**Introduction to Biblical Counseling**

**BC 300**

**JOANNE: CASE STUDY**

**David Powlison case study**

Joanne is a divorced woman in her 30’s with two children, 8 and 4 years old. She was grievously betrayed by her husband – years of secret adulteries, physical and verbal abuse. She became a more committed Christian in the aftermath of the divorce, and she has started to come to your church and small group Bible study.

Joanne has many “felt needs.” She is a “needy, hurting” person. She is trying to put back together the wreckage of her life. She is lonely. She feels profound hurt and confusion. She wants friends. She wants someone to take care of her and make everything better. She wants a husband who will love her above all: she aches for physical companionship, someone to just hold her. She wants “support” from the church and your group, wants people to listen to her and care for her.

She is under a good deal of financial pressure. She is new in the work force and can only find a low paying job. She must arrange child care, which causes inconvenience, financial strain, and guilt. Predictable, her husband is delinquent in support. Every interaction with him is an occasion for hard words between them, for more hurt, for threats of endless and expensive legal maneuvers.

Joanne is having trouble with the children. She tries her best to spend time with them, keep house, raise them. But often they are unruly, manipulative, and act up to get attention. She has trouble disciplining them, and ends up doing a lot of pathetic pleading with them which leads to shouting, threats, and occasionally, slapping them on the face. On Saturdays her husband takes them out and spoils them: McDonald’s, amusement park, new toys. He never disciplines them. He doesn’t have to, because they are so entertained when they are with him, and when they act up he can simply say, “If you keep doing that I’ll take you back to you mother.” He’s the nice guy; she’s the bad guy. She is the one that always has to say “no” because there’s no money, or she’s dog-tired, or they’re acting up. When the children say she’s “mean” it tears her heart out with despair and rage. It’s true…and she feels very guilty. But it’s not true…she’s trying to love them and the whole situation is so unfair.

Joanne is very open about what she’s feeling and thinking – raw, desperate and bitter honesty. She sees – rightly – that covering up her feelings is a lie. When she talks she pours out a chaotic and contradictory mix of grief, fear, anger, pain, loneliness, frustrated desires, hopelessness, self-pity, guilt, accusations, self-accusation, worry, rationalizing, blameshifting and misery. Her problem is not “tidy.” You can’t say, “This is an anger problem” or “This is a problem of worry.” Her problem is as large and deep as life itself. Her problem is life! She wants comfort, commiseration ad pity. She wants “Help”: somehow, something, anything. She’s bitter at her husband. She doubts God’s love: “A sovereign God who is in control of everything; a God of pure love and goodness…and *this* mess?”

She talks about a younger man at work who seems to be making advances towards her. In passing she mentions things that sound like she encourages it and gets some sort of charge out of the attention. Perhaps she wants to date this non-Christian, or there is some incipient immorality. She goes through cycles alternating among attraction, guilt and defensiveness.

**LOIS: CASE STUDY**

**David Powlison case study**

Lois is a 39 year old woman. She was married at 19 because she was pregnant, and was divorced at 22. She subsequently got her bachelor’s degree in elementary education, and has been teaching for 12 years in a local public school. She has found a lot of meaning and stability in her job – especially during rough times emotionally – and has received consistently good evaluations from supervisors.

Lois had a number of short-term sexual relationships with men over the years, but never remarried. Her daughter, Renee, left home after high school, and is working in a beauty shop and living with her boyfriend. Lois’s relationship with Renee was basically positive over the years, and she looks to that, too, as a source of stability and “being forced to be responsible” over the years.

At various times she drank heavily and used marijuana recreationally. She never considered herself an alcoholic, for she could stop at will when she got alarmed at what seemed to be excessive use. She is slightly pudgy, and is concerned over a recent ten pound weight gain which she attributes to “snacking to calm my nerves.” She dresses modestly and “middle of the road” – neither flashy nor dowdy – and uses makeup only occasionally and sparingly. “I try to keep myself looking reasonably well, but I’ve never been too obsessed with what I look like, like some women are.” She used to watch TV for a couple of hours every night, but now does that only 2 or 3 nights a week.

She had gotten herself rather deeply in debt during her marriage and schooling. Despite occasional “binge” purchases that set her back, she has been basically free of debt for the last 5 years. She sees herself living “hand-to-mouth,” however, and not able to save. She worries that she has not been able to save in an IRA for a downpayment on a house. She views her teacher’s pension as an important source of security.

At various times she struggled with depression, even seeking psychiatric help on one occasion. She frequently oscillated between fearful “mousiness” and angry rages with her husband and boyfriends. Feelings of anxiety, failure and self-hatred are “endemic and sometimes become epidemic.” The intensity and frequency of these reactions and feelings lessened somewhat as she “grew up” in her 30s.

Her family upbringing was, in her words, “bizarre.” Her father was “brilliant, and he’d always tells us that he failed to get his PhD only because he insulted his advisor who was a total jerk and deserved it. He was a believer in telling people exactly what he thought of them, which wasn’t too pleasant for me because he didn’t think too much of me.” Her father was an alcoholic who was constantly losing jobs and alienating people by his aggressive and “paranoid” ways. “I think I inherited some of his intelligence, for I always did well in school. I think I would have felt more hurt by him if I hadn’t seen him as a ‘crazy man’ even from when I was in elementary school. I usually tried to keep my distance.” Lois sees herself as a lot like her mother in personality – “only not so extreme” – in being prone to passivity, fear, anxiety, and only occasional anger. “I’m a pleaser and a follower, not an initiator, leader or aggressor. I’m like her, but I was never close to her.” The family lived in 8 different towns during Lois’s school years. “I basically got pregnant and married in order to have an excuse to get out of the house. I never really had any friends, and I fell for the first person who was nice to me.” She had no formal religious upbringing.

Her father is living 3000 miles away. “Since I became a Christian I’ve been able to forgive him, and start up a reasonably cordial relationship – I write or phone every few months, and have visited for a couple days on two occasions. He’s still a bit of a trial, and it would take a miracle for us to ever really be close. He’s this same old self, though each of his negative ways is less intense.” Lois’s mother had divorced him after the children left home, and she died ten years ago. “I grieved. I coped. I think I feel sadder and feel regrets more now that I’m a Christian, because we were never really close. She was too much wrapped up in her own problems.”

Lois has a brother 7 years older with whom she has never been close. “We each kind of tried to make the best of it, and were too far apart to ever be more than next-door neighbors who feel a kind of arm’s-length curiosity about the other. He’s had a couple divorces, but seems to be doing pretty well running his small business.”

Four years ago she was converted to Christ through the testimony of a neighboring woman who had become a friend. The sexual immorality and substance abuse stopped immediately. The slow curve of improvement in negative feelings and actions – anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, fearfulness – took a rather marked positive jump, though she is still plagued by these things to a certain degree. The model of other Christian women has really helped her to grow both personally and in having some confidence to think about getting involved with a man again, “this time in the right way which I didn’t know anything about before.” She wants to serve the Lord with her gifts, and has gotten active in teaching Sunday School and attending a few courses in the church’s weekly Bible school. She has 3 Christian women whom she feels close to, all of whom are married. One of the couples hosts a weekly Bible study and fellowship group which Lois attends regularly and finds to be a place where “people are honest and pray for one another in a way that’s not just surfacey.”

She has sought counseling from you. Her presenting problem is two-fold: “I’m depressed, afraid and panicky in my own heart. I know that Jesus died for my sins, but sometimes I just don’t feel it and feel that God must hate me. And things are angry and tense between me and Willy.” She has been dating Willy for about 8 months. He is a Christian man her age, and was never married. He has been a Christian since his teens, and is both knowledgeable in the Bible and committed to diaconal ministry. He is a high school graduate, and works as a foreman in a factory.

They met at the Bible study. They both found it easy to talk with one another – until recently. They have the same basic goals for lifestyle and ministry, and have felt a real “click.” They would like to marry, and their mutual friends think it is a natural. But their relationship is having problems. “He’s the one, I know it, but why am I getting so uptight?” she has become very picky at his shortcomings, and both of them hate that. They have had arguments which they have not been able to solve, so trust has been diminishing. There are “taboo topics” which they can’t approach without tensions: setting a date for the marriage; he really hopes to have children and she is cold to the idea; her depression or pickiness and his grumpiness, etc. Lois has a terror of being abandoned and rejected, “of failing for the umpteenth time, and this time as a Christian.” There is no sexual impropriety in their relationship, for both are very careful and circumspect.

They have prayed, read the Bible and Christian books, attended several seminars and retreats, sought the advice and prayers of friends, without being able to lick either the personal or relationship problems. “Maybe this sound contradictory, but my devotional life has actually gotten more regular and more meaningful since we’ve been having problems. I always had trouble being consistent, and I actually think I feel closer to the Lord than I did a year ago.” Willy does not want to seek counseling at this time. But Lois says, “That’s OK, because I really think that a lot of the problem is me, not us, and if I can change it will make a big difference. I’ve tried to do the right things, and I think I’ve improved, but I still get angry and negative as a knee-jerk reaction. Then I feel so guilty. I always ask his forgiveness after, because the Lord convicts me instantly. Willy forgives me, but I wallow around being depressed. And then I hurt him again, or he hurts me. I can tell he’s got his guard up and is confused about whether I love him or not and whether he can trust me. Believe it or not, I’m getting better. I don’t get *so* panicky when he’s angry at me, and I more easily think of loving things to do for him. But I just still feel stuck. Maybe it’s that I’m not moving fast enough. He can be grumpy at me and I act as if it’s the end of the world. Oh, one other thing you ought to know is that I get extra touchy and negative when I’m overtired or around the time of my period. I’m on a committee at the school involved in redesigning the curriculum, and that has meant a lot of extra meetings and work which, on top of everything else, has had me pretty worn out.”