

Running Head: USING THE SCRIPTURES IN COUNSELING

Guidelines for the Effective Use of the Bible in Counseling

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Abstract

Though much has been written about the place and value of Scripture in Christian counseling, clinicians do not have yet a body of literature regarding the effective use of the Bible in the act of counseling. This essay provides a brief review of how Christian counseling literature approaches the Scriptures, discusses the risks of its unthoughtful use, and sets out basic guidelines for more effective use—paying close attention to matters of purpose, contextualization, and client/counselor rapport. Four short vignettes are included to illustrate the possibility of diverse use while following the guidelines.

How ought counselors to use the Scriptures in the act of counseling?¹ Given that professional Christian counseling (distinct from the ministry of pastoral care) has been a phenomenon in this country for nearly 40 years, you might think this question long and well answered. Peruse the literature and you will be quite surprised with what appears to be a complete absence of information regarding the process of using the Bible with counselees. The literature that does speak of both the Bible and counseling falls into two general categories: grand apologies regarding the relationship of the Scriptures to counseling or specific issue essays connecting biblical passages with certain problems of living. As a result, the potential for abuse and misuse of the Bible in counseling is greatly increased. This essay intends to give a brief review the current relevant literature regarding the use of the Bible in counseling, explore the potential risks resulting from our neglect of this important topic, and conclude with several basic guidelines to help clinicians use the Bible effectively in the act of counseling.

The Current Status

Most counseling related literature discussing the Bible or particular texts falls in to one of two categories: apologies that set out the relationship between the Bible and the science or practice of counseling or specific issue essays focused on a particular problem in living. The apologetic literature tends to be theoretical in nature and usually defends the author's opinion about which side of the equation is more relevant or primary to the act of counseling. Some authors tout the power and sufficiency of the Word as well as its purpose and scope (e.g., Baker, 1986, Hindson & Eyrich, 1997; MacArthur, 1993, 1991; Mack, 1998; Powlison, 1999, 1993, Welch & Powlison, 1997). The Bible may not speak

¹ Admittedly, I make the assumption that counselors can and should use the Scriptures in the therapeutic environment since the Scriptures are not merely technique, but avenue to the presence of God. However, it is not the only avenue and other means may be more effective at any given moment.

about every counseling issue, but for this audience it has something life-changing to say to everyone no matter the struggle. When professional counselors write about the Bible in this larger context, they tend to explore the relationship between special and general revelation as it relates to psychological inquiry (e.g., Carter & Narramore, 1979; Collins, 1981, Crabb, 1981; Hurley & Berry, 1997; Johnson, 1992).² These grand scheme essays occur less often today, in part due to a reduced interest in trying to build a single model of change that the Christian community can rally around.³

When discussing more narrowly the Bible and counseling, both biblical and professional counselors have written about how the Bible addresses specific issues such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, boundaries, trauma, and marital discord (e.g., Allender & Longman, 1994; Armentrout, 1995; Jones, 1999; Powlison, 1999, 2000; Stover & Stover, 1994; Tripp, 1994).⁴ These essays illustrate how biblical content is apropos to a wide variety of problems people face.

Impossible as it may seem, we have few examples of how one might use the Scriptures in the act of counseling. How should we bring counselees to the text of Scripture? While there are a few attempts to look at how counselors might better interpret the Scriptures when developing or defending a particular theory (e.g., Cranmer & Eck, 1994; Maier & Monroe, 2001; Schultz, 2001), and a few more examples of how wisdom literature might be meaningful in counseling (e.g., Schultz, 2001; Schwab, 1998, 1997a/b,

² There is not, by any stretch of the imagination, consensus regarding the relationship between psychology and the Bible amongst professional counselors. For some the Bible holds authority; for others there is very little overlap between biblical and psychological data.

³ For the most part, practitioners and scholars have given up attempts at articulating grand integration models. The prevailing sense is that relational attachment to faculty, not articulation of grand models, depicts the process of learning to integrate (Sorenson, Deflinger, Bufford, & McMinn, 2004).

⁴ In reality, every book, chapter, or article that references biblical support for theories or goals falls into this category.

1996a/b, 1995), we have done a rather poor job analyzing the best practices for using the Bible in counseling.

Why This Neglect?

I suspect several reasons play into this neglect. First, writing about any process is difficult and highly idiosyncratic. Even individuals aspiring to the same model of counseling likely bring their own style and procedure to what they do. Second, professional counselors may feel nervous about venturing into an area that is outside their academic training. Still others may think that such writing is dangerous given the many misuses and abuses of the Bible by some counselors. Third, biblical counselors may assume process articles either manipulate the Spirit's guidance or are of such basic knowledge that scholarly articles are unnecessary. Finally, the dearth of writing in this area may well be the result of the lack of agreement amongst counselors as to the role the Bible plays in the kind of problems that bring people to counseling. When the didactic and exhortative uses of the Bible have been so emphasized in Christian culture, it may not seem relevant to those therapists who operate from insight and affective models. Whatever the reasons, counselors do not now possess a literature on ways to use the Scriptures in counseling.

The Result?

When counselors are not attentive to interpersonal processes at play in helping relationships, they are more likely to use techniques that serve their own purposes and desires without regard for the particular needs of the client. Intentional or not, when counselors serve their own desires the healing relationships and the interventions employed lose value, much like a picture of a sunset does not capture the vibrancy

experienced when seeing it with ones own eye. Worse than losing luster, the potential for harm increases. This is especially true when the Scriptures are used in an unthoughtful manner. Consider two serious process problems resulting from the unmeditated use of the biblical text in counseling.⁵

Distances counselor from counselee. It is an unfortunate fact but far too many individuals have easy access to memories where they poured out their souls to another only to receive a hasty answer and Bible verse in the form of a projectile. Oswald Chambers (1937) warns,

Now there is a wrong use of God’s word and a right one. The wrong use is this sort of thing—someone comes to you, and you cast about in your mind what sort of man he is, then hurl a text at him like a projectile, either in prayer or in talking as you deal with him. That is a use of the word of God that kills your own soul and the souls of the people you deal with. The Spirit of God is not in that. Jesus said, “the words I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”⁶

Not surprisingly, the typical reaction is to recoil from a projectile and distance oneself from the shooter. *If this confidant does not acknowledge or validate my feelings, perceptions, experiences, they are not safe nor caring of my situation.* Sadly, this interaction has been repeated in both lay and professional counseling situations and begs the question: Why are we inclined to shoot Bible bullets at those who are suffering? The answer is simple: quick and tidy answers serve our purposes. A verse or passage may baptize a personal opinion so as to give it greater credibility. It may provide comfort and

⁵ For the sake of space, I will not touch on the obvious problem of the misapplication of texts that distorts its meaning and purpose (e.g., using submission passages to send a battered woman back home, disregarding safety issues). Neither will I survey common misuses (e.g., superficial comfort, comfort alone when correction is also needed, correction without comfort, etc.)

⁶ As cited from the *Complete Works of Oswald Chambers on CD-ROM*.

protect a fragile faith that might otherwise crumble under the weight of having to struggle with no clear answer to the why of a particular suffering (hence why Romans 8:28 is often used for the speaker's benefit). We, like Job's counselors, often desire a black and white God who is never mysterious and always follows human logic. Whatever the reason, when a counselor uses the Scriptures in an unthinking and/or self-serving manner, it produces a chasm between counselor and counselee and makes subsequent counsel ineffective.⁷

Hardens hearts to God. The misuse of Scripture not only creates division between people, it also separates people from God. In contemporary Christian culture, we have a tendency to use the Scriptures as a technique to achieve peace and harmony. We look to the Bible as we might a magic wand, hoping that it quickly changes our outlook, or better yet, our circumstances. Sadly, there are many who do not know what other purpose they might have in reading the Scriptures besides making life more bearable.⁸ Thus, when the Scriptures are used superficially, it doesn't take long for struggling individuals to become convinced that the Bible doesn't really have anything to say that can change their situation. They become hardened to future encouragement to read or hear the Word. They take little comfort in the Scriptures and resist those who want them to meet Christ on the pages of their Bible. And if Chambers is correct, the damage is not just to the recipient of the unthinking use of the Scripture. We do damage to our own relationship with God when we use the Scriptures superficially.

⁷ Never mind that it also violates the purpose of the Bible to minister to the needs of others!

⁸ Is this not the fruit of the pervasive evangelistic message that suggests that when unbelievers turn to Jesus their lives will be easier, happier, and mostly pain-free?

Why Use the Scriptures?

Christians from all theological persuasions believe passionately that the Bible contains the very words and presence of God. Not only are they God's words, they are His words *to us*. Thus, we turn to them when we are hurting, confused, rejoicing, or—as Isaiah puts it—waiting and yearning for God and his renown to be made known to all (26:8-9). Consider the following benefits the Bible offers to clinical work.

Secondary Reasons

Teaching and training. 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that God's Word is useful in teaching, training, and correcting us so that we will be able servants of God.

Discernment and understanding. When we study the Bible and eat of its message, we gain in understanding and discernment about the world we live in (e.g., Psalm 111:10). The Bible is not like a novel that we read once and talk it over with our friends. Rather, we continuously meditate on it so that we are able to recognize good from evil (Hebrews 5:13).

Comfort. The Psalmist tells us that God's Law is a source of comfort (119:52). Paul tells the Corinthians that prophecy (The Word of the Lord) has a purpose: to comfort, strengthen and encourage believers (1 Cor. 14:3).

Hope. The Bible is to be a comfort, but it also builds hope—hope that God will deliver and keep his promises. Paul in Romans 15 tells the reader that, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.” Psalm 119 expresses how the Psalmist finds hope in God's Word and Isaiah suggests that even the islands find hope in God's Law (42:4).

The Primary Reason: Connection with God

We might sum up the value of the Scriptures as something able to both comfort and provoke the counselee—which is at the heart of most counseling strategy. We want to comfort and encourage those who are hurting. Yet, we are also interested in provoking them to grow in places where they may be stuck. While not an encyclopedia for every problem, the Bible is rich in its counsel and guidance for God’s people as they live in a broken world. It is salve for wounds. It is discipline for the wayward. It is hope for the hopeless. In it depressed individuals find comfort. Addicts find help for living with distorted desire. Such are the riches of the Bible that it is foolish for Christian counselors to neglect this resource!

Yet we do a disservice to the Bible if we leave our discussion of its value at this point. To do so would ignore its most prominent purpose; this is by far better than understanding, comfort, and hope. The Scriptures exist primarily to connect us to God. They are our corrective lenses to see God. They exist not just to tell us about him or to offer us help in our daily lives, but more importantly to usher us into His presence. And what happens when people meet God? They see themselves. They begin to relate to God as a person. From Isaiah to Job to Paul, the Bible tells us that when individuals encounter the living God they see the truth about themselves and their situation and begin to relate to him much differently than before. For example, a counselee who had experienced abandonment and rejection by her family met God in a new way as she read Psalm 56:8 and realized God kept a record of all her tears. As she played with that image, other texts provided new comfort (e.g., Psalm 73, 88, etc.) as she realized that God had placed these

desperate cries in the Bible to show her He was near and involved—even when it felt otherwise.

So we must remember that the primary purpose for the biblical text is to usher men and women into the presence of God. When people meet God, they tend to see themselves on the pages of the Bible, see God’s hand in their life, and become more aware of both God’s kindness and call to repentance and faith.

Guidelines for the Effective Use of Scripture in Therapeutic Settings

These guidelines should be taken as such—guides to cause us to be more thoughtful about our use of Scripture in counseling. Guidelines are not rules nor do they possess any power themselves. Oswald Chambers (1937) reminds us to be wary of those who try to turn guidelines into never fail methods. We cannot,

deal with the human soul and the ailments and difficulties of the human soul according to any one principle whatever. As soon as we get wedded to a shortcut in dealing with souls, God leaves us alone. (p. 160)

When considering the best use of a particular technique, clinicians do well to consider matters of competency, assessment, and informed consent. Similarly, the use of Scripture in counseling requires careful consideration of our competency to do so (including potential personal biases), client experience and understanding, our purposes, contextual concerns, and consideration as to its ability to advance the therapeutic relationship and achieve the purpose for which it was intended.

Competency

Competent care stands as a hallmark of every therapeutic code of ethics (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2002; American Association of Christian

Counselors, 2004; Christian Association for Psychological Studies, 2005). These codes call clinicians to obtain training and supervision for the interventions they employ. The APA code (2.01 (e)) further requires, “In those emerging areas in which generally accepted recognized standards for preparatory training do not yet exist, psychologist nevertheless take reasonable steps to ensure the competence of their work...”

Given the lack of a body of literature and clinical training for scriptural interventions, Christian counselors may need to seek out pastoral care and discipleship experts who possess the ability to use the Scriptures well. Such training may include hermeneutical principles and knowledge of the various literary genres, but will necessarily include training in the art of using the bible to open individuals up to new ways of experiencing God and growing in self-awareness.

Avoiding biases. Part of the work of competent therapists is the ongoing evaluation of personal biases. Biases will always be present, but clinicians ought to understand and minimize their impact on others. The therapist using the Scriptures would do well to review personal experiences with the Bible, especially from the hands of others. How might experiences of abuse of the text impact clinical applications? Further, how do current uses of the Scriptures affect clinical usage? Are only certain texts used to the neglect of others? What idiosyncratic beliefs may lead therapists to move from the therapeutic use of Scripture to indoctrination?

The message must go through you first. Just as therapists should not rely on superficial knowledge treatment interventions, neither should they use the Scriptures without substantial familiarity and practice. When we use the Scriptures without wrestling personally with its meaning and message, we likely will do so in a superficial

manner. Imagine how comfort and hope oriented passages would sound when delivered by one who does not know deeply of God's rich comfort and hope. If we are to do justice to God's Word, we must not only read them but be on our knees praying them so that we do not give counsel that we ourselves do not follow. This preparation protects us from relying on personal experience and passing fads when using the Text.⁹

Assessment

Competent clinical intervention includes thorough assessment of individuals prior to initiating an intervention strategy. When using the Scriptures in counseling, wise counselors consider matters of contextualization: the goal, the person, the contextualized message, and the delivery. Just as the Gospel of Matthew considers the interest of Hebraic readers and Paul addresses Athenian culture at the Areopagus, similarly we do well to consider the most helpful ways to communicate the implicit and explicit messages we deliver in counseling. Though we are not evangelists in the classic sense, we do attempt to convey a message that will be received and internalized the way we intend.

The goal. A few simple questions may help to assess the intended goal. *Why do I want to have them read this text? What do I hope to accomplish through it (e.g., to be provoked, taught, comforted, connected to something greater than self, to change one's focal point, etc.)? What barriers might hinder this goal? How might they misinterpret my intention?* No matter the particular goal, it is essential that clients understand that the Scriptures are living and when we engage them, they have a way of penetrating us, even if there isn't an obvious change after numerous meditations on a particular passage.

⁹ Consider the client struggling with the concept of forgiving an offender. Counselors often see the consequences of poor theological teaching that emphasizes superficial forgiveness or pairs it with unthoughtful reconciliation. When we allow the Word to flow continually through us, it has a way of protecting us from the knee-jerk responses such as minimizing the need to forgive offenders.

While there may be many useful goals, one goal should take priority—engaging the person’s affective experience as much as their intellect. Stories have a way of changing us in ways bare conclusions rarely do. A good story evokes feelings and images, textures, and colors that connect us to the story’s subject and message, and thus, changes our own experience. For example, you may know that infidelity is destructive, but listen to the story of a victim of an affair and you not only know but feel the devastation.

The person. Matters of history (spiritual and otherwise), experiences, issues, abilities and learning styles all provide data for the clinician to review when considering the use of any intervention.¹⁰ This is also true when using the Scriptures. How has the client understood themselves, their spiritual surroundings, and the divine? What is important to them? What particular experiences with the Bible shape their ongoing view of it? Is it a source of comfort? Does it surface painful memories? How do they tend to learn best? What type of counseling style do they expect and/or desire?

The contextualized message. All clinical care happens within and across cultural and relational contexts. Clinicians consider matters of culture, current events, history, relational attachments, and transference to name a few when determining the most effective interventions. The therapist using the Scriptures will want to determine how these factors influence the types of passages that may be most effective and the means by

¹⁰ For example, see Gregory, Schwer Canning, Lee, & Wise (2004) for a brief overview of client factors leading to greater success with bibliotherapy for depression.

which clients may hear its message.¹¹ Does the message of the Scriptures meet them where they are at?¹²

The delivery form. The work of contextualization of the biblical message begins the moment that counselors meet counselees to collect background and personal data and continues until termination. The Spirit led counselor humbly recognizes the need to process and pray over the means by which they bring the counselee to the text and ultimately to God. Whether we ask them to read aloud, read silently, act out, meditate on a word, phrase, or image; whether we paraphrase or assign a reading as homework, it is imperative that we consider why we are choosing this particular form. Otherwise, we may fall into an unhelpful myopia.

Follow-up. Wise counselor statements and interventions ought to stir counselees to continued reflection and dialogue. When counselors give in to the temptation of speech making (whether in favor or against the counselee) or interventions without reflection, it rarely leads to critical counselee activity such as exploring, trying on, wrestling with, and the like. Likewise, effective use of the Scriptures ought to promote ongoing dialogue between the counselor and counselee. Such discussion forms the basis by which counselors assess the effectiveness of their interventions. Questions (e.g., What did you hear? What didn't make sense or didn't seem to fit your experience? What is your first reaction to this?) may be. While these questions may seem obvious, the shape, spirit and the rapport behind them are of vital importance. Otherwise, the client will be tempted to revert to "Sunday School" answers (i.e., giving the answer they think you most want to

¹¹ Consider the differences between how you might comfort an anxious person from an individualist culture as opposed to someone from an extended family driven culture. Would you use the same texts or different?

¹² Far too frequently we deliver a message about what the person should be like once they have arrived rather than deliver a message they need at this very moment (e.g., we tell the recently bereft not to mourn as those who have no hope rather than considering how God records their every tear).

hear) causing counselors to assume the text had its intended purpose. Missteps or awkward attempts to try out a passage in a session do not necessarily mean failure when the follow-up questions show that the counselor cares about the honest responses and questions of the client.

Follow-up is even more essential when using the Scriptures to teach/correct/confront. Consider the passages in Paul's letters regarding headship and submission in marriage. Both abusers and victims have used Ephesians 5 to excuse all sorts of evil behavior. It would be normal and appropriate for a counselor to want to correct either party's misuse or neglect of these texts. Yet, unless the counselor remembers that the biblical text is not merely a repository of truth but the connective tissue that links people to Christ, it is unlikely that even the most persuasive arguments will have much impact. So, in this example, it might make more sense to start with the first chapters of Ephesians as a means to get both victim and abuser to reflect on how God relates to them as their true husband.

Informed Consent

Counselees are more likely to flourish when they have a clear sense of and agreement with the direction, purpose, and methods of therapeutic interventions. If the purpose of using the biblical text is not clearly stated, clients are likely to draw their own—possibly inaccurate—conclusions. Therapists will want to use every opportunity to discuss the value, purpose, and possible impact of using Scripture. These discussions have the possibility of helping clients avoid misunderstanding and misconstruing the purpose for the Bible in the treatment protocol. If we want to enable people in this fast food and extreme makeover culture to see the Scriptures in a different light, we must

teach them first. This requires that we not only teach them about our purpose for using the Scriptures but also what is *expressly not* part of our purpose.

Four Vignettes

I have included four short vignettes in order to illustrate how these guidelines might work. While the final three cases are fictitious, they represent portions of actual cases where these themes were present and where I used similar passages.

How Not To Use the Scriptures

I have the joy of teaching pastors and counselors-to-be some of the most basic pastoral counseling skills. As part of their self-assessment project I have them recall the acts and attitudes of wise counselors in their past. Without exception, students recall how certain individuals listened and were willing to speak both lovingly and honestly into their lives. They did not find helpful those “mentors” who merely told them what was wrong and what needed to be changed. Ironically, these same students struggle to engage each other’s affective experience when they use the Scriptures in counseling practice. More often than not, they tell clients about the Scriptures, give the conclusion that they ought to come to (e.g., God will take care of you so don’t fear; God will vindicate so don’t be angry; God will provide so don’t be discouraged), and so achieve a predictable result. The client looks at the passage or truth like they might an artifact in a museum—something from another world that has little tangible value for their life at this moment. The reason the counsel has so little value is because they have merely repeated the punch line and forgotten to invite the listener into the story. The client hears the moral, “God wants me to be less fearful, more trusting, less bitter,” but the story does not seem to engage their affective interpretation of their present situation. Instead the Scriptures ought

to meet clients in their present affective location, so as to invite them to engage a topic rather than receive it in some cold and processed manner.

Return to the scene of my students learning counseling skills. During one class I illustrated some skills with my teaching assistant playing the part of the counselee. She spoke of the real pain of infertility. Some of her colleagues at work had recently gotten pregnant and seemed to show no regard for the struggles they knew she was having. She felt angry and hurt, but even more on her mind was the weight of being a good example of what a Christian should look like while suffering. During our brief exchange, I gently inquired whether it was okay to be angry with cloddish friends, with bodies that don't work right, and whether being a "good Christian witness" might mean to her that others wouldn't see her pain. Afterwards the class discussed the vignette and what they might want me to do next. A few students were amazed that I had not confronted her obvious (in their opinion!) pride of wanting to look good. One student even suggested a passage of Scripture that might be useful to that end. This became a great teaching opportunity to show that while we can use the Scriptures to point people to where we think they should be (if they were more mature in Christ), when we do not take the time to meet people where they are, we run the risk of injuring them with our use of the Word.¹³

Just One-Thing Meditations

Clients struggling with generalized anxiety often find themselves overwhelmed by the possibilities of disaster or failure lurking around every corner of their lives. Joe, a 28 year old, graduate student came to me for counseling. He was engaged to be married and trying to wrap up the finishing touches of his dissertation, plan a wedding, and

¹³ See Fig. 1 as an illustration I use with my students to help them visualize where their clients are and whether the passage they are considering will engage the client's present experience or will seem like a call to climb Mt. Everest.

prepare for a cross-country move to a new job. Joe considered himself a strong Christian, familiar with biblical teaching, and distressed that he had never been able to get a handle on his worry. Now that he was facing major changes in his life, the intensity of the worry drew him to seek counsel.

Treatment for anxiety-based problems (from a Cognitive/affective approach) requires both exploration of the feelings and core beliefs that operate below the surface and the teaching of skills to fight repetitive anxiety provoking thoughts. In many respects, Joe was a quick study. He was able to name the core beliefs that gripped him and articulate Gospel centered truths that he would rather fill his heart. However, articulation and change are not the same, and Joe struggled to live the truths he wanted to believe. We spent many sessions exploring the way Joe unintentionally shapes his view of life by the things he meditates on. In order to combat looking at how Joe shapes his view of life by the meditations, I had him talk to me about how his devotional use of the Scriptures. True to form, he tended to read quickly and widely, anxiously trying to make sure he was never avoiding portions of the Bible that God might use to reveal His will. As a homework assignment, I asked him to consider taking a break from his reading plan and only meditate on just one passage—Psalms 131—every day for the next week. We discussed how anxious he might become when he put aside his typical reading style. Further, I made clear that my reasons for meditating on this passage were two-fold. First, anxious thoughts have ways of confusing the mind. The image of being a child on the lap of his mother—not grasping at anything but content to sit in the comfort of her lap—is simple and easy to remember and return to when feeling anxious (hence the “just one thing” title). Second, I wanted Joe to experience another way to use the Scriptures beyond

that of grasping for possible messages he might have missed. I also make it clear that Joe might see an increase in anxiety and that the passage was not likely to have an immediate effect.

The following week, Joe and I explored his experiences with the text. He had noticed an increase in anxiety at first, but was able to convince himself that meditating on the Word was never wrong. The image of peace was powerful and though he didn't feel that way yet, Joe decided he would like to continue to meditate on the passage for the next week (which turned into the next 2 months) in order to "take to heart" the images in the Psalm.

Provoking Conversation

Michael, 52 years old, married, with 2 children in college came due to his struggle with homicidal and suicidal ideation. Not long ago, he lost all that he had invested in his business when his partner took legal control of the business through deception. Michael is fighting this in court, but has already lost a couple of decisions thus far. Michael attends church regularly. The small group he attended with his wife tried to be helpful, but on numerous occasions, he was rebuked for being angry and bitter or encouraged to just forget about the other guy since its only money and he still has his health and family. Michael stopped going to church and the group and found himself contemplating how to kill his former partner—which is what propelled him to therapy. During an early session, Michael expressed how angry he was with his church friends for their brushing over the pain he was in and how angry he was with God for not protecting him. But even as he talked about his anger, it was also clear that Michael was confused and wondering if maybe he was wrong and they were right. So, I opened the Bible to the Psalms and read

to him the first few verses of Psalm 89, 91, and 103. After reading these verses, I commented that I suspected that it would be hard to connect to these passages. Michael burst out in agreement and launched into a long conversation how he had never felt connected to God's mercy and protection since he had numerous experiences where he did what was right and was taken advantage of by others. Michael communicated at the end of the session that he was grateful for the opportunity to talk about his lack of appreciation for God's mercy since he had spent years avoiding the Psalms and did not feel comfortable expressing his true feelings in church settings. Before we ended, I had Michael read from Psalm 88. He was surprised and heartened to read a psalm that expressed his feelings without the happy ending. Over the course of the next few sessions, we considered how we would have to try to understand how both the thanksgiving Psalms and the lament Psalms paint a more accurate picture of God than either alone.

During treatment, one of Michael's friends offered him Psalm 55:22, "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall." He brought the verse to the next session. How could this passage be true? He didn't feel as though he was kept from falling. We explored the larger context of the passage that seemed to contain contradictory images—the Psalmist's cries of distress from the pain of knowing that *God is behind the enemy attack* (v. 12-14). Together, we pondered the same horrors. But, then I asked him to consider why God might have included such a Psalm. Might it be for a situation just like this? Michael derived some comfort in knowing that God had ordained these kinds of questions even if the answers were not readily apparent.

Perspective Building

John and Lisa have been married for 8 years. They are both professionals and heavily involved in church ministry. John and Lisa struggle over differences in how to manage their finances. While both agree that they have lived above their means, Lisa blames John for not sticking to a budget and John feels controlled and interrogated by Lisa (she controls the money and gives John a weekly allowance) when he buys “anything at all.” John, who makes most of the money agrees that it would be better for them to live more simply but sees his purchases as much more minor (a book here a shirt there) whereas Lisa bought a car when her previous car was still working. During initial sessions, both John and Lisa exhibited ambivalence over trying out new communication skills that would move them to attend to each other’s concerns and dreams. While they affirmed they wanted a better marriage, each felt that if they validated the concerns of the other that they might never get their deep concerns heard by the other.

As an attempt to break the stalemate, I asked them to read and discuss the story of Acts 6. Prior to reading the passage, I gave them the background of the story (i.e., the tremendous growth in the number of believers, amazing worship, fellowship and miracles, everyone willingly giving up their possessions to benefit all of the believers). Then we proceeded to read the story of the conflict between the dominant culture Hebraic Jewish widows and the minority culture Grecian Jewish widows. We discussed what it might be like to feel ignored or slighted as well as what it might be like to be a Hebraic Jewish widow who might really feel that it wasn’t her fault if something was wrong with the distribution process. Then as we read the solution (the dominant culture giving the entire food distribution process over to Grecian (minority!) Jewish leaders), we discussed

how hard it is to trust someone else to make decisions for us. John and Lisa were then ready to consider the possibility to not approach marriage counseling by demanding power first but by trusting God that he would protect them better than they could protect themselves. This illustration stuck with them in a way that enabled them to understand how their spouse might feel vulnerable, which resulted in both being less defensive and less motivated to keep score as to who had the most control.

Conclusion

Just as it requires practice to hone counseling and interpersonal skills, so also we must prepare ourselves to use the Scriptures effectively with counselees. Unthoughtful attempts may neuter the power of the biblical text, harm the client, or harden their hearts to future attempts by others to connect them to God through the Word. While we ought not delude ourselves that we can harness the power of the Scriptures with a few steps, prayerful consideration of context, purpose, continued relationships as well as personal application are key to the effective use of the bible in counseling.

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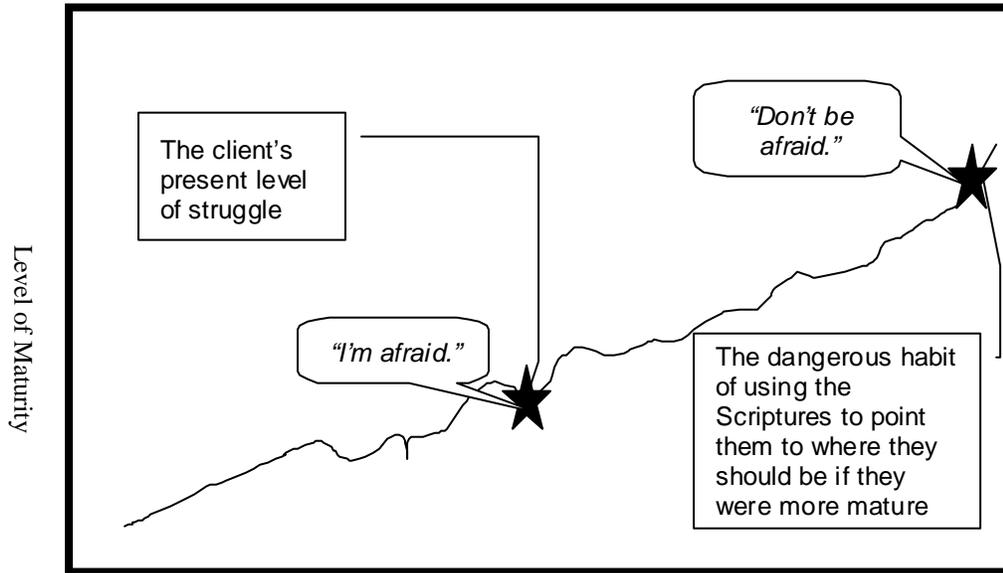
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Fig. 1



The Christian Life

Illustration of why some uses of the Scriptures fail to engage the affect of clients