



3. Promoting Brutal Honesty

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The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at jcraig@northernlightcc.com.

Case Study

It had been a long Sunday morning, and Pastor Rich was relieved to see the last few worshipers leave the church building. His plan was to run home, get changed into play clothes, and take his family to the local state park for a picnic lunch, an afternoon hiking the trails, and dinner at the lodge. His associate minister had agreed to take his youth group responsibilities for the evening.

Lightly whistling praise songs, the happy pastor locked his office door and walked toward the side door leading to the parking lot. John and Jan were standing by his car. They had parked their own car just behind his, making sure he could not leave before they had a chance to talk to him.

Pastor Rich slapped on a smile and greeted them, trying hard to disguise his irritation. "How are you two today?" he asked. After sixty seconds of uncomfortable silence, Jan said "We have to talk to you this afternoon. We're just not getting along very well."

Remembering his experience with Elmer, the pastor courageously answered, "Actually, I cannot meet right now. I have to get home right away. But I will be available Tuesday evening at seven. If you can wait until then, I'll have plenty of time to listen." Again, the couple remained silent. As the seconds ticked by, Pastor Rich fought an overwhelming urge to give in, unlock the office and spend the afternoon with John and Jan. This time, it was John who broke the awful quiet. "That will be fine. We'll see you then."

Tuesday evening's session began with small talk punctuated by long pauses. Jan finally complained mildly about their lack of communication. She said John always comes home from work, plops down in his recliner, watches TV until dinner, eats without saying much, and returns to the TV until he falls asleep. (She said nothing about the four beers he drinks each night or the pornographic movies he watches after she and the kids are in bed.)

When the pastor turned to John for his response, he looked down and scratched his head. "Really, everything seems to be going OK, except for when we argue about the kids or money." (He neglected to tell the pastor that Jan was threatening divorce.)

Pastor Rich spent a second low-energy session trying to get them to discuss parenting and financial issues. After nearly falling asleep listening to them squabble about who should wake the kids up for school, the pastor decided to try something new.

He began the third session by saying "I want you to be brutally honest—to hold nothing back. John, I want you to start by being honest with Jan right now and telling her what you really need from her. Tell her about your deepest desires. What would really make your marriage exciting and



joyful?” John sat staring at the floor, sighed, shifted in his chair, and finally said “I don’t know. Nothing different, I guess.” Jan looked at the pastor and said “Your see? He just can’t share his feelings with me. My sister says it is because he is bipolar, just like her ex-husband.”

Pastor Rich concluded their problem was more serious than he was equipped to handle. He urged them both to see a psychiatrist. They left the office discouraged and apprehensive.

The Problem

Recently, a training video produced by a company that sells premarital tests was sent to mental health clinicians. A well-known expert was featured, supposedly demonstrating how married couples can be coached to be completely honest with each other, sharing their deepest thoughts and desires while the therapist looks on with unconditional positive regard. The sessions went smoothly—and usually do, when actors, students, and eager-to-please counselees agree to be videotaped for training purposes!

In the real world, troubled people do not respond well to a counselor’s admonition to be completely honest. Some use it as an opportunity to deliver scathing criticism like “I hate you and wish you were dead, you ugly pig!” Others use it to deny or trivialize serious differences. For example, when a fed-up pastor calls two warring church members in to get their conflict resolved, they may act shocked, swear nothing is wrong, and accuse the pastor of stirring up trouble. Ironically, an invitation to be completely honest often provides cover for those who are fundamentally dishonest and manipulative. Pharisees know how to use apparent honesty to cloak their true motives and methods.

Even when urged to do so, combative couples are unlikely to share their most intimate thoughts, desires and needs in the presence of a counselor. A wife who fears her husband is having an affair often won’t come right out and say so. Instead, she will spend hours talking about their lack of communication, her inadequacies as a wife and mother, and the problems the kids are having in school. Though she feels betrayed and repulsed by the thought of him with another woman, she will talk around the problem to avoid conflict.

Likewise, a husband who is frustrated with his wife’s lack of sexual desire will appear agitated and sullen. When the counselor asks, “What do you want to discuss tonight?” he will look at his wife and say “I don’t know.” Even though he is so angry he can’t sit still, he loves her and will hesitate to embarrass her in front of the pastor.

Marital intimacy requires the keeping of secrets. Married couples have a private life. It is really no one’s business how much they earn annually, how often they have sex, or how they really feel about their in-laws. An insensitive or voyeuristic counselor can damage a couple’s intimacy by pressuring them to disclose deeply personal details. Even if the couple comes specifically to discuss money, sex, or in-laws, a sensitive counselor will urge them to reveal only what is necessary to address the problem.



The Solution

Couples protect themselves and each other by not sharing personal thoughts and needs. The counselor who asks invasive questions or pressures them to share secret thoughts and intimate details can actually make things worse.

For example, a pastor may feel obligated to shatter a couple's naïveté, e.g. "You say you are ready for marriage, but you have not talked about how an unexpected pregnancy, financial crisis, or severe illness would impact your relationship. Don't you think this indicates a communication problem?" The ambushed couple will admit they have not discussed these matters. They will also leave the office feeling angry and violated, telling family and friends "We didn't have these problems before we went in to see the pastor."

Similarly, a pastoral caregiver may notice a married couple dancing around the problem that obviously forced them to seek counsel. While it is tempting to demolish their defenses in the names of honesty and effective time management, it is usually best to assume they have justifiable reasons for hiding their deepest thoughts and feelings. Many couples withhold information from ministers because they don't want to become the next sermon illustration or church bulletin prayer request!

Providing a safe place to discuss deep personal issues, even if they are shared indirectly, is the key. Couples can be reassured in the following manner:

You may think counseling is an hour when someone pressures you to reveal all of your inmost thoughts, desires, and secrets. Actually, if I did, I would be helping to divide you. As a matter of fact, you may be having problems in part because too many people know your personal business. So, I am going to leave the office for about ten minutes. I want you to decide which of the issues you agree we should address, and which you would rather keep private for now.

These comments usually elicit knowing glances and tacit agreement. They help a couple feel protected, respected, and more willing to be honest with each other both in and after the counseling session. They also help the couple understand that they share these weaknesses with many others.

Ironically, reassuring John and Jan that they won't be pressured to talk directly about alcohol, pornography, separation, suicide, or other serious problems they are hiding increases the likelihood that they will choose to open up at some point. Even if they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge what is bothering them, the pastor can pave the way for further communication by saying:

I promised I would not pressure you to reveal personal things you prefer to keep to yourselves, and I meant what I said. When you are ready to discuss some of those more private items, I'll be available.

Pastoral Teaching Tip



As far as we know, Jesus used the word “church” two times in his ministry. In Matthew 16:18, he framed the church as an *offensive* ministry, battering down the gates of hell itself. Taught correctly, this passage is used to challenge the fears and anxieties that immobilize Christians. Christians are *winners* historically and eternally.

In Matthew 18:17, Jesus framed the church as a place in which conflict is confronted and resolved. He emphasized the importance of limiting the number of people who know about a sin. If the matter can be settled one-on-one, that is best. If a witness needs to be added, OK—but only one. If the matter has to go all the way to the elders and to the church, so be it—provided every attempt has been made to settle it before it goes this far.

This is just an ethical extension of the Old Testament’s concern for boundary markers. Long before our concerns for appropriate emotional distance, God was concerned with boundaries. In fact, the commandment against bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16) is meant to forbid false testimony with regard to a neighbor’s property. Good fences make good neighbors.

When it comes to confronting sin, the Bible presents a simple principle: The fewer who know, the better. Relationships are best restored with a minimum of shame, humiliation, and exposure. In the case study above, great progress is made when one couple works with one counselor to confront a problem that has confounded them. Ultimately, it is essential that the counselor be willing to step out—out of the room during some sessions, and then out of their lives at the end of the counseling process—and grant them the privacy they need for intimacy.