

## Homework and Biblical Counseling, Part 2

by Paul David Tripp

Fear controlled Sue's life. When she sought counseling, she told me that she had rid her house of knives because she was so afraid that she would sleepwalk and hurt her child or husband. Sue constantly worried that she had contracted some fatal disease. She irrationally distrusted her husband. She fretted that she had said or done something to hurt, anger or alienate her few friends. She was afraid of counseling because "no one would understand what I'm going through" and "I'll be put away." *How could homework penetrate this nightmare and help Sue learn to trust both God and her counselor?*

Psalm 37 gives the fretful and fearful someone to trust, someone whose care runs deeper than their problems. Psalm 37 openly discusses frightening life situations. And Psalm 37 challenges fearful people to examine their own lives. At the end of our first session, I asked Sue to read this Psalm several times during the coming week and to ask herself, "What is God saying to me?" Over subsequent weeks Psalm 37 provided a vehicle for me to enter Sue's world of fear and to build a counseling relationship with her. Further assignments from the Psalm drew out Sue's experiences of fear and set these next to the Lord's promises. Sue faced the cause of her destructive fears: her reactions to the sins of people around her revealed her own sins and unbelief.

Neither Fran nor Bill came to counseling to be counseled.<sup>1</sup> When I asked them in

the first session what they thought was wrong with their marriage, they immediately said each other's first name. Each came to counseling in order to tell me how to fix the other person. *How could homework focus our data gathering and cut into their mutual accusations and defensiveness?*

During our second session I discussed the "speck and log" principle, God's grace, and the way of repentance.<sup>2</sup> I asked each of them to construct a personal "log list": What are *you* doing that is wrong and harms the union that God has ordained for your marriage? Fran and Bill did the assignment; both started to become counselees—disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ—that week. Problem solving in subsequent sessions built upon their lists and the principles of Scripture embodied in that assignment.

"You won't believe what I discovered in my homework this week!" were Judy's first words as our fifth session began. I had asked Judy to keep a journal of her encounters with her husband. Their marriage was a war zone, and Judy was convinced that it was caused solely by "Jim's typical selfish response to everything." Judy had "prayed for years, and nothing had changed." *How could homework help Judy see herself biblically?*

Judy's journal tracked each argument between her and Jim, specifically noting what she was thinking, desiring, feeling and doing in each encounter. Judy faithfully kept her journal for three weeks. On the fourth week her assignment was to read through her journal over and over, looking for patterns of thought, motive and behavior. She compared what she found to biblical passages on relationships: James 4:1-6; Ephesians 4:25-32; I Corinthians 13. I *did* know what Judy had discovered that week; God's truth had broken in. I could hear new humility and new hope in her words; I could see in her face and hear in her voice that the words were not just words.

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<sup>1</sup> I introduced Fran and Bill in my previous article, "Homework and Biblical Counseling,"

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*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, XI:2 [Winter 1993], page 22.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37-42.

Bart had been estranged from his family for many years. In the course of counseling, his bitterness and cold indifference yielded to the grace of God. *How could homework "put feet" on the changes in Bart's heart and attitude?* For homework he wrote a letter of reconciliation to his mother, whom he had not contacted in over ten years. I asked him not to send the letter, but to bring it to our next session where we would evaluate it together. He and I both wanted to make sure that Bart's letter expressed God's agenda for change in Bart's relationship to his family, changes that flowed out of the change in Bart's relationship to God.

You see in these stories four examples of homework, each quite different, each seeking to accomplish a different purpose. My homework with Sue was a means of breaking through her walls of self-protection and building her relationship with God and with me. For Fran and Bill, homework was a major means of focusing the data gathering process. Judy's homework was self-revealing: it helped her to see herself in the mirror of Scripture. Bart's homework was an instance of applying God's agenda concretely to his everyday life.

Homework is more than guided Bible study, reinforcing the teaching aspect of counseling. Homework for the biblical counselor is not limited to a single focus and single purpose. Homework, creatively designed and appropriately used, advances each phase of counseling. Used well, homework doesn't function as an addition to the counseling process but as an integral part of it. Each step of the counseling process continues, even when counselee and counselor are not together, because good homework keeps the movement going.

The biblical counselor should ask during every phase of counseling, "What kind of homework is appropriate and helpful? What would buttress, support and advance what we are presently working on?"

For the purpose of this article I want to break the counseling process into four "phases." Of course, in actual counseling these phases are never as distinct as they will appear here. The four phases of counseling that will inform my discussion are:

1. Welcome: Build a godly relationship with counsees.
2. Understand: Gather data which moves toward the heart.
3. Confront and Comfort: Help counsees to see themselves biblically and to embrace God's promises.
4. Action: Apply God's agenda for change to everyday life.

For each phase I will give a summary goal followed by sample homework that flows from each goal. This article is meant to whet your appetite for good homework; you will need to develop a full and diverse menu for

your own counseling ministry.

## Welcome

**Goal: Build a relationship of understanding and trust with the counselee while at the same time building the counselee's hope in God.**

Counseling is a relationship between two (or more) people. Counseling is a relationship that God, in His sovereignty, has brought about in order to accomplish His sanctifying purpose.

How important is the counselor's own life and love in counseling? Pay attention to the example of Christ, the Wonderful Counselor. He entered our world and became intimately familiar with our experience. He became a sympathetic and understanding high priest, touched by our weaknesses, temptations and sufferings. We can approach Him with confidence because we know that He will be merciful and gracious in our time of need.<sup>3</sup> Pay attention to the example of Paul. His evident love for those he ministered to and the honesty with which he lived before people gave his entire ministry of the Word integrity and persuasive force.<sup>4</sup>

What is *biblical* counseling in a nutshell?: "Speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into Christ."<sup>5</sup> Counsees need to know that you are speaking the truth from God. Counsees need to know that they can trust you: the one who speaks is for them. You must, like Christ, demonstrate sympathy, understanding and humility if counsees are to begin to place the fine china of their lives into your hands. Do counsees know that the counsel they receive comes from someone who understands their world and has been touched by their weaknesses? This draws counsees into confident participation in the counseling process.

How does this relate to homework? One goal of homework during the initial phase of counseling is to build relationships that are channels of transforming grace. I want the counselee to know early on, "God speaks to what I'm struggling with." I want the counselee to know early on, "The counselor has heard me and understands what I'm struggling with."

As I begin counseling, I look for "entry gate" issues that will make my initial feedback and homework count.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 4:14-5:9 is a remarkable passage that motivates confidence in Christ through sounding the note of His identification with us.

<sup>4</sup> See II Corinthians 1:3-2:4, I Thessalonians 2:1-20, and Acts 20:17-38 for three extended passages in which love and personal honesty set the stage for effective ministry of the Word. Paul continually builds on his relationship with his hearers, even in those epistles that are relatively more "impersonal" and "objective" (e.g., Ephesians, Colossians, Romans).

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:15.

Entry gate issues are frequently those “presenting problems” a counselee currently struggles with. They may not be the core issue(s) that ultimately must be dealt with, but they open the door into a person’s life. Entry gate issues must be dealt with if the counselee is going to commit to change and become a participant in the discipleship process. I ask, “What is this person struggling with right now? What homework can I give that addresses it?” Examples of entry gate issues include fear, discouragement, anger, bitterness, loneliness and hopelessness.

If handled well by the counselor, entry gate issues often lead to more fundamental problems. For example, Sue, whose life was disintegrating with fears, needed basic reassurance: her problems were understandable; she was not crazy; God cares; biblical counseling could help her. Subsequently, more basic problems emerged: anger, demandingness, fear of man, selfishness, perfectionism, and unbelief. Early on we had created a context of trust and truth that then let us deal with these things.

As I design and assign homework to address entry concerns, I want it to say two things to the counselee. First, “I have heard you and am seeking to understand what you are going through in order to help.” Second, “God cares for you; you can put your hope in Him.” Often counselees come to counseling with little or no hope. Hope-giving homework provides a natural entry into relationship with the counselee and stimulates confidence in God.

Sarah was a single lady in her late twenties. She described herself on her Personal Data Inventory<sup>6</sup> as an “introverted, overweight loner.” Sarah hated her job, felt uncomfortable and misunderstood by her church, and was alienated from her family. She said that her closest friend was her cat! She was convinced that her life was horrible, that she was “one of God’s mistakes,” and that there was no way out short of death. What homework could encourage Sarah that both God and her counselor understood? I assigned her hope homework from I Corinthians 10:13 (next page).

This assignment needs to be carefully set up by the counselor before it is given. This entails working through I Corinthians 10:1–14 with the counselee during the session in which the homework will be assigned. The passage speaks to people in hardship; it identifies common sinful reactions to life’s hardships; it speaks of how Christ the Lord is present to bless in the midst of temptation.<sup>7</sup> What did this assignment accomplish with Sa-

rah? First, it helped me enter into Sarah’s experience. Second, it helped Sarah see that her hopelessness had an identifiable cause. It was tied to the way she thought about God, herself and her situation. It was tied to the way she responded. And third, it helped Sarah begin to reinterpret the struggles she faced. As she looked at her problems biblically, her sense of hope grew.

Work through this study yourself. Photocopy it and use it in your own counseling, or adapt it.

Here are other examples of entry gate and relationship building homework:

1. Hope grows by seeing what God is up to in your sufferings and difficulties. For example, study Romans 5:1–11, 8:18–39; James 1:2–27; I Peter 1:1–2:3.

2. Focus on your resources and identity as a child of God. For example, study Ephesians and what it means to be “in Christ.”

3. Use biblical narratives that emphasize seeing God in your situation. For example, Exodus 13–14, Numbers 11, Numbers 20, I Samuel 17 focus on whether people forget or remember the Lord. Ask the following questions of the narratives: What difficulty are they facing? What do the people in the situation think about what is going on? What are they feeling? How do they react? What do they want? What is God doing? What are the indicators in the situation of God’s involvement? How would the people in the situation have behaved differently if they had “seen God” in the situation?

4. Study people in Scripture who became discouraged, e.g., Elijah in I Kings 19; Samuel in I Samuel 8; Moses in Numbers 11. Focus on three questions: What was the cause of discouragement? What was God’s response to the person’s discouragement? What was the solution to discouragement?

5. Deal with fear and anxiety as common human experiences; e.g., Philippians 4:4–10, Psalm 37, Psalm 46. Ask the following: What causes fear? What are the results of fear in the life of a person? What are the results of fear in your life? What solutions to fear are found in these passages? How does your relationship with God affect your fearfulness? How would your life look different if you were living unafraid?

You will find entry gate issues in the lives of counselees around which homework can be built. This homework says to the counselee, “I have heard your concern. I have taken it seriously. I am seeking to understand what you are dealing with. God is involved. There is hope and help to be found in Him.” As Sarah left the session she felt understood and encouraged because the

<sup>6</sup>An example of a Personal Data Inventory (PDI) may be found in Jay Adams’s *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, (USA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), pages 433–435.

<sup>7</sup>This work sheet can be helpfully combined with Jay Adams’s

pamphlet, “Christ and Your Problems” (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), which expositis I Corinthians 10:13.

# I Corinthians 10:13

## The Enemy's Lies

## God's Truth

<p>“Your problems are unique, bigger and tougher than other peoples’.”          (List problems in your life that you have thought about this way.)</p>	<p>“You are dealing with common temptations.”          (List the daily temptations that you face that are not unlike others’ temptations.)</p>
<p>“God has forgotten you.”          (List the places where you have tended to feel forgotten.)</p>	<p>“I am Faithful.”          (List evidences of the faithfulness of God in your life.)</p>
<p>“Your problems are more than you can bear.”          (Where have you felt overwhelmed or overburdened?)</p>	<p>“I will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”          (What are the resources for dealing with your problems that are already present in your life?)</p>
<p>“You are trapped and there is no way out.”          (List the problems that you are facing that seem unsolvable.)</p>	<p>“I will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”          (Identify changes in you that would enable you to deal with the difficulties of your situation.)</p>

homework touched her where she struggled.

### Understanding

**Goal: Get to know the counselee, the situation in which God has placed him, how he is responding to the situation, and what issues of the heart shape those responses, while being used of God to bring the counselee to greater self-awareness.**

Homework should serve the two-fold goal of the data gathering phase of counseling: to gain first-hand knowledge and to refocus attention on what matters. First, it is vital that I establish a detailed understanding of this person and his situation. Sin and obedience are never general. They are always particular responses to the specifics of the situation in which God has placed a person. Biblical counseling aims to apply the Word of God specifically. This distinguishes it from public preaching. I gather data so that I understand the counselee as a person and the details of his situation well enough to make concrete application of Scripture. Data gathering is incarnational. It has to do with entering the world of the counselee, becoming familiar with the details of that world, being touched by its realities.

Second, data gathering focuses attention on what matters. It provides me with a natural interactive teaching opportunity. As I ask questions that flow from a biblical perspective on people and their problems, counselees are required to think better and more biblically about themselves and the situations that they face. My goal here is to bring the counselee to a greater biblical self-awareness. As data gathering proceeds, the counselee should be learning new things before any actual instruction takes place. I am not only gathering data in order to find out where change should take place; rather, data gathering done well becomes a part of the change process. Data gathering is instructional. Good questions begin to teach the counselee to organize, interpret and explain his world biblically.

I want the homework during this phase of counseling to propel these two purposes outside of the weekly session. One of the best homework tools for data gathering is keeping a daily journal. It would be overwhelming and counterproductive to have a counselee write down anything and everything. However, it can be very useful to assign a structured, specific journal. Here is how I set it up with Judy, the counselee who thought all the problems were her husband's fault:

1. I asked her to purchase a pocket-size notebook that could be carried in a shirt pocket or dropped in a purse. This notebook was for jotting quick notes for later reference. I wanted Judy to have it with her all the time. She could scribble a couple of words that would help her remember the situation later in the day when she sat

down to complete her journal.

2. I asked Judy to focus her journal on situations of conflict with her husband, Jim.

3. I asked her to answer five questions about each incident:

- What happened?
- What did you feel?
- What were you thinking?
- What did you want?
- What did you do?

4. I asked her to keep the journal for three weeks. After this period of time Judy read her journal as homework, looking for themes and patterns. In the following session we compared her findings with Scripture.

Judy's journal gave me all kinds of detailed data about her and her struggles. It also helped Judy to step back and to begin to think properly about her situation and how she interacted with it.

There are many other sorts of helpful data-gathering homework. For example, I often use lists and questionnaires that guide counselees into self-evaluation:

•“Log List,” as mentioned for Fran and Bill at the beginning of the article;

- “Ways I would like to see my marriage change”;
- “Ways I have sought to deal with this problem”;
- “If I could press a magic button and my life would be just the way I want it, what would it look like?”;

•Wayne Mack's *Homework Manual for Biblical Counseling Volume 2* has some very useful marriage evaluation assignments.

An essay evaluation is often useful to get people to describe their lives.

- I am unhappy with my life because...;
- The most important thing to me in my life right now is...;
- Growing up in my home was like...;
- My marriage would be better if only...;
- The thing that I am most afraid of in life is...;

Use them as examples and tailor your assignments to the people with whom you work.

For some counselees, stories and pictures allow them to communicate things they would find harder to depict in words. When I am gathering historical data, I will often have the counselee write about their family of origin in story form, “My life in the \_\_\_\_\_ family.” Pictures can also be useful; for example, have the counselee draw a picture that depicts the relationships in his family of origin. I have the counselee explain and interpret the picture for me during the next session.

One of my favorite data gathering assignments is what I call my “Big Picture” assignment (next page). I introduce this assignment by taking counselees to Luke 6:43ff and introducing them to the concept of “fruit and

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**Luke 6:43ff**

# **Getting The Big Picture**

## **SITUATION:**

**WHAT IS GOING ON?** (Circumstances, behavior of others)

## **FRUIT:**

**HOW ARE YOU RESPONDING TO WHAT IS GOING ON?** (Emotions, actions, reactions)

## **ROOTS:**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT WHAT IS GOING ON?** (God, myself, others, life)

**WHAT DO YOU WANT?** (Goals, desires, wants, demands)

root." I tell them that I do not want counseling to focus only on the situation and its difficulties, or on other people, or on behavior alone. I want us to step back and get the big picture: situation, fruit and root. So, I ask the counselee to write a response to the four questions on the homework page. Feel free to photocopy this or adapt it to your own counseling needs.

Writing a letter can be a helpful tool to get a counselee to express honestly what is going on. Here the letter that the counselee writes is not to send to anyone. It is written for the purpose of data gathering. It is a way of getting the counselee to put down his or her agenda on paper. This assignment works well when the counselee is struggling with a particular relationship. I ask counselees to "write the letter of your dreams," being honest about thoughts and feelings with regard to the relationship. It is obviously very important that this letter not be sent. It is for the use of counselor and counselee as a means of gathering data about the counselee's true desires and intentions.

John, twenty, single and angry, wrote the letter to his mother that I asked him to write. What a letter it was, ten pages long! The letter was very useful for me; I got to know what made John tick through that letter. But there was more. John began to get to know himself better. John saw himself written down on paper. The letter and the questions that came out of it began to open windows of self-awareness and conviction for John. Data-gathering homework led John into the first steps of change: "I am an angry person. How can I change?"

Homework provides opportunities to keep the data gathering momentum going outside of the counseling office. It involves the counselee in an active process of self-examination. Homework keeps counselees involved, not just being known by another, but taking responsibility for self-examination and learning to think about themselves in new biblical ways.

### **Confrontation and Comfort**

**Goal: Help counselees to see themselves biblically and to embrace God's promises.**

Because of the deceitfulness of sin, all of us need to be confronted. Because of the guilt, power and misery of sin, all of us need to be comforted in Christ. We need people who will take up God's call to "speak the truth in love." Confrontation has been given a bad name in our culture. Confrontation has come to connote harshness. But Scripture presents confrontation as an act of love: words that are loving, perceptive and candid, motivated by my neighbor's need not my convenience.

Similarly, comfort and encouragement have acquired misleading connotations: all-tolerant, relativistic, all-affirming, self-esteem boosting, unconditional "sup-

port." But biblical comfort is filled with truth, with the gospel of the crucified Savior and the power of the Holy Spirit to change us.

Let three aspects of biblical truth-speaking guide your thinking about the confrontation-comfort process and how to use homework as part of it. First, engage your counselee. Second, hold up and hold out God's words to counselees. Third, probe issues of the heart as well as issues of behavior.

First, how will you engage your counselee, someone who may be resistant to the truth? II Samuel 12:1-25 is exemplary. The prophet Nathan confronted David for his adultery and murder. Notice Nathan's confrontational methodology. He created a dialogue, rather than putting David immediately on the defensive. His story engaged David's conscience; it penetrated walls of self-deceit and hiding. Nathan then said, "You are the man." This frank and timely confrontation met with no defensiveness, no deceit, no excuses. Psalms 32 and 51 portray the inward dynamic of David's repentant response to Nathan's skillful confrontation.

Nathan was also a skillful and timely comforter. He did not give David unconditional positive regard, blanket tolerance or self-esteem enhancing messages. But he did love David and brought God's hope to David: "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die." David heartily believed him. Nathan later bore another message of comfort from God to David: "The LORD loves Solomon." Therefore, Solomon gained a second name, Jedidiah, "beloved of the LORD."<sup>8</sup> Psalms 32 and 51 portray David's faith in the promises of grace that Nathan ministered to David. The confrontation and comfort that you offer in counseling can benefit from Nathan's interactive model.

The second aspect of biblical confrontation-comfort is found in the first chapter of James: hold up God's standard and hold out God's promises. James 1:22-24 likens Scripture to a mirror. This wonderfully describes how confrontation takes place in biblical counseling. In the truth-speaking phase of counseling, I want to help counselees see themselves reflected accurately in the Word of God. Often they have been peering into carnival mirrors of self-deception and the opinions of others. They have a distorted view of themselves. Confrontation puts the mirror of the Word in front of counselees so they see themselves as they actually are. Effective biblical counselors do not always have to speak the actual words of rebuke. They hold up the mirror. They use Scripture in such a way that God's words break through blindness in order to convict. True self-knowledge leads to true repentance and confession.

<sup>8</sup>II Samuel 12:24-25.

James 1 also abounds in comfort.<sup>9</sup> The heart of biblical comfort is not human affirmation to boost self-esteem, the world's fraudulent substitute: "I'm for you. I believe in you. You're okay." Comfort, too, comes from God. If confrontation holds up God's mirror, comfort holds out God's promise. "If any of you lacks wisdom—if your folly and sin emerge when you are tested—ask God, Who gives generously and does not reproach you for needing the help only He can give." That is a promise counselees can take to heart and act on.

The third crucial aspect of the confrontation-comfort phase of counseling is also present in James 1. Verses 14 and 15 show how sinful desires give birth to sinful lifestyles, which result in the misery of God's curse. Sue, Fran and Bill, Judy, and Bart all experienced misery, confusion and unhappiness. They all expressed specific sins in their attitudes, actions and words. They all had defected from God in their hearts, serving false beliefs and lusts of the flesh. You must expose these issues of the heart as well as resultant behavior.

What is God's agenda in people's lives? Consider Joel 2:12-13:

Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD, our God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

The prophet refers to the Old Testament custom of tearing one's clothes in grief. Rending garments was an outward sign of a heart response. God doesn't want "repentance" at the level of behavior alone. He wants repentance that begins with and flows out of a heart that returns to Him. He wants to recapture and rule your counselees' hearts, thus changing the way they live. The comfort of counseling invites people to return to the merciful God with all their hearts. Truth-speaking in counseling must address the heart as well as behavior.

Counseling needs to be interactive, biblical and penetrating. How can homework help? Homework that I assign in this phase of counseling falls into two categories: instructional homework and self-awareness homework. I will discuss each of these and give examples of homework.

I assign instructional homework because many of my counselees are poorly taught. They do not know or understand fundamental concepts, categories, principles, commands and promises of Scripture. Understanding truth is vital if a counselee is to interpret and react to life biblically. So I must teach as I confront; I must teach as I comfort.

The assignment, "What is the Christian Life?", (next

page) offers an example of homework that instructs. This particular homework assignment is encouraging in its teaching. It also pointedly challenges counselees. Biblical counseling makes no great divide between confrontation and comfort; the two work hand-in-hand to accomplish God's ends.

Why is a study like this helpful? Many counselees do not grasp the basics of progressive sanctification: "God is up to something in your life. A disciple walks in a way of ongoing transformation, not yet perfect, still failing, but always growing in faith and obedience." Few understand that the Christian life is a process of change, neither perfection nor defeat. Many counselees look for some "secret" of the Christian life to remove the struggle. Many others simply give up and plod along in their sins and misery. Others have never heard that Christ's lordship is over all Christians, not simply over a dedicated elite who have taken some second step of consecration. Others still have never grasped that God saves us not only from the damnation of sin (justification), but also the dominion of sin (sanctification and discipleship). Luther's quotation and the Scripture passages are simultaneously a wake-up call, a challenge, and an encouragement. Study "What is the Christian Life?" for yourself. Use it to help people you counsel, or adapt the questions to fit the people you are counseling.

Unbiblical systems of thought must be replaced with perspectives on life that are distinctly biblical. I assign the following instructional studies over and over again.

1. What does Scripture say about the heart? (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:43ff, James 4:1-5);
2. What is idolatry? (Ezekiel 14:1-6, Romans 1:18-32, I Corinthians 10:1-14, Ephesians 5:3-7);
3. What is the counselee's identity in Christ? (Romans 6:1-14, Ephesians, II Peter 1:3-9);
4. Who is God and what is He doing? (Psalm 34, Psalm 46, Isaiah 40, Romans 8);
5. How should you understand trials and suffering? (Romans 5:1-5, James 1:1-8, I Peter);
6. How should you deal with being sinned against (Matthew 5, Matthew 18:15-35, Romans 12:9-21).

This is not an exhaustive list, but it samples the kinds of instructional homework that can be assigned during the confrontation-comfort phase of counseling. These assignments allow the counseling time to be used more efficiently. The counselee comes in already having completed a guided study on critical truths that needs to be incorporated into his life and discussed in the session.

The second kind of confrontation-comfort homework that I assign is self-awareness homework. These assignments focus on issues of the heart since the heart shapes behavior. The struggle with the deceitfulness of sin takes place internally; repentance and faith take

<sup>9</sup>e.g., verses 2-5,12,17,18,25

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## What is the Christian life?

1. The following are different views of the Christian life.

- a. Do you think that there is a “secret” to the Christian life that ends the struggle and makes life easy sailing?
- b. Have you resigned yourself to failure as a Christian, because it seems too hard to change?
- c. Have you ever become a “disciple,” someone consciously changing, learning how to think and act like Jesus Christ in every situation of life?
- d. When you become aware of a shortcoming in your life, do you treat it as a great crisis, either to excuse or to despair over or to seek instantaneous perfection and deliverance?

2. Read this description of the normal Christian life:

*This life, therefore,  
is not righteousness but growth in  
righteousness,  
not health but healing,  
not being but becoming,  
not rest but exercise.*

*We are not yet what we shall be, but we are  
growing toward it;  
the process is not yet finished but it is going on;  
this is not the end but it is the road.  
All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being  
purified.*

—by Martin Luther

- a. What is this life like?
- b. What promises does this hold out, both for the present and the future?
- c. Is this your view of the Christian life? Where are you challenged? How are you encouraged?
- d. How specifically do you need to change?

3. Luther wrote what he wrote because he had studied the Bible. Study the following passages of Scripture: James 1:2-5; Philippians 1:6, 1:9-11, 2:12-13; 2 Peter 1:3-11. Ask of each passage the same questions you asked of Luther’s quotation.

- a. What is this life like?
- b. What promises does this hold out, both for the present and the future?
- c. Is this your view of the Christian life? Where are you challenged? How are you encouraged?
- d. How specifically do you need to change?

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place internally.

One assignment that I often give comes out of James 4:1–6. James states that human conflict is caused by the desires that rule the heart. People approach others with an agenda, with spoken or unspoken demands. I ask the counselee to respond in writing to the question, “What I really want out of life is...?” or “What I really want from the people around me is...?” Then I ask the counselee to write down ways in which these desires have affected his relationships. One way that I ask the question is, “How has your heart agenda (ruling desires) shaped the way you feel and act toward others?”

Obviously the goal of this assignment is to get the counselee to acknowledge the idols of heart that consistently move him away from the behavior that God requires. Many counsees do not question the logic of their behavior. In fact, they don’t think of behavior as having meaning; that is, that our actions express the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Because of this counsees often think they have no choice but to do the things that they are doing. When they understand that they have a choice, then the promise of James 4:6 becomes meaningful: “God gives more grace; He opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.” Self-awareness becomes God-awareness and leads to meeting God (James 4:7–10).

I want to help counsees to think motivationally. I want to help them to be able to speak from the heart. One way I do this is with the “Responding to the Situations of Life” homework (next page). I write a paragraph presenting a problem similar to the kinds of things that the counselee faces. Then I ask the counselee to respond to the vignette, listing five possible responses to the situation, along with the reason someone might have for choosing each response. This part of the assignment helps him to acknowledge the strategic nature of behavior. I then ask him to characterize his response to a particular situation we have discussed and examine what it reveals about the desires and purposes of his heart.

The study of biblical narratives can be helpful here, and it can easily be incorporated into the “Responding to the Situations of Life” homework. I ask the counselee to examine the response of a biblical character to his or her situation, and then look for clues as to what is motivating those responses: Jonah; Moses in Numbers 11; Gideon in Judges 6; Peter in Galatians 2; Herod in Mark 6; Esther in Esther 4–5. This assignment sets up the call to respond in godly ways for reasons of gratitude to God and concern for God’s glory.

One other assignment that I often use at this point in counseling employs Matthew 22:37–40. I prepare the counselee for the assignment by discussing the passage

with him during the session in which it is assigned. I ask the counselee to meditate on the two great commands and how they set an agenda for dealing with the situation in which he lives and with the people with whom he must relate every day. Then he makes two lists with the headings, “If I truly love God above everything else, I will...” and “If I truly love my neighbor as myself, I will....” The next week we discuss the lists and the specific changes that they dictate.

The goal of confrontation-comfort is true repentance that includes thought, motive and behavior. The biblical counselor needs to design homework that engages the counselee in the process of biblical self-examination leading to heartfelt confession to God, embracing Christ, and functional change in the person’s style of life.

### Action

**Goal: Assist the counselee to apply the truths learned about God, self and others to the specifics of his living situation, making biblical corrections and instituting new biblical habits.**

Counseling does not end at the point of insight. The counselee’s insight into himself in light of God’s Word is the foundation of the fundamental life changes that must follow. Scripture has a functional purpose, that we would be “thoroughly equipped for every good work.” The biblical counselor needs to stay on site as the counselee begins to apply what he has learned to the often difficult realities of everyday life.

By this point in counseling significant things have been learned which need to be applied. Here is the counselor’s job description. First, he functions as a *shepherd*, guiding the counselee as he seeks to apply truths that may be new to him. Next, the counselor functions as a *friend*, giving comfort, support and encouragement as the counselee seeks to deal with the old pressures in new ways. Third, the counselor functions as *pastor*, holding the counselee accountable to God’s high standard when the temptation comes to turn back or give up. Fourth, the counselor functions as *watchman*, aware of the reality of temptation, warning the counselee of the attacks of the enemy, and helping design means of defense against the enemy’s devices. Fifth, the counselor functions as *teacher*. The course isn’t over when the disciple has new biblical insight. Real life is the practicum, the lab. The teacher needs to continue to reinforce the truths that have been learned.

I would like to take these five functions and let them structure our examination of the kinds of homework that are appropriate at this phase of counseling.

1. *Shepherd*. Have the counselee construct a biblical Personal Agenda. First, I ask the counselee to set *goals* for himself where change needs to take place. He is to

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# Responding to the Situations of Life

**Read the following story carefully.** (Counselor writes a paragraph vignette that relates to situations in the life of the counselee.)

**List five ways a person could respond to the above situation and then attach a goal or purpose to each.**

RESPONSE	REASON
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

How have you responded to \_\_\_\_\_?

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What does that tell you about the desires and purposes of your heart?

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ask himself, "Where is God calling for change in my daily life?" (e.g., changes in personal life-style and habits, changes in relationships and changes in the living situation). Second, I ask the counselee to list under each goal specific ways of accomplishing that goal. The counselee is creating a *strategic task list*. The changes to be instituted are purposeful; they move the counselee toward God's goals. Third, I ask the counselee to *prioritize* both the goals and the task list under each goal. During our next session together we work to fine-tune the plan for the counselee to put into action.

Another way to help a counselee focus during the action phase of counseling is to work on a simple put-off/put-on list. I want the counselee to ask, "What are the things in my life, my personal habits, my relationships and my living situation, that need to be forsaken? What have I not been doing that I now need to be committed to do?" I assign this as homework because I want the counselee to take responsibility for this kind of biblical self-examination and planning. Specific planning leads to specific obedience.

Defining responsibilities is also very important. Many counselees are confused about what they are and are not responsible for. To clarify this issue for them, I assign simple homework based around God's call to "trust and obey." See the assignment, "Clarifying Responsibility" (next page). Most of the people with whom I do this find it helpful. I set it up very simply by saying, "All of us have two circles in our lives, a narrower circle of responsibility and a wider circle of concern. Our circle of responsibility contains all the things God has called us to do. Here we are called to obey. These responsibilities we can give to no one else. They are commands to us in our God-ordained situation. The second circle is the circle of concern. In this circle are things that are important to us and part of our daily concern but that are not our responsibility to produce and are not under our control. These things we must entrust to God. I want you to take the things in your life and place them in the proper circle." This has proven to be a simple method for clarifying the issue of responsibility. It also clarifies the cause of anger, anxiety, fear, manipulation, passivity, and many other sins. Attempting to control where you are called to trust and failing to act where you are called to obey are roots of every sort of evil.

One of the ways that I set up this assignment is by taking the counselee to Romans 12:17–21. Paul discussed being sinned against. He distinguishes between God's responsibility and ours: it is not our job to repay evil for evil; it is God's job to avenge. Our job is to overcome evil with good. Paul says, "leave room for God's wrath." He is saying, "Don't try to do God's job; stay out of His way. Entrust avenging evil to God and do

what He has clearly called you to do." Paul also says "as far as it depends upon you be at peace with all men." Your job is to seek to make peace. But you are not responsible for actually changing any other person or turning enemies into friends. You must trust God for the outcome—whether happy or unhappy—of your efforts. This passage provides a simple way to set up the responsibility assignment. Use it or adapt it to those you counsel.

2. *Friend*. The focus here is encouraging and supporting the counselee with the gospel as they do the hard work of application. Generally, I assign guided studies of passages of Scripture that highlight one's identity as a child of God, the hope of the gospel, the promises of God, the resources that God has supplied, the power that God has given one to change and obey, the present ministry of the Holy Spirit, viewing today's struggle from the vantage point of eternity, and the power of God over evil. I design each assignment for the needs of the particular counselee, have him take it home and work on it throughout the week, and then discuss it together at the beginning of the next session.

3. *Pastor*. In Hebrews 13 the pastor is described as someone who "watches over" God's people "as one who must give an account." Counseling is more than dispensing advice. Counseling has a pastoral function. I am personally accountable to God for the people that He has placed in my care. The pastor not only gives God's people the truth; he holds them accountable for believing it and obeying it. Under this function I assign two kinds of homework. The first is assessment homework. I lay it out this way:

- Things that I have learned (about God, myself, others, life, gospel, my living situation, etc...)
- Things that I need to learn (areas of confusion or doubt).
- Things that have changed (list specific changes that have been made).
- Things that still need to be changed.
- Things that I am doing to address places where change is needed.

Again, I use the assignment-discussion-action format I have mentioned several times already.

The second assignment I employ here is the journal. I lay it out for the counselee in the exact manner that was described earlier in this article, with the five questions. This works very well for both assessment and accountability. It is also encouraging to compare this journal work to the journaling that was done earlier in counseling. This leads the counselee to heartfelt praise and to recognize the need for consistency, discipline and further change.

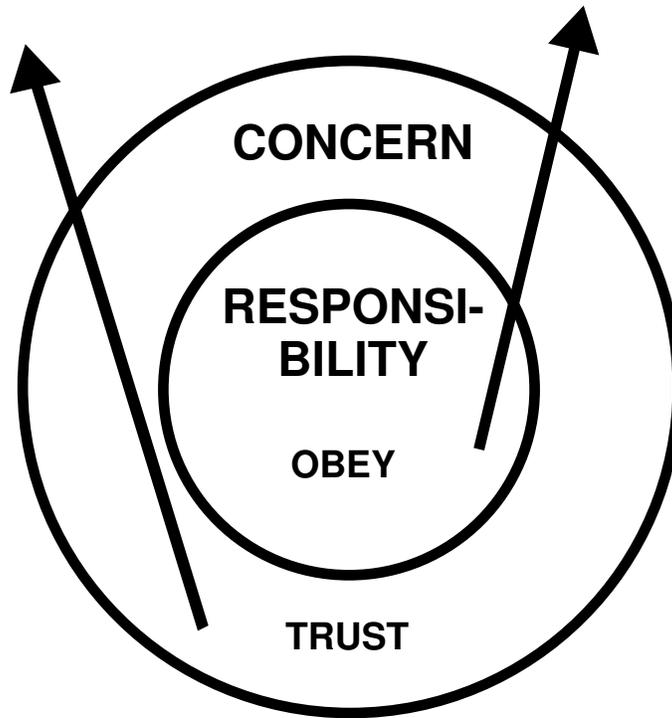
4. *Watchman*. Here the counselor functions in two

# Clarifying Responsibility

Things that are concerns in my life but are not my responsibility. These things I must entrust to God.

Things that are my God-ordained responsibility and, therefore, cannot be given to anyone else.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10

Changes that I need to make:

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primary ways. First, the watchman warns. I want to keep the counselee alert to the attacks of the enemy. Second, the watchman protects. I want to help the counselee set up suitable defenses against these attacks. I will give an example of a homework assignment under each function:

- Warning: One frequent assignment is a *pressure points* list. I want counselees to identify where their struggles are taking place. I want them to identify where they are tempted to bend the rules or cut corners. And I want them to consider why they are particularly vulnerable at these points. The discussion that comes out of this assignment is very useful for setting the agenda for the next assignment.

- Protection: After the *pressure points* assignment, I usually ask the counselee to design a *temptation plan* to deal with the places where attack is occurring. Often after counselees have done the assignment and we have fine-tuned it together, I will have them write the important elements on a 3 x 5 card that they can carry with them and have available at the moment when temptation strikes. The plan includes three things:

- Things to think (important passages, important biblical concepts, warnings).

- Actions to take (things that must be done in order to have victory over this temptation).

- A person to call (someone who has agreed to be “on call” as a support and encouragement in time when this is needed).

5. *Teacher*. Finally, I function here like a teacher moving amongst the students gathered around the tables in a science lab. He is guiding their application work. The teacher asks questions and makes observations that students might not make. He even teaches new things when appropriate. So, I as an “expert in the field” continue to teach my counselees as they are now applying the things they have learned. I want to mention two kinds of teaching homework.

First is *biblical interpretation* homework. The purpose of these assignments is not only to help a counselee to think biblically about his life but to learn the process of developing valid biblical understanding and interpretation of the things he must deal with daily. We identify situations that still provoke confusion or struggle. We find relevant passages of Scripture and assign these as homework. I ask a counselee to ask four questions of each passage:

- How does God describe this?
- What is God’s purpose in this?
- What does God want me to do?
- What are the resources God has given me for this?

I then take what he has learned from Scripture and help him use it to interpret what he is experiencing.

The second type of homework I assign in the teaching function is *new subject* homework. This homework goes after specific subject matter that the counselee does not understand biblically. Examples of subjects might be finances, sex, work and career, the church, parenting, communication, personal devotional life, etc.... I design guided studies appropriate to the maturity level of the counselee. I want the counselee to do some digging before we discuss the topic together.

The final goal of counseling is taking action. It has to do with actually doing what God has called me to do in the place of life He has ordained for me. For the counselor this step of action means shepherding, befriending, pastoring, protecting and teaching. Homework is one of the tools the biblical counselor must use to accomplish these goals. The reasons for this should be clear. This phase of counseling moves toward action. Homework accomplishes exactly that. It requires the counselee to take action. It requires him to accept responsibility for the changes in his life. It requires him to dig, study, assess, do and redo. And he builds spiritual muscle and spiritual discipline all along.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of homework in the counseling we do with the Sues, Frans and Bills, Judys and Barts whom God sends our way. Homework is not a luxury. It is not an adjunct to the normal biblical counseling process. It is a vital part of productive biblical counseling. Whether building relationship, gathering data, confronting sin, offering Christ’s comfort or making concrete application, homework is useful. It keeps the counselee active; it keeps him in Scripture; it engages his heart; it makes him responsible for his behavior. Homework makes the counselee participate actively during every phase of counseling. Homework potentiates the work of the counselor as the counselee takes the counselor home with him in the form of practical, productive, wise and God-honoring homework. Jay Adams, in discussing homework, says,

From the very outset they (counselees) are required to do what God expects of them in the light of Scripture and in dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit. The counselor does not do their work for them. He coaches them; he is a shepherd who leads his sheep. Yet they do the work. He insists that they learn to “work out their salvation” (solution) through obedience to God and dependence upon His aid. Homework puts the emphasis where it belongs—upon the counselee’s responsibility to God and his neighbor.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (USA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), pages 306f.