are neither pietistic, superstitious nor mystical. They teach us to speak a full-orbed honesty—putting our actual afflictions, sins and blessings into words; expressing the unfolding dance of actual experience and emotions; maintaining intent awareness of what God is like and what he says. The qualities of true humanness populate the psalms.

Unlike Jesus, do you speak in theological abstractions and generalities, putting a premium on cognitive ability? “Remember the Sovereignty of God… Rehearse your justification and adoption by grace through faith… Hold in view the synergy between God’s active initiative and man’s active response in the sanctification process…” Shorthand jargon is helpful sometimes, but abstraction holds truths at arm’s length. Ministry talks with people. Jesus talks the way people talk. “Notice how God feeds the crows. The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Ministry takes truth personally, and makes the implications up close and interpersonal.

Unlike Paul—no two letters and no two sermons ever the same!—do you offer the predictable boilerplate of a pat answer and pet truth? Are you a Johnny-one-note, reiterating one promise or principle as the panacea for every kind of problem and person? The apostle is nimble, continually adapting what he says to the contingencies and exigencies of each situation.

Unlike the Bible, does your counsel comfortably restate the current assumptions and advice of our surrounding culture? Do you sound like a self-help book, perhaps with a sprinkling of Jesus and God? Do you label people with whatever explanatory labels happen to be this decade’s hot properties? Flannery O’Connor caught how thoughtful Christian faith is always wild and unexpected: Push back against the age as hard as it pushes against you. What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.2

If everybody’s saying it, then our counsel will take that culturally comfortable muzak and transpose it into a different key, a different arrangement, a different instrumentation. What secular people see most clearly and care about most deeply is always important—and factoring God into the equation will always turn their familiar world upside down.

There are innumerable ways to run off the rails. But even if your counseling is ineffectual, off-putting or harmful, you are still a counselor. If you are a good counselor, then you are learning how to sustain with a word the one who is weary (Isa 50:4). This is wonderful, nothing less than your Redeemer’s skillful love expressed in and through… you. You’ve learned to speak truth in love, conversing in honest, nutritious, constructive, relevant, grace-giving ways (Eph 4:15, 25, 29). You deal gently with the ignorant and wayward because you know you are more like them than different (Heb 5:2–3). You don’t only do whatever comes naturally to you, but have learned the flexibility to be patient with all, to help the weak, to comfort the faint-hearted, to admonish the unruly (1 Thess 5:14). You bring back those who wander (James 5:19–20) just as God brings you back time and again. You are engaged in meeting the most fundamental human need, both giving and receiving encouragement every day (Heb 3:13). In becoming a better counselor, you are growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Pastor, you are a counselor—and much more than a counselor. A pastor also teaches, equips, supervises, and counsels other counselors. You are the counselor-in-chief. Your teaching and example will profoundly shape both the content (‘counsel’) and the practice (‘counseling’) of the conversations taking place all around you in which people try to be helpful to each other. Is your preaching worth the time you put into it? Is it worth the
time others spend listening? The proof lies in whether they are growing up into wise mutual counselors. God gives shepherds and teachers for a reason: to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11–12). That leads directly to the call and challenge that Ephesians 4:15–16 and 4:29 make to all God’s children. Hands-on pastoral counseling never means that you become the only counselor in the body of Christ. You are training Christ’s people how to walk in the image of the Wonderful Counselor. This is a refreshing vision for the care and cure of souls! It is a distinctively Christian vision.

This article focuses on the counseling aspect of a pastor’s calling. But I do hope other people will listen in. All human beings are counselors, whether wise, foolish, or mixed. All Christians are meant to become wiser counselors. God intends that every word you ever say to anyone is actively constructive in content, intention, tone, and appropriateness. That’s Ephesians 4:29. Those who face any affliction should find you a source of tangible, life-renewing comfort. That’s 2 Corinthians 1:4. Wisdom sets the bar high. We are to become a community in which substantial conversations predominate. You who are not pastors will grow in wisdom by considering how pastoral work particularizes the wisdom of Christ in the cure of souls whenever the body of Christ is working well.

This article has two parts. First, we will discuss how to understand the word ‘counseling’ within a pastoral frame of reference. Second, we will unpack a few of the distinctives that make a pastor’s counseling unique.

A. What Is ‘Counseling’?

The psychotherapeutic conception of “counseling” operates in a different universe from the pastoral conception. The psychotherapeutic conception of “counseling” operates in a different universe from the pastoral conception. The human problems are the same, of course: distressed, distressing, straying, broken, confused people. People who need help. How should we define the “talking cure” for the ills that beset us?

A therapist’s treatment typically means a private relationship confined to an appointed hour once a week. Like medicine or law, the mental health professions treat patients/clients on a fee-for-service basis. State-licensure recognizes education and experience that presumably grant esoteric explanatory insight and exceptional interventive skills. Like medical professionals, mental health professionals present themselves as possessing objective scientific knowledge and offering value-neutral technical expertise. The ostensibly healthy treat the definedly sick. A client’s difficulties and distress are susceptible to diagnosis in morally-neutral categories: a DSM-IV syndrome,
counseling really is and ideally ought to be. Counseling per se is not like medical doctoring. It is pastoring. It is discipling. If we want to use the physician analogy, counseling is the “bedside manner” part of doctoring, not the medical part. It expresses the influence human beings have on one another’s thoughts, values, moods, expectancies, choices and relationships. Counseling is not essentially a technical enterprise calling for technical expertise. It is a relational and pastoral enterprise engaging in care and cure of the soul. Both psycho-therapy and psych-iatry attempt pastoral work, engaging in “care and cure of the soul” as their etymologies accurately signify. Sigmund Freud rightly defined therapists as “secular pastoral workers.”

Personal factors—who you are, how you treat people, what you believe—are decisive in all pastoral work, whether secular or Christian. The key ingredients in pastoring another human being are love, wisdom, humility, integrity, mercy, authority, clarity, truth-speaking, courage, candor, curiosity, hope, and things like these. Pastoring calls for sane humanity, wide experience, much patience, careful listening, responsive immediacy. Pastoring entails a willingness to live with uncertainty about process and outcome. Pastoring calls for the ability to help others both gain big-picture perspective and take practical action.

Secular therapists also sense these things, deep down, and say as much when they doff the professional persona. These are terrific personal qualities. They express nothing less than how the image of God lives in human flesh while going about the work of redeeming distressed, distressing, straying, broken, confused people. The mental health professions intuit well whenever they say that personal factors are the essential factors. But they serve in pastorates with no God and no church. They aim to restore straying, suffering, willful, dying human beings. But they consider Christ unnecessary to their pastoral work. As a matter of principle, they will not lead strugglers to the Savior of strays. You know better. But the secularized-medicalized definition of “counseling” powerfully intimidates pastors and laypersons alike. If the habits, instincts, outlook, and goals of therapeutic pastorates define “counseling,” then you had better not pretend or aspire to be a counselor.

Consider four ways that you as a pastor must redefine ‘counseling.’

For starters, if the psychotherapeutic definition controls our vision, what pastor could ever provide the necessary care and cure of even 30 souls, let alone 100, 500, or 5000 souls? Who has the time? And what pastor has time to get the presumably necessary secularized education? Having labored long toward your ordination by the church, who has time or inclination to labor for a second ordination by the mental health system? What pastor could ever invest so much effort in 1:1 counseling? A pastor needs a very different vision for what counseling is and can be.

Second, what true pastor believes that the love of Christ and the will of God are value-free? You will never say to anyone (except ironically), “You are free to discover your own values, whatever works for you, whatever way of living with yourself and others brings you a sense of personal satisfaction.” God has chosen to impose his values on the entire universe. First Timothy 1:5 bluntly asserts non-negotiable goals: “love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” That calls forth an entire package of explicit behavioral, attitudinal and motivational values. God insists on the supreme worth and glory of who he is and what he has done. God insists that self-centered people learn faith and love—not coping skills, not self-actualization, not meeting felt needs, not techniques of managing emotions or thought life, not fulfilling personal goals. (As a byproduct, faith and love accomplish all these secondary things, too—while inverting their self-centering logic.) God’s morally charged categories heighten human responsibility. His willing mercy and sheer grace give the only real basis for true compassion and patience. He insists that we learn love by being loved, by learning Jesus: “In this is love . . . that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). On the last day, every knee bows to God’s “values.”

The whole nature of ministry is to “impose” light into darkness, to induce sanity, to form Christ’s life-nourishing values within us. Pastoral counseling openly brings “ethical or moral suasions” as expressions of genuine love that considers the actual welfare of others. The
conscious intentions of Christless counselors are kindly, but they cannot consider the true welfare and needs of actual human beings. A pastor has a systematically deeper and brighter vision for what counseling is all about.

Third, what honest pastor would ever buy into the arm’s-length professional reserve of the therapist? Ministry is self-disclosing by necessity and as a matter of principle. After all, we follow David, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul. Shouts of delight along with loud cries and groaning are part of the whole package. No real pastor can be clinically detached. The Paul who wrote Thessalonians 2:7-12 is far too emotionally involved. Like Jesus, he cares too much to ever stand at arm’s length from people and their troubles. If Jesus had entered into purely consultative, professional relationships, he’d have had to stop being a pastor. Pastoral self-disclosure is one part of wise love. It is not self-indulgent. It is neither impulsive venting nor exhibitionistic transparency nor a pontificating of private opinions. It includes proper reserve. But Christian openness is a different ballgame from the ideal of dispassionate professionalism. Ministry expresses the honest emotional immediacy of team sports and contact sports. It is full-court basketball, not chess or poker.

How about you? Don’t people know you in all sorts of other roles besides counselor?—proclaimer of Words of life, friend at the dinner table, bedside visitor in the hospital, second-baseman on the softball team, mere man and leader who can’t help but show how he faces financial pressure or handles interpersonal conflict, object of uproarious roasting at the church retreat, public speaker who tells a good story on himself, host and landlord to the struggler staying in your spare bedroom, husband of a woman who is well known in her own right, father of (less-than-perfect) kids in the Sunday school class, fellow sufferer who needs what he asks of God, fellow worshiper who candidly gives thanks for what he receives, fellow servant who yearns to love better than he does. You not only have a dual relationship with the people you counsel, you have multiple relationships. And that’s as it should be. Christianity is a different counseling ethos.

Finally, what good pastor could ever in good conscience adopt the ethos by which the ostensibly well presume to treat the evidently sick? Aren’t we all in this together, facing the same temptations, sorrows, and threats? Aren’t we all prone to the same sinfulness? “Behavioral medicine” (as the HMOs label it) claims to cure a patient’s character disorder, identity confusion, mood disorder, thought disorder, maladaptive behavior, relational dysfunction, or post-traumatic-stress syndrome. Ministry addresses the exact same problems. But God humanizes—normalizes—the struggles. A dark disease deranges character, identity, emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. A world of woes besets us, whether those woes are traumatic or chronic, highly unusual or merely inevitable.

A bright Savior sets about curing such souls. Psalm 23 infuses a different way for us to live in the midst of besetting sins and sufferings. Our derangement is fundamental, rooting in dedicated attentiveness to our own inner voice, the liar we find most persuasive—Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2. Our losses are fundamental: a sea of troubles…the heartache and thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to (Hamlet, III:1). But our Pastor’s voice heals us: “My sheep hear my voice.” Don’t you have the same kinds of problems as those you minister to? Aren’t our differences matters of degree not kind? Aren’t we all part of the same ongoing healing? Real ministry engages the same personal and interpersonal problems that the psychotherapies address—but more deeply. It pursues hidden moral cancers that we all share. It consoles universal sufferings, whether the experience is brutal or mild, whether the symptoms of distress are florid or subtle. Any healing is our healing, one and all.

Where does this pastoral ethos come from?
Jesus himself was touched with the weaknesses, struggles, and temptations of those with whom he spoke and for whom he died. Jesus eschews clinical detachment. He chooses frank self-disclosure and the multi-relationships intrinsic to pastoral love. Jesus was never value-neutral. He used every form of loving suasion, right down to publicly dying for those he sought to persuade.

What applies to pastors, applies to all God’s people. Jesus is a different drummer.

B. The Uniqueness of Pastoral Counseling

We have sketched a vision for counseling as pastoral work. What does it look like? We will consider five unique aspects of the pastor as counselor. Your responsibility, opportunities, methods, message, and context are each unique.

1. You Have a Unique Responsibility to Counsel

You must counsel. It’s not optional. You can’t say No as if it were simply a career choice, a matter of personal preference or an absence of gifting. This does not mean that every pastor will have the same balance between public and private aspects of ministry. How much you’ll “formally” counsel (i.e., meet with particular persons at agreed on times) depends on many factors. Some pastors will do a great deal of hands-on cure of souls, some relatively little. But every pastor ought to dedicate some percentage of his ministry to the delicate art of intentional conversation, as well as being continually on the lookout for the informal opportunities latent in every human interaction.

A pastor’s calling to counsel is significantly different from any of the other counseling professions. We’ll consider several aspects of this uniqueness.

a. Your call to personal ministry is woven into all the Scriptures. Many passages express the significance of hands-on cure of souls. The classic texts include Acts 20:20; Galatians 6:1f; Ephesians 3:14-5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 3:12-14, 4:12-5:8, 10:24f; and scores of other “one-anothering” passages. In fact, every place that addresses the specific concerns of a named individual can be considered a counseling passage. A pastor’s counseling responsibility is unique. What other counselor is called by God himself to both counsel and train others to counsel?! Briefly consider three passages.

The Second Great Commandment says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love engages your neighbor’s specific personal needs and struggles. Love encompasses many things: attitudes of patience and kindness; actions that meet material needs and offer a helping hand. And love includes honest conversation about what matters. Interestingly, the original context for the command makes a personal counseling illustration and application.

You shall not hate your neighbor in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Lev 19:17–18)

God chooses to go after one of the most difficult of all matters: how will you love kith and kin in their shortcomings? Love of neighbor is illustrated by an example of candid, verbal problem-solving, in contrast with the judgmentalism, avoidance, bitterness and aggression that come so easily. You yourself act on this command by doing personal pastoring with your neighbors. Whenever their problems involve interpersonal conflict, you will also help those you counsel to learn constructive, verbal love. What a promise you have! “I am the LORD” (gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving…while honestly reckoning intransigence). Personal pastoring depends on this God, and then lives out the very image of this God amid the exigencies of helping broken people. You live out what is inside that last parenthesis. Exodus 34:6-7 displays the goodness and glory of God…and goodness and glory are communicable attributes, the image of Jesus forming in us.

Conversational love takes many other forms as well. You will ask, How are you really doing? Would you like to talk? How can I pray for you? Where are the pressure points? What are your joys and your sorrows? Any secret gardens? Conscious struggles? Delightful victories? How are you doing with God and with your nearest and dearest? What burdens
are weighing on you? When you did/said ________, what were you after? How are you processing anxiety, anger, or escapism? How are you handling this wonderful achievement or blessing? In asking and answering such questions, we enter each other's lives. These are doors for grace, because these are the places Jesus meets people. As a pastor, your most obvious neighbors (beyond family) are the flock for which you have personal responsibility. “Love your neighbor as yourself” calls you to counsel.

Second, consider the Proverbs as a whole. It's not wrong to preach from Proverbs. Wisdom herself calls out in the streets, inviting all comers to listen (Pro 8-9). But you had better counsel Proverbs. Verbal wisdom is highly esteemed, and most of what Proverbs commends reads as warmly personalized individual counsel: like a father, like a wife and mother, like a true friend, like a good king, like any wise person. Wisdom is a counseling gift. When it comes to distributing this most valuable, life-renewing gift, God’s generosity is blind to differences of gender, ethnicity, age, wealth, status, or education. Surely he will not lavish the desirable gift of counseling skill only to everyone else in the body of Christ, while leaving out pastors! You are called to become one of the wise men.

Finally, consider the “pastoral epistles.” Paul's letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are examples of personal counseling captured on paper for all time. Each is addressed to a named individual. Each discusses particular challenging circumstances, considers specific strengths and weaknesses, builds on the actual relationship between counselor and counseled. As a counselor, Paul is tender, knowledgeable, self-disclosing, pointed, relevant, encouraging, challenging. Can you legitimately preach on what amounts to a personal counseling text? Of course. But would you only preach on a personal pastoring text, and not also do personal pastoring? Pastor, the pastoral epistles call you to pastor.

b. You are called to do the impossible. It is curiously comforting to know that your calling is beyond your capability. This is another way that a pastor’s call to counsel is unique. You can place no confidence in your gifts, experience, education, techniques, professional persona, credentials, maturity, wisdom. You are called to do what God must do.

In 1 Timothy 4:6-16, Paul exhorts Timothy, “Immerse yourself in revealed truth, in a life of faith, in active love, in the work of ministry, in serving Jesus Christ. Exercise, devote, practice, persist. Watch closely over yourself and what you teach.” Why does Paul so carefully drive this home? The reason is astonishing: “By so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” Come again? You will save yourself and your hearers? It’s so. Who is sufficient for such things? God alone saves from death, from sin, from tears, from weakness, from ourselves. Christ alone saves by grace, mercy, and patience at immediate personal cost (1 Tim 1:14-16). The Spirit alone cures the soul of suicidal selfishness, making a person and a people alive to faith and love. Yet this great and good Physician willingly uses Timothy, a mere pastor, as a physician’s assistant in the curing process. He also uses you.

It is hard to shepherd souls. It is hard to combat intricate moral evil. It is hard to help people walk through pain and anguish. Gregory the Great called it the “art of arts” in his great treatise on pastoral care. He thought the task of guiding souls far more difficult than the tasks performed by a mere medical doctor. Think about that. The body is relatively accessible. It is often explicable by cause-and-effect reasoning and treatable by medication or surgery. But the “more delicate art deals with what is unseen,” the irrational madness in our hearts (Jer 17:9; Eccl 9:3). When you consider the challenge, how is it that most churchly counseling seems slapdash, pat answer, and quick fix? A good M.D. spends a lifetime in acquiring case-wise acumen. A mature psychotherapist pursues continuing education. Can a pastor be content with one-size-fits-all boilerplate? Kyrie eleison. People are not served when the Christian life...
is portrayed as if some easy answer will do—a pet doctrine, religious strategy, involvement in a program, spiritual experience—and presto!, case solved. Again, hear Gregory’s words:

One and the same exhortation is not suited to all, because they are not compassed by the same quality of character.... In exhorting individuals great exertion is required to be of service to each individual’s particular needs.\(^11\)

A pastor’s work is the art of arts.

c. You are called to do something so simple only a Christian can do. Hearts may be unsearchable and insane, but the Word of God reveals the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12-13). God teaches us the truest form of self-knowledge. My self-righteous reaction to criticism may be an unsearchable morass of iniquity, but I can learn to name it for what it is, to turn for needed mercies, to seek and find the God who humbles me. We can come to know ourselves truly (though never wholly). Similarly, though the purposes and intentions of another’s heart are deep water, a man of understanding draws it out (Pro 20:5). You can learn what you need to know. Though you have no privileged access into any soul, though every strategy or truth can be resisted, though you have no power to open blind eyes or to make deaf ears listen, God uses your ministry to cure souls. Human beings are idiosyncratic in every detail, yet there is no temptation that is not common to all (1 Cor 10:13). Each of us faces very different life circumstances, yet you can comfort others in any affliction with the comfort that you receive in your particular affliction (2 Cor 1:4). Fundamental unities make us comprehensible enough to significantly help each other. These are things a mere Christian can do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was raised in a sophisticated, modern psychological culture, and his father was a psychiatrist. Bonhoeffer thoroughly absorbed the psychological models and psychotherapeutic practices of the great 20th century psychiatrists, but he had this to say about the knowledge and wisdom that make the decisive difference.

The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of man. And so it does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner. The psychiatrist must first search my heart and yet he never plumbs its ultimate depth. The Christian brother knows when I come to him: here is a sinner like myself, a godless man who wants to confess and yearns for God’s forgiveness. The psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The brother views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ.\(^12\)

You might want to read that again, slowly—I speak as someone prone to skim block quotes. As a fellow Christian with those you counsel, you know depths that other counselors cannot and will not see. You can go where they never go. And as a simple Christian, you can lead those who do not yet believe to true knowledge of their own hearts. You can bring the Savior of the world.

d. Where ministry is strong, pastors practice in private what they preach in public. Your calling uniquely combines public and private ministry. The Christian message preaches well to crowds. The Christian message converses well with individuals. Preaching and counseling stand in a complementary relationship, and no other kind of counselor does both. A pastor’s working vocabulary and intentional activity must “counsel the Word” as well as “preach the Word.”

Of course, up-front proclamation and in-private conversation bring the message home in very different ways. A talk is relatively planned, scripted, and structured. It usually involves one-way communication—though Jesus did have a way of flexing his message after an outburst from the crowd, or launching a message based on a question someone was asking! In a sermon, you usually have a rough
idea what you’ll say next and where you’ll end up. But giving a talk is different from the give-and-take of just talking. Conversations are extemporaneous, improvised, unpredictable, back and forth, messy—even when you come with a game plan. You never know what a person will say next. Since what you say is usually a response, you almost never know what you’ll say next. It’s a bad sign when either party reverts to boilerplate, delivering a set piece or shtick. Counseling usually starts with immediate, troubling experience, and moves toward the God whose person, words, and actions bring light. In contrast, preaching usually moves from Bible exposition toward life application. The two aspects of ministry demand different, but complementary, skill sets. The Lord and his prophets and apostles move freely in both directions. Pastors need the complete skill set.

The church has a long tradition of well-reasoned practical theology and skillful pastoral care. Like any legacy of art and wisdom, without continual use and updating, ideas become cobwebbed, applications get out of date, and skills are forgotten. Several factors internal to the church blind our eyes to the pointed counseling implications of Christian faith. Among those who take Scripture seriously, ecclesiastical habits focus almost exclusively on the pastor as public proclaimer, team leader, and administrator. Skill in cure of individual souls is optional—and sometimes is even discouraged as a waste of time. These assumptions structure seminary education, ordination requirements, job descriptions, role models, and the priorities of actual church practice. They shape the illustrations used in books about ministry, the relative dearth of books on how to counsel biblically, and the common associations to “ministry of the Word” that treat the phrase as synonymous with “the pulpit.”

In your preparation and testing to become a pastor, perhaps no one ever said that first-hand understanding of people and first-hand skill in counseling is an essential aspect of your pastoral calling. But it must be said and taken to heart. know (or have an inkling) if you are honest (or dishonest). They know if you are kind (or indifferent, even unkind). They know if you are wise (or foolish). They know how you handle (or mishandle) the pressures of life. They know if you are humble (or proud). They know if you care (or couldn’t care less). They know if you want their welfare in God’s kingdom (or if you are building a kingdom for your ego). They know (or have a pretty good idea) if you are a good counselor (or a busybody, a pontificator, a slacker, a pat-answer man). They know if you are the real deal (or a religious role player). Since you fall short, they intuit your flaws already. They have some inkling of how you handle your failings and how you’ll handle theirs. Are you honest with yourself before God, a person who finds the grace and mercy of Jesus? They know (or have an inkling) because you are not a “professional counselor” isolated in an office and self-protected by “clinical detachment.” You live, move, and have your being in public space. If you fail the test, they won’t seek you out, and they’ll be guarded when you seek them out. If you pass the test, your counseling will gain a power for good that is unimaginable to other counselors.

It is daunting to know that your sins misounsel others. Richard Baxter famously observed, “I publish to my own flock the distempers of my own soul.” He warned of the danger that “you unsay with your lives what you say with your tongues.” But it is a
corresponding delight to know that God uses your honest faith and love to publicly counsel others, so that both publicly and privately you might bring others under the sweet rule of his voice.

f. If you and the church don’t do counseling, who will? It is unique to your calling that it matters whether or not people find help in the church. Psychotherapists want to make a living, but in principle, as a professional courtesy, they are just as happy to have a struggler go to anyone else for help, even if another practitioner operates with a very different counseling philosophy. But the church must not give over the care and cure of troubled souls to other voices. Those voices may be well-intended, but when they try to fix “with-God” problems using a “without-God” message, that’s a problem. From the Bible’s point of view, the fear of the Lord is the ‘beginning’ of wisdom. Consciousness of God is the starting point, the wake-up into reality. Consciousness that we live before God’s eyes and have with-God problems is the system-aligning principle, the architectonic prerequisite for making good sense of life. When friends, family, coworkers, the mass media, self-help books, or psychotherapeutic professionals ignore this reality, they inevitably mis-counsel. In Jeremiah’s metaphor, they heal wounds lightly, “saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer 8:11). I will say it again. Pastors must not hand over care and cure of souls to other voices. Any number of people, paid and unpaid, are more than willing to do your work for you.

Pastor, God calls you to wise, fruitful conversations.

I hope that every reader catches the implications. The call that crystallizes in how God defines a pastor’s work extends to every Christian. Whether we counsel in some formal capacity or simply seek to love our nearest neighbors well, all of us are called to the fruitful “one-anothering” that includes how we talk with each other.

2. You Have Unique Opportunities to Counsel

Pastoral counseling is unlike any other form of counseling because of the many unusual opportunities a pastor has to engage lives. Here are seven unique facets of the pastoral life that open doors.

a. You have opportunity to pursue people. Jesus Christ goes looking for people. He takes the initiative in loving. Even when people sought him out with their sufferings and sins, they were responding to his pursuit. They had heard about who he was, what he said, how he cared, and what he could do. In a fundamental way, our Redeemer always makes the first move. His entire modus operandi is active. The good Shepherd goes after the one that is lost until he finds it (Luke 15:4). Good shepherds do likewise, creating counseling opportunities. You can ask, “How are you really doing?” or “How may I pray for you?” in any context. The person’s answer, whether candid or evasive, becomes an opportunity for a significant conversation. When you hear that someone is facing trouble or going through a hard patch, you can stop by to care.

Do you know how radical this is? In contrast, all other counseling models are passive, responding rather than initiating. Psychotherapists must wait until a troubled person seeks aid or a troublesome person is referred by a concerned third party. But a pastor pursues, and people respond in a unique way to being actively loved.

b. You have opportunity in crucial life situations. You have natural access into people’s lives at decisive moments of transition, hardship, and joy. They invite you in. You have license to simply show up. The door is open to you whenever important events unfold:

- engagement and marriage
- injury, illness, and hospitalization
- dying, death, bereavement, and funeral
- birth of a baby
- moving into a new neighborhood
- loss of a job or retirement
- betrayal, adultery, and divorce
- a child on drugs or in trouble with the law
- catastrophic victimization by house fire, crime, or storm

No other counselor has natural access at the most significant moments.

It so happens that these events are the major stressors on every stress scale. It also happens that the inner reality of a person becomes more
obvious and more accessible in exactly such circumstances. Is he living for true hopes or false? Are her fears realistic or distorted? Are their joys and sorrows appropriate, inordinate, or oddly absent? What do these insecurities or angers reveal? Where is this confusion coming from? The heart lies open. Furthermore, it so happens that people become unusually open to seeking and receiving counsel at exactly such times.

Consider one example. God says, “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). Those can be heard as nice-sounding religious words. But when the heat is on in any person’s life, previously covert false hopes show up in high-definition video and audio. True hopes also show up. And false hopes can change into true hopes. You have a counseling moment. Life-changing reorientation can occur. The combination of high significance, strong feeling, and unusual openness means that you have privileged access into the God-sent circumstances when people can grow up in faith and love.

c. You have opportunity with both the struggling and the strong. Biblical ministry is not only for troubled or troublesome people. Pastoral care serves both weak and strong, able and disabled, talented and limited, successful and failing. The gospel speaks life-rearranging truth into every person’s life, “comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable.” Those whose lives overflow need to learn gratitude, humility, generosity—and alertness to temptations of presumption, superiority, and pride. Those whose lives run on empty need to learn hope, courage, patience—and alertness to temptations of despair, grumbling, and covetousness. All of us need to learn what lasts and what counts, whatever our conditions of life. All of us need to learn to comfort others with the comfort we receive from God. The Vinedresser’s pruning shears are in every life. As a pastor you understand that every person you meet today needs to awaken, to turn, to trust, to grow, to love God and others. Everyone needs counseling every day: Hebrews 3:12–14. Even God’s thriving children need counsel (and counseling training) in order to better help their struggling brethren who are straying, discouraged, or helpless: 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

No other counseling role has a vision for everybody. Other counseling models define some class of human beings as needing help, and others as essentially healthy. Christian faith defines every human being as needing the cure of soul that is a pastor’s unique calling.

d. You have opportunity with both rich and poor. A pastor has a huge advantage over other counselors in that the counseling relationship is founded on loving concern, not fee-for-service. Pastoral counseling is a gift to the needy. It is funded by free-will offerings of the people of God, whether or not they are counsel-seekers. Broken and distressed people rightly wonder about professional counselors, “Do you really care? Are you really my friend?” The gift of ministry takes off the table questions about divided or suspect motives. The exchange of money for time, care, attention and friendship always brings a high potential for warping a relationship.

In contrast, a pastor has great freedom to work. With people who have money, you are in the unusual position of not allowing them to buy the services they want. With people who lack money, you are in the unusual position of not excluding them from receiving the help they need. A pastor is uniquely able to incarnate God’s freely given mercies and wisdom. Counseling is caring candor (Eph 4:15). When no fee is involved, your care is less ambiguous and your candor less constrained.

It makes a great difference that you come free. When the tithes and offerings of many people underwrite how the church meets counseling needs, it creates the best of all possible “delivery systems” for care and cure.

e. You have opportunity with people who already trust you. What is the first issue in every counseling conversation? Though rarely verbalized, every person who sits down to talk with someone is always asking: “Why should I trust you?...Are you giving me good reason to trust you? ... Do I trust you?” If the bottom-line answer is Yes, the conversation might head somewhere constructive. Basic trust leads to two further questions that also determine the success or failure of the conversation: “Can I be completely honest with you?” and, then, “Will I
listen to what you say to me?”

Of course, questions of trust, willing honesty, and willingness to listen are often worked out gradually. But it is a unique aspect of pastoral work that you will counsel people who have already decided to trust you. They come committed to be honest and willing to listen. This trust arises because you are a known quantity. Pre-answering these questions in the affirmative gives an incalculable boost to the efficacy and efficiency of your counseling. You don’t need to spend months building trust. You can cut to the chase, because counsel-seekers cut to the chase.

The fact that you are known and trusted also means you’ll be the first person that others seek out to talk over their problems. They will be honest about the most delicate things: grave sins, deep fears, heartbeat, disappointment, fragile aspirations, underlying confusion. Otherwise unspeakable matters find words where there is trust. After you have listened well to these most vulnerable utterances—quick to hear, careful to ponder, slow to speak—you also find that people listen to you if your words are kind, illuminating and true. What comes to the light can become light.

Other counselors rarely enjoy this privilege, but you may find it is a regular occurrence.

f. You have opportunity with people you already know. Not only do others know and trust you, you know them. As a pastor this creates another unique opportunity. If you’ve made any kind of effort, you already know your people. You are continually getting to know them better. Such first-hand knowledge gives you an incalculable advantage over the office-bound professional counselor. You know people by name, personality and life context. You’ve seen them in action. You already have a sense for strengths and weaknesses, besetting sins and flourishing graces, good habits and bad. How does a man treat his family? Does this woman pitch in to help? Is this a man who keeps his word or have you learned to wait and see what he does? What is her reaction when she faces frustration, hardship, and conflict? How does he talk about the blessings he receives? How does she worship? You may know significant history and circumstances. You may know someone’s family. You have natural access to many involved parties.

Wide-ranging knowledge helps protect you from some of the pitfalls that beset counselors. For example, counselors often hear only one side of any story. They are always vulnerable to spin and disinformation—facts and reactions may be true and plausible as far as they go, but steadily mislead and prevent accurate, balanced assessment. Given various

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No other counselor has a regular opportunity to get both a head start and a reality check on what you hear in private conversation.

g. You have opportunity with people who already have a wise change agenda. Not only do people know you and you know them, but as a pastor you will counsel people who already have a pretty good idea of what’s wrong and of where they need to grow. Such upfront acuity is never guaranteed, but when it happens, it gives your counseling another huge head start.

We mentioned earlier the basic questions of trust, willingness to be honest, and willingness to listen. The next watershed question in all counseling concerns agenda: “Why are we here? What are we aiming to accomplish?” In general, most counsel-seekers come with defective goals:

- “Change how I feel.”
- “Change my circumstances.”
- “Vindicate me.”
“Give me a formula.”

Counseling with any modicum of wisdom works patiently to change these agendas into “Help me to change what I live for and how I live.” Christian faith and ministry fleshes out the change agenda in a particularly rich way. A wise person understands our deepest need:

Help me to change both what masters me and how I treat people. Let me see where and how I run astray. Let me grasp how Jesus’ grace and truth connect to my daily struggles. Help me learn how to turn to God, how actually to trust. Help me to actually love people, rather than using others, fearing others, competing with others. Help me take refuge in the Lord when life is hard. I need to set my hopes on what is indestructible, rather than pursuing my instinctive, obsessive schemes for earthly joy. Help me see more clearly how I contribute to conflict and distance between people. I need forgiveness. Help me to forgive. Make me a more constructive human being.

It’s a counselor’s dream whenever a person comes with even an inkling of such an agenda already operative. If your church has any clear-thinking vitality, you’ll sometimes—often?—counsel people who already have a feel for what’s really at stake. Even having a roughly accurate agenda makes a big difference.

Good public ministry, robust small groups, meaningful friendships, and relevant private devotion form people who already know the framework of reality. They know the contours of the soul’s struggles. They know something of how God connects. But all of us need help connecting the dots. We always need help overcoming the contradictions between what we know and how we live. Those you counsel need the wonderful surprises that always come when an honest seeker sits down for a patient, probing conversation with a wise pastor of souls.

No other counselor gets regular opportunities to work with people who already have an inkling of what they most need.

Like your responsibility to cure souls, your opportunities are unique. I hope this vision thrills you. I hope it nerves you for the long fight to bring pastoral achievement closer to pastoral aspiration. I hope that every reader hears the implications. In some fashion, these same opportunities come to every single member of the body of Christ.

3. The Way You Do Counseling Is Unique

From a distance, it looks like most counselors do the same things. They talk with people experiencing some sort of trouble. The conversation focuses on the concerns of the troubled party. Would-be helpers demonstrate kind and constructive intentions. They ask questions, elicit personal honesty, listen attentively. They give feedback intended to illuminate, challenge, give hope, reorient, affect, or redirect. Troubled people who take the conversation to heart and act on it experience some alteration of mood, thought, or action. But apparent similarities are like similarities between different religions. When you get up close, you realize profound, systematic differences.

Your counseling methods are unique. Your line of questioning moves in atypical directions. Your interpretation of the etiology/causality of problems takes the conversation to places no one else goes. Your self-disclosure and proper reserve obey a different set of principles, reveal a different set of purposes. You bear witness to the testimony of God himself, who made, sustains, judges, saves and commands. You act as physician’s assistant, not the great physician. That affects a conversation in countless details of tone and content. The image you have of your calling as a counselor—pastor-shepherd, minister-servant, responsible brother, peer in the body of Christ, fellow sinner and sufferer needing a Savior—subtly and openly affects everything that happens. This section could be book-length, but I will highlight only one unique aspect of how you approach the art of arts: You pray with and for those you counsel.

Do you realize how unusual this is? Have you ever considered how significant it is that you pray as a matter of course, while other counselors don’t pray? The designated psychotherapists in our culture—psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, etc.—in principle do not pray with and for people. This lacuna in their practice signifies that they believe no outside help is needed, wanted, or available. They and those
they counsel presumably possess everything they might need for making sense of problems and choosing to live fruitfully. The answers lie within the individual, combined with a supportive, insightful, and practical therapist, perhaps with a boost from psychoactive medication.

You as a pastor do not believe that an explanation and cure of human difficulties can leave out the active, intentional heart that is always loving either the true God or something else. Only an outside agent can turn a wandering heart into an attentive heart. A true cure of the soul can’t ignore the active malice of the deceiver, enemy, and slavemaster of souls. In the fog of war, who will help you see clearly? Wisdom does not suppress knowledge of the living God. Who will deliver us from evil? When you and those you counsel lack wisdom, who will give what is needed? You need and want available help. Therefore, you pray with and for others. Teaching others to voice honest believing prayers is one prime counseling goal. You pray because people need forgiveness for their sins—you cannot grant that. They need a Shepherd who will never leave them—you are not that person. They need the power that raised Jesus from the dead—so do you. They need the hope of the resurrection, that one day all tears will be wiped away and all sins washed away—you share the same necessity. They need faith-working-through-love to become truer in their lives, to run deeper, to take hold of everything.

- You pray for people before you sit down to talk.
- You pray inwardly while you are talking.
- You pray with people as an appropriate aspect of the conversation.
- You pray for people after you say goodbye. Your way of counseling is unique.

This is so for every Christian. If you seek to love wisely, you will as a matter of course learn to pray well for and with others in their real need.

4. You Counsel a Unique Message

The uniqueness of your message is easy to see. But you already know this. I won’t rehearse the unsearchable riches of Christ, or the 10,000 pertinent implications.

But I do want to note the uniqueness of your message by contrast. Every counselor brings a “message”: an interpretation of problems, a theory that weights causalities and context, a proposal for cure, a goal that defines thriving humanness. How does your message compare with their messages? Simply consider what our culture’s other counselors do not say.

- They never mention the God who has a name: YHWH, Father, Jesus, Spirit, Almighty, Savior, Comforter.
- They never mention that God searches every heart, that every human being will bow to give final account for each thought, word, deed, choice, emotion, belief and attitude.
- They never mention sinfulness and sin, that humankind obsessively and compulsively transgress against God.
- They never mention that suffering is meaningful within God’s purposes of mercy and judgment.
- They never mention Jesus Christ. He is a standing insult to self-esteem and self-confidence, to self-reliance, to self-salvation schemes, to self-righteousness, to believing in myself.
- They never mention that God really does forgive sins.
- They never mention that the Lord is our refuge, that it is possible to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil.
- They never mention that biological factors and personal history experiences exist within the providence and purposes of the living God, that nature and nurture locate moral responsibility but do not trump responsible intentionality.
- They never mention our propensity to return evil for evil, how hardships tempt us to worry, despair, bitterness, inferiority, grumbling and escapism.
- They never mention our propensity to return evil for good, how felicities tempt us to self-trust, ingratitude, self-confidence, entitlement, presumption, superiority and greed.
- They never mention that human beings are meant to become conscious worshipers, bowing down in deep sense of personal need, lifting up hands to receive the gifts of the body and blood of Christ, lifting voices
in heartfelt song.

- They never mention that human beings are meant to obey God’s will, not our own wishes.
- They never mention that human beings are meant to live missionally, using God-given gifts to further God’s kingdom and glory.
- They never mention that the power to change does not lie within us.

In other words, they always counsel true to their core convictions.

As a pastor, you can’t help but mention these things, or you are no pastor. Even more, you are never content merely to mention or list such realities, as if a troubled person simply needed the bare bones of didactic instruction. Like a skilled musician, you develop a trained ear. In every detail of every person’s story, you learn to hear the music of these unmentioned realities. You help others hear what is actually playing. A relevant, honest pastoral conversation teaches another person how to listen, and then how to join the song. Need I say more? No one else is listening to what you hear. No one else is saying what you have to say. No one else is singing what you believe. No one else is giving to others what you have been given that you might freely give. Everyone who “needs counseling” actually needs your unique message.

This message also belongs to every Christian. May God make all our words (and the thoughts within our silences) ring true to our convictions.

5. You Counsel in a Unique Community Context

As a pastor, you counsel within the church. That doesn’t just mean that your office is located in a different building from other counseling offices. Your setting contains unique potentials. God intends that churches serve as schools of counseling wisdom. You serve a congregation of potential members of the pastoral care team. Furthermore, every person whom you successfully counsel becomes in some way a better counselor of others. I’ve witnessed this development hundreds of times.

Other kinds of counselors operate as private professionals in an office or as members of a treatment team in a quasi-medical institution. But therapists sometimes dream that counseling services might become truly community-based. For example, Sigmund Freud dreamt that psychoanalytically trained community workers would fan out into every community to offer their services. Over the past century many thoughtful psychiatrists and psychotherapists have candidly recognized the limitations of office-based professional practice, and have longed for community-based “mental health services.” It makes all the sense in the world, given that people’s problems play out in the home, in the workplace, on the street, amid the relationships, exigencies and contingencies of daily life. But secular counselors have been almost powerless to realize their dream of what is needed to get the job done.

You are living their dream.

You work within the ideal community context. The church’s DNA includes wise counseling in daily life by people who already know and love each other. Troubled people find meaning and relationship in a natural social context. People who find true meaning and loving connection to others are no longer ‘troubled,’ whatever the severity of the ongoing troubles and struggles. We are beloved children, inching along the way of peace, and our troubles and struggles are invested with new significance. In principle, the living body of Christ is the ideal home for counseling practice.

How is this so? Jesus Christ embodies the DNA of compassion. He is purposefully patient with all kinds of strugglers, adapting his approach to the particulars of varying need. So, for people facing big troubles, Jesus Christ demonstrates practical care by offering tangible aid. He holds on to the weak. And, with people who feel anxious, discouraged and overwhelmed, Jesus Christ brings comfort and hope. He tenderly encourages the faint-hearted. But, toward headstrong, opinionated,
self-centered people, Jesus Christ comes with challenges, constraints and consequences. He admonishes the unruly who use, abuse and misuse others.

As with the teacher, so with his disciples. The body of Christ becomes most itself when expressing this Christ: admonishing the unruly, encouraging the faint-hearted, holding on to the weak, being patient with them all (1 Thess 5:14). This is a comprehensive ‘counseling’ vision. It is tailored for those who need practical assistance: the weak. It is tailored for those who ask for help: the anxious and depressed. It is tailored for those who don’t want to change: the unruly. It is tailored for all of us—who usually have a bit of all three characteristics, and need a bit of all three kinds of ministry help, who need a lifetime of purposeful patience.

What we need and receive, we learn to give. Some of us are better at the mercy ministry aspects of pastoral counseling. Others of us are better at the encouraging, illuminating, walk-alongside-you aspects of pastoral counseling. Still others of us are better at the disciplinary, hold-you-accountable, tough-love aspects of pastoral counseling. All of us should express something of each aspect. Yet all of us need to grow up into the image of Jesus who expresses each of these aspects in perfect balance. All of God’s children put together can patiently do what is needed.

I’m not denying that our churches fall short of this sweet dream—fall far short. When it comes to handling problems well and wisely, church can seem more like a coma, a sleepless night, or a nightmare. But our failures as the church always stand next to Ephesians 4. The dream will come true. Community-based counseling practice is in our eschatology as well as our DNA. Your task right now is simply to take the next step in the right direction.

I will close with a final perspective on a pastor’s unique community setting. You stand in a tradition of pastoral care reaching back through centuries. Wise Christians have come before you. Set out to learn from your brethren.

Every pastor will profit by reading Gregory the Great’s Pastoral Care, written almost 1500 years ago. We may have better hermeneutics, wider doctrinal understanding, and more awareness of the richness of the gospel of Jesus. But Gregory has more awareness of “the Truth in person,” more case-wisdom, more flexibility in adapting to human differences, more sense of pastoral responsibility, more humility about his achievements, more alertness to the subtlety of sin. Stand on his shoulders.

Every pastor will profit from reading Richard Baxter’s The Reformed Pastor (and, if you are really ambitious, his Christian Directory). Baxter is dense and, like all old writers, dated. You won’t do ministry in the same way he did. But if you sit with Baxter, you will become a wiser pastor. Similarly, every pastor will profit from reading Thomas Oden’s Pastoral Counsel and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life Together. Oden’s digest of ancient wisdom will introduce you to wise pastors you never knew existed. Your church history class likely explored the development of doctrine and events in church politics. Oden explores how pastors pastored. Bonhoeffer’s 20th century wisdom and example will inform and nerve you as you take up your unique counseling calling.

Every pastor would also profit from carefully pondering Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country and Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead. Why fiction? It’s the same reason pastors in the 1700s read both their Bible and Shakespeare. Good fiction (along with history, film, and so forth) gives you vicarious experience of people. It builds your case wisdom far beyond the bounds of your own social setting. I mention these two novels in particular because you will watch how Christian life and ministry work on the inside, amid the untidy details of life lived. In each book the protagonist is a pastor. Each struggles as an honest man with losses, regrets, fears, angers, sorrows. Each finds grace, and each gives grace.

Of course, I think that every pastor profits by reading and hearing teachers in the resurgence of biblical counseling that began in the 1970s. Ministry never simply recovers wise nuggets from the past. Pastoral theology undertakes fresh work. Current writers address questions and problems the church has never before addressed, or has never addressed in quite such a fine-grained way. Not all of it will stand the tests of time, ministry and Scripture. You will become part of the winnowing of wheat from chaff.

As with pastors, so with all Christians, each of us profits in various ways from the things God uses to make us wiser.
Finally, let your life and your counseling express the faith that you preach and sing. You must involve the body of Christ in this calling to counsel. Growth and perseverance in faith in Christ always has been, and is, and always will be a community project.

1 An earlier version of this article was published in Sam Storms and Justin Taylor, eds., For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 419–442.
4 Ibid., 418.
7 Not all therapists buy into the reserve valued by psychodynamic psychotherapists. For example, a Virginia Satir or Albert Ellis, a Marsha Linehan or Steven Hayes, brings a dynamic and charismatic “presence” into the counseling moment, freely expressing opinions, emotions, reactions, assertions, personal testimony. In their case, what gives them the right to so freely push their values and perspectives onto others? The more detached psychotherapists rightly see the danger of charlatanism endemic to the more intrusive psychotherapies. But the more intrusive counselors rightly see that values are “induced” in every form of counseling, and that a pretense of neutrality only makes that process covert. Only Christian faith embodies a principle by which values can be openly and continuously induced without either bullying or manipulation.
8 For discussion of how much time a pastor should give to counseling and the sorts of people to whom he should give himself, see “Pastoral Counseling,” in David Powlison’s Speaking Truth in Love (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2005), 127–132.
10 Ibid., 229.
11 Ibid., 89, 226.
14 Ibid., I:1:3, 63.
16 The odd counselor, out of personal religious convictions, might walk out of step with the professional ethos, and step out of role. But as a rule, there is no prayer.
18 Thomas C. Oden, Pastoral Counsel, vol. 3 in Classical Pastoral Care (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
Overview

When working with children and teenagers, how can you effectively draw them out in order to understand how they experience life?

Too often counselors make the mistake of interacting with children the same way they interact with adults. We expect children to sit and talk about their lives using adult vocabulary, abstract concepts, and mature ideas. If we want children to open up about their perceptions of life, themselves, and their relationships, we need to relate in a way that connects to them. We need to learn to see life through their eyes so we might talk in the language of their experience.

One way to connect is to learn how children experience relationships with family and friends. The Relational Assessment Activity is designed to help you with this. It offers a natural and non-threatening way to help a child talk to a counselor about what is going on in significant relationships. Children often find it easier to write or draw than to talk directly about their experiences. With that in mind, this activity asks children to identify the significant people in their lives, and then to respond to a series of guided questions about those relationships. You will capture the information on a form that is helpful to the child and to you. It readily shows which relationships are close and which are more distant or even troubled.

This is a valuable tool to use in the beginning stages of counseling to gather crucial information as you are getting to know a child or teen.

Here are a couple of things to keep in mind to help a child understand what you are asking for:

• Keep your directions simple. Think through how you will say something, and ask yourself, “Is there is a simpler way to say this?” Once you settle on it, do not come up with multiple ways of asking the same question. The more you explain, the more you tend to change the meaning and cause confusion.

• Check to be sure the child understands your instructions. Ask: “Would you like me to explain that again?” Or simply: “Do you have any questions?” Though most children will ask for clarification on their own, some may not be comfortable doing so. Another way to be sure your instructions are clear is to ask the child to repeat back to you what was explained.

The following pages describe how to use this tool with children. You will find detailed instructions, an assessment form with directions (Diagram 1), a case study, and a blank form for you to use with your counselees. I encourage you to take a blank form and fill it

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out yourself. This gives you some practice with it and a first-hand experience of how the tool works. I always try an activity myself before I use it with a counselee.

May this be a helpful resource to you as you seek to know children better and love them wisely.

Relational Assessment Activity Instructions

Purpose
- Information-gathering activity for teens and children, designed to help a counselor explore and evaluate a child’s relationships

Recommended Age Range
- Six years and older

Goals
- Build trust and rapport with the child
- Gather information about the child’s perception of personal relationships
- Discern where there are positive, supportive relationships and where there are negative relationships
- Build a working relationship with the child

Materials Needed
- Relational Assessment Form
- Various colorful pens or colored pencils
- Stickers (optional, but especially useful for younger children)

Advance Preparation
- Have all materials prepared and ready for use

Description of Activity
- As you work through this activity, be mindful to give the child adequate time to complete each step, and do not ask any detailed questions until the child is completely finished writing
- To begin, provide the child with the Relational Assessment Form and explain the activity as follows:
  “Let’s talk today about the people who are in your life. I want you to pick a pen. What color would you like? In the center box, write your name. What do people call you?” (See Diagram 1)
  “Who do you feel closest to? In the next box (box 1), I want you to put the names of the person (or people) that you feel closest to.”
  “Now, in the next box (box 2), I want you to put the people that you like and enjoy being with, but you don’t feel quite so close to. What are their names?”
  Continue to the next box (box 3). “Now, please write down the names of people who are a part of your life, but you don’t feel close to them.”
  “In this last box (box 4), put the people who are a part of your life, but you don’t like them or perhaps you have a hard time getting along with them. Maybe there is someone who does things that hurt you or even frighten you.”
- When finished, have the child pick a different colored pen/pencil and ask:
  “Out of all the people you wrote down, who do you go to when you need help? Circle those people.”
  “Who do you spend the most time with? Underline those people.”
  “Think about all the people you wrote down. Put a star ⭐ next to the people that you think like you best.”
  “Who are the people who you have a hard time getting along with? Put a [box] around those people.”
- If the child hasn’t mentioned God, ask: “Where would you place God?”
- Some other suggestions
  For younger children, or for those with reading or writing difficulties, you may offer to write for them.
  You may also use stickers and have the child (even teens) pick a sticker to represent each person identified, including themselves. It’s best to offer a wide variety of stickers (animals, shapes, bugs, people, objects, etc.). This will give additional information regarding how the child sees each person. When you discuss the worksheet, be sure to ask the child what sticker was picked and why. Ask how the sticker represents the person. Always allow the child to tell you what the sticker is (even if it seems obvious). Children will often have specific reasons or names for their choices that can be revealing.

Discussion
When the child is done, explore the details. Begin with box 1 and ask whose name is in the box. Feel free to ask questions about each person (type of relationship, what makes it close, etc.). Then move on to each of the other boxes. Ask who is underlined, boxed, starred or
circled. Slowly and methodically ask why the child made the choices shown.

This is your opportunity to learn more about the child’s world. In all this, you are seeking to understand the quality of the child’s relationships. Good? Bad? Indifferent? Constructive? Destructive? Isolated?
- How much or how little support is available in this child’s life? Are there many names, only a few, or none?
- Who does the child talk to or go to for help?
- Are family members shown? How are they perceived?
- Does the child have many friends?
- Are there many difficult relationships? One particular difficult relationship? What makes these difficult?
- Does the child feel enjoyed and loved by anyone?
- Does the child spend a great amount of time with the people identified as easy to get along with? Or is much time spent with people the child does not enjoy?
- Is God in the sphere of relationships? How does the child see God? Jesus? What is the quality of the relationship?
You may also add or subtract questions, depending on what you know about the child's situation. Using different color highlighters, ask the child to answer questions such as:

- Who are the people who feel safe?
- Who are the people who feel unsafe?
- Who do you wish you could spend more time with?
- Who are the people who make you feel sad, happy, frustrated, angry, etc?
- Is there anyone you wish were not in the picture?

Now that you have a sense of how this activity works, the case study below will show you the types of information it can reveal about a child's life and how it might help with the counseling process.

Case Study: Elaine

Elaine (age nine) has seemed depressed and has been withdrawing socially. Her grandmother, who is staying with the family for the summer, brought Elaine to counseling while her parents were at work. The grandmother expressed concern over how both parents are working full-time and that Elaine's mother has little involvement with her children. Elaine's teacher from the past school year also remarked that she was socially withdrawn in the classroom.

In getting to know a young girl like Elaine, I use the Relational Assessment Activity to build our relationship and to become familiar with her world. After we filled out the form, I went back to each box and asked Elaine to tell me about the people she put in each one. Elaine's assessment form is included as Diagram 2.

I learned some significant things through this activity. Though Elaine lives with both parents and has three siblings, she feels closest to her grandmother, to God, and to her dog Polly (their names are in the first box). She explained that her grandmother loves her and spends a lot of time with her when she visits. Grandma reads to her, takes her for walks, and talks to her about God. Elaine placed God in her first box because Grandma talks about God all the time, takes her to church, and reads her Bible stories. She connects a close, loving relationship with God to a close, loving relationship with her grandmother.

Grandma and God are also circled (as those she can seek help from). Grandma says that God will be with Elaine even after she has returned home at the end of the summer. Polly, Elaine’s dog, is always home and happy to see Elaine. When she isn’t with her grandmother, Elaine spends most of her time with Polly. She tells the dog all her secrets and never has to worry that Polly will be nasty to her, unlike kids at school who can be mean. She also feels that Grandma, God, and Polly love her best (identified by stars), though she knows only Grandma and God can really help her when she has problems.

Elaine’s father and grandfather are in the second box. She enjoys her relationship with both of them. She is especially fond of her dad and feels he likes her (starred). Elaine shared that she is upset that she only sees him for an hour or two after work and before bedtime.

Her mom, cousin Kelly,1 brother Tyler, sister Rebecca, and a neighbor girl (Amy) are in the third box. Elaine explained that though she spends most of her time with her family (underlined) she feels as close to her neighbor friend as she does to her mom and siblings. Elaine has confirmed what Grandma said about her mother—that their relationship is not close. The grandmother said her mother is unhappy at work and when she comes home, she is tense and short with the kids. Elaine interprets her mom’s reactions as a sign that her mom is not interested in her and doesn’t care about her.

Elaine also struggles with her big sister Kylie and with some peers in school (boxed). Elaine thinks Kylie is bossy and tries to act like her mother; Kylie is often quick to correct Elaine but is not nurturing. Her peers at school pick on her and make fun of her hair, clothes, or schoolwork. Note that Elaine put the two mean boys from school (Taylor and Andrew) outside the last box indicating how threatened she feels by them.

As we talked through each section, I asked Elaine how she responds to each person and situation. A pattern quickly became clear. Feeling alone at home and bullied at school, Elaine responds by withdrawing. At home, Elaine withdraws to her room and looks for comfort from the “safe” people in her family (her grandmother and dog). At school, she simply doesn’t interact with her peers though she spends many hours each week with them.
So what would be a good starting point for counseling with Elaine? There are many possible places to begin. One is to explore the positive relationships in her life (grandmother, father). How have they helped her in the past and how might I involve them to help in her current struggles? Could they be a part of the counseling process and to what degree?

Or, I might choose to focus on the difficult relationships (Mom and older sister). To what degree do they cause distress? What skills or resources does Elaine need to cope? Is it possible to bring in her mother or sister? Are they available and willing to be part of the process?

What about the bullies at school? Were her parents aware of this problem? Is it possible to contact school authorities to develop a plan for the new school year? Are there other supports at school that can be developed?

The Relational Assessment Activity has provided some good information about how Elaine experiences her world and has pointed to some good starting points for counseling. It also helped me to build rapport and start a relationship with her. But this is only the beginning. In moving forward with Elaine, I will continue to construct an understanding of her world by engaging her in other activities and exercises. As I get to know her parents and possibly other relatives, themes will arise and I will be able to form appropriate goals for Elaine and her family.

1 It is interesting to note that children will identify friends, cousins, and others in the assessment without having any meaningful or significant reason. The cousin is not a regular part of Elaine’s life, yet she listed her in this box.
Each of us is a work-in-progress. Biblical counseling exists because God uses people to help people, comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable. Biblical counseling exists because none of us changes all at once, in the twinkling of an eye. When we see Jesus face to face, then we will be fully like him. Until that day, the story is not yet complete. This section of JBC seeks to capture snapshots of the struggles and the change process as it is happening. The stories are framed by and infused with biblical truth—not just the theory, but the rough and tumble, the fits and starts of an unfolding personal story.

These stories come from students in CCEF’s Dynamics of Biblical Change class taught by David Powlison. We are calling this section “Lives in Process.” These stories are the fruit of an assignment in which students choose an issue to address in their lives. The entry point might be a personal problem—from a minor bad habit to a significant pattern of temptation and sin. Or the entry point might be some hardship, trouble or trial that a person is facing. In either case, students spent 4–6 weeks working on the issues and journaling the process. They explored the details of their situation and their responses. They probed motives. They engaged the Word of God and the God of the Word. They sought help, counsel and prayer from friends and family. They recorded their thoughts, actions and feelings, their hopes and fears, their successes and failures, as they learned first-hand about the dynamics of biblical change.

This ‘self-counseling’ project forms a key part of counselor training. We become able to help others effectively as we understand how we are alike (amid all our differences of detail) and how God meets us.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10:13)

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,… comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Cor 1:3–4)

We trust that you will benefit in reading these “lives in process” and believe that the Spirit will use this testimony—for stories bear witness, not to theory, but to what has actually happened, to “things that Jesus did” (John 21:25).

For this issue, we have two offerings. The first is anonymous; names and identifying details have been changed. The second was submitted under the author’s name.
An infamous desire haunts my heart. I want to be great. I want recognition. To me be the glory. I have never forgotten a story my mom told me of an event that occurred when I was four years old. A friend visited my parents and the topic of discussion came around to me. The friend commented, “I feel that there is something special about her. I know the Lord is going to use her.” I believed these words. They have remained with me and have shaped my expectations. Throughout my life, I have been waiting for my greatness to be revealed, for my name to be one that people remember.

Why do I desire to be great? What is it in me that longs to be recognized by others? I have wrestled with this throughout the years. I know my sin is not the simple desire to be valued and significant. God made us in his image. But somewhere along the way, this desire went wrong. It expanded from being valued to being GREAT. This confused me. I am not an extrovert, so why in the world would I actually want to be noticed? My neck turns red when I speak in large crowds. Even in Bible studies, my heart starts to race when I have something to say.

My lack of clarity became an excuse not to deal with my wayward desires. After all, I did not need praise and glory given to me directly (though I didn’t mind that!). I was fine with it being given behind my back—somehow that did not seem as bad. I see it differently now.

Whether the praise is to my face or behind my back, I now admit that I wanted people to know my name because of the good things I have done. My desire was for any and ALL praise. When people would recognize ways in which others were gifted, I would become envious. I would acknowledge their giftedness with my lips and yet, in my head, a voice would be shouting, “I am gifted too!” There have been many other instances when I felt the lump in the back of my throat for not being recognized the way I wanted to be. There are two specific examples that shed light on how this self-seeking desire affects my everyday life.

The first example happens almost every night. I love to cook and would like to think that I am a good cook. Every night, after my husband Bill takes one bite of dinner, I ask him what he thinks. Even if he responds positively, I ask him again halfway through the meal: “Is dinner okay?” Then, a few hours later, I might ask him a third time. Sometimes, I will even bring it up again the next morning! What I am after, of course, is to be told that I am a great cook. But gaining that validation is an obsession. It goes further. When we go to a friend’s house for dinner, I critique the meal served to us. I will either feel defeated because I could not cook as well as the host, or feel prideful because I could do better. In the car on the way home, I often comment on the meal and ask Bill if he thinks I could do it better.
My behavior can become critical and mean behind my friend’s back. I am so desperate to be recognized that I am willing to sacrifice the joy of rejoicing in my friend’s gifts to promote my name.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to cook a good meal, or with receiving a compliment afterwards. The deeper issue lies with the motive that drives my repeated questioning about the quality of my cooking. I want to be the best cook among all my friends. I want Bill to rave about my cooking to them. And I want them to rave about my cooking to their friends. This type of praise is what I most desire—to have other people discussing how good I am (and somehow I hear about it!). I not only want to be great; I want to hear about my greatness from others as well. I find value and glory in what others think of me.

The second example is something that happened recently when my doctor found a lump in my body. A biopsy was needed to confirm that it was benign, which it was. Naturally I was relieved because I did not want to have cancer. But something else was going on inside me at the same time—I was disappointed. I was not afraid during the week between the discovery of the lump and the biopsy because I thought cancer could be my moment to shine. I had hoped that cancer would provide a great opportunity to show everyone that I am uniquely special. I could demonstrate that I am mature in the Lord and that I can handle a major trial in my life. I would be strong and continue to serve and love others, even though I had cancer. I would be a great patient who clung to Jesus and walked by faith every step of the way.

This second example is more disturbing to me because it shows the extreme lengths to which my desires can go in order to gain fame and eminence. Rather than longing for the Lord to be rightly glorified and praised, I want to receive his glory. Not to you, O Lord, not to you, but to ME be the glory.

Joining God in His Work

The Holy Spirit first began dealing with my sin when a speaker told a humorous story at a marriage conference. He had given his wife a present and repeatedly asked her if she liked it. Throughout that day, the next day, and even the next week, he kept asking her about it. She finally became annoyed and reminded him that she had worn the necklace every day. Was that not a clear sign that she loved it? The speaker paused and then reflected on his own heart. Whenever his wife would praise him for the gift he picked out, he would feel good about himself. I laughed when I heard the story, but then I began to think about my own heart. I do the same thing! But for me it was not just one instance with a gift—it was every night when I cooked dinner. I was addicted to praise.

As I began to examine this issue, I became overwhelmed by it and struggled with the temptation to ignore it; the problem seemed too deep. The Spirit revealed to me more of my heart than I desired to see. Yet I knew God was leading me to repentance and to a season of wrestling with this sin. As I acknowledged this, I was drawn to join God as he made me more like Christ. I began by reminding myself of who Christ is, and who I am in him. In Christ, I am forgiven. I am a new creation. Christ will finish the good work he has started in me. I have been given the Holy Spirit who enables me to conquer the sin that is in my heart and in my words. This encouraged me, and God released me from guilt and despair so that I could fight this sin.¹

During this time, God used a few key passages both to convict me and to grow my understanding of his worth. Who God is garners him, and him alone, all glory and praise. Psalm 115:1 reads, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.” This verse became my battle prayer. It guided me in what my thoughts and attitudes should look like. All glory belongs to the Lord because of the work that he has done. By God’s grace, I began to earnestly desire to be a person who longs for Jesus—not me—to

God released me from guilt and despair so that I could fight this sin.
be rightly praised.

I was also confronted with the call to be humble in the pattern of my Savior. Scripture never says that people deserve honor and praise. People are called to humbly give the honor and praise to God. Our hope lies in this promise: as we humble ourselves before our Lord, he will exalt us, in his perfect timing, through Jesus. God will grant his children eternal glory in Christ, but gaining that glory is a gift of God. It is nothing that I inherently possess, nothing I could ever earn, nothing other people could ever give me.

As I began to digest these truths, something unexpected happened. I began to actually fear recognition. There were times when I became flustered and awkward if I did receive praise because now I did not know how to handle it. I was tempted to flee from it to avoid having to deal with conflicted feelings of both wanting it and knowing I should not want it. But the Lord has been faithful. By his continual guidance, I have learned to not only turn from my sinful desires, but also respond rightly to praise and recognition. God has taught me that each of us is given gifts by him and it is not wrong to recognize them. I can receive praise humbly, knowing I would not be able to accomplish anything of value without the gifts the Lord has given me.

With these scriptural truths taking root in my heart and in a rhythm of repentance, I began to see what concrete change could look like in my life. For example, I decided not to ask Bill about dinner anymore. When I wanted to ask Bill about the meal, I trained myself to stop and think, what am I really asking and why do I want this? Then, I trusted both Christ and Bill—and did not ask!

Another crucial component of this change process was to speak to others about my struggle and let them help me. Bill has seen things that I have not noticed and has lovingly brought them to light. Admittedly, it has been hard to be honest and open with people about this sin. I do not want my family and friends to see how desperately I need Jesus, but I am thoroughly convinced that allowing others to be a part of the change process is vital to my Christian walk. I cannot do it alone. I am not called to do it alone. Bill and my friends have pointed me to Jesus, and patiently reminded me of who I am in Christ. They have encouraged me to run to him, and not simply avoid or turn a blind eye to the sin that the Spirit reveals.

A Long Obedience

I wish I could say I never struggle with this sin anymore, but we all know that change tends to happen slowly! I may have a few days or weeks without thinking about it, but my desire will crop up and catch me off guard. For example, a few weeks ago I applied for a job that was competitive. After I applied, I made sure that my friends and family knew that there were many applicants and I was not likely to be offered the job. I did not even think about what I was doing. I thought that I was simply preparing others and myself for the worst. But when I reflected on my actions later, I realized that I wanted them to know that it was competitive for two reasons. First, if I did not get the job, it would not reflect badly on me because everyone would understand that the competition was tough and I had given it my best shot. But, if by some chance I was offered the job, my friends and family would understand that I am truly a person worthy to be praised and recognized. This would be evident because many others were passed over for the job. It was the same sinful pattern and desire as in the past, but it showed up in a different circumstance in my life. By God’s grace, I saw my sin and repented. This instance served as a reminder that I cannot conquer my flesh on my own. I still desperately need Jesus, just as much as I did when I first began dealing with this sin. Thankfully, God’s love is patient and never ending. For this I am so thankful.

Knowing that sin is still present in me, I
look forward to the day when I join Christ in eternity, and he makes my desires and responses perfectly righteous. I will then wholly desire for Christ to have all the glory that he deserves. But I also rejoice now because we can taste the goodness of that promise on earth. Christ is working in us already. He has not left me alone to struggle in this world. He gives us the Spirit (who helps us see our sin) and gives us to each other to encourage, love, and build each other up.

I hate that my heart screams for recognition. I hate that I have spent so much of my life waiting for my greatness to be revealed. But I am not left without hope. I want Christ to be revealed to me and through me. I want his greatness to be known throughout the world. With God at work in me, I joyfully join in the hymnist’s song of praise:

To God be the glory, great things he hath done!
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,
and opened the lifegate that all may go in.

These passages were helpful to me: 2 Corinthians 5:17; Philippians 1:6; Romans 8:9, 12-15; Ephesians 4:2; 3 1 Peter 5:6; 4 1 Peter 5:10

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**Postscript**

Our inaugural Lives in Process story expresses many of the central themes in how the cure of souls unfolds. Here are six principles that particularly strike me from her story.

Small incidents count large. No one ever seeks counseling because they ask for compliments too often, or because they secretly wish to suffer heroically, or because they subtly set up how friends will respond to forthcoming news about a job application. But wise counseling is keenly aware of the significance of such subtle distortions that compromise both faith and love. Coming to understand the cosmic significance of ‘little’ things brings to life Jesus’ comment that we will give account for every careless, unthinking word we ever say (Matthew 12:36). All of us need Christ’s pastoral attention, whether our problems register 9.5 on the Richter scale or whether they seem to be imperceptible 1.1 temblors. And minor distortions contain the same ingredients as major life breakdowns.

The mercies of God pointedly give hope. Who can dare to look at what is really going on in this intricate dance between our God, our hearts and our neighbors? The temptation to feel overwhelmed runs strong when our relentless instinct for self-righteousness begins to weaken, and we first glimpse how profoundly we are skewed. It is no accident that the center of this story is filled with the Word incarnate and the Word written. People sometimes get the mistaken idea that the directives of Scripture are at the heart of biblical counseling. But as this story illustrates, promises received are the sun and rain that nourish fruit expressing Christ’s directives to love.

It is helpful to name your battle. How well the opening line of this story puts things: “An infamous desire haunts my heart.” Our endemic sinfulness expresses great ironies. This vivid, memorable description registers that the author is wide awake.

Surprises abound. Our modern world dreams of finding keys that allow us to thoroughly explain, predict and control. This dream of techné—a mindset that works well in engineering and in certain aspects of medicine—can create expectations that people will change according to a standard protocol and normative pattern. Such expectations can affect (and distort) ministry in general and counseling in particular. People and relationships don’t reduce to techné. The author’s comment that “something unexpected happened” is far more common than a step-step-step progression.

Ask for help. Other people make a big difference.

The struggle does not end until the end. You’ve heard a story of significant, life-rearranging progress, full of reasons for joy and thanks! Yet she writes, “I wish I could say I never struggle with this sin anymore…. My desire will crop up and catch me off guard.” How typical of us sinners! And this is the pattern of all growth—genuine progress, remaining struggle. This is why perfectionistic expectations are deadly. This is why the ‘moods’ of Christian faith range from deep groaning to high delight. This is why it matters that we will see Jesus face-to-face, and then our joy will be complete.

David Powlison
Stomping among Lilies

I find a frustration within my heart at times, subtle as it may be, that strangles the grace from simple, unguarded moments in communication with my wife. It is impatient. It expects its own way. It doesn’t have time for the gospel. This frustration is especially destructive within the vulnerability and intimacy of marriage. The following is a window into my experience amidst biblical change. I should tell you now that when you reach the end, my journey will not yet be complete, but it is begun. This is the beauty of true change. The Word of God does more than show us how to cope. It moves us. It rearranges life in such a way as to make room for grace to enter in and actually change us.

I notice in the unguarded moments of my marriage—those simple, garden-variety moments that seem like any other—a certain susceptibility in my heart. Moments like my way in the front door at home, stumbling in on an afternoon with bags in hand, my wife already home awaiting my return. Moments like a quick phone call from her during the day, when we have yet to connect since that morning. Moments like her hurried request from the other room for my help with some particular task.

Sometimes, an interaction can change from beautiful to broken in only a moment. All of a sudden I am annoyed with her for expecting my keys out of the front door. All of a sudden my wife seems less of a joy on the other end of the phone as I realize how long this call is going to take. All of a sudden I feel hesitant to put down my book and run into the other room in response to her request for assistance. All of a sudden. It happens so quickly.

If you spend any time in the Word at all and you see there the grace and beauty with which it calls us to live with one another, then you cannot escape its implications for frustration. Frustration is not innocent. Consider even briefly Col 3:19, *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them,* or Eph 5:25, *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.* Or consider 1 Cor 13:4-7, *Love is patient and kind...it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Is frustration innocent in light of these descriptions of life together in marriage?

Consider now what might be the opposite of these verses. *Husbands, hold fast to your own desires, even if it means being harsh with your wife.* Or, *Husbands, love on your own terms; it is of little relevance how Christ has loved you.* Or, *Love is impatient and inconsiderate. It insists on its own way; it is often irritable and resentful; it rejoices to get what it wants even if at the expense*
of hurting her. It barely survives day to day, believes in nothing, hopes in nothing, endures nothing. As I consider before the Lord moments of frustration in my marriage, they look and feel much more like these latter ‘verses’ than they do the former ones. The Word confronts us with the truth that frustration is not an innocent whim. It shows us that there is something fundamentally wrong in frustration. It is antithetical to love.

As I saw love as it is in the Scriptures, I began to understand that frustration deconstructs togetherness. Even when it is subtle on the outside, it is always profoundly destructive on the inside. Frustration is the experience of interpreting something or someone as an obstacle to one’s own desire, and wanting that obstacle removed or changed. When I feel this way toward my wife, I necessarily turn myself against her because she has become that obstacle. Because of this, frustration divides. And when this happens between spouses, an exclusive union between only two persons, frustration then isolates. Because I have turned on her in my heart, my wife finds herself momentarily abandoned by her friend, lover, and support. She finds me dismissing her feelings, complaining of our situation, criticizing her concerns, because in that moment we are alone against one another rather than together with one another. Frustration within marriage always produces disunion because, rather than fill the space between spouses with tender, constructive, grace-oriented communication, it fills the space with destructive, divisive, self-oriented dissatisfaction.

I have to ask myself, what motivates these recurrent moments of frustration, especially within the preciousness of marriage? What motivates frustration with someone for whom just minutes ago I would have given anything? I ask myself that question because the Word asks it of me. The Word gives us a framework for how to understand ourselves, and it reveals what is essential to our reactions, our emotions, our words: they are the product of the desires rooted within our own hearts (Matt 15:18; Luke 6:43-45; James 3:12). In order to understand my moments of frustration, then, I cannot only observe my circumstances. I need to see what desires rule my heart in the moment of those circumstances. What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel (James 4:1-2).

God reveals that beneath my frustration that sabotages moments with my wife are the many restless desires that develop in absence of love for him. In any given moment that I drift from love of God, a great shift takes place across every other desire in my heart. I turn inward and desire on my own terms. I desire time on my terms. I desire love on my terms. I desire control on my terms. When my heart is far from the gospel, these desires rule those moments rather than desires for the love and ways of God, and they reach the surface in reactions, emotions, and words of frustration when my wife is not willing to accommodate them.

I wrestled with this in my heart before the Lord. I wanted to see my wife always through his eyes rather than only my own. As I did, I learned something further revealing: frustration is not necessarily loud. The process of change would go much deeper than I had anticipated. Though I was slower to communicate frustration, I realized that quiet frustration existed beneath the calm surface. Quiet frustration is that frustration that may not give a terse response, but resents a spouse inside for expecting your attention at the moment. It imagines what it would be like if she would wrap up this phone call sooner than later. It wishes my wife did not want my help in the other room. Frustration does not have to be loud at all. It can rule us in complete silence.

This is the moment in the journey that I began to understand that biblical change—real transformation—is not merely from frustration to passivity. A restraint to communicate frustration may have been the first step in change, but it was not the destination. Biblical change is not a rearrangement of the situation but a transformation of the heart. The heart works in one of two directions—either self-centeredly or other-centeredly. Biblical change is a transformation from the former to the latter. An other-centered heart cannot be contained by passivity; it desires to be like Christ and act in love. Biblical change not only constrains us, but also moves us. It lifts our eyes and then teaches us to love what we see. It transforms my heart toward an other-centered concern for my wife’s welfare through a patient, enduring, and safe love. It moves us away from frustration.
and toward its opposite, which is constructive gentleness. Biblical gentleness in marriage is to create, guard, and propagate an experience of unity, blessing, and peace for my wife. The motion from frustration to constructive gentleness is one from self-centered dividing to other-centered uniting.

Through his Word, God meets us, captures our hearts, and leads us through this process of change. He continued remaking my vision for communication in marriage: But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (1 Tim 1:16). Christ’s perfect patience is his evidence to me that he loves me. He calls me to love with that love in which he loves me. The same patience, gentleness, and long-suffering the Lord has toward me is what I am called to embody in my relationship with my wife. Christ intends that she experience him, her true Husband, in my love toward her. Our words toward one another, according to the Word, are an act of love (Eph 4:15). They are to “give grace” (Eph 4:29). It broke my heart to realize how my moments of frustration obscure this ministry of mercy and love within our marriage. But the Word’s continual encouragement was that change does not wait to begin in the rare, momentous moments of life, but starts today, living in its truth in the simple, everyday moments of life together in marriage.

Loving my wife as Christ does is only possible because of what Colossians describes in chapter 3, which I encourage you to read in its entirety. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. How can we ever love like this verse intends? The answer is revealed earlier in the chapter. We can love like Christ because our lives are “hidden with Christ” (v.3). To say we are hidden in Christ describes that we are united to him, living in the reality of the gentleness, patience, and love in which Christ perseveres for us. In this union we are made like him so that we can put on... compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another...above all these, put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony (vv.12,14). Change comes by our moment-by-moment abiding in Christ (John 15:5).

I hope you will not be discouraged to hear that this has been a rather gradual process. There remains a long way ahead. But this patient process is how the Lord chooses to change us. It is not this way in every instance, but it is for most. His patient ways with us allow change to take hold of the deepest parts of our lives. Martin Luther writes, “We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.” Let us also add, we are growing toward him. This is biblical change.

* * *

Postscript

Like a green tree, a child grows and keeps on growing. The Bible gives us this lovely picture of human flourishing:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon....
They still bear fruit in old age.

They are ever full of sap and green.

—Psalm 92:12, 14

Surely, one delight in being God’s child is that, whatever your chronological age, you should be evergreen. Wherever our Father is present and pruning, we continue fruitful and full of sap. It is a wondrous thing: Christian growth began on the day of your new birth, and will continue until your deathday. And, if the most sober intuitions about eternal life are accurate, we will continue to grow more wise, more joyous and more loving, forever and ever, Amen.

Chris’ story bears witness to a trajectory of growth. The details matter. Particular things exemplify broad, life-giving principles. For starters, notice how God tailor-makes growth. It matters that Chris is in his 20s, that he is married, that he is married to the woman who is his wife, that he has the temperament that he does. Growth never happens in general.

Furthermore, notice how he keeps discovering things. Initial insights into a subtle attitude ripen into profound awareness of need for transformation. Notice how self-awareness and awareness of need for Christ go hand in hand. Notice how receiving Christ’s love changes what he wants himself to be as a husband. Impatience pushed his wife away; patience and kindness take her person and her concerns into his heart.

David Powlison
Most counselors know instinctively that helping couples grow means helping them connect to each other. Talking more honestly, deeply, and constructively about their relationship is one aspect of connecting, and most marriage counselors agree that emotions play an important role in that process. But connecting in an emotionally-charged environment is exactly what makes marriage counseling feel a lot like creeping through a minefield. When couples are revealing some of their most deeply-held and emotionally-charged beliefs, one poorly chosen word or ambiguous response can lead to combative exchanges that quickly spiral out of control.

After a few disastrous forays into this minefield, many counselors find the volatility unmanageable and decide to see their most difficult couples individually. Granted, there are many good reasons to meet with spouses individually, but the counselor’s discomfort is not one of them. I frequently remind my marriage counseling students that the emotions that make marriage counseling so volatile are what counselors must learn to harness and redirect for counseling to be productive.

That is what I find so helpful and provocative about Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) as described in Susan Johnson’s book. It is an approach that aims at helping couples look beneath the destructive patterns of interaction and learn to connect at a more honest and vulnerable level.

Johnson recounts an exchange between a couple that illustrates this quite well. She calls it the “peanut butter incident.” Johnson describes a counseling session in which a husband tells how he recently asked his wife for a kiss only to be rebuffed because, at that moment, her mouth was full of peanut butter. This story sounds humorous, and it is, but by utilizing EFT principles the counselor teases the interaction apart to help the couple speak more deeply about all that was emotionally involved in this interaction. The husband says that he often feels that bids for his wife’s affection and affirmation go unheard or are cut off. As the wife begins to hear and understand her husband’s underlying emotions, they connect and both are able to respond differently. The counselor created an atmosphere that made it safe for the husband to disclose the hopelessness and fear that lurked beneath his seemingly angry and critical behavior toward his wife. Rather than having a silly fight about kisses and peanut butter, the couple begins to interact more honestly about matters that regularly derail their marriage.

My interest in EFT is based on the parallels between what Johnson has studied and built a counseling approach on and what

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Reviewed by Winston T. Smith

The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection


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many counselors have observed anecdotally: sometimes beneath angry and destructive reactions are feelings of hurt and fear. If we can help spouses to reveal these emotions, it serves to defuse and de-escalate destructive responses and creates opportunities for positive responses. In my experience hurt and fear often seem “truer” and “deeper” than the anger or indifference that make-up the more typical atmosphere of the marriage. In other words, angry attacks sometimes serve as a foil to cover up other feelings. EFT seeks to guide couples beyond angry and defensive escalation and toward mutual honesty.

This is a good goal and though the foundation is different, it is analogous to expressing faith and love, and is an embodiment of the “one flesh” principles of the Bible. Scripture does encourage us to see beyond the obvious events and emotions that typify “fights and quarrels” in order to understand the underlying “desires that battle within” (James 4:1). To unravel these patterns of relational combat, Scripture directs us to the various desires of the heart (cravings for comfort, ease, acceptance, power, etc.) and the corresponding fear of doing without them. These are the forces of the heart that battle within, producing a gamut of emotional responses, and guiding us into battle against God and each other.

EFT does not see the God-ward dimension in underlying desires, but it does describe a process of bringing these motives into focus. Here are some of the steps Johnson describes:

- create a secure connection with each member of the couple
- de-escalate the conflict
- identify the larger pattern and underlying emotional issues
- help the couple learn to understand and support each other

At each step, Johnson describes “markers” or features of the couple’s interactions that provide an opportunity for the counselor to facilitate the process. She then describes the skills or interventions that are appropriate for that step. This is exactly what practitioners are hungry for: do not just explain your theoretical orientation, tell me what works!

However, this is also where biblical counselors have to take utmost care. We can never settle for what “works.” Though we care very much about our counselees’ suffering, we cannot be satisfied with “symptom reduction” alone. Our ultimate aim is to magnify Christ. Our certain hope is that growth, maturity, and relief result from being connected to Jesus, not just to a spouse. So when we find an approach that offers a method and results that resonate with some of our goals, we need to examine it carefully and thoughtfully lest we import meaning and messages into our counseling that are contrary to the gospel.

Johnson helps us to interact with EFT because she clearly lays out the theoretical foundations of her approach in the first few chapters. She uses attachment theory as her organizing and integrative principle. It postulates that humans have an innate and lifelong need to find refuge and safety from the dangers of life in the acceptance and nurturance of others. The ability and freedom to share emotional distress with someone who provides safety and acceptance is essentially what creates a secure attachment. EFT, then, is the counselor’s attempt to create an environment in which husband and wife learn to share emotional pain and distress so that they can serve as secure attachment figures for each other.

Attachment theory and language is both intriguing and aggravating. Interestingly, as Johnson begins to discuss it, she writes with obvious excitement, if we ask our clients what is the basis of happy long-term relationship, they inevitably answer with one word, love. However, in the field of professional couple and family therapy, love has been conspicuous by its absence... The recent application of attachment theory to adult relationships is a revolutionary event for couple therapy, because, for the first time, it provides the couple therapist a coherent, relevant, well-researched framework for understanding and intervening in adult love (p.24).

It is true. Study marriage counseling approaches from any non-Christian orientation and the word “love” is curiously absent. How strange that something so central to marriage and intimacy drops out of the picture as soon as it is “scientifically” studied. Love is at the center of relationships, according to Scripture.
But attachment theory provides a meager understanding of what love is. Its biological and evolutionary underpinnings assert that there is nothing uniquely human about our need for secure attachment—this is just what mammals do to promote survival. But would Shakespeare write a sonnet about “attachment”? God’s love for us and our love for each other—Exodus 34:6-7; 1 John 4:7-21—is far more than meeting attachment needs.

So, what is right about EFT? At a basic level, EFT theorists observe that humans seek to live in intimate relationships. They also observe our warlike nature. When we are injured in relationships, we are more inclined to counter-attack than to admit we have been harmed. EFT seeks to create an environment where it is safe to lower the shields and put down the weapons. The goal is to understand another person’s pain and fears. Counselors can work with the couple toward this goal if they are skilled enough to manage the atmosphere in the room.

Christian faith speaks clearly to things that EFT can only describe in a shadowy way. As image bearers we were indeed created for intimate relationships. But we are more than wounded; we are also sinful. We are as likely to attack and devour our spouses as we are to nurture them. Attack and counter-attack is our forte, not just because we are covering fear and shame, but because our hearts beckon us to put ourselves first, to seek our own “good,” to serve the self above all else. Disclosing our hurts in front of a spouse who has wounded us does not appeal to our fallen nature. We do not want to create another opportunity to be wounded or rejected. We do not want to let go of our own angry demands for retribution and judgment. EFT observes sin in operation, but it does not see it for what it is, and seeks to cure sin by appealing to a subtler form of self-interest and self-salvation.

Here is where the gospel becomes critical. Jesus speaks to how we seek to cover ourselves with angry attacks or cold indifference. He has come and lovingly revealed our hearts to us. In effect, his coming to forgive and restore says, “You don’t need to attack or hide. You are loved. Turn to me. Trust me. You are forgiven and covered. You are safe.” If I understand that Christ knows and loves me right where I most go astray, then this is the secure foundation (or “attachment,” if you will) that allows me to disclose myself to my spouse. What EFT offers is really a distorted imitation of the love and safety we have because of our oneness with Christ, which we, in turn, are to offer to one another.

EFT skills are provocative. Its goals, steps, and interventions are worth studying, but not because attachment theory is true. Biblical wisdom does an even better job of helping spouses live in gospel truth: “You are already known, loved and forgiven by Christ. You can be honest with your spouse. You can support your spouse in doing the same. This is part of how we can love each other.” But where EFT unwittingly imitates some aspect of God’s love, I want to understand and rework it biblically, reconnecting it to the gospel truth to which it properly belongs.
This is a memoir written by a father. The story is told from his perspective and with his daughter Sally’s permission. It follows Sally through the summer of 1996 during her first ascent into mania.

On July 5, 1996, my daughter was struck mad. She was fifteen and her crack-up marked a turning point in both our lives. “I feel like I am traveling and traveling with nowhere to go back to,” she said in a burst of lucidity…(p.3).

Given phrases like “my daughter was struck mad,” it is clear that Michael Greenberg has not pronounced psychiatric explanations as sacred and he does not present a wonderfully rosy conclusion. What you get is a straightforward and open account of Sally’s mental unraveling, psychiatric hospitalization, and gradual improvement during the course of one summer.

The outline is too familiar. Sally’s increasingly erratic behavior creates impatience and anger in the home. On one outing with a friend her recklessness is so evident that the police pick her up and bring her home. At first, people assume that drug abuse is the culprit, though it is not. Eventually someone suggests that Sally is experiencing a psychiatric crisis. Sally is admitted to an expensive and well-staffed psychiatric hospital. Despite the high-end care, Sally finds the experience dehumanizing and confusing, and her parents feel like they are losing custody of their own daughter.

A series of questions take up permanent residence in the father’s heart: Why? What did I do wrong? Was it the divorce? Is it the weirdness gene from Uncle Steve? Was it the unbalanced polarities of out-of-synch parents? And back again to: What did I do wrong? Chemical imbalance is the alleged culprit, and the parents eventually come to terms with the usefulness of medication. But everyone knows the real answer: no one knows why this happened. Insanity remains a mystery.

Once Sally is released from the hospital, the family walks on egg shells. They wisely deem patience a virtue and avoid displays of anger. The family also listens carefully to every phrase, hoping to hear a scrap of sanity, although they don’t bring that relational attentiveness to their other relationships. They wonder if their daughter will ever return. When she does return to her former self the family wants to celebrate, but there has been too much talk about “remission” and the uncertainties of mania’s future course. They find contentment in Sally’s willingness to take medication and to talk with someone who might be able to help her sort through the pieces. Of course, the girl will forever wonder who she is. Am I

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Hurry Down Sunshine

Reviewed by Edward T. Welch
the sedated one? Or am I the one with that delicious fire in my brain? She wrestles gamely with understanding herself. And just when things seem to be going well, mania pounces again. Apparently it was just lying in wait.

If you have ever come close to mania, whether in yourself or in a loved one, you know the story. But a memoir like this can still be helpful. It gives us words for an experience that teeters on the ineffable. And the full cast—Sally, father, mother, step-mother and brother—gives us enough perspective to demonstrate that mania becomes a turning point in many people’s lives.

From our perspective however, we cannot leave it here. As those who live under the Word of God, we are compelled to reframe Michael Greenberg’s experience. Of course this task has its challenges. How do we think biblically about an experience that is not directly discussed in Scripture? We believe Scripture interprets and sheds light on everything, and the story in *Hurry Down Sunshine* is part of that everything. We can begin by walking into the world of the struggler and listening to the families who are familiar with mania. And supplement that experience with memoirs such as Greenberg’s. (See also Kay Jamison’s book *An Unquiet Mind*, the standard for memoirs of mania.)

The principle is this: When we encounter something that is not clearly discussed in Scripture, we first listen to the person who is experiencing the crisis. Note all that is going on. Listen until the normal and biblically recognizable emerges from the abnormal and mysterious. For example, as we get to know someone like Sally, we will notice that her enthusiasm attaches itself to seemingly random ideas or objects. That might be hard to understand. But the anger that can accompany that enthusiasm is certainly recognizable, and passages such as James 4 come into view. Then we listen some more and bring what we hear back to Scripture again. One ministry goal is for the Bible to come alive and speak deeply to the person about this multi-layered problem.

Consider the matter of identity. We can be sure that any person who experiences mania will be haunted by the question: Who am I? In Sally’s case: Which personality is the real me? Most human beings are relatively predictable and recognizable from day to day. A manic person is never quite sure who will show up. Undoubtedly there are complexities here, but all of these can be interpreted in the light of Scripture. Beneath the complexities and fragmentation is an ordinary question of personal identity. It is a question every human being should ask. Scripture disassembles old identities and refashions people in the image of our Creator and Redeemer. We are created. We sin. We suffer and die. Christ died for such as we are. We must turn to him. We belong to the Lord. We serve him. We love others. Such reassembling of identity is not exactly what Sally is asking for at first. But it takes her chaotic experiences and her more superficial questions and directs her to a fundamental, deeper, and more important answer. If someone like Sally wants to discover a predictable personality style, she might be disappointed. But if she wants answers that immediately orient her to her deepest problem and to her most glorious purpose, then the questions about personality become secondary and less important for skillful living.

Counselors are drawn to people and their stories. Whether the stories end with hope, despair or uncertainty, we find in them our common humanity. The themes of creation, fall, judgment and redemption recur in every person’s story. *Hurry Down Sunshine* brings you into the details of one summer in the life of a modern family. It is not a Christian book and Greenberg lost his Jewish beliefs long ago. But the book has recognizable humanness throughout, and it will bring you into the life of mania.
This book is not for the faint of heart. The topic makes people uncomfortable. Predatory crimes are repulsive and often hard to comprehend. None of us wants to believe our lives and our loved ones may be subject to vile abuse. Most of us have a genuine desire to think well of others and typically rely on our ability to discern character and truthfulness when evaluating risks. We like to believe that those with deviant sexual impulses are limited to a small few, and that the chance of running into such predators is even smaller. However, this book reveals that sex offenders are widespread. Young or old, you may find yourself, or someone you love, impacted by such vile crimes.

Sadly, children are targeted for sexual abuse because they are easily controlled. Parents do, of course, attempt to guard their children well and carefully choose the activities their children are allowed to join. But this book shows how predators do the same thing. Churches and other places where kids congregate are considered promising places to find new victims.

This book aims to help protect children from being victimized by informing parents, educators, and other professionals about how sexual predators operate. Salter does this by offering extensive descriptions of the various types of predators, explaining how they think and act. Their motivations vary from rage to various patterns of sexual attraction. Most are methodical. They develop a relationship with a child and manipulate both the child and the family by deceiving them. It is disturbing to see how predators get away with their plans time after time. They are shrewd, meticulous, and good at what they do.

Salter provides numerous direct quotations, excerpts from interviews, and case studies of various rapists, pedophiles, and other sexual predators. While such statements are difficult to read, they are eye-opening. Salter shows how so many perpetrators easily get away with terrorizing and abusing their victims. She dispels any belief that predators are crazy-looking psychopaths who are easy to identify and avoid. Portrayals of clergy, coaches, and family members demonstrate the cleverness of such evil, and how perpetrators rely on deception and likeability to win trust and gain access to children.

Some of the most disturbing stories revolve around those who move into churches, youth groups, and sports teams—operating for years without being noticed. Often predators develop such widespread trust in the community that when their crimes finally are exposed, many refuse to believe the charges and actually come to the predator’s defense.

Salter offers guidance on how to detect the various forms of deception used by these criminals. And while there is no sure formula,
the author teaches readers to be more aware and more wary. She explains how body language and verbal language can supply clues to detecting a sexual predator. These are subtle, but can often be observed if one is looking to assess a person’s authenticity. She explains how a predator grooms a family to gain increased access to the child, including time alone. Salter offers practical suggestions to prevent this, such as being more visible in the child’s life and activities, even at places we often assume are “safe.” She also talks about how to “deflect” unwanted advances.

Her approach does not promote suspiciousness, an alarmist mentality, or suggest you become distrustful of everyone you meet. Her intent is to teach discernment. She wants the reader to become knowledgeable and to act accordingly.

This book is descriptively rich and offers practical advice. It could be a wake-up call for those who tend to live under positive illusions that we and our children are more often safe than not. Salter helps us become more alert to the ways in which evil people pursue the weak and vulnerable around us, reminding us that we live in fallen world. As Christians reading this text, we must not fail to supply the biblical perspective that understands evil for what it actually is and knows the God who both judges and saves.