

## How Do You Help a “Psychologized” Counselee?

by David Powlison

I met Sabrina, a 31-year-old single woman, when her mother brought her to counsel with me several years ago. Sabrina had agreed to meet me once, largely to please her mother, who had become concerned about her. After four years in psychotherapy, Sabrina seemed increasingly confused, self-absorbed, friendless, and depressed.

When Sabrina first walked in the room, I noticed *Homecoming*, a popular self-help book by John Bradshaw, wedged in her purse. Bradshaw advocates the view that sin and misery (my terms for problems he vividly describes!) arise because “dysfunctional” families fail to meet the love needs of their members. The “inner child” within each of us, born pure and wonderful, becomes contaminated and wounded. A life of misery, rage, compulsion, and shame pours out of the cauldron of unmet psychic need. The “codependent” strives endlessly to fill the empty tank of love, but is always disappointed.

Having described and interpreted the problem, Bradshaw suggests that such a person find sources of affirmation: a support group and a therapist. They can begin to fill the need and can teach techniques of self-affirmation. Bradshaw is a “convert” to a gospel, and his testimony to his own “healing” threads through the book. He himself learned to affirm and indulge himself. He claims to reconnect with his inner I AM-ness, and to find a new life of wonderful, joyful freedom to express himself. He

urges the reader by exhortation and example to do likewise.

But Sabrina was in the room with me, not John Bradshaw. I met the devotee, not the master. Sabrina began to tell me her story. She was a professing Christian, who since her teens had been earnest in her devotional life, regular in church attendance, well-taught doctrinally, active in a mercy ministry to homeless people. Long-standing tendencies to social anxiety, loneliness, and discouragement had worsened about five years earlier, prompting her to seek help from a psychotherapist. Over the previous three years, her relationship to God had “gone stale, and God seems far away.” A note of peevishness and self-pity crept into the way she talked about God; all those truths that Christian doctrine proclaimed seemed like barren words on a page compared to the deep things she kept discovering about herself through her therapy and reading. God was a more or less disappointing person. Unsurprisingly, habits of Bible reading, prayer, public worship, and ministry had slackened. Even when she was “faithful,” she was going through the motions.

The grievous effects of living in a fallen world had not left Sabrina untouched. Her father had betrayed the family, leaving when she was fourteen years old, after years of angry outbursts and adulteries. Her mother, cowed by the multitude of betrayals, had been largely ineffectual. Sabrina’s peer culture was obsessed with typi-

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cal values: beauty, popularity, possessions, athletic success. Sabrina had bought the value system, and largely failed against it. The breakup of the family and her obsession with largely unobtainable goods bred turbulent emotions and behavior. After several years of promiscuity (one way to obtain at least the illusion of desirability) Sabrina found Christ when she was seventeen. She had joyously embraced forgiveness and a new life, and lived a life of sexual purity thereafter. But God works changes over a lifetime: patterns of her heart that had once driven her immorality did not yield so rapidly. Many things in her life had stabilized. She had gone to college and become a competent elementary school teacher. But as her singleness continued through her twenties, Sabrina's emotions again became more troubling.

She looked for help. Friends recommended a psychotherapist who was a Christian. He had suggested she read *Homecoming*, as well as similar books by both Christians and non-Christians: *Codependent No More* by Melanie Beattie, *Love is a Choice* by Robert Hemfelt, Frank Minirth, and Paul Meier. Sabrina had found these books "incredibly meaningful, I saw myself on every page." She was now reading Bradshaw for the fourth time. Her therapist largely adopted the codependency and dysfunctional family theory, Christianizing it by suggesting Sabrina look to Jesus to meet her need for love, because Jesus accepted and affirmed her unconditionally.

Her therapy and reading had aroused a great deal of emotion and had given Sabrina the sense that she was continually discovering profound things about herself. But she still lived in a gray world, and for all the self-discovery, her life was unraveling. Neither Bradshaw nor therapy nor Jesus seemed able to give her hope, vitality, or significant change.

Sabrina is a classic "psychologized" person. She has been disciplined into a way of probing and processing her problems in living that effectively excludes what is most deeply true about God, herself, and her world. And her misunderstanding of the Christian life hinders her from probing and processing her problems biblically. How do you help Sabrina? How do you help others who are convinced that their core problem lies in what somebody else perpetrated upon them? Or in how they were raised? Or in their opinion of themselves? Or in how they are genetically hard-wired or hormonally imbalanced? You likely know people who have been sent on a long wild goose chase, grasping answers that never deliver what they promise. How can you help Sabrina to know the "solid joys and lasting treasures that none but Zion's children know"? Let me suggest a half-dozen things to

anchor your work with psychologized people.

**Don't underestimate how strongly people hold their current beliefs, however confused, and remember that their reasons seem plausible to them.**

You must dig out those reasons. You must be able to hold them up to the light of a different set of beliefs, revealing the pretense in her current beliefs next to the beauty and comprehensiveness of the truth. The Bible will always make better sense of the experiences, behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and attitudes that modern psychologies pretend to explain. The psychological explanations Sabrina currently embraces do a number of things for her. They "ring her bells" by accurately describing how some people feel, think, act, and experience. That's the bait. The hook is the false explanation. Popular hooks often restate those symptoms using some bit of technical jargon that gives the illusion of deep explanatory power. "Low self-esteem," "ADD," "codependency," and "dysfunctional family" are recent examples of such jargon. These terms actually do nothing more than summarize certain troublesome symptoms, but they pretend to describe underlying, "real" causes of problems.<sup>1</sup> They are descriptions masquerading as explanations. Such labels carry an explanatory model that deviates from reality. Both the explanations and solutions invariably lead people away from a biblical understanding of God, sin, suffering, grace, obedience.

Sabrina needs to be won. You will want to "ring her bells," too. You will want to use true labels that explain life from God's point of view, rather than by evading God. You will want to lead her to see how biblical truth makes sense of her life and leads her out of her problems. How will you accomplish this?

**Remember that you are counseling a person, not a book.**

Sabrina is a wandering sheep, not a false prophet; she is a struggler, not a theory. Sabrina wanted help

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<sup>1</sup>The entire *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV) does something similar. The more thoughtful practitioners—and DSM-IV's authors!—know full well that these are not "diagnoses" at all. They don't describe "things." A broken bone, pancreatic cancer, or viral pneumonia are things that people can "have." But people don't "have" oppositional disorder, borderline personality, adolescent adjustment disorder, or post-traumatic stress syndrome. They "do" such things. These categories simply describe a few typical patterns of behavior, emotion, attitude, thinking that are particularly unhappy and disruptive for everyone involved. They say nothing about causality. They are simply "syndromes," a group of things that often occur together.

four years ago, and she took what was out there. What she took seems poisonous, pitiful, shallow, and deceptive. I hate what Bradshaw teaches (and one of my goals is to help Sabrina learn to hate it intelligently) but I dare not hate Sabrina. I feel for her in her confusion. And I have no reason, initially, to go after Bradshaw with her. He's not in the room, she is. I want to win her to something better. She doesn't need polemics. Amid her fourth reading of his "incredibly meaningful" book, you'll only discredit yourself if you start attacking it. She first needs something to make better sense of her world than Bradshaw does. What will you give her?

### **Don't give her what she has already tried and found wanting.**

The outward forms of Christian devotion have become empty husks for Sabrina, so don't give them right back to her. Find out why they've become empty. You want to feed her the sweet honey of wisdom, the bread of life. But she's been distracted. It will take work, exploration, knowledge – not pat answers – to find and restore the wandering, misled sheep. Assuming that you haven't underestimated her problem, haven't gotten into a needless argument, and haven't given her empty forms, what will you now do?

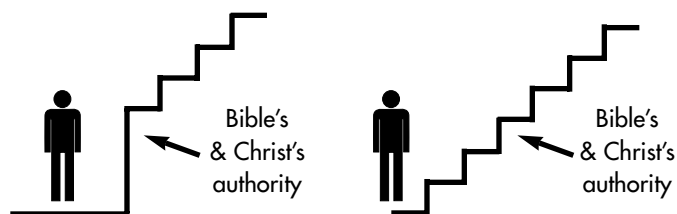
### **Care for Sabrina in a way that communicates.**

It seems likely from the few facts we have that Sabrina is driven by a desire to be loved: (1) Rejection often reveals the intensity of such cravings and intensifies them; (2) Promiscuity expresses their degrading power; (3) The characteristic temptations of singles in their late-20s make it even more plausible; (4) Bradshaw's model easily seduces such people. You want to help set Sabrina free of her beguiling "need" for love. But, paradoxically, you begin by loving her. You bless her with kindness, concern, acceptance, care. Though she craves to be "accepted just as I am," accept her. Welcome her. Care about her. Accept her God's way – "accepted just as I am, despite who I am, intending to change who I am." God's grace in Christ and God's agenda for change make Christian love far more powerful and radical than the cheap acceptance she longs for. She will experience your Christian kindness as genuine kindness. Listen to her story. Take her seriously. Pursue knowing her and her world. Sympathize with her struggles. We serve a Savior who is Himself touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and then calls us to seek mercy and aid that we might not be deceived and destroyed by sin. We serve a Savior who freely gave bread to hungry people, and then taught bread-idolaters about the Bread of Life. As you

care about her, what will you do?

### **Get to know Sabrina and her world.**

Wise counsel thrives on details. You can't engage someone when you are ignorant. So dig in. You already know she has misinterpreted her real problems – she's "psychologized" – but what *are* her real problems? Expect to find out things about her that – understood biblically – will let you engage her creatively and personally. Expect that when the Word lights up her life, you'll be able to offer her things that she never knew. Or you may find things she once knew in part, but has forgotten. Get to know how she thinks, feels, acts, talks, chooses, interprets, evaluates. Get to know what happened to her, what is happening in her world, what she imagines will happen. God is at work in *this* young woman, who has organized a good bit of her life around some very destructive beliefs. She is not a generic category, the "psychologized counselee"; she is a specific person to know. Knowing her, where will you start to intervene?



### **Don't make Sabrina leap tall buildings with a single bound. God puts a stairway – even a handicapped ramp – in front of each one of us.**

Look for the next step, organic to who Sabrina is. Don't force her into some predetermined mold. God meets people amid their experience. He has so designed His universe that all experience – rightly interpreted – cries out in testimony to the God of Scripture. And every moment presents significant choices. I've known counselors who routinely started with Sabrinas by making them leap a tall building. They would say, "This counseling will be based on the Bible, and your commitment to Christ's lordship must come first." That's entirely the right core commitment for the *counselor* and the right goal for counseling. But it's entirely misguided as a starting point for *this* counselee. All the facts cry out for a different starting point. Explicit discussion of the authority of Scripture and Christ might belong five steps down the road, or it might simply get established as a byproduct of the effective ministry of the Word. But it is a "tall building" at this moment. You need to find the next step in the right direction.

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The Bible itself begins in many different places. Scripture continually models how God's servants hook the immediate experience and concerns of hearers. Because they aim to be *heard* by real people in real situations, they don't prepackage their message. When Paul spoke in Antioch to a Bible-honoring synagogue audience, he could begin by unpacking chapter and verse (Acts 13:14-41). These hearers were ready to grapple with the claims of Christ and the Word. But when Paul spoke to peasants in Lystra, he began by exposing the emptiness of their particular false beliefs, and then moved on to their immediate experience of God's goodness in weather and crops (Acts 14:14-17). It was the appropriate point of contact. And when Paul addressed the intelligentsia in Athens, he engaged their religious practices and literature (Acts 17:16-34). The core message remained the same in each case: the living God – who reveals Himself in the Scriptures and in His creation – calls people to turn from sin to Christ. But Paul could get to the same destination by many routes. Paul was only doing what the prophets and the Lord Jesus had done before him, and what we ought to do after him.

Sabrina gives ample evidence that the authority of Scripture and the lordship of Christ are poor starting points for her. Notice some important things about Sabrina, things we know even based on minimal information. She currently finds the Bible *insignificant* in comparison to her experiences of self-exploration; she finds Christian truths *meaningless* in comparison to John Bradshaw's interpretation of her experience; she finds the orthodox gospel *irrelevant* in comparison to the gospel of a need-meeting Jesus. That her experience has proven to be a morass, that neither Bradshaw nor the therapeutic Jesus work, has made little apparent difference. She is currently fascinated by what you know to be emptiness, and bored by what you know to be fullness.

At the same time, God in His immediate redemptive working has brought Sabrina to you. One of the *goals* of your counseling is to bring her to understand the relevance of the Word of Christ. She doesn't see the relevance; she sees a husk. If you make her commitment to a husk your first step, you fail. You fail Christ, because He meets people on many different footings, and you've failed to find the right point of contact. You fail Sabrina by blundering, and may well repel her from the very truths she most needs.

What might be an appropriate starting point with Sabrina? Her current experience and interpretation of life. You've already started there by avoiding many pitfalls. You've cared for her: that creates a context for trust. You've sought to know her: that gives you the

goods to interact intelligently and searchingly. As you start to speak into her life, you want to make better sense of her life experience than the other voices she's been listening to.

### **Reinterpret her experience and world biblically.**

Truth is far better than the deceitful half-truths and fabrications she has embraced. So let God's truth make sense of her life. You haven't viewed her as the enemy; you haven't given her pat answers; you've cared about her; you've gotten to know her; you've looked for the point of contact. Timely and appropriate truth will now shed light into dark places.

1. You want to ring her bells about what happened to her, but to give it a different meaning. She has been taught to view her "dysfunctional family" upbringing as determinative. Help her to see that her family's sins created pressures of temptation, teaching her lies, sinning against her in specific ways. Woe to those through whom stumbling blocks come. God is merciful to sufferers, the refuge of the poor and needy. We dare not return evil for evil. Temptation does not determine our response.

2. You want to ring her bells about how she reacts, but to give it a different meaning. Sabrina has come to view her "codependent lifestyle" as a form of personal dysfunction, not a pattern of sin. Help her to see how her anger, manipulation, abuse of food, social anxieties, and the rest are works of the flesh that arise from her heart.

3. You want to ring her bells about what controls her, but to give it a different meaning. She believes that the deepest problem of her heart is an unmet need for love, acceptance, and affirmation. Help her to see that her heart is ruled by a demand for such things, an enslaving, voracious craving. It makes perfect sense that God seems far away and biblical truth abstract: she's been worshipping at the altar of another god, and making Jesus the errand boy of that other god's demands. But Jesus never cooperates with a deceit in the lives of those He loves. God will never allow one of His choice daughters to be happy serving her idol.

4. She has come to view Jesus as the psychotherapist in the sky, who exists to meet her felt needs. You may not even need to mention this. If you've done your job on the previous three points, you will now be able to help her to see instead the crucified Savior who died for her lusts and lies and the attendant bad fruits. He will forgive her, as she sees her real need and seeks Him. Help her to seek the Lord whose strength is sufficient to change her. He will help her. She can become free of what traps her and makes her miserable. Christ will help her to be ruled by Him and not by her slave-

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masters. Help her to take refuge in the one who delivers the oppressed; she can trust rather than fear in the face of hardships.

5. Sabrina is living as if faith were bare assent to doctrines and obedience were the fulfillment of religious responsibilities. Help her to see that God has much better things in mind for her. He claims her trust, her love, her dependence. He calls for her obedience, that she would learn to love others intelligently, rather than demand their affirmation and adoration. Bible, prayer, church, and ministry had become husks; they can again express living communication and significant love.

The key to helping psychologized people is to bring truth to bear in a way that explains and addresses their real life problems. If you can't make sense of the details of Sabrina's life, your words will have the same taste as those empty husks. If you make sense, your counsel will drip milk and honey.

I've spoken with many psychologized Sabrinas (and Sams). I have found that more often than not they rejoice to embrace biblical truth when it is expressed personally, caringly, pointedly, cogently. They are Christians, after all. They love the light. They love grace. But they've been offered either pat answers or psychobabble to solve their real life problems. When the former didn't work, the latter looked attractive and sounded persuasive. Heresies are the unpaid debts of the church, after all. We can be up in arms about Bradshaw and his kind, but we ought to put the great bulk of our energy into doing a better job of making sense of Sabrina. If we pay our debts by deepening our counseling, we will do a far better job than any of the psychologies.

Confusion and despair visibly lifted from Sabrina's countenance over the course of those first couple of hours we spoke. The Bible makes sense of life, and that sense is deeply satisfying. "If you get one thing, get wisdom. Nothing you desire can compare with her." Wisdom is much better than endless, futile efforts to fill a leaking love tank or to prop up a sagging self-esteem. Wisdom is love. Wisdom is joy. Wisdom is peace. Wisdom is wisdom. Sabrina had agreed to meet me once. Four years of psychotherapy and Bradshaw in the purse weigh a lot. But she came back the next week without *Homecoming* in her purse. Her countenance was half clouded over again, but her first words filled me with joy: "You know the things we talked about last week? Could we have that same conversation over again?" We did – or at least an approximation thereof. She again became radiant with hope. She started drawing fresh, rapid-fire connections herself.

The next time we met – perhaps a month later – Sabrina mentioned that she had quit meeting with her therapist. It had seemed thin and empty – a husk. The Word of the living God, prayer to that God, honest and constructive Christian friends, doctrines of grace and truth, ministry to others, these dry bones were already coming back to life. The real issues in her life kept getting addressed, both outside and inside counseling. She saw numerous ways that her craving for human approval and her terror of rejection played out in her life. And she began to find Christ and the courage to love people in those numerous, fresh situations. She began to deal with bitterness at her father and disappointment with her mother, forgiving them. She began to try on new ways of relating to them. Her newfound courage was quite remarkable. She started to deal with her own patterns of fear and ineffectualness, and made several major life decisions over the next several months. Sabrina had taken the next step in learning to live life in God's world from the standpoint of faith, rather than in the quicksand of human approval.

Sabrina and I never actually had to deal with Bradshaw head on. Of course, it would be appropriate with some people to take on Bradshaw at the right time. The question is, Where is the point of contact, the next step, with *this* person? When Sabrina started tasting the truth, the counterfeit lost all its savor. A couple months later, she commented, as an aside, "You know, I really have no desire to read those books anymore. It's funny how much I used to think was in them. I thought I was in them. But I'm not anymore." Case closed. This psychologized young woman had instead found herself in the Word of the living God.

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Bill Smith opens this issue of *JBC* by looking at the different arguments that have been used to promote a distinctly Christian approach to counseling over against the approaches of the secular psychologies. You'll find that "Authors and Arguments" provides an unusual perspective on matters that often remain unexamined and undiscussed.

In "A European Looks at Christian Counseling in America," I had the privilege of interviewing Ernst Gassmann, a Swiss pastor who had spent several months traveling the United States to study how different churches organize counseling ministry.

Robert Roberts's "Psychology and the Life of the Spirit" says in a fresh and articulate way many things that biblical counseling authors have said. Many readers will differ with certain of Roberts' assumptions

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and conclusions,<sup>2</sup> but, nonetheless, his critique of both secular psychology and run-of-the-mill integrationism is worthy of attention. When Roberts calls for Christians to develop “a psychology not derivative of the secular ones,” when he charges that the church has been “held captive by the alien spirits [of psychology]” and therefore has “not had much of our own to contribute,” he throws out a constructive challenge for us all to get about business.

In “Modern Therapies and the Church’s Faith,” I attempt to capture the historical big picture in order to help us better understand our present historical moment and its opportunities. To understand our times is crucial if we are to act into our world wisely.

Paul Tripp concludes his three-part series on data

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<sup>2</sup>See the review of Roberts’s *Taking the Word to Heart* by Kaleen Chase in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 13:2 (1995) pp. 61f.

gathering with a practical look at ways to get to know people: “Strategies for Opening Blind Eyes: Data Gathering, Part 3.” The methods by which you come to know those you counsel can contribute to their self-knowledge before the face of God and to their growth in Jesus Christ.

George Schwab’s “The Book of Daniel and Godly Counsel, Part 2” completes his series on implications of the book of Daniel for counseling. Typically the prophets are little used in counseling, in comparison with the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs. Schwab gives insight on how to redress the imbalance.

We review Jay Adams’s commentary *Hebrews, James, I & II Peter, Jude*, the fifth volume of his *Christian Counselor’s Commentary* series.

In *Queries & Controversies*, Alan Medinger addresses a very common, practical question, “Is Masturbation Always a Sin?”