

How Healthy Is Your Preparation?

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A student recently asked me, "What do you do to prepare for a counseling session? And why do you prepare in the ways you do?" Those are good questions. They drew me to consider the difference between being well-prepared and ill-prepared. Here's what happens when I'm doing it right.

First, I follow through on my commitments. If I said I'd make a phone call, I do it. If I planned to write the person a letter, or design a personalized homework assignment, or copy an article, I get it done. If I intended to seek advice from another counselor, I pursue it. Tangible love plays a significant role in pastoral progress. It affects me, for one thing. I find that when I have acted to love someone, I care more in subsequent interactions. I probe more carefully. I listen better. My counsel is warmer and more personal.

It also affects the other person. He experiences the immediate blessing of my action, and also observes and experiences a model (albeit a small one) of the sorts of changes God is typically working in his life, too. So why do things for people? How can we *not* do such things if Christian "counseling" is simply one part of making disciples of Christ—and Christ is making me a disciple, too? Such actions simply express what it means to be Christ's people.

Second, I check out my own attitudes and life. If I'm bitter or anxious, grumpy, fearful, or presumptuous, I deal with it. Sometimes my sin may relate to the person I'll be counseling. I might be viewing the upcoming meeting as "too hard," feeling intimidated or anxious. Perhaps I recog-

nize that I'll be tempted to play it safe rather than risk speaking the truth in love. Perhaps I realize that I'm tempted to dislike someone, and so to become harsh or impatient. Or I might be viewing the meeting as "too easy," feeling overly confident and in control. At such times, I'm tempted not to prepare, not to pray for God to work, not to care intensely, but to simply go through the motions.

Sometimes my sin or struggle pertains to another part of my life. Perhaps I'm fretting about money or unfinished tasks; maybe I haven't resolved a spat with my wife. Biblical counseling takes its own medicine first, to the praise of God's grace. I find that the state of my own faith, repentance, and obedience is the single most significant factor affecting the counseling I do. When I'm a changing person, I'm better able to help others become the same.

Third, I read and study the Bible. I do this extensively (through the Bible each year) and intensively (focusing in on particular passages). In the first half of 1995, Titus was my companion. For the past six months, I've been slowly working my way through Psalms. Over the past couple of months, Ephesians has taken center stage. Why? Because I need the same radical reorientation as those to whom I minister. And when I'm thinking straight, counseling blossoms and bears sweet fruit.

Fourth, I think hard about those with whom I'll meet. I go over notes, especially from the previous meeting, if I have them. I often take fairly extensive notes either during or after a meeting, and then go back through them with a yellow highlighter. I'm looking for—and praying to understand—what I call the "watershed issues." Where is this person facing a significant choice to live out either the "former manner of life" or a new life of specific faith and love? God's grace is at work in people, teaching us to say No to our natural darkness and selfishness, and to say Yes to the light (Titus 2:11-15; Ephesians 4:17-5:10).

I'll ponder the issues on which my previous session with my counselee turned. Where did we get to? Where does this person typically get stuck in life? If our previous session was on target, then identifying the watershed issue usually led to setting some goals together: a choice to embrace the truth in faith, a commitment to act in obedience. I'll want to follow up on that, to see what has been done with counsel.

My concern to identify watershed issues arises from several foundational truths. Our Father is a vine-dresser who prunes those He loves (John 15:1f); He is a father who raises children intentionally, with specific goals in mind (Hebrews 12:5ff). Ministry relies on this sovereign and gracious providence. A person's struggles typically organize around key themes, and when I counsel, I want to offer new and specific wisdom to replace my counselee's "characteristic flesh." As I know a person truly, I get to see—and seize—the particular form of his or her struggle to believe and to obey.

Fifth, I pray for each person, asking God to work.

Obviously, people don't change because they "go to counseling." They change significantly because God works in them and they work out His call: "Work out your salvation... for God works in you both to will and to do His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12f). So I ask the Holy Spirit to bring to my counselee a conviction of the truth both about himself and about the One who is full of grace and truth.

I pray for myself, also. I need all the requisites of pastoral care: wisdom, clarity, courage, a breadth and depth of biblical knowledge. I need many abilities: to listen hard and well, to enter the person's world, to apply Scripture, to speak the word that builds up and gives grace, to communicate love, to be honest, to get practical, to "be patient with them all." I ask my family and coworkers to pray both for me and for those I counsel.

Sixth, I set a rough agenda for our meeting. It might be as open-ended as finding out what's really going on. It might be as specific as "teach and role-play reconciliation principles," or "check out whether they are still avoiding each other," or "Psalm 31: the refuge that's an alternative to self-pity, fear, anger, and escapism." Sometimes my agenda includes a specific exhortation to myself. "You spoke too quickly last time; ask that one more question or think for five more seconds before you speak." Or, "You were vague and minced words; just say it clearly and boldly." Or, "Be more cheerful and humorous." Or, "Be more serious; humor almost offended last week."

Biblical counselors differ on how detailed their agenda is and how consistently they intend to stick to

it. Some take a rather programmatic approach to discipleship. I do this sometimes, but I lean towards the more flexible end of the spectrum. I think the strengths of tightly structured counseling emerge with counsees who are either highly committed to change or who are pointedly rebellious in a high-handed way. In the broad middle, I've found that it's better to let the specific agenda emerge in the give-and-take of an honest relationship. I like to look for what's happening—"What's hot off the press?" I may set an open-ended Titus 2:11-15 agenda and see what emerges. Usually the watershed issues play out afresh, and face-to-face ministry takes on vibrancy and immediacy. The person has reacted to events of the day or week past. The person is reacting to things happening right now. The person is already reacting to events of the day or week ahead. Counseling becomes immediately relevant.

Many of the greatest joys of face-to-face ministry emerge amid the unpredictability of human reactions, in the need of the moment, in the challenge of winning a person whose commitment to change is fickle, in disarming a person whose anger and defensiveness fill the room, in the delicate task of wooing and encouraging the faint-hearted, in hearing some dark or painful secret that had never been voiced before, in witnessing acts of courageous faith and godliness. I think structured programs have their place, and perhaps the situation in which you typically counsel is one that highlights the strengths. But let me argue a biblical rationale for making the most of opportunities to approach counseling with a more open-ended agenda. I'm impressed by the wondrous flexibility manifested by Scripture itself. No two prophets, no two psalms, no two gospels (indeed, no two interactions between Jesus and his hearers), no two apostolic letters are quite the same. God's unified truth gets communicated in diverse ways tailored to the diverse needs of audience and situation. So biblical counseling should also prize freshness and flexibility, insight and creativity.

Seventh, I often review basic principles of counseling to orient myself. I hadn't thought about the fact that I did this until my student posed her question. Here are some of the reminders posted in the vicinity of my desk.

- "How can even this situation prove redemptive?" If I never lose hope in Christ's gracious control and redemptive agenda, I will be able to communicate the same to those I counsel.

- "Most people don't know that their biggest problem is not 'out there' in the world; it's 'in here' in their own heart." Always move the agenda towards the person sitting

in front of me.

- *“Love. Know. Speak. Do.”* Counselors care, probe, speak Ephesians 4:15 and 4:29 truth, and help people make concrete changes. Am I covering all the bases? Am I on the right base now?

- *“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”* I am a servant called to be faithful and full of faith, not a technician called to fix it.

- *“Get to specifics. Go towards specifics. After all the talking is done, what are you going to do about your watershed issue this week?”* Change happens in the details, in the step-step-step of your walk. Effective counseling moves towards substantive change.

- *“This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness.... We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.”* Small changes accumulate; a glimpse of final, finished glory.

- *“Counseling—no magic, no technique, no sure cure.”* Biblical counseling is simply the way of being wisely human in speaking with moral decision-makers who will trust and obey either lies or truth.

I need reminding. Otherwise the sinful inertia of my own tendencies may hijack the ministry goals set by the great Shepherd of the sheep.

Eighth, I do things that orient me to the ministry task. This, too, I'd never really thought about before my questioner piped up. I might take a walk outside—to take a few deep breaths, to let my eyes drink in patterns of cloud and tree, to smell and feel the wind. Raptors have returned to the suburbs north of Philadelphia, and I might spot a red-tailed hawk wheeling across the late afternoon sky. A walk outside reminds me that God's world is much bigger than my office. That site where problems can loom large is situated in a universe whose God of grace looms larger.

Sometimes I'll sit for a few minutes in the chairs in which those I counsel will soon be seated. I try to reflect on what it's like to be on that side of the room and on that side of the conversation. I can never actually feel what another person's life is like: “The heart knows its own bitterness, and a stranger does not share its joy” (Proverbs 14:10). But sitting in the chair helps me realize that a person bears these sorrows and struggles with these sins. I will counsel people with problems, not problems with people somehow attached.

Sometimes I'll eat dinner—and enjoy it in a quiet half hour. I suppose that even enjoying dinner expresses, in its own way, a significant part of how to prepare for the tasks of counseling! The God whose goodness provides daily bread, who gives all things richly to enjoy, will surely also give wisdom to His

children. When all has been said and done, the kingdom is His. And that is a fountain of comfort and peace amid the difficulties of the work.

Prepare well!

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Our “Letters to the Editor” section debuts in this issue. We trust it will provide a place where constructive critique and commendation can both find a voice. Contribute your letters. While reserving the right to edit for length, we will make every effort to faithfully communicate both the content and tone of letters published.

The very questions you ask people ought to reflect and further the goals of your counseling. Paul Tripp's series on “Data Gathering” continues with an examination of the questions you ask. Good questions express and contribute to the objectivity, wisdom, clarity, and purpose that counselors can bring to those they counsel.

The last issue included a brief discussion of the common phenomenon of anger directed towards God. In this issue, “Anger at God” by Robert Jones tackles this controversial question more thoroughly. His answers are refreshing, and strikingly different from most of what you hear on the subject.

Biblical principles and answers don't hang in a void. The Holy Spirit writes grace and truth into lives lived. In “Anger and God's Grace” a husband and father tells his story of grappling with his temper and finding God's effective grace.

A number of articles in this issue cluster around topics related to singleness, marriage, and family. Jeffery Forrey found three tough issues repeatedly surfacing in the lives of single Christians: loneliness, contentment in being single, and finding a spouse. “Biblical Counsel for Concerned Singles” offers pastoral wisdom to address these.

Many pastors believe that pre-engagement counseling is at least as important as pre-marital counseling. They want people to decide to get married for good reasons, not attempt to sort out whether they ought to get married after they've already asked and answered, “Will you marry me?,” and set the date. “Should We Get Married?” by John Yenchko and David Powlison appropriately follows on Forrey's article. It is for pre-engaged couples, helping a man and woman decide whether or not to get married.

When people get married, a family often ensues. And where you find a family, you'll frequently find a television—and ambivalence about its presence. Journalist Pete Hamill wrote “Crack in the Box” for *Esquire*

magazine several years ago. Now *Esquire* is not the usual place we dig up our writers! But I think you'll find his reflections on TV-watching very stimulating.

Joshua is well known for his bold stand: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15). The sad sequel is almost as well known: "Joshua died... and there arose another generation that did not know the LORD" (Judges 2:8, 10). Our preaching section contains a sermon that John Yenchko preached on the latter passage. "Families at Risk in the '90s: You Snooze, You Lose!" sounds a brisk call to nurture the next generation in the knowledge of the Lord.

We review a book on parenting, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp. Tedd Tripp (Paul Tripp's brother, for the curious) is a father, pastor, and school principal who knows of what he speaks.

The notion that a husband is directly responsible for the spiritual state of his wife has become popular in recent years. The guilt engendered can certainly motivate some men to get "on the stick," but the idea

seems to run contrary to the thrust of passages such as 1 Peter 3:1-5 that address wives directly on the basis of their relationship to God. In our Queries & Controversies section, Jan McMurray tackles the question.

There it is. Remember, the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* exists to give you resources. Many of the articles you'll read in this issue might help someone you know. Think about who might profit, and feel free to make copies for pastoral and educational purposes.

P.S. Part 3 of my series on anger will be delayed. As of this moment, I have misplaced the file folder that contains all my notes. I hardly intended to be prophetic when I closed Part 2 with the words, "Part 3 will appear in the next issue, God willing. Isn't it interesting how that last phrase can keep readers, author, and editors alike from sinful anger should something interfere with those plans!" Thankfully, we serve a God who knows the location of lost notes, and who extolls the virtues of patience and contentment in a sometimes frustrating world.