

Opening Case Study

- You get a voice mail from a ministry leader (Group Coach) asking to speak with you regarding a serious incident in one of their CGs. You finally connect and he proceeds to unpack an all too familiar account that you have heard before, to some degree.
- A spouse has confessed to adultery—either repented or refuses to repent
- The adulterous relationship—either has been broken or is still intact
- The offended spouse—either initially expresses the desire to reconcile or divorce
- The adulterous partner—either a member of your church or not
- Any immediate consequences—perhaps pregnant, STD, the other spouse is on a rampage, kids somehow know
- The forecast—either expressed as hopeless or numb or by God’s grace we will somehow make it
- The main question one of spouse asks—“Is there any hope for us and our marriage?”
- **What** do you say? **What** is the next step? **Where** do you start? **What** are the issues that need to be addressed? **When** and **how** do you address these issues?
- These questions may be going on in your own mind, but they are also coming from your ministry leaders as well.
- Within 24 hours, you receive another call from another ministry leader reporting an incident involving another husband and wife: physical abuse ... pornography ... destructive conflict ... financial crisis ... despair

Issues and Questions to Address for MC

Even if your ministry leaders have developed a certain skill level through doing PMC, MC is in a different level than PMC!

Push-Back Issues (what issues or questions are involved in each?)

1. How can “lay” couples do this type of ministry? I have a hard enough time counseling couples in crisis!
2. How can couples with no seminary education, let alone counseling courses, serve in a MC ministry?
3. Aren’t we breaking some counseling rules about having a couple counsel another couple, let alone having yet another couple sit in and watch—issues of confidentiality, the husband and wife seeking help won’t open up as much when others are watching, especially strangers ...
4. Why can’t I just refer our people to a trusted biblical counselor in town who has much more expertise and time than any of us in the church?
5. We are increasing the risk of liability if we start doing MC at our church!
6. What kind of time commitment are we talking about here? Aren’t people busy enough with their own work schedules on top of church schedules?
7. Why is this a vital ministry? What does the bible say about marriage counseling?

Process Questions

1. Ministry Leaders
 - a. Why should we use couples for MC? Which couple(s) should I ask to help in this ministry?
 - b. What do you look for when recruiting marriage counselors?
2. Counseling Particulars
 - a. Do you charge for the counseling?
 - b. If I am counseling the couple can I also counsel the husband individually as well?
 - c. Where should we meet? What about childcare?
 - d. How do you gauge the amount of sessions you do with couples? How do I know when we are finished counseling?
 - e. How long should I meet with a couple who doesn't seem to be making progress?
3. Counseling Issues
 - a. How do you deal with a couple where one spouse committed adultery?
 - b. What do you do when one spouse refuses to repent or refuses to forgive?
 - c. When would you ever separate a husband and wife?
 - d. What are the biblically permissible reasons for divorce and remarriage? What about abuse?
 - e. What if one spouse refuses to come for counseling? What do I do if one person in the couple stops coming, or refuses to participate?
 - f. What questions do I need to ask about medication one or both of the couples is taking?
4. The Church & Community
 - a. Why is community important throughout the journey—learning and growing with other couples.
 - b. What do you do if members of your church want to seek outside counseling? How can we be a part of the process of their restoration?
 - c. How do I need to structure my ministry areas for such an approach to MC?
 - d. Is it OK for me to talk to other pastors/elders/deacons about the counseling if I need advice or help?
5. Training
 - a. Observing and Observing and Supervision—the process of equipping.
 - b. Do you do MC with unbelievers? If yes, what does it look like compared to a believing couple?
 - c. How do you do MC? How do I train our people? What books would you recommend? Any websites?
 - d. What resources are available to train my people? How do I get everyone on the same page?
 - e. What does it look like for a seasoned couple to train a couple learning how to do MC? How can Christian couples strengthen their skills in MC?
 - f. Which evangelical churches in our country are doing MC well?
 - g. Which marriage conferences would you recommend?
6. Referrals
 - a. When do I refer to someone else?
 - b. What should I be looking for in a counselor if and when I do refer?

Background

- For 3.5 years, I served in a church-based counseling center as a counselor during my doctoral work. I logged in over 450 hours of just marriage counseling. But my transition to counseling as a pastor was huge! Some of the more significant changes:
 - **Shepherd**—If a couple failed to show at the counseling center, I would call and follow-up but if they decided to not return my call, then the relationship would end.
 - **Shepherd**—I recall few, if any pastors or church leaders who followed up with me regarding a couple from their church with whom I was counseling.
 - **Community**—Most couples were not involved in community outside of the weekly counseling session with me. I truly believe 1 hour of counseling per week is not enough, if not integrated with good, gospel-driven community.
 - **Church Discipline**—If a spouse decided to call it quits, then there was no other action that I could do on my part.

Global Vision Drives a Global Approach

- **One Another**—The commands to care for one another—to love “one another” (John 13:34-35), to encourage “one another” (Heb. 3:13), to carry “one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:1-2), and comfort “one another” (2 Cor. 1:3-7) are addressed to the church.
- **Equip to Build Up**—As pastors, teachers, and ministry leaders, we are called to equip the saints for the work of service, so that we might grow and build one another up in love as the body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:11-16).
- **Care & the Church**—God designed his church to care for the church—the gospel informs and guides our ministry so that our care and counsel can be done by the church, in the church, through the church, and for the glory of God.
- **Members & the Church**—overall, we as church leaders have underestimated and underutilized our people along with all that God has given to us in the gospel. What are some common thoughts and perspectives of individuals or couples you approach with a vision and call to ministry?
 - I am not qualified. We don’t have a good enough marriage. We could never do that. What do we know? I don’t even know where to start.
 - There are some who are too confident! Has any individuals/couples approach you to get involved in a marriage ministry and they are still engaged?
 - There are some who see ministry as an opportunity for glory.
- **Marriage Ministry**—After working with couples for over 10 years from PMC to MC, I firmly believe the overwhelming situations requiring MC can and should be handled by the church. Do you know why? 99.9% of the issues that divide the one flesh relationship are relational in nature—relationship with God and definitely relationship between husband and wife (and others—children, bosses, friends, extended family, neighbors, etc.).
- **Spiritual Battle**—the enemy deceives, divides, and destroys. The kingdom of evil always rages against the kingdom of God, but we must know and believe the kingdom of God always wars against the kingdom of evil. Therefore, mere communication skills and other relational tips are not enough—if they were, Christ did not have to descend, dwell among us, die, and rise again!

Big Picture—What is Counseling?

Confusion abounds when you talk about counseling, whether in the world or in the church. Like most areas of theory and practice, variant understandings of counseling exist because of differences in perspectives driven by foundational beliefs and personal experiences. The church can and must take the lead in developing a unified and comprehensive understanding of counseling since such an understanding is critical to the mission of God and his church. So before we take a look at what is counseling, let's start with what if the mission of the gospel ...

THE GOSPEL MISSION

In view of God's two-fold command to love (the Two Great Commandments—Matt. 22:37-30), **the gospel has a two-fold mission.** Gospel mission ultimately results in God being glorified through His children worshipping with their whole lives as they grow in conformity to Christ (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

To Build Up the Body of Christ in Love (Loving God through Loving Others in the Church) (Eph. 4:11-12; 16)—*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the **building up of the body of Christ...** from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the **building up of itself in love.***

Building up the body in love is Christ preparing His bride for the ultimate marriage at the end of God's redemptive history. The body is built up as we love one another in the church, helping one another to believe in and live out the gospel by clinging to Christ. The body is also built up as it engages those outside the church with gospel word and deed.

To Advance the Kingdom of Christ (Loving God through Loving Others in the World) (Matt. 28:18-20)—¹⁸*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Because Christ is advancing his kingdom (Matt. 6:10), we too are called to advance his kingdom since we are in Christ (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; John 12:26). The kingdom of God is advanced every time a person is made a new creation by the redeeming power of God (cf. John 3:5; Acts 10:38; Rom. 5:5; 2 Cor. 5:17); every time the love of God does its redemptive work in the hearts and relationships of God's people (1 John 4:12); every time evil is overcome by good (Rom. 12:17-21); and every time God's people are compelled by the love of Christ to engage the world with mercy in word and deed (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

Every man and woman who is part of God's family is called to be a servant and missionary as one loves God and others in a way that builds up the body of Christ and advances the kingdom of Christ—*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them* (Eph. 2:10). In other words, every member of the kingdom of God is called to be a minister of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-20) and to live a life engaged in the mission of the gospel—this is why we should see all of life as ministry!

Definition of Gospel-Centered Counseling

Gospel-centered counseling is a way of loving one another as we listen, explore, and understand the struggles of unbelief in the heart of another in the midst of life and suffering, while showing how Christ and His gospel truths apply in deeply personal and specific ways, so that we can live out the gospel by faith in community, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Rationale for Training MC couples versus individuals

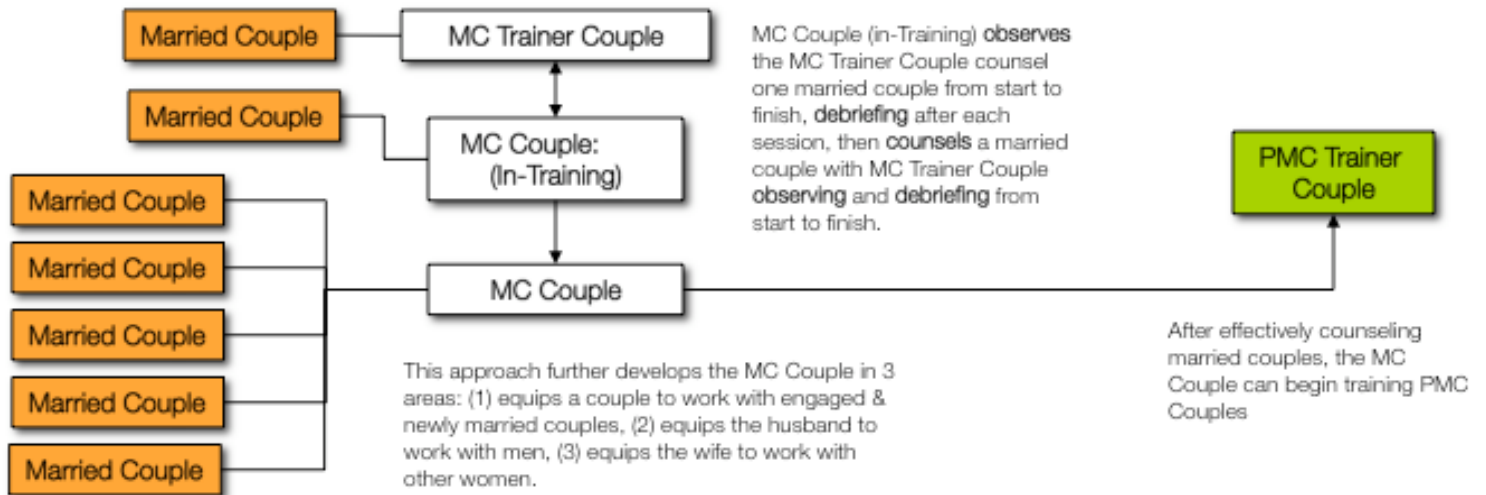
- Like PMC is a great first step into marriage ministry, MC is at the center of any marriage ministry
- Trains both husband and wife—as a couple, as a man, as a woman in issues like:
 - Gospel vision of marriage—as God created, designed, and purposed
 - Spiritual dynamics—as you explore and understand their relationship with God individually and as a couple, how they respond to the realities of life and relationship—issues of the heart and unbelief
 - Biblical manhood and womanhood issues—spiritual leadership, submission, gender differences
 - Relational dynamics—exploring the heart of the other, family background issues, conflict—confession, forgiveness and love—marriage as a means of gospel change
 - Marriage bed issues
- The married couple receiving counseling benefits—male/female dynamics, husband/wife dynamics:
 - The husband calls out the man for not leading in various aspects in the relationship—ranging from conflict, relationship not centered on Christ, physical boundaries, not preparing to provide—job, insurance, etc.
 - The wife calls out the woman for being overly controlling—not a spirit of submission, disrespecting him, etc.
 - The husband calling out the woman
 - The wife calling out the man—too strong in touch or talking to her
- Done in the home or in a church office—for training and childcare purposes

Process of Training Marriage Counselors

- Serve as a PMC for 4-6 engaged couples to learn the basics of marriage well enough to teach other couples. Also 4-6 couples provide a range of issues, personalities, and situations.
- Observe a marriage counseling case from the first session to the last—1 hour of MC + 30 minutes of debrief—question training couple about “content” and “process”
- Then conduct marriage counseling while observed by a MC training couple—1 hour of MC and 30 minutes of debrief.
- Supervising them through an actual MC case once they are on their own

Marriage Track—Marriage Counseling (MC) Ministry

Robert K. Cheong—Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, KY



Process of Marriage Counseling

- Note this is not PMC—the couple is now one flesh since God established the marriage covenant, which no one should separate. Even if a couple went through PMC, they might not have really “got it” in spite thinking they understood the concepts
- “He/She is not the same person I married!” —Help them understand this IS the person they married, but not the person they dated
- Assess the following aspects:
 - [Vertical Relationship]
 - Views of God and how God sees him/her
 - Ways each of them and together they are not believing in the gospel—examples—“He will never change!” I can never forgive him!”
 - Ways in which each of them and together are living/not living out the gospel because they are living for their own kingdom—from self-glory to self-protection
 - Opportunities for repentance and faith
 - [Horizontal Relationships—poor horizontal relationships flow from a weak vertical relationship]
 - Marriage basics that are/are not in place—issues covered PMC
 - What hurts have been experienced as manifested by bitterness and self-protection
 - Poor patterns of relating—these will be issues for confession of sin and gospel love and forgiveness.
 - Look for signs of God’s grace in their lives, relationship, and situation
- Identify areas of common struggles to normalize the sinful dynamics within each individual and as a couple as appropriate—draw parallels to own life and marriage.
- Offer a gospel vision of marriage and assurance of an enduring marriage as they each cling to and trust in Christ

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Lessons Learned

- Community is essential in ensuring the couple is encouraged and challenged outside of the counseling sessions.
- Follow-up is essential as the couple continues to change and grow. Require the couple to stay in community. Most couples will not take the initiative to seek help again in a timely manner, or perhaps not at all.
- A couple is placed at a disadvantage if they do not have the PMC experience before doing MC. The minimum PMC experience involves 15 hours of observation and debrief then an average of 50 hours of PMC (represents 4 engaged couple)

Areas for Growth

- Better structured and systematic course of study coupled with regular “case conference”—when you gather PMC and MC to train and review a case study.
- Intentional formal/informal follow-up with the married couple in community and possibly with the counseling couple