Public ministry is typically proactive. When we gather together, each aspect—call to worship, reading Scripture, songs, prayers, preaching, teaching, confessions of sin and of faith, the Lord’s supper—takes the initiative and gets first say. They invite us to respond and take to heart, making personal application. By God’s design, proactive ministry does many things simultaneously. It awakens the drowsy, orients the confused, pursues the drifting, instructs the ignorant, soothes the anxious, buoys the despairing, challenges the straying, and nourishes the alert. The public cure of souls instructs us all in grace and truth, pursuing each one of us whatever the state of our hearts and whatever the circumstances we face. Public ministry takes the initiative.

In contrast, counseling ministry is typically reactive, responding to some evident human need. Usually, in a counseling conversation, a struggling person first makes known his or her troubles. Then the counselor reacts and interacts. At other times a straying person causes such trouble and pain to others that it necessitates an intervention. In either case, the personal cure of souls responds with personalized care. Interpersonal ministry is responsive.

A public event and a conversation are different, and we are all familiar with the difference in who gets first say and who responds. But it’s not an

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absolute difference. Public ministry is not always proactive. Sometimes it can be reactive and even interactive. For example, look at Jesus’ public ministry. When he was a guest at a large banquet of religious leaders, he was faced with a man suffering from dropsy (serious edema). He responded to the need by raising questions about the Sabbath to the whole gathering—then healed the man, and pressed home another question (Luke 14:1–6). Then, at the same event, after observing how people picked their seats at the table, Jesus responded with a mini-sermon about a different way to choose where you sit (14:7–11). And after a pious comment from one of the guests at the table, Jesus responded with another mini-sermon that upended expectations about God’s kingdom (14:12–24). Our habitual public practice will not likely be as disruptive as Jesus’! But I’ve witnessed very effective reactive public ministry on occasion.

Along the same lines, personal ministry can sometimes speak the first word in a conversation, rather than being habitually responsive. Paul’s interpersonal ministry was often proactive and instructive, not simply reactive. He initiated personal letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, speaking relevantly to them. And in many of his letters he spoke about matters that his audience had not raised with him. I will unpack a few implications for counselors.

I want you to consider approaching your counseling ministry with some proactive options in mind. It makes sense that in your first meeting with someone you will be exploratory and responsive. It makes sense that on many, even most, occasions, you will first draw the person out, and then respond. But as you get to know and trust each other, as the issues become clear, as goals are stated and agreed on, then it also makes sense to weave more proactive elements into the counseling conversation. You will find it helpful, even very helpful. Counseling that lacks proactive elements too easily bogs down and becomes problem-centered.

At the simplest level, your opening prayers should become increasingly thoughtful, pointed, and personalized. Boilerplate prayers—e.g., “Lord, bless this conversation”—are rarely helpful. They become less and less plausible when you understand what a person is up against and how much this person needs our Father’s immediate hands-on care, truth, strength,
and protection. When you learn what another person most needs from God, then you learn to pray specifically to the giver of all good gifts.

Here are other ways that you may take the initiative from the start. Perhaps instead of opening the conversation with a question, you might offer a direct word of care and encouragement. For example, “I was thinking about you this week. I know you get discouraged at how hard it can be to change. It is hard. A line from 2 Thessalonians caught my attention, because Paul expresses something so significant for us when we feel discouraged. He says that he always prays, ‘May God make you worthy of his calling, and by his power may he bring to fruition every desire for goodness and every action prompted by your faith.’ God doesn’t leave us on our own. He sees your good intentions, that you want the right things. That matters, and we can directly seek his help.”

Or perhaps you might open a counseling session by saying, “Let’s look at a hymn together. I think it’s helpful for us to listen in on a brother or sister from long ago who experienced the same sense of struggle and need that we experience.

When burdens press, and seem beyond endurance,
Bowed down with grief, to Him I lift my face;
And then in love, He brings me sweet assurance:
‘My child, for thee, sufficient is My grace.’
The person who wrote those words really understands what we go through. What do you make of it?”

The conversation can unfold with a real sense of direction as we reflect together about how a wise saint applied themes from 2 Corinthians 12. From the start, such initiative on your part keys the subsequent conversation to God’s grace, his sweet assurance, his love, and the reality that strugglers can lift their faces to him. We can bring our cares to the one who cares for us—the very thing that careworn people are often too discouraged to do.

If you know another person well, if he or she knows you care, if you have a relationship of trust, then you don’t need to always wait for them to pour out their burdens and griefs. You can take the initiative—not always, of course, but whenever it might be helpful. As I noted earlier, counseling that is only responsive is always trying to catch up to problems, rather than
leading the way toward worthy goals.

If you’ve tended to approach all counseling as a response, rather than being proactive in appropriate and timely ways, I think you’ll be joyously surprised as you learn to vary your approach. You will find how helpful it can be when you shape a conversation from the start, rather than only seeking to reshape conversations later on in the process.

* * *

This morning my wife Nan and I were singing the hymn, “When morning gilds the skies….” It struck me how relevant each stanza is to the counseling process—and to the articles in this issue of the Journal of Biblical Counseling. Take this hymn to heart, as I introduce each article.

When morning gilds the skies,
My heart awaking cries, May Jesus Christ be praised.
Alike at work and prayer
to Jesus I repair; May Jesus Christ be praised.

The beauties in God’s creation offer us a daily public ministry that invites us to wake up to joy. And then there are the hard tasks to be done, and the burdens of sin and sorrow about which we pray to God. Our forebears in the faith described the Christian life as ora et labora—pray and work. Counseling is Christ’s work. My editorial sought to freshen how you think about your work and prayer.

The hymn continues, and I will introduce each one of our articles by reflecting on successive stanzas.

When sleep her balm denies,
My silent spirit sighs, May Jesus Christ be praised.
When evil thoughts molest,
With this I shield my breast, May Jesus Christ be praised.

Todd Stryd’s “Self-Hatred and the Loving Voice of God” addresses one variety of the dark thoughts that can keep a person awake at night. The God of all mercies is committed to nullify the force of accusatory and demeaning inner voices. This is an article first for counselors, but strugglers will find Todd’s words a thought-provoking shield of grace.
In heav’n’s eternal bliss
The loveliest strain is this, May Jesus Christ be praised.
The powers of darkness fear,
When this sweet chant they hear, May Jesus Christ be praised.

Scripture calls us to be fearless and cheerful in facing down evil. It is our enemies who have reasons for fear. In “Stand Up to the Powers of Darkness,” I unpack some of the practical, counseling implications of our warfare with the troika of world, flesh, and devil. We look closely at Ephesians 6, and then fill in Scripture’s teaching with detailed case studies.

Does sadness fill my mind?
A solace here I find, May Jesus Christ be praised.
Or fades my earthly bliss?
My comfort still is this, May Jesus Christ be praised.

Chronic pain does more than bring sadness and a fading of earthly bliss. It imposes unrelenting earthly misery. Esther Smith is both a sufferer and a counselor, and she speaks wise comfort in her article “Searching for Healing: How to Counsel Individuals with Debilitating Chronic Pain.” She gives substantial reasons for praising Jesus Christ in the midst of anguished honesty.

Let earth’s wide circle round
In joyful notes resound, May Jesus Christ be praised:
Let air and sea and sky,
From depth to height, reply, May Jesus Christ be praised.

A difficult marriage grates with harsh, discordant, unhappy notes, rather than singing with joy. Marriage counseling does the hard, patient work that seeks to change the music in the marriage. I think that you will find Lauren Whitman’s “How to Begin Marriage Counseling” offers you sweet, practical wisdom about how to structure a first meeting.

Be this, while life is mine,
My canticle divine, May Jesus Christ be praised:
Be this th’eternal song,
Through all the ages on, May Jesus Christ be praised.

Christians who counsel often have trouble getting beyond their theological pat answers. Kristin Silva unpacks the story of what happened when Elijah
and his anxious servant Gehazi faced the entire Syrian army. Life took a very surprising turn! “God’s Unexpected Provision When Enemies Close In” shows how the surprise of what God does—through all the ages, and in our time, too—can ground and encourage a person who struggles with anxiety.

May Jesus Christ be praised!