

Introduction to Lay Counseling and Discipleship

I. The Role of a Spiritual Leader in Discipleship and Lay Counseling:

The topics of discipleship and lay counseling are distinct but quite interrelated. They both fundamentally deal with applying the gospel to the life of believers and helping them grow in godliness.

One might say that discipleship is more proactive and counseling is more reactive, but a disciple is constantly reacting and a counselor should be proactive.

Counseling tends to be issue focused and occasional. Discipleship tends to be holistic and indefinite.

This primer will offer both general and specific tools for use in discipleship and counseling situations.

A. Life on Life: How and where does counseling and discipleship happen?

Do you see yourself as one of God's instruments or merely as a conduit—a passive channel connecting people to “real” instruments of God? Do you assume that you need the help of your pastor, elder, or a professional counselor to bring about godly change in someone's life?

Scripture is filled with many examples of “life on life” discipleship. More than just leading hurting people to resources, these examples show intentional Christian relationships as the means God uses to grow his people.

Randy Pope put it this way:

Life-on-life discipleship is not curriculum-on-life. We believe that discipleship happens because of relationships, not because of books or materials. There is something organic that takes place in discipleship even as one works through engineered content. Although there is a learning component to discipleship, the focus is on living and sharing truth, not merely learning it.

The theology behind these relationships is profound. Through the mediation of the Spirit, we can embody Christ to one another in a way that can only be described as sacramental (see “**Life on Life**” **handout** for fully developed idea). As Martin Luther said:

Now this is the fruit, that even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, Take, eat and drink; and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words.

This doesn't just take place in the midst of formal ministry, but can happen in any number of occasions:

- Intentional one-on-one discipleship/mentoring relationships
- Discipleship groups
- Community groups
- In the context of friendships with other members

It must begin by demystifying concepts like “counseling” that have grown into a professionalization and excluded our role as God’s instruments. Often we can play the role of friend and support person, but limit ourselves to pointing people to help rather than being used by God to bring about change. Paul Tripp writes,

In personal ministry, I want to bring more than a heart of compassion, a willingness to listen, and a commitment to help bear someone’s burden...I want to bring the heart-changing truths of Scripture to people in the midst of their situations and relationships.

B. The Balcony Paradigm

Often the struggles that a Christian faces is only perceived on the surface. The tangible, visible issues like social, economic, political, and material needs appear to be the real problem. Yet, in reality, there is an underlying cause of sin and suffering that the Christian is blind to. The role of the spiritual leader is to help them see the story behind the story, to get a **balcony** perspective.

Balcony metaphor (from Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*)

“We call this skill ‘getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony,’ an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, ‘What’s really going on here.’”

The spiritual leader is someone who can see things from the balcony. Or, to put it in biblical categories, the spiritual leader functions like a **prophet** providing the vantage point of God.

Walter Brueggemann describes this person as a poet-pastor who confronts us with the *“ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age. The preacher has an awesome opportunity to offer...an existence shaped by the news of the gospel...a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibilities.”*

From the vantage point of God, the spiritual leader can begin to do the following:

- Adjust expectations
- Revise core values
- Challenge an adjust standard operating procedures, cultural norms
- Step out of the fog and see the greater war

II. Diagnosis: Life’s Issues are Gospel Issues

It is easy to blame our situation for our stress, anger, depression, fear, lust, etc. Just dealing with the “dance floor” issues will never bring real change and at worst can turn one into a legalist, judgmental and hardened to the gospel.

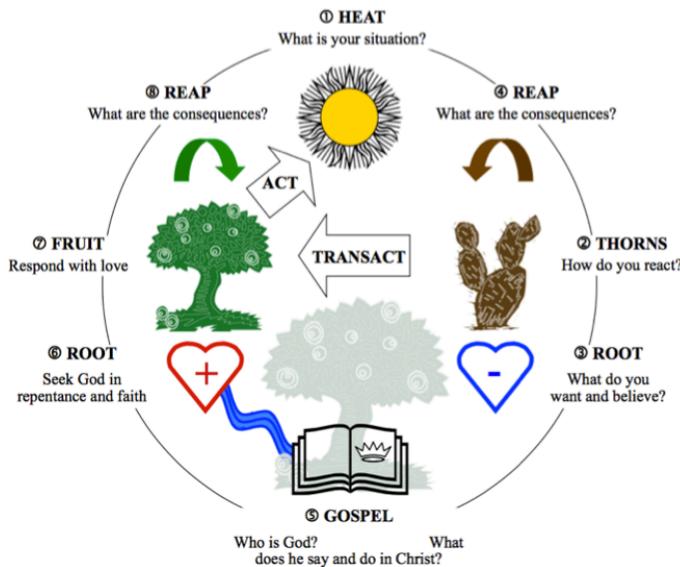
A. Identifying the Heart as the Problem: Getting to the Root of Life’s Issues

This means that we must be careful to dig deeper beyond the situation as “the cause” of our sin. The root of sin is always a heart issue.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

One implication of this passage is that you can face any situation and not sin. Our situations might trigger our sin, but only because there is an underlying issue of our heart. That issue is a lie that we tell ourselves about God and/or ourselves.

The following image from Tripp and Powlison illustrate this point:



B. Idolatry: the sin beneath all sins

1 John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Created to Worship

We were created to worship God. When sin entered the world that God given function did not cease to exist. We still constantly worship. We worship almost any thing, aside from God.

“The human heart is a factory of idols. Every one of us is, from his mother’s womb, expert in inventing idols.” John Calvin

Romans 1:18-25 [18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Colossians 3:5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

“Pride makes a god of self, covetousness makes a god of money, sensuality makes a god of the belly; whatever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted in or depended on, more than God, that (whatever it is) we do in effect make a god of.” – Puritan Matthew Henry

Making Good Things into Idols

Mark Driscoll has summarized idolatry in the following statement:

“Idolatry taking a good thing and making it a god thing and then it becomes a bad thing.”

Idols are good things in the wrong relationship to God. This is why idolatry is so easy to slip into and so desirable when committing. It makes them into ultimate things and begins to define our identity, meaning, worth in terms of it.

(See **idolatry chart** from Timothy Keller’s book *Gospel in Life* on web)

Idols Promise and Never Deliver

- Idols promise ultimate happiness through them: power, approval, comfort, and control become idols.
- The promise is contingent on our feeding/serving the idol’s demands.
- When the idol fails to pay out, we shoulder the blame for not serving it enough
- We are left to double our efforts in a cycle that will only leave us miserable

III. Applying the Gospel: Discipleship by Working the “S” Cycle Paradigm

A spiritual leader brings help (through counseling and discipleship) out of a biblical-theological vision of reality. It begins by framing our circumstances within the context of our relation to God.

The pattern of restoration and renewal from idolatry to salvation is not just applicable to conversion. It is the cycle all Christians go through in our battle with sin. The spiritual leader is called to help those struggling to navigate the “S” cycle.

1. Sin/Idolatry: Identify that the problem is making an alliance with an idol
(See idolatry section)

2. Servitude: God's gracious "anger" to reclaim us through discipline. We are left to feel the burden and misery of the idolatry.

Helping others through in the midst of oppression requires discernment. Challenging them to let go of the things that enslave them. Sometimes this religious idolatry can be the hardest to challenge them to leave.

3. Supplication: Facing life apart from an idol can be terrifying. The "unknown" of relying on God can feel riskier than the security of trusting in an idol (even an oppressive one).

A spiritual leader needs to help them frame the "worst case" scenario in biblical terms. Listen to Jesus' counsel:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Matthew 6:25

4. Salvation/Renewal: Living out of the gospel
Salvation comes by disabling our idolatry, which can feel like death (Luke 9:24 "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it") though it is the path to life.

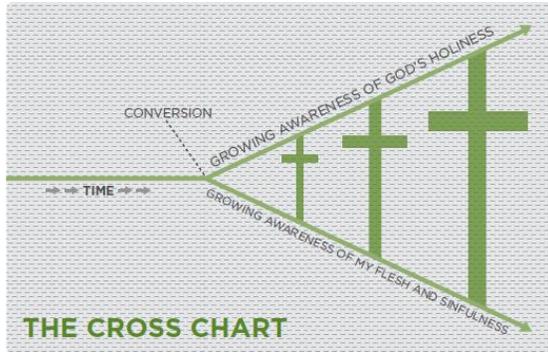
IV. Sanctification from the Balcony

A. Gospel Sanctification

Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

On the "dance floor" the work of God in a believer's life can be disorienting. Instead of spiritual growth, we can feel like we are growing in our sin. When we are told to examine our lives we get discouraged.

As you grow in Christ your understanding of God's holiness increases. The bar becomes higher. Self-justification becomes that much more unattainable. At the same time, our awareness of your sin also becomes greater. You will gain a greater sensitivity to your idolatry and mixed motives.



B. Transformation

Not only does the gospel save us, it begins a work of transformation. This is what the scripture calls being “born again” or “regenerated”. It is the present experience of the resurrection, now begun in our hearts:

WCF 13.1. They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

V. Helpful Questions to Get to the Heart

In the context of discipleship or even counseling a particular issue, it is helpful to have a few good “go-to” questions that will help you get to heart matters. David Powlison’s article “X-Ray Questions” walks through 35 such questions. Here are some good examples.

2. What do you desire? What desires do you obey?
4. Where do you bank your hopes?
5. What do you fear? What do you tend to worry about?
7. What do you think you need?
10. Where do you find refuge, safety, comfort, escape, pleasure, security?
13. Whose opinion of you counts?
15. On your deathbed, what would sum up your life as worthwhile?
16. How do you define success?
21. What do you see as your rights?
24. What do you pray for?
28. What are your characteristic fantasies, either pleasurable or fearful?
32. How do you live as a slave to the devil?
33. How do you implicitly say, “If only...”?

VI. Particular Counseling Issues

A. Making Biblical Decisions: The Wisdom Model (see Biblical Decision handout)

1. God Has a Plan: Resisting a secular mindset
 - God has a plan (Eph 1:11), it is for your good and his glory (WSC Q.7)
 2. Avoiding Two Harmful Approaches to Discerning It
 - a. Serendipity: God leaves clues for us to interpret (open doors?). God is trying to communicate to us, but he does so obscurely and we are ultimately left unsure about how to proceed.
 - b. Direct Communication: We rely on a direct word from God before acting. While this removes uncertainty, it also leaves us stagnant until he supernaturally communicates.
 3. Wisdom Model
 - a. God doesn't intend for us to know his decretive will. It is actually toxic knowledge for us to know his providential plan.
 - b. Often, the reasons behind why we need to know his plan are ungodly. We want to be right, escape blame, control God's blessing, avoid mistakes/regrets, etc.
 - c. God does give us his preceptive will: He tells us how he wants us to live: in godliness and seeking to be wise.
 4. Rather than praying to "know" what to do, pray for wisdom and pray that God would bless your decisions.
 - a. This is a far more dignifying approach because rather than treating you like a little kid, God is making you into a wise and godly son or daughter.
 - b. This means our call is to grow in knowledge and faith not in skill at finding clues.
- B. Shepherding the Tempted (see handout)
 C. Reconciliation (see handout)
 D. Shepherding the Afflicted (see handout)

Family Systems

Every family "system" is constantly interacting in a way that chooses, reinforces, and tolerates certain behaviors.

I. Levels of Interaction:

How does a family control, balance, or change behavior within a system?

- Behavior Control: Normal rules and routine with +/- reinforcement
- Tolerance: Flexibility in tolerance limits, showing grace
- Adaptable Methods of Control: creating new ways of responding when tested methods no longer work
- Value Modification: changing the goal itself to be more compatible with values in a new situation

Healthy families will demonstrate all four of these levels.

II. Balancing Individuality with Mutuality

Two extremes of dysfunction and one healthy model

1. Enmeshed: Family members lack a sense of separate identity, being overly dependent on the family for identity. This will be evident when the whole family is devastated by one member's problem. A member who tries to separate is viewed as disloyal.
2. Disengagement: The life of each member rarely touches the others in a meaningful way (often a reaction against enmeshment).
3. Healthy Differentiation with Support and Loyalty: Strong families with mutuality and involvement which is supportive but not intrusive. Stage of life will dictate some of this: children developing from bonding to working on self-identity to independency.

III. An Adaptable Family System is Healthy

- Chaotic: Lack structure and predictability
- Rigid: Unbending structure does not give flexibility in times of transition
- Adaptability in Strong Families: Flexibility and Stability

IV. Healthy Systems Communicate Well

- Perception: It involves listening skills, ability to pick up body language and willingness to ask for clarification—empathetic skills are essential for functional families.
- Expression: Strong families are able to communicate feelings, opinions, wishes in an unambiguous manner...there is no deceptive game playing.

VI. Leadership

Leading Children To Empowerment Developmentally

1. Telling
2. Teaching
3. Participating
4. Delegating

Control: Balance division of labor within collaborative hierarchy

Authoritarian (low support, high control)

Permissive (high support, low control)

Authoritative (combines support and control)

VII. Guidance

- Know yourself and the issues you are facing both privately and organizationally.
- Work at not letting the social system be about you!
- Don't react. Try to step back with the other person and get the bigger picture.
- If necessary—minimize (even if temporarily) a person's ability to create dysfunction in a social system even if by marginalizing them at points of greatest temptation.

