

The Counseling Zone By Pastor Blake Shaw



Now that we are done with the key elements of the Biblical Counseling process, we are going to take a case study followed with a few questions for you to ponder and wrestle with.

Case Study #1: "I'm afraid that I am going to hell," were Gary's opening words to you. Gary recently began attending your church. He continues, "Last night I got drunk and when I came home my mother was really uptight. She thinks that I should be put into a mental hospital." Gary's appearance eloquently supplemented the story of his 28 years of frustration and discouragement. Grossly overweight, disheveled and dirty, he was the very picture of a hopeless case. Still living with his parents, he had never held a steady job and had no prospects for one. He declared he was subject to occasional flashbacks because of his experimentation with drugs a few years back. He claimed to be the only Christian in his home, but his testimony to his parents, needless to say, was nil. Numerous attempts to reform—which always fizzled—left his parents skeptical over his talk of "sorrow" or "repentance" and "change." This skepticism had burrowed its way into his own heart: "I can't go on this way. I want to repent, but I don't feel that God will forgive me anymore. I have repented so often in the past."

Biblical Counselor, here are some questions for you:

1. What does "repentance" seem to mean to Gary?
2. How would you handle Gary's fear of going to hell?
3. Where would you begin with him?

Q&A continued from inside ~

4. What are three or four books you would recommend to a person who wants to study Biblical Counseling and get an idea of the philosophy of Biblical Counseling?

Answer: I was asked this several times over the past several months and my standard answer has been: 1) *Instruments In The Redeemer's Hands*, by Paul Tripp; 2) *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, edited by MacDonald, Viars, etc.; 3) *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, by Dr. Bob Smith; 4) *Counseling the Hard Cases*, edited by Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert; and 5) *The Gospel Primer for Christians*, by Milton Vincent.

5. What is required to be involved in the counseling ministry at Grace?

Answer: This is a question that might require more room than I have in this article but let me share several thoughts to this answer. First of all, one must have a consistent walk with Jesus Christ. Their reputation must be that they have a faithful walk with the Lord. That doesn't mean they are perfect, but they do keep short accounts with God; Second, I personally am always interested in certain qualities in a person's life. For example, are they humble, teachable, and faithful? If someone is arrogant, or not willing to take input from another, or we can't count on them, or if they are emotionally a mess all the time I am not sure they have the maturity to be in an official position for the counseling ministry. Interestingly, it is sometimes the person who actually came for counseling who ends up being a good counselor. It is good for us to be on both sides of the desk. As a Biblical Counselor, one must understand his own propensity to sin and his own struggles with idolatry of the heart. If one is not aware of his own sinfulness he most likely isn't going to be able to counsel another. So the person who has sought counsel has often stated by his coming to counsel that he is humble and teachable. Third, to be in an official capacity in the counseling ministry one must be an actual member of our church. We will have to discuss at a future time how we will involve several others who are certified biblical counselors who go to other churches in the valley, but for now, the person who is actively involved in our counseling ministry has to be a member of Grace. Fourth, it would seem that the quality of teachable, faithful, and available would result in the person making every effort to be in any and every class that is offered in biblical counseling and would make the time and even set aside financial resources to attend conferences where he/she can be trained. This is a quality that I personally observe and it communicates to us in the counseling ministry that the person might just be one who is willing to pay the price to be the most effective counselor he/she can be. Next month, I might expand on this answer more because it has been put forward to me several times over the past year.

Summary: Overall, there are some amazing things taking place in our counseling ministry. Yet, though encouraged in some ways, reality is, we have a lot of work to do. We always need to sharpen ourselves as counselors. We always need to have more people being trained. There are a lot of hurting people in this community and there is much potential for ministry and outreach. So we have a lot of work to do.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: The Community of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry and the editor of the monthly newsletter welcome letters from the readers. Letters may be edited if the editorial team deems it necessary to do so to fit the space allowed or due to unbiblical communication practices. We encourage the reader to write with edification in mind. Letters must be signed. Names can be withheld upon request. If you have a question about counseling that you would like to ask for future publications feel free to submit those questions to Pastor Blake Shaw.

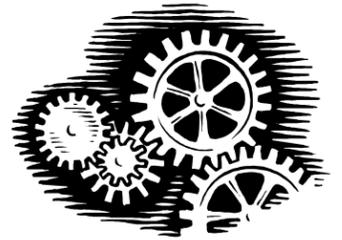


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COMMUNITY OF GRACE

Biblical Counseling Ministry

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW

"Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled..."
(Hebrews 12:14-15)

Bitterness! There's that word again. My friends, I don't know how else to say it but bitterness is like poison. Every month, without exception, I interact with someone, either by phone, email, Facebook, or in person, who struggles with bitterness. It gripped me recently how prominent this one issue is in the lives of men and women and young people who claim to love Jesus Christ. Last month I wrote,

"Bitterness is like a cancerous tumor that if not surgically dealt with can prove to be deadly. It could be likened to a deadly plague as well, a plague that sweeps through a nation and decimates a population. In other words: Bitterness has to be dealt with. It has to be dealt with expeditiously or it can wreak havoc on a family, a ministry, a church. You see, bitterness doesn't just affect the one who is bitter. It defiles others. It slowly begins to ooze out in the person's conversations. It hits the gossip train and begins to pull other people along with its sickening course. Before long, person after person finds themselves ensnared. Yet, the oddity of bitterness is that it usually hurts the bitter person more than anyone else. It's like drinking poison, hoping that the one who is your enemy will be the one who dies."

That's the nature of bitterness. Yet no one wakes up one morning, having had a great life, and says, "I think I'm going to become a bitter person today." Bitterness, much like a noxious weed, grows over time. It starts with anger and sprouts into the all-consuming weed of bitterness. In fact, like many other sins, bitterness is so deceptive that most people who are bitter don't realize they are bitter. Everyone else around them knows it but they can't see it. That's how bitterness works in the soul.



Let me illustrate this by a real to life case study (used by permission with names, and some details changed, but it still illustrates the point): Marci seemed like a perfect candidate to be a bitter person. Now 52 years old, Marci had lived a hard life. She grew up in an abusive home. Her parents divorced when she was 17. She was an angry young woman by the time she arrived at the college campus. She didn't last long there. One year after arriving at the university she departed back to her home town. There she met James and a year later they were married. A year into her marriage, both she and James became believers and were very involved in their small local church. James and Marci had four kids. In her late 30's Marci had a conflict with a woman in their church over a schooling decision that she and James had made. Others in her church family likewise expressed frustration with James and Marci. Marci began to back off from relationships she once held dear. During this time period, James and Marci's teenage daughter was killed in a car accident. It was a crushing experience for the two of them. Both responded differently to the horrendous pain and heartache that followed. James dove into his work to try to silence the never-ending ache of losing a child—his 14 year old daughter nonetheless. He started working 12 to 14 hour days. Marci went into seclusion. She became silent. She began to drink alcohol. She rarely got drunk because she knew that the Bible commanded against drunkenness. But she drank to "take the edge off" of the sorrow that ravaged her heart. In the aftermath of the loss of their daughter, two of their three other children, as they grew into their teen years, decided that they no longer believed in God. Their logic was, "How could a loving God allow their sister to be killed in a car accident involving a drunk driver?" Their sister had done nothing to deserve this, which is true. Life began to crumble for Marci. As her boys left home, one by one, they all claimed to be agnostics. Marci rarely left home. On Sundays she and James would religiously attend a church service but they would slide in a few minutes after the church service started and slide out during the closing prayer.

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Around the time their daughter died, many people from the church reached out to them, provided meals, worked hard to encourage them, but now there is little to no interaction with people from the church. Marci would often protest, "See, the people in our church don't really care about us. No one talks to us. No one checks in on us. Even the pastor, knowing full well what we went through, never calls to see how we are doing." In her late 40's, Marci was diagnosed with cancer. The treatments were successful for which she was very happy. But if you asked her about the treatments and how she held up through that time, she would be quick to point out that she made it through that time on her own. And she would always add, "Sadly, no one from the church helped me out. No one called to check on me. No one called us to see if they could help." Little did she realize that actually no one in her church family even knew she had cancer for she and James had pulled so far away from people that no one even knew. But bitterness had taken hold, had blinded her, and now she wasn't seeing things clearly. Now at age 52, Marci is enslaved to alcohol, has no real relationship with her husband, no friends to speak of, no input from God's Word. She is estranged from her three sons who have all gone off to college, to the work force, and the military. She is a mess, but if you asked her how she sees herself she would describe herself as a woman who cares deeply, who longs to be whole again, who is loving, but yet at times she sins, at times she struggles with loneliness, and at other times she feels depressed. "Who wouldn't be depressed," she exclaims, "if they went through the things I have gone through." But Marci would miss some key elements to her description. She wouldn't see herself as a fellow-sufferer with many others around her. She wouldn't see herself as a woman who has been caught in the sin of bitterness. She might be inclined to shrug it off if you told her, "Marci, you are very bitter." She'd deny it or say, "You'd be bitter too if you experienced all I have experienced in life." What Marci needs to hear is that her bitterness is primarily hurting her. Sure, others around her feel the brunt of it, but really, the bitterness is destroying her life. Marci also needs to hear that if she knows Jesus Christ personally, she doesn't have to stay bitter. Marci is not an exception when it comes to bitter people in the church. I am convinced that she is the norm.

So how do we help the "Marcis" who are in the church? They are here. In fact, you might be one of them. Last month we considered a starting point for dealing with this issue of bitterness. It was noted that Marci has to start by admitting that she has a bitterness problem. Words can be woven together and spoken in a kind and gentle way to let Marci know that bitterness does characterize her. Getting her to see this might be the biggest hurdle to overcome.

For the sake of argument though, let's say that Marci finally admits that she has a bitterness problem and she seeks our help. She understands that she is driving friends away and her bitterness has a tremendous effect upon all who associate with her. Where do we go? What counsel do we present to her?

Start off by understanding that you are helping a fellow sufferer. Marci has, and is, suffering. Because of that reality, you should approach her with great patience and

humility. If you have suffered you know all too well the emotional ups and downs that one experiences in the midst of suffering. You might be tempted to dole out canned answers to Marci, yet you know better. Perhaps you can plant yourself first in Romans 12 and weep with those who weep. Weep with her over the tragedy of growing up in a home that was everything but what God desires. Weep with her over the abuse she experienced at the hands of abusive parents and weep with her over the divorce that finalized the tragic marriage; Weep with her over the conflict she experienced with well-meaning people in her church who held to a different conviction regarding educational philosophies; Weep with her over the tragic loss of a daughter. Parents never totally get over burying their own child, especially at a young age; Weep with her over sons who have walked away from the Lord, even calling into question the very One who gives them life and breath and who took on human flesh to die in their stead. Weep with her over a husband who has so engrossed himself in his work that he distanced himself from his own bride. Weep with her over the cancer that ravaged her body and cost her years of her precious life. Weep with her over her loneliness and disconnect from the church family, even if it is self-induced, it is a reality. You see, we might be prone to immediately pounce on the issue of bitterness, of withdrawing from the church family, of her complaining of the church, or of her propensity to turn to alcohol to deaden the pain. So weep with her.

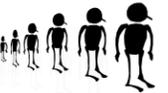
As you weep with her, you can gently lead her to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. You might not be able to relate to many of the trials she has walked through but there is One who does understand. His name is Jesus Christ. So talk often of Jesus and what He experienced while on earth. He understands. He experienced abuse. He experienced rejection and being misunderstood. He experienced every temptation we face (yet without sin), so He understands. Walk Marci towards the cross. As you walk that direction, help Marci to see that God has been and is up to something good in her life. Though often over-used or wrongfully used, Marci needs to be reminded from Romans 8:28 that her God really does take all things and He works all things together for good. He never says in His Word that all things are good but that He takes all things (joys, sorrows, sin, heartache, encouragement, wins, losses, etc.) and works all things together for good. Marci may wonder what the "good" is and you can explain to her that it is found in Romans 8:29; that the good that comes from the all-things is that God is conforming her into the image of Jesus Christ. He is making her holy. If you use Romans 8:28, make sure you use verse 29 as well.

You as the counselor and friend are not her Savior. Jesus is, so talk to her often about the love of Christ. Talk to her often about what all He has done in her place. Talk to her about how Jesus understands the very specific details of what she has experienced.

There's more to consider, so next month we'll take up some other things you might do to help a friend like Marci deal with the nagging problem of bitterness.



Q&A with Pastor Blake Shaw



This Q&A is going to be different in that I want to give a "State of the Counseling Ministry" report. It will follow the outline of a number of questions that have been asked in recent months with answers that follow.

1. You have officially been in the pastoral position of Pastor of Counseling Ministry for two years. What is your own personal perspective on the counseling ministry at Grace?

I tend to be my own worst critic so my first thought is that we have a long way to go. However, there some very encouraging things have taken place in the first two years. People in the counseling ministry have done much counseling over the past two years. I believe we have about 15 people who are providing counseling in an official capacity with about 45 people being counseled at various times during the week. The number of people being counseled fluctuates from month to month. Currently we have about six people on a waiting list and sometimes that waiting list exists for six weeks. We have also had the opportunity to counsel a fair number of people from outside Grace Bible Church. This has been encouraging and discouraging. This is encouraging because the word in the community is that Grace provides biblical counseling; it is discouraging because we realize how many pastors there are in the area who refer their "sheep" to counselors outside of their church body. As a pastor, I understand why they refer people to someone else for counseling, because counseling is very time consuming and difficult. It is easier to refer the person(s) to someone else. We have seen a lot of people take up an interest in Biblical Counseling, some who have gone on to get some training by way of conferences and/or the classes we offer here at Grace. Without a doubt a highlight for us was the conference we hosted here at Grace in July. The conference exceeded our expectations in significant ways. I think the conference put Biblical Counseling on the map, so to speak, in the state of Montana. In other ways counseling ministry has been very challenging. Frankly, some of the counseling has been heart-breaking. Weekly we see the glory of God being attacked. Weekly we see professing believers make life choices that give unbelievers a reason to blaspheme God. Weekly we see Proverbs 13:15 fleshed out in that it says that, "the way of the transgressor is hard." Overall though, I am encouraged where we are at with our counseling ministry. We have a lot of work to do though to get this ministry off the ground to the place where we want it to be.

2. What are some of the other challenges you see at the 2-year mark?

Answer: I would say that some of the challenges relate to the answer above. First, I would say that there is a mind-set that some people have that the Biblical Counselor is a miracle worker of sorts and the person shows up for counseling expecting the counselor to do the work to bring about change in the person's life. But much counseling fails because the person seeking counseling has no desire to change or to really work on the areas where he/she needs to change. So the counselor works diligently to provide counseling to the person but the person isn't willing to do the work or even to look into the spiritual mirror and say, "I have logs in my eyes that need to be removed." We have never seen Biblical Counseling fail when the person has taken the principles of God's Word and applied those principles in a faithful manner.

Second, I would say that what we see with people on Sunday mornings is radically different than what is reality. In other words, people are not as healthy spiritually as they appear to be on Sundays. I think most would agree that we are very different on Sundays when we walk through the door of the church building than we are during the week. Based upon the counseling I have been involved in or have given oversight to over the past two years, I would say that I have a growing concern about the health of our church family.

Third, we have to give thought to how to deal with the waiting list that we have for people who are seeking counseling. It's not that a waiting list is bad. It's just that many people who are on the waiting list find themselves in an unfortunate predicament. They want counseling. Their situation feels like an emergency and oftentimes is rather urgent. But sometimes the wait for a counselor is a month or more. What that tells me is that we need more people trained to do biblical counseling.



3. What are some anticipated goals for the next year?

Answer: Ideally, we would want every person who considers Grace Bible Church their home, to be exposed to the philosophy of Biblical Counseling and truly embrace the philosophy because we believe that all believers are to counsel one another using God's all-sufficient Word. So we will continue to offer classes to our people to expose them to the philosophy of Biblical Counseling. This fall

we are offering a class called "Introduction to Biblical Counseling" with approximately 25-30 people in attendance. Even if most of these people never took on an official role in the counseling ministry, we are thrilled that they are being exposed to the Biblical Counseling philosophy. All 30 of those people in the class counsel all the time. The only question that would need to be answered is: Do they counsel biblically or not. We also have about 30 people in the class, "Gospel Treason," which is a class addressing heart idolatry. I believe every person in our church should take these two classes at some point.

We also are hoping that one of our counselors will have a book published within the next year. That will be a thrill for us to see if it can be published.

We also have a number of people in our counseling ministry who are working on a certification process with an organization known as ACBC (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors; formerly known as NANC). Several are working on their exams for the certification process and one is just beginning his 50 hours of supervised counseling. This process takes time and I originally had hoped that we would have 10-12 certified Biblical counselors in the first year but God had different ideas. Everything is right on schedule from His perspective. But our anticipated goal is to have a team of certified Biblical Counselors large enough to where we can offer counseling to our community one day a week. We simply see a counseling ministry as one way that we can have a profound impact for the gospel of Christ in this community.

We also have plans to host another Biblical Counseling Conference here at Grace next July. The first one was such a blessing and we had close to 400 people attend, so our plans are to host a similar conference with several of the same speakers, but addressing some other issues.

I have a long term goal of seeing a Vision of Hope type of ministry started here in Bozeman. Right now we have an intern back in Lafayette who is spending two years being trained and gathering information on how a Vision of Hope ministry functions. How and when this will materialize is something that only our Lord knows. We just want to be on the same page as our Lord, but we see a need and phenomenal potential for such a ministry in Bozeman.

