

Homework and Biblical Counseling

by Paul David Tripp

One methodological distinctive of biblical counseling is the regular use of homework. Good, well-tailored homework can play a significant part in the counseling and change process. Jay Adams has written, "Biblical counselors have found homework to be one of the most vital and effective forces that they can marshal in counseling."¹ Why the use of homework? There is certainly no proof text for homework; Jesus didn't tell the rich young ruler to write down a "log list" of personal failings and return next week! Is using homework, therefore, simply a matter of stumbling upon a technique that has proven itself pragmatically?

Homework has been a consistent emphasis in biblical counseling because the use of homework is driven by cardinal biblical doctrines. For the biblical counselor theology is not only a matter of the *content* of faith and practice. Biblical, exegetically-derived theology also addresses the *process* of changing beliefs and behaviors: both counseling methods (from the counselor's side of the process) and progressive sanctification (from the counselee's side). The methods of biblical counseling emerge out of Scriptural theology. What the biblical counselor *does* in counseling—and has counselees do—must be as biblically consistent as what he or she *says*. Homework is one of those methods that is a logical and practical extension of the beliefs that make biblical counseling distinctive.

In this article I will discuss five doctrines that drive the use of homework. After developing the rationale for the use and design of homework, in a second article I will discuss particular kinds of homework appropriate to various phases of the counseling and change process.

1. Doctrine of Scripture

Sam was a long-time church member. In recent years he has faced difficulties: his wife died after a lengthy illness; his pharmacy business has suffered from new competition; an old football injury has acted up and made him gimpy; and the congregation committed itself to a building program, voting against Sam's vocal

opposition. Sam has become increasingly sour as life has not gone his way. He is bitter, disillusioned, unhappy, full of complaints, at odds with God, neighbor and circumstances. How do you help Sam? What part might homework play?

Biblical counselors by definition are committed to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Because of this commitment they seek to look at the current catalog of human problems from the perspective of the truth of God's Word. For example, the Bible discusses Sam's problem at great length in the many passages on the problem of "grumbling" because of what we crave or fear in situations of stress.² It follows that biblical counselors want to help their counselees think biblically about the issues of life. Sam's mind needs to be renewed; he needs to process his life's difficulties in that very different way that God gives.

The Biblical counselor provides much more than a listening ear and comforting words of sympathy. You listen. You sympathize with a man "tempted, tried, and sometimes failing." But you also lead Sam to understand himself and his problem biblically in the light of who Christ is: "Even when my heart is breaking, He, my comfort, helps my soul."³ Biblical understanding leads to actions, doing what is biblically appropriate in each part of his situation. Homework? The biblical counselor works early to get the counselee into the Word of God so that the counselee's agenda for counseling becomes increasingly biblical. Sam may want to unload complaints and prove to himself and you that life is hopeless. God wants Sam to repent of grumbling and live for His glory in the tough times.

Homework enables the counselee to mine the riches of Scripture for understanding, conviction, promises and guidance. Biblically designed homework gives the counselor the delightful opportunity of surprising the counselee with the personal, practical wisdom of Scripture that speaks to the specifics of his particular life: "Let's look at people in hardship and how they were tempted to respond (Numbers 11–21). Let's look at what God is up to in the midst of those hardships that make people feel how fragile their lives are (Deuteronomy 8). Let's look at what God wants you to do as you deal with your grumbling and withdrawal by turning back to Him (Philippians 2:1–16)."

Biblical homework calls for commitment. At the outset of counseling it places the counselee under the authority of God in Scripture. All of God's ways are right and all of His words are true, so homework calls

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¹Jay Adams, *Ready to Restore*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1981), page 72.

²Numbers 11–21; Philippians 2:14–16; etc.

³From the second and third verses of "Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners!"

the counselee to learn to test each question by Scripture. It calls for counselees to invest effort in study that leads to functional biblical wisdom about the issues of life. Homework asks the counselee to lay down his interpretation and pick up God's. It requires the counselee to have a life driven and shaped by the principles of the Bible rather than by emotion and personal desire.

In short, homework practically applies the doctrine of the authority and sufficiency of the Word to the life of the counselee. It calls for thinking and acting that is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. **Our doctrine of Scripture calls for homework that gets counselees into the Bible.**

2. Doctrine of Human Responsibility

Bill and Fran presented quite a picture when they entered my office. Bill was rigid and withdrawn while Fran was in tears before the first question had been asked. I looked over their Personal Data Inventory⁴, introduced myself and asked my first question. "Tell me," I said, "what is it that has brought you here today; what is the problem as you see it?" At the same time they each said one word which summarized their evaluation of their marital problem. Bill said, "Fran"; Fran said, "Bill"!

Now, as a counselor, I was in trouble! Neither Bill nor Fran had come intending to be a counselee. Each thought the other was the problem. Each was saying that if the other was fixed everything would be fine. This is a difficult situation for a counselor because you don't really have any counselees in the office. Neither person is taking responsibility for the problems in their relationship or for the changes that must take place. Counseling with them would go nowhere fast unless each begins to accept responsibility for existing problems and needed changes. How can homework help refocus counselees?

Obviously, the issue of responsibility is of central concern to the biblical counselor. Scripture says that each one of us stands responsible before God. Each person will give an account for every word and deed. God calls us to honest self-examination, honest confession and honest repentance. He calls us to fully participate in His work of change. The call of Scripture is to be more concerned about my log than my neighbor's speck. God requires that people exchange pointing the finger for examining the heart.

The doctrine of Scripture calls for homework that gets counselees listening to God. This doctrine of hu-

man responsibility calls for another genre of homework: looking at oneself. Homework functions to direct the focus of counseling. Proper self-examination takes the primary focus away from the actions of others and onto the counselee's responses to circumstances. Homework moves the focus away from the counseling "professional" and the mystique of a weekly hour where change is supposedly going to take place. Homework makes Bill and Fran responsible for their moment-by-moment, day-by-day participation in the process of change. Homework directs the focus of hope. It moves people from hopes that other people or circumstances will change and make life easier. It moves people from hopes that the counselor will do powerful things that will create change. Looking at personal responsibility moves hope to God and to the power of the gospel to change the counselee himself.

Homework requires the counselee in the early stages of counseling to begin to understand himself before God, to entrust himself to God and to walk responsibly before Him. Homework helps hold the counselee responsible for the changes that need to take place in relationship to God and neighbor. He does not come to counseling to sit passively before a guru. Rather, the counselor is a guide and a teacher showing the counselee his part in the process of change.

Human beings are responsible, and good homework emerges out of this fact. All of this is important because the momentum of the Fall and of our culture is in the opposite direction. Bill and Fran live in a culture that has institutionalized blame-shifting; The "Inner Child," "co-dependent," dysfunctional family," "adult-child" systems lay the blame for the counselee's attitude and behavior at the feet of someone else. Add to these pervasive voices the natural inclination of fallen hearts to erect elaborate systems of excuse and blame, while at the same time being blind to personal wrongs. You begin to understand how important homework can be in getting the counselee active and involved in examining self and making changes out of hope and dependency on God. **Our doctrine of human responsibility calls for homework that has counselees stop to look at themselves accurately.**

3. Doctrine of God

Jane had a tremor in her voice as she acknowledged her anxiety about "...trying counseling one more time. I'm a nervous wreck. I've seen eight different therapists. I was hospitalized and had ECT. I've been on more kinds of prescription meds than I can remember. I've tried biofeedback. I've tried New Year's resolutions. I've tried vacations. I've tried getting jobs and seeing if that would help. I've tried support groups. I've gone to inner

⁴An example of a Personal Data Inventory (PDI) may be found in Jay Adams's *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 1973), pages 433-435.

healers to see if spirituality could heal my inner wounds. I've burned out all my friends because I'm such a drain on them. I've tried...." How could homework play a part in helping Jane?

Biblical counselors stand apart from all other systems in that they believe God is the One who changes people. The distinctive of biblical counseling is its trust in a redeeming God who has the power to fundamentally change the heart of man. The biblical counselor sees himself not as the creator of change but rather as an instrument in the hands of One who is able to create change that is better than anything counselor or counselee could ask or imagine.

The problem is that people lose sight of God in the midst of the pressure of their circumstances and the self-centeredness of their flesh. Now, this is not a new phenomenon. Israel, camped in front of the Red Sea, was terrified as she realized that the army of Egypt was in hot pursuit. Israel lost sight of God, His loving control and His redemptive purpose. The first few verses of Exodus 14 make quite clear that the situation was not out of control, that Israel had not been left to herself and that God had a purpose for the entire experience.

The people of Israel were not unlike Jane. Like Israel, she has lost sight of God, His Lordship over circumstances and His power to enable her to do all that He has called her to do in the midst of what she experienced. Often counselees fail to interpret their circumstances from the perspective of the Fact of facts: God IS, and He maintains His loving, redemptive control over all things. Since they fail to refer their situation to God, His character and work, they respond to what is going on as if they are alone. This God-unawareness shapes their thinking and behavior.

Homework offers a wonderful opportunity to put God back on sight. Homework that points to God and His work for His people gives Jane a radically different interpretation of her circumstances. Homework that gives the counselee a God-awareness helps clarify what things in the situations are her responsibility and what things she must entrust to God. God-centered homework tends to draw the counselee away from dependency on the counselor and into a deeper and more confident dependence on God. The counselee who has caught sight of God can face her own failure, weakness and inability without fear; her hope is in God. She is able to give disciplined, anxiety-free attention to the things that God has called her to do while entrusting to God the things she is unable to do.

Our counselees need to see God for Who He is. Jane needs to understand His involvement in her life. She needs to begin to understand His agenda for her as His child.

The existence and work of God should become the main interpreter of personal experience for the counselee. Scriptural studies that begin to bring God into view are vital. These studies should include:

1. Who God is: His character and attributes;
2. How God works: His sanctifying process, His sovereign control, and His grace and forgiveness;
3. Counselee's relationship to God: identity in Christ and adoption as sons; how to meet God; how to serve God in the Holy Spirit;
4. Case studies from Scripture: God at work on behalf of His people. God the fulfiller of His promises.

Homework focusing on these truths about God will put the circumstances and problems of the counselee in proper biblical perspective. Truth draws the eyes of the counselee away from the dilemmas of the moment to look with confidence and hope to the One who is the author and finisher of their faith. It is important to do more than speak these truths to the counselee. Counselees need to be involved in the process of searching the Scriptures so that God's powerful presence is indelibly stamped in their hearts. **Our doctrine of God calls for homework that has counselees meet God.**

4. Doctrine of Sin

As Jim and Mary came in for marriage counseling, it was quite clear that the problems they were dealing with were not new. Their marriage had always been full of conflict. Jim was a demanding, perfectionistic, workaholic fellow who saw failure as a curse and free-time as an evidence of irresponsibility. His pattern was to make heavy demands on Mary and judge her harshly whenever her work was not a raving success. His interactions with Mary and their children were negative and cynical.

Mary was a very angry lady who rehearsed to herself daily Jim's wrongs against her. She was able to recall these incidents in elaborate detail. In her own way she made daily war with Jim. In her own way she struck back at him again and again. However, Mary did not see herself as an angry person at all. Mary was quite self-righteous, viewing herself as a helpless victim suffering through a hellish life. How do we understand Mary's problem? How will homework contribute to her understanding and the counselor's understanding?

The problems of counselees run deeper than behavior. They run deeper than feelings. They run deeper than the labels our culture pastes on problems: low self-esteem, co-dependency, compulsion, borderline personality, impulse disorder, adult-child and the like. There are problems which are more fundamental than habits, actions, words, self-talk. The biblical counselor is concerned with more than exchanging behavior for

behavior, feeling for feeling, cognition for cognition. The biblical counselor is concerned to get to the problem of the counselee at its roots.

Distinctive to the biblical counselor is his concern with the "heart," as the Bible defines it. This focus is radical in a culture that doesn't even believe that the heart exists. In modern psychology the term functions only as an anachronism. In Christianized psychologies the term is loaded with all sorts of secular baggage: we hear of "wounded hearts" or "needy hearts" or the heart as a "storehouse of repressed wounds and damaged memories." None of these definitions is true. The cause of human problems is inevitably misdiagnosed where secular categories control.

Surely our counselees have been influenced by the current cultural discussion of "the problem." If fundamental, lasting change is going to take place, the counselee must understand the problem biblically. The counselee must acquire a biblical definition of sin. Such a definition cannot but include a discussion of the heart.

Scripture declares that the roots of human problems are in the heart. The roots of sin are there. It is the root system of the heart (Hebrews 4:12, Genesis 6:5) that produces the fruit of a person's words and deeds. What controls the heart shapes behavior. What rules the heart influences each part of the person's life.

Christ put it in plain and simple language. Good comes out of good stored up in the heart and evil comes out of evil stored up in the heart. Problems of fruit are directly related to problems of root. Yet few counselees come in with an agenda to examine the heart. Most often they have an external agenda. They want the situational "problem" removed or fixed so that they can be happy once again. Or their internal agenda is simply to remove unpleasant feelings.

Ezekiel 14:5 says that God has another agenda: "to lay hold of the hearts" of people estranged from Him. He recaptures the hearts of His people so that they will serve Him and Him alone. The biblical counselor must have this heart agenda as well.

Here again homework becomes very important. Scripture functions like a mirror. As the counselee looks intently into it, he sees himself as he really is. Hebrews 4:12 says that Scripture is the great revealer of the mysteries of the heart. Scripture is able to cut through and expose the thoughts and intentions that are resident there and which shape the behavior of the counselee.

The counselee needs to see that his heart is interacting with all that is going on around him; and if his heart is controlled by something other than God, the counselee will not respond to his circumstances in the way that God has ordained. For example, James presents the cause of human conflict as being the desires that battle

within the heart. Because of these "encamped" desires people make war with one another. It is vital that the counselee recognize and own the thoughts and intentions of his heart since these cause his response to life. How does specific homework grow out of the doctrine of sin?

I asked Mary to keep a journal of her interchanges with Jim. I told her that I wanted her to journal for a few weeks and then I would keep the journal for a week to look through it. I knew that anger would be a theme in her journal, and I was right. I took the journal and marked in red all the places where anger was evident. The journal was literally red with anger. As Mary was journaling, I assigned her studies in Ezekiel 14:1-5, Luke 6:43ff and James 4. Mary began to see her heart, the anger that ruled her and the way this anger shaped her behavior towards Jim.

A carefully assigned and organized journal coupled with biblical homework on the heart will function to direct the concern of the counselee to taking responsibility for fundamental root change. It will function to correct the false cultural assumptions about the cause of the counselee's problem and cut through the blindness caused by the deceitfulness of sin.

Sin is identified in the light of the alternatives: righteousness, peace-making, love, obedience and problem-solving. As Mary identifies what is wrong (put off), she also starts to see what God would have her do instead (put on) as she embraces the gospel of Christ. Homework gets specific with the skills of peacemaking: forgiveness-seeking, learning to confront lovingly and humbly, and doing acts of tangible love even when our neighbor is acting like an enemy. Homework becomes the occasion for planning those "good works which God has prepared beforehand for us to do" in particular situations. **Our doctrine of sin calls for homework that helps counselees rethink the way they understand their problems and then guides them into specific life changes.**

5. Doctrine of Progressive Sanctification

Josh said, "But I've tried. I've done all the things God says to do to deal with lust, and nothing works. I've repented. I've prayed. I've yielded up control to the Lord. I've rebuked Satan. Sometimes I think I've solved the problem once for all, and then a month later I fall again." The counselor inquired further about several things: the circumstances of Josh's tumbles into immorality, whether Josh had ever let any mature Christian men in on his struggle, and whether Josh was looking for a once-for-all solution. The answers were predictable. Josh knew virtually nothing about the way the Christian life works and the means of grace God em-

ploys.

Berkhof describes the process of sanctification this way: "...sanctification is a work of which God and not man is the author. Only the advocates of the so-called free will can claim that it is a work of man. Nevertheless, it differs from regeneration in that man can, and is duty bound to, strive for ever-increasing sanctification by using the means which God has placed at his disposal. This is clearly taught in Scripture: II Corinthians 7:1; Colossians 3:5-14; I Peter 1:22." (Berkhof, page 534).

What are the means that God employs to sanctify His children? The three means that are most prominent in the New Testament are: the Word of God, God's providence, and the edifying ministry of the body of Christ. These are what counseling is about. Counseling is the ministry of the Word from believer to believer in the context of what God is doing in a person's situation. Biblical counseling at once recognizes the authority of the Word, the sovereignty of God over circumstances, and the call of the body of Christ to person-to-person ministry.

What does all of this have to do with homework? Homework provides an opportunity for the counselee to understand God's sanctifying purpose and to participate in His sanctifying process. Homework asks the counselee to participate in the disciplines of sanctification, particularly the study of the Word, consistency of applying the Word in acts of faith and obedience, and submission to the edifying, encouraging, admonishing ministry of the Body of Christ.

Homework teaches the counselee that growth in grace doesn't come by lightning bolts and magical encounters but by a humble honest, obedient and practical application of God's Word to the specifics of one's everyday experience. In sanctification what does God call His children to but to follow, stand fast, forsake, trust, put off and put on, run, obey, put to death, study, flee, resist, etc...? Homework takes this call of God and applies it with specificity to the counselee's situation. Homework takes resistance, forsaking, following and putting on out of the abstract and makes them concrete. Homework asks the counselee to do, in the context of his particular circumstance, what God has called him to do as a participant in His sanctifying mercy.

Homework also fits well with the extended process nature of sanctification. Metaphors of sanctification in Scripture, such as running a race, growing from infancy to adulthood and the growth from seed to mature plant, depict sanctification as a lengthy process. In reality, it is a process that encompasses our entire lives. Homework helps nudge the counselee away from the hope for a "quick fix." Homework helps the counselee to buy into God's line-upon-line, step-upon-step process of change.

Homework charts the significance of each step made in God's name, erecting milestones that can be looked back upon in praise to God. A homework journal or notebook will function as an encouraging record of the progress that has been made as God has used counseling to continue His sanctifying work.

Finally, homework challenges the "right to privacy" attitude that many Christians hold onto in the Christian experience. Often sanctification is thought of as a private matter between a person and God. It is impossible to read Ephesians 4 and I Corinthians 12 and conclude that sanctification is an individual concern. The nature of homework in counseling is that it demands accountability and submission to a fellow believer. It calls for the counselee to be honest before God and one of His instruments of redemption, the counselor. A fine example is Jay Adams' devotional, *Four Weeks with God and Your Neighbor*.⁵ This devotional is designed to be used by the counselee during the week and discussed with the counselor at the counseling session. It calls for the counselee to forsake the pride and fear that make him hide from those God has raised up to help and to step out in honesty, thanking God for the resources of help that He has provided. **Our doctrine of progressive sanctification calls for homework that encourages counselees in the process of change and that connects them to other people in an ongoing way.**

Summary

Our doctrine of Scripture calls for homework that gets counselees into the Bible.

Our doctrine of human responsibility calls for homework that has counselees stop to look at themselves accurately.

Our doctrine of God calls for homework that has counselees meet God.

Our doctrine of sin calls for homework that helps counselees rethink the way they understand their problems and then guides them into specific life changes.

Our doctrine of progressive sanctification calls for homework that encourages counselees in the process of change and that connects them to other people in an ongoing way.

Homework is an essential part of biblical counseling. Using it is consistent with the doctrines that provide the foundation for counseling that is truly biblical, as I have illustrated with the five examples given above. Homework provides a way for those doctrines to become the practical operating principles in the daily life of each counselee.

⁵Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1978.