

Editorial

Why We “Care” Instead of “Counsel” Each Other



by ROBERT K. CHEONG

As a pastor at a large, multi-site church, I made a strategic decision a few years back to replace the word *counsel* with the word *care*. I didn't send out a memo or make campaign signs. I simply began to intentionally use the terms “care” and “caring” everywhere I would have used the words “counsel” and “counseling.” This change was also reflected in my conversations with others and in training material developed for ministry leaders at each of our church locations.

This change was not a knee-jerk reaction, nor did it stem from having an axe to grind. I know that *counsel* is a fine, biblical term and *counseling* is a valid word to describe the constructive conversations that characterize vibrant personal ministry in the body of Christ. I am not trying to ban words. The Scriptures are clear that God “counsels” us with his Word (Ps 16:7; 73:24). Jesus is referred to as the Wonderful Counselor (Isa 9:6). And we are called to counsel one another daily (Heb 3:13). But even though our pastoral team had worked hard to help our members see how biblical counseling is part of the ministry of the Word and does address the problems of our lives, we faced an ongoing challenge with how the congregation interpreted the word *counseling*. And the challenge was deeper than terminology.

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It reflected a misunderstanding of God's design for personal ministry.

When we called it "counseling," people in need expected more... and less. In the past, those in our church who sought help with life struggles filled out a "Counseling Request." One woman who did so expected to see a licensed counselor, given the name of the form. We explained to her that there were women who could care for her and journey with her, but they were not formally-trained counselors. Because she expected *more* (from trained counselors) and *less* (from other godly women), we had to explain why she would receive wonderful care through the church even without a "formally-trained counselor." So to help shift people's expectations, we changed the name of the form to "Care Request."

When we called it "counseling," even pastors misunderstood the role of care in ministry. Not only did those requesting help need to understand the breadth and depth of gospel ministry, so did our leaders. It's easy to reduce the ministry of the Word into separate functions like counseling, preaching, evangelism and missions. A prime example of this reality emerged in a discussion with a leader who was about to be sent out as a church planter. He asked, "When should I start training up counselors?" Instead of answering, I rephrased his question, "When should you start training your people to care for one another with the gospel?" He sat back with a smile and replied, "Right away."

Additionally, our ministry leaders and pastors often talked about counseling as something they are not gifted in or something they refer out to the "counselors" in the church. However, these same leaders regularly ministered Christ to those in need, addressing difficult situations and heart issues with gospel faithfulness. Too often, pastors and other leaders can underestimate their ministry effectiveness by thinking their efforts are "less than" compared to formally-trained counselors.

When we called it "counseling," God's people misunderstood their calling. When I asked married couples if they had a desire to minister to other couples, they would either say they never thought they could do such ministry or that they are not marriage counselors. When I took the time to explain that God has called each of us to be ministers of reconciliation and ambas-

sadors for Christ so we can bear one another's burdens,¹ they began to see more clearly their God-given calling as members of the body of Christ.

All three of these groups labored under misconceptions about who is qualified to help others. By referring to the personal ministry of the Word as care instead of counseling, we debunked some of these myths and began to engage more deeply in our real mission—to glorify God by worshiping him with our whole life and loving one another in the church and world.

Today, by God's grace, we are equipping our church to expect more, not less, from Jesus. Our leaders are learning how to care for one another, and they are equipping others to do so as well. We have a larger and more diverse team than ever before. Since the change in emphasis, God has raised up over seventy care leaders and apprentices representing various ministries at all four church locations. Over the past six years, these leaders have introduced gospel-centered care to hundreds of other ministry leaders and members through small group experiences, where men and women are encouraged and comforted in Christ during their time of need.

As a result of this growth, we are hearing encouraging testimonies. Church members are growing in their understanding and experience of God and his love for them. Couples share how their marriages are growing more intimate as they draw out each other's hearts and draw near to God together. Small group members are engaging more openly about their struggles. Parents are sharing how they are shepherding their children's hearts and seeking help when they feel stuck. Men and women are telling us that they have even been able to engage more deeply with people at work as they listen and ask questions that lead to conversations about faith.

We certainly haven't arrived or figured out everything though. God is gracious to keep leading and teaching us as we continue to learn and grow in being faithful. Several sobering realities remain:

- There will always be more ministry to be done than available servants (Luke 10:2).
- We struggle with limited time to equip and serve given the busyness of life, especially with an "all-volunteer army."

¹ John 13:34–35; 2 Corinthians 5:17–20; Galatians 6:2

- We face never-ending attrition as men and women have to step out of ministry or move away.
- We simply can't meet all of the needs of our people. This leads us, at times, to refer people to other trusted caregivers in our city.

But these challenges are to be expected, and we feel blessed by the task. We know we do not labor alone.

Thankfully, God's redemptive work is not dependent upon semantics. We are, indeed, offering our people real care even though we don't call it "counseling." We learned that once God's people understand their calling to love and care for one another with the gospel, they step out in faith and obedience. May God continue to build up his church in love and advance his kingdom in this world as we join him in his mission.

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The *Journal of Biblical Counseling* is committed to helping churches, like the one described above, to grow in offering wise care. We believe the articles in this issue will help to do that. Here is a preview.

A marriage is not always what it seems. Behind a peaceful façade there can be a history of great distress because one spouse controls and abuses the other. The Bible has a word for these coercive patterns: "oppression." Because these patterns are often hidden, it takes skill and knowledge to draw them out. In "Identifying Oppression in Marriages," Darby Strickland gives you tools to do this.

Friendship is important at every stage of life, but not much has been written about it from a Christian perspective. Jonathan Holmes fills some of that gap with his article "Do Your Friendships Live Out the Gospel?" Well aware of how our highly digitized world has impacted relationships, he calls us to invest in what he calls "biblical friendships." He explains what a constructive friendship looks like and offers concrete ways you can build such relationships.

In our next article, David Powlison discusses the underlying dynamics at work in anger at God. Fallen people instinctively hate the Lord because he insists that we listen to him and that we take what he says to heart. God's insistence insults our pride and self-will. Powlison goes on to identify four

bits of bad advice often given to those who are angry with God, and then offers rich biblical alternatives.

We live in a world where people's sexuality is increasingly broken and misdirected. You can help. In "Abiding in the Vine: Walking with Sexual Strugglers," Ellen Dykas gives us a framework to do so. Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches offers a lens on sexual sin as an "anti-abiding" lifestyle. When strugglers reconnect to the Vine and live in Christ, a deep dynamic of change begins. Dykas offers concrete tools you can use to help others as they engage the Lord.

Our Counselor's Toolbox contains two items. In a "More Than a Proof Text" article, Brenda Pauken shows how she uses the Old Testament story of King Jehoshaphat to provide foundational guidance to someone in a crisis. The second toolbox article asks the question: "Should I see a counselor?" Eliza Huie gives readers six questions to ask when you or someone you care about is wondering if it's time to seek formal counseling help.

—David Powlison

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