

More Than a Proof Text: An Introduction



Our “More Than a Proof Text” section features a short article that simply brings a word of God to life. It demonstrates how a Scripture passage becomes a relevant, personalized message, and how ministry engages a person. We hope to give a glimpse into the ways that a truth rescripts a life. And it gives an example of how you might actually speak a vivid, relevant message into the life of another person. The emphasis is on *relevant* and on *message*. This is not a Bible study or an exposition of a passage. Careful study and accurate exposition reside in the background, but the intent is to illustrate ministry happening in the foreground. Yet it is also not a proof text scattered into someone’s life like pixie dust. The goal is to connect the dots between a person’s complex struggles and a simple truth that bids to rearrange that person’s reality map.

This issue’s “More Than a Proof Text” article describes a situation in which a counselee struggled greatly in her relationships with others. Watch as she learns that she doesn’t primarily need new relationship skills. As she embraces the deepest truth about who she is—a beloved child of a God who delights in her—she learns to better love others.

—*David Powlison*

Counselor's Toolbox

More Than a Proof Text: “What is the deepest truth about who you are? God delights in you” (Zephaniah 3:17)



by CECELIA BERNHARDT

Margaret sought counseling because she felt like she was failing in the relationships that mattered most. She tried to move closer to her friends and family, but either they didn't respond to her efforts at deepening intimacy, or worse, they moved in the opposite direction. After several seemingly close friendships had faded away, it seemed to her that nothing would ever change. She seemed to sabotage her own efforts because something was not quite right in the way that she moved toward people. Her past track record of loss predicted her future failure and she didn't know how to fix it.

Have you ever counseled someone like Margaret?

This article will describe the process I used to help her—and a Scripture passage that reoriented her to her true identity. As you'll see, what helped her most was actually growing in her understanding of her identity. Though it might seem intuitive to teach her how to do her relationships in a new way, the deeper healing came as she learned how God viewed her—and she began to live out of that reality. Why is that? Let's first consider the issue of identity, which will give you a sense of how Margaret and I approached her struggles.

As human beings, we all live out of a sense of our identity. “Identity” refers to who you are or believe yourself to be. It describes where you fit in the world, and reflects how you value that place. A sense of identity is formed from many sources: successes and failures, the opinion of significant

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others, self-reflection, abilities and disabilities, associations with like-minded people, and our closest and most consistent relationships. Identity is affected by your age, sex, ethnicity, and social class. It's typically a composite of your opinion and the opinions of others. As biblical counselors, we understand the deep impact that these factors can have in our counselees' lives. All that a person has experienced, knows, and feels are what make the person who sits in front of you unique. But Scripture reveals that God's opinion about a person's identity gets final say.

For Christians, the swirling diversity of factors listed above are outweighed by one foundational reality: *we are beloved children of the living God*. He defines our identity. We only know ourselves truly in relation to him. We are God's children and brothers and sisters to his son, Jesus. How *he* sees us and what *he* says about us is what should form our foundational sense of identity.

When we acknowledge God's love for us as our deepest value we are freed from attempting to build an autonomous worth by our own efforts. And that freedom from focusing inward allows us to be outwardly focused—to love God and others. We can be patient, kind, trusting, and true, in increasing measure. Our goal as counselors is to awaken people like Margaret to the importance of this—to teach them how to ground their identity in Christ. Then, we walk with them as they learn to live out of this glorious truth in light of what they face in day-to-day life.

If a counselee is unaware that his or her identity is found in Christ or doesn't know what that means, then the person's sense of identity will be grounded elsewhere, in the many places I mentioned earlier. A common way this becomes a problem is when we focus our identity on how others treat us, give too much weight to their ideas of who we are, or base our sense of ourselves on the perceptions of others. But forming an identity based on the opinions of others is to build it on shifting sand. It encourages people to constantly redefine themselves and what is most valuable in light of ever-changing situational factors. It is exhausting. It is fickle. It is false. This describes Margaret's struggle.

As Margaret and I had these initial discussions about identity, this was her response: "No one has ever told me that before. I thought I was just a sinner in God's eyes. This changes everything." She realized that she was missing *the*

key variable at the heart of her sense of self—a true understanding of how the Lord sees her. Then, after we had been meeting together for a few weeks, an opportunity arose to talk about identity in a concrete situation. Recently, she and her friend Barbara had become estranged and Margaret feared that she might lose the friendship completely. “I am beginning to see a pattern,” she said, fighting back tears. “I do this every time. I overdo it and they can’t take it anymore and before I know it, the friendship is over.”

Margaret explained that when she meets people, she is able to connect easily. But as she spends time getting to know new friends, she recognizes a fear growing along with the comfort and familiarity of the friendship. She cares too much about what people think of her. She is afraid that her friends will judge her and find her to be boring and not worth getting to know. Her thoughts become focused on trying to figure out what they are thinking of her rather than getting to know them and enjoy them. She tries to guess at their opinions of her, and then works to be the person she thinks they want her to be. This was now happening with Barbara.

Margaret first met Barbara in her small group at church. As they realized they had some common interests, they began spending time together by heading out for a movie or meal. As the relationship deepened, Margaret began to feel anxious. She frequently asked Barbara for her opinion on where to go and what to do. If Barbara asked Margaret to choose, Margaret froze because she was not sure that her choices would suit her new friend. Margaret became increasingly reluctant to share any interest of her own. At the same time, she became overly inquisitive about her friend and pursued her almost continually through texts and phone calls. She changed her interests and activities to match Barbara’s choices. She bought her small gifts even when there was no occasion to do so. She became critical of her own opinions, comparing them in her head to Barbara’s. Before she knew it, she was exhausted and the friendship had become strained.

“I know I care too much about people’s opinions of me,” she told me with a sigh. Her face became saddened and her whole body slumped in her chair. She was quiet for several moments as she pondered what was happening in this valued friendship. We continued.

“Why do you need to know Barbara’s opinion of you?” I asked. “What

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