

Editorial

Breaking New Ground



by DAVID POWLISON

Let me pose a few questions to men and women who are committed to a richly biblical understanding of counseling ministry. How do we hold fast to core commitments—and at the same time extend the scope and depth of implications and applications? How can our thinking and practice remain unwavering—yet develop creatively? How do we pursue dynamic and fresh insights—while standing firm on familiar ground?

Here's what got me thinking about these questions. The evils that we now face in counseling somehow seem uglier, thornier, more sordid, more devious, more desperate. Darker things seem to be coming out into the open. The ways of destroying oneself and harming others seem more tangled, more intricate, more fatal. The wounded and the wandering seem more wounded and further astray.

Of course, pastoral care has always dealt with bad habits, marital conflict, poor parenting, sorrow, immoral behavior, worry, avoidance of responsibility, gluttony, and self-harm. But today we seem to be peering into a deeper abyss of darkness as we face drug addiction, domestic violence, abuse of children, despair, sexual perversity, pervasive anxiety, escapist fantasy worlds, bingeing/purging, and suicide.

You might want to reread that last paragraph and compare the two

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sentences point by point: bad habits seriously intensify in the slavery of addiction; marital conflicts seriously intensify in criminal violence, and so forth. These familiar sins and sorrows will always be part of pastoral care, but when the virulence is heightened, pastoral care needs to go deeper. I don't think it's simply that we are more aware of the darkness. Of course, intricate, virulent forms of darkness have always existed, but these extreme versions have become more common and more visible in our churches and communities. And that means ministries of prayer, words, and practical helps must dig deeper. What will it look like to take that long walk beside people who need a long redemption? Wisdom—the insights, the skills, the structures of care—must develop to meet deeper redemptive needs. At the same time, we always need fresh reminders of how to better understand and address the familiar, everyday problems.

How can we do this well? How does the same redemptive ministry of Christ break new ground? Consider these two sentences in juxtaposition:

- The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 9:10).
- Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser (Prov 9:9).

The first describes a defining, unchanging characteristic of faithful ministry. The God-centeredness and humility of biblical wisdom must be evident in everything we see, say, and do. The second describes an ever-ascending, never-static path of growing practical theological wisdom. The starting point sets the entire trajectory; the trajectory goes to new places. Wisdom keeps the Lord in view; wisdom is dynamic and developing. When we hold these two together, then our model, our practices, and our structures will remain fundamentally oriented, whether we are breaking new ground or taking another look at a familiar problem.

This issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* does some of both. The first three articles address previously unexplored topics. The last two articles come at familiar topics from a fresh angle.

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We break new ground by addressing one of the darkest problems imaginable—sexual abuse in marriage. Darby Strickland's "Uncovering

Sexual Abuse in Marriage” lifts the lid on this box of evils. Marital rape was not a category in how ministry thought about marriage problems. Strickland raises our awareness of an urgent need. She helpfully defines and describes what can happen in marriages, and gives us ways to engage and care for the many wives who are victims of such violence.

“How Christian Faith Compares and Conflicts with Mindfulness” discusses a significant trend in contemporary secular psychotherapy. Joanna Jackson describes how mindfulness was introduced into western care models for distress management. She evaluates its appeal, philosophical assumptions, and popular practices, with reflection on how mindfulness imperfectly points to its Christian analogues of meditation, prayer, and embodied faith.

Next, we have Michael Gembola’s “Helping the Unassertive Find Their Voice.” He describes unassertiveness as more than a personality trait. It expresses anxiety that springs from a lack of Christian maturity. With help from some of the church’s earliest leaders, he charts a course to help these brothers and sisters find their voice and then use it for the good of the church.

Overeating is an endemic problem in societies with an abundance and variety of foods to sate any and every desire. And so we eat—and we eat more than we need. In “Overeating: When Enough Isn’t Enough,” Mike Emlet speaks practically and personally to strugglers. He lays out how the Bible talks about food and then offers advice on how to win this food fight.

Finally, Kristin Silva helps us think about how and why we disagree with each other. “Disagreeing Well” reminds us that God created us and our world to be a place of great and beautiful variety—imbued with difference. But due to sin, what starts out as difference becomes a wedge between people. Silva is passionate to show how faith in Christ can enable us to accept and maneuver through our differences so we can disagree well.

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