

Only a Teenager



By David Powlison

Jimmy was sixteen. He sat in the chair next to me, quite composed, in fact bored. His parents thought he ought to talk to someone, but he wasn't much interested in talking to me. Eventually we got past the monosyllabic, awkward silence phase. As Jimmy opened up a bit, he told story after story about how he'd been mistreated by his family, mistreated by classmates, mistreated by teachers, mistreated by God, mistreated by the whole godforsaken universe. He gave a detailed recitation of all the injustice, unfairness, betrayal, disappointment, offense, and plain old stupidity committed against him. He had a rap sheet on the whole world.

Jimmy played his parts to perfection: crime victim and aggrieved plaintiff, prosecuting attorney and hanging judge, unanimous jury, outraged public, and ever-so-willing executioner. Most of his stories seemed plausible, in fact. But none of the offenses sounded particularly outrageous. They were the things that happen to everyone. A few stories sounded a bit exaggerated, or even made up, but most of it sounded pretty factual.

Two things struck me about Jimmy. First, Jimmy spoke in an unvarying monotone. His

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apparent emotions were flat line. He sounded like he was reading from a telemarketing script or reciting the directions for how to assemble a piece of IKEA furniture. His dull litany of grievances was scarier than outright anger. At one point I asked him, "Are you angry?" (I invited him to say the obvious, to let it come out of his own mouth. It might move our conversation in a good direction if we could establish that at least we had a problem worth talking about.) Jimmy seemed taken aback for a moment. Then he recovered his cool and said matter of factly, "Nah, I don't get angry... *I get even.*" This anger was chilly, not hot. It was more "premeditated, cold-blooded murder" than "crime of passion." He was not going to waste emotions on the vermin and trash that he had to deal with in life.

Second, Jimmy lived in a universe that featured *him*. Everything was all about one all-important, all-intriguing, all-offended being. Every scene in his film, every page of his book, every news story in his daily paper circled around *Jimmy*—but he was never an agent or cause of anything. Every person, event, place, and object existed only to the degree it affected his pleasure or displeasure. And because every other character in the story had dedicated his or her life to making Jimmy miserable, he felt entitled to this *modus operandi* of bland, cold vengeance.

The monotone and the logical paranoia

chilled me. His anger was in the genocidal mode: efficient, decided, as matter-of-fact as taking out the garbage or exterminating bugs.

Jimmy might be only sixteen, but he is one tough customer. Jimmy might be only sixteen, but he is possessed by his pride (“I am the center of the world”) and his unbelief (“There is no God to whom I owe my life”). He operates with no point of reference outside of his own will and opinions.

As a Christian, can I truly understand Jimmy? Am I able to understand him in a truly Christian way? Is it then possible for me to wisely counsel Jimmy? If God wills to bring light into darkness, is it possible for me to counsel him effectively? In the context of my pastoral care, could Jimmy actually blossom? Could Jimmy begin to live a life worth living? Could he become a friend worth having, a student worth teaching, a worker worth hiring? Could he someday develop into a man worth marrying and a father worth honoring? At sixteen, Jimmy is not a promising young man. Do I, a Christian worker, even have the right to try to counsel Jimmy? Or does he “belong” to licensed, mental health professionals?

To transpose these questions slightly, are *you* able to understand, counsel, and (possibly) aid in Jimmy’s transformation? Do *you* even have the right to try to help such a person? Here’s a further question that might sound odd at first. Does your church’s preaching speak to Jimmy? That’s not to say whether or not he’ll listen (“ears to hear” are nothing we can engineer!). But it’s simply to ask whether or not the preaching has the stuff to ring his bells, to accurately speak into his experience, to call him relevantly out of darkness and into light.

In our culture, Jimmy wears labels. Years ago he might have been called a ‘psychopath’ or ‘sociopath,’ a case of ‘character disorder’ or ‘antisocial personality.’ No doubt, Jimmy is decidedly antisocial, narcissistic, and conscienceless. Currently, he might be labeled ‘oppositional-defiant disorder.’ No doubt, Jimmy is hostile and cross-grained to all and sundry, with a particular defiance to any would-be authority. Or he might be labeled ‘depressed.’ No doubt, Jimmy’s world is darkly hopeless. Or, if his anger had a more explosive and aggressive feel, he might even be labeled ‘bi-polar.’ Again,

no doubt, Jimmy is subject to some troubling moods. All these labels sort of describe him, don’t they? And all these labels seem to disqualify a Christian worker and friend from both knowledge and effectiveness when it comes to such a tough teen. Yet all these labels do little more than redescribe the obvious in a fancy way.

Let’s bridge the gap between “ministry” and Jimmy. To do that, we also have to bridge the gap between preaching and counseling. The relationship between public ministry and personal conversation is rarely tackled with depth and balance. There is an intimate and complementary relationship between preaching and counseling ministries. “Counseling-types” tend to detach counseling from preaching (and from sacraments, worship, and the rest of ministry and ecclesiastical oversight). If counseling indeed mediates a separate truth via separate practices, then, of course, let’s detach the two and never the twain shall meet. But if Jimmy’s personal problems are the same kind of problems that preaching ought to address, then let’s bring the two activities together and revitalize both. “Preaching-types” also tend to detach counseling from preaching. Often the ministry of the Word is treated as virtually synonymous with “preaching” and “the pulpit.” So, after a cursory attempt at exhortation, many pastors simply refer “counseling problems” out to the designated experts in people like Jimmy. This is despite the obvious fact that there is little the experts can really do with a ‘stubborn child’ (another vigorously descriptive label, this time drawn from the legal system).

Many Christians who believe in the sufficiency of Scripture for preaching and teaching do not functionally believe in the sufficiency of Scripture for actually changing a person like Jimmy. The scope of revealed “faith and practice” is narrow. In effect, Scripture is fine for addressing crowds in church, but inadequate for the wisdoms needed to address individuals in daily life. Scripture can explain justification by faith or the meaning of history, but it can’t explain Jimmy in his little slice of history. For people who take the Bible seriously, it is a virtue to “preach the Word.” But is it similarly virtuous to “counsel the Word” with a troubled young man? Typical responses to this

notion are interesting.

First, some people respond quizzically. The phrase sounds nonsensical because the church does not do real counseling beyond “It’s wrong to be angry” and “You need to forgive. I’m praying for you to be able to trust the Lord in the midst of what you’re going through. Here’s an encouraging Bible verse.” What else would the Bible have us say and do with Jimmy? The quiver has few arrows. Counseling that aims “deeper”—asking for details of what he’s going through, probing how he organizes his reality, explaining him to himself, challenging his choices and beliefs at many levels, and actually helping him change—this now is the mysterious province of state-licensed professions. Jimmy’s problems seem beyond the scope of the Bible, thus beyond the scope of ministry.

Second, others respond with suspicion, as if to counsel the Word means becoming insensitive or even censorious to troubled people: “Does that mean you just preach at

But biblical truth is not appropriate for helping deeply troubled and highly troublesome people. In other words, little sinners and little sufferers can be helped by God’s truth and love. But big sinners and big sufferers need something more, something different. That flatly rules out churchly help for Jimmy. He’s certainly not normal, and he’s not heading anywhere in the direction of normal. What an odd way to look at Scripture! Such a response probably reveals that someone has only experienced polite uses of the Bible in polite churchly settings. They don’t yet realize how the God of Scripture steps into the storm, blood, war, and despair of the human plight.

Finally, a fourth group gets offended. They hear the very idea of counseling the Word as an arrogant intrusion by the incompetent into someone else’s area of competence. Counsel Jimmy? It’s as if a housewife, youth worker, or pastor offered to perform neurosurgery or to write up a legally binding will. Consider the

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struggling people, beat them over the head with Bible verses, and exhort them to change?” Interestingly, when transferred into the counseling context, the words “preach,” “Bible,” and “exhortation” take on negative, moralistic connotations. They lose all their warmth, breadth, depth, and intimate relevancy. Such a response reveals more about someone’s views of preaching and the Bible than it says about the discerning love that biblical counseling is or should be. Of course, 999 times out of a thousand, Jimmy will not change by being clobbered with verses. But God will mercifully change the one in a thousand despite the clobbering! But what does moralism have to do with wise biblical counseling?

Third, many others think that God’s words are fine for relatively normal people who manage to get to church, to hold a job, to have a quiet time, and to live a life that is generally socially acceptable and socially constructive.

example of a youth worker. Often youth workers are pegged into the roles of effervescent host, activities director, missions trip leader to far off places, and dynamic Bible study leader. The notion that a youth worker might also grapple with Jimmy’s deepest problems face-to-face seems inconceivable. But why not? There is no reason why not. Wisdom that learns how to grapple well can make the deepest difference imaginable.

These four responses are odd biblically. Real ministry of the Word fits none of the underlying assumptions. But the responses are understandable to the degree the church fails to conceptualize and practice ministry of the Word well, whether with the Jimmys or with other troubled souls. When God’s message is not good enough for the individuals most in need, then all ministry skates on thin ice. When public ministry promises to get crowds into heaven, but personal ministry fumbles the struggles of real

individuals amid the exigencies of real life, then all ministry verges on irrelevancy. But when ministry of the Word actually explains (and sometimes changes) a life like Jimmy's, then ministry will get both crowds and individuals into heaven, making them fit for heaven in the process.

Public and private ministry of the Word reinforce each another. Public ministry based on doing counseling well takes on the unmistakable flavor of *human reality*. Truth puts on the clothes of true-to-life experience and struggle. In the same way, private ministry based on doing preaching well takes on the compelling persuasiveness of *God's reality*. Christ's authority, power, and love come for all kinds of people in all times and places. So Christ comes for Jimmy. The life that is life indeed flourishes at the confluence of ministry to crowds and to individuals.

Why do we have a hard time seeing this? Many scholars, both secular and Christian, have noted how the dominant remedial efforts of modern culture offer a "therapeutic" assessment and cure for the human condition. The drama of human life is defined and treated as a medical-scientific problem, rather than as a religious-moral problem.¹ Jimmy is viewed and treated as if he were literally "sick," not as trapped in the maelstrom of Sin 101. Troubles that God views as moral—e.g., breakdown in relationships, reactions to manifold sufferings and social influences, confusion about personal identity, the experience of meaninglessness, slavery to the vices, various dysphoric emotions—have come under the intellectual and professional authority of the modern mental health professions. Jimmy has all the troubles just mentioned. But such troubles are diagnosed without reference to his (and our) sin and misery before the face of God. They are treated without reference either to the living Jesus Christ or to the life-giving dynamism of repentance, faith, and obedience.

One can bewail the famine of truth in modern self-understandings and attempts at cure. One can bewail the shallowness of nonbiblical explanations of the Jimmys. But the languishing of effective truth almost always involves a double problem: lively error thrives where truth is deficient, disabled, or distracted.

It is easy to criticize the mutant fertility of the world's philosophies and alternatives to ministry. It is harder to recognize and remedy barrenness in our own functional faith and practice. If we can't counsel Jimmy, we don't really understand our own truth very well.

Sit for a moment under some hard, personal questions. First, how well do you really know people, yourself included? Self-knowledge and knowledge of others are difficult. Let me hazard a generalization. Most "ministry-oriented" people are doers, conceptualizers, talkers, organizers, and planners. They do not tend to be observers, listeners, experiencers, and ponderers. But we need to cultivate both sets of strengths. The image of God spans a wide spectrum. The Bible and ministry both span that same spectrum.

Second, are you deft at getting to know people? Do you probe actions, thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, the story a person lives? Do you probe context, noticing the 'voices' that influence a person, identifying and entering his or her significant experiences? Often we operate with tunnel vision, looking only for small bands of a particular color within the vast electromagnetic spectrum. It seems easier. It makes our formulas seem more plausible. But we miss essential, significant *human* things. We miss essential, significant *biblical* things.

Third, do you have a feel for how a person actually changes—not just in theological theory, but in practice? Do you have a practiced, skilled sense of the dynamic and the process? Do you know how the gospel works progressive renovation in a life like Jimmy's? How does truth inwork into the heart and outwork into the walk? Or do you drift into the various pat answers that characterized the twentieth century church's approach to changing lives—moralism, pietism, doctrinalism, exorcism, or the thin gruel of secular psychologies and psychoactive medicines?

Jimmy is "only" a teenager. But he needs grown-up help. And that's the job of the articles that follow.

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This issue of *JBC* is about teenagers, about parents, and about how to help both grow up. I

think you'll find an intriguing mix of the familiar and the fresh. And I trust you'll be stimulated both to live and to counsel more wisely.

More than ten years ago, Tedd Tripp wrote *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, a remarkably wise book on overall child-rearing. With good reason that book has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. In this issue of our journal, he contributes two articles specifically focusing on how to raise teenagers. His article, "Dazzle Your Teen" comes first in this issue for a good reason. If you get what he says, it will change everything about how you, as a parent, approach the responsibility of parenting. If you get what he says, it changes everything about how you, as a counselor, help parents to grow up into better parents.

"What is 'Success' in Parenting Teens?" Paul Tripp, Tedd's brother, tackles that crucial question—really a dozen interlocking questions—in an interview with Peter Hastie, an Australian pastor. Only a biblical understanding of what parenting is actually about can enable parents to approach their task with grace, courage, and humble optimism. Most parenting is conceived of as a one-way street: the parent does things *to* and *with* and *for* the child. But Tripp conceives of parenting as a network of two-way streets. Traffic runs *between* parent and child, between parent and God, *between* child and God.

In the final analysis, there are no *good* kids... and there are no *good* parents. Jesus settled that as a matter of obvious fact: "No one is good except God alone" (Luke 18:18); and "If you, being evil..." (Luke 11:13). At the same time, we are called by God to be good kids: His children. And those of us who are parents are called to be good parents: in the image of the one good Father. Putting these complementary truths together is crucial to parenting sanity. Jim Newheiser does so in "Why Do Kids Turn Our the Way They Do?"

Tedd Tripp knows teens. He loves teens. He's raised teens. He understands the humanness of teens. And so, of course, he talks with teens. "*Communicate with Teens*" sets out the way he thinks about that and does it. So many approaches to parenting are premised on a logic that is fundamentally manipulative, controlling, or pandering. But this approach is wise, respecting the way God made people.

Mary Somerville writes as the mother of a son who strayed (and eventually returned) and as the wife of a pastor. "Addressing the Problems of Rebellious Children" sets the family struggle in context. The principles of humble wisdom she sets forth apply directly to families in the ministry. They also can be applied more widely. There is *always* a way forward. That comes with the territory of living in God's world and listening to God's words.

"Counseling Angry, Unmotivated, Self-centered, and Spiritually-indifferent Teens." How do you like *that* title? How do you like that task?! Rick Horne comes to problem kids in a fresh way. He doesn't let the vast chasm between pervasive negativism and deep need for Christ lure him into an all-or-nothing approach to counseling. He first finds a common ground, a way to engage. He first finds a way to take small steps towards big, life-changing goals. Biblical wisdom works with both "natural affections" and "inordinate lusts" (in the language of wise, old theologians). A teen's motives can be illuminated by wise counseling, both appealed to and challenged.

Nina Campagna reminds us in "Yelling at My Kids" that we need to examine our own heart attitudes and desires while our children are still young. She uses the "Three Trees" model of self evaluation found in Jeremiah 17:5-10. Start early and capture those heart formation opportunities with your young children, then hopefully the teen years will be easier.

¹ A vast literature discusses this cultural transformation: e.g., Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987); O. H. Mowrer, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1963); Os Guinness, "American's Last Men and Their Magnificent Talking Cure," in Guinness and John Seel, eds., *No God but God* (Chicago: Moody, 1992); James Hunter, *American Evangelicalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1983); David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

Readers wishing to get a feel for the inner logic and stated agenda of "The Therapeutic" would do well to read charter documents by the founding fathers of modern psychotherapy. If I had to pick 50 pages or less, I'd choose the introductions to Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* and Adler's *Understanding Human Nature*, and the last chapter in Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Many of their specific theories have faded away, but the spirit of their worldview remains strong, cross-pollinated in the current decade by an obsessive-compulsive biologizing of human experience.