

Introduction

Life is not what it is suppose to be! Heartache, guilt, shame, grief, anxiety, hopelessness, fear, and confusion touch every part of our lives. Where does one turn for relief and help? Our minds are flooded with questions and obsessive thoughts: Who am I? Am I normal or is something wrong with me? Will anyone ever love me for who I am? How can I make it to the next day if I don't want to live another day? I can't imagine living like this for the rest of my life! Why me? Why do I have to suffer? Why is life so hard? What is the purpose of life? Can I ever change? These deeply personal and practical questions have shaped our understanding of counseling. But should the reality and difficulty of our human experience determine the essence, means, and goal of 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.

In order to understand what counseling is all about, we must begin with God since we are created in His image, redeemed by His Son Jesus Christ, and sustained by His Spirit as we live in His world. We are not able to make sense of our lives in this world apart from God's wisdom and grace as expressed and displayed throughout His redemptive story. Every aspect of life and ministry must flow from the gospel, to include the ministry of counseling.

THE GOSPEL

The gospel is the good news of God displaying His glorious power (Rom. 1:16) and merciful love (Eph. 2:4) as He brings His people back to a right relationship with Himself through the saving and final work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The shocking reality of God's initiating and unconditional love is seen in the fact "while we were enemies we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10). The apostle Paul summed up what it meant to give his life completely to the gospel by proclaiming he was "determined to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The gospel also points to Jesus as our Savior King who ushered in the kingdom of God and is advancing His rule and reign in this world as He claims, gathers, and redeems His people.

The Gospel's Relational Themes

The undeniable themes of the gospel can be seen in the dynamic relationship between our triune God and us: (1) the patience, mercy, sovereignty, justice, wrath, forgiveness, and love of God the Father, (2) the rebellious, hopeless, self-exalting, idolatrous, and unbelieving nature of all men and women, (3) the humble, sinless, sacrificial, self-giving, and redeeming life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose death reconciled our relationship with the Father, and (4) the abiding, comforting, and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, who brings about progressive gospel change in and through us as we live as a family in the kingdom of God by faith in Christ.

The nature of the world stands in stark contrast to the nature of the gospel, where the greatness and love of God is revealed through the cross of Christ--"glory in shame, wisdom in folly, power in weakness, victory in defeat."¹ Consequently, life in the kingdom of God is radically different from our natural inclination and reason but is totally consistent with the character of our holy God.

Personally knowing, experiencing, and believing these gospel themes not only enables us to live out the gospel, but also equips us to help others live out the gospel, all by the grace of God. The ultimate goal of the gospel is the glory of God, reflected in us as his people who are being renewed into the image of God as the body of Christ and who worship Him with our whole lives (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Rom. 12:1; Col. 1:28).

¹ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church*, p. 170.

THE GOSPEL ENABLES LOVE

Love is a major theme throughout the gospel. Jesus explained that the two Great Commandments, otherwise known as God's radical double-love command, are a summary of all of God's commands and are the key to eternal life (Matt. 22:36-40; Mk. 12:38-41; Luke 10:25-29). On this side of heaven, God realizes we will fail to fulfill this double-love command, but Christ perfectly fulfills this call to love through His sinless life. God enables what He commands. God demands we love; God supplies such love.

... the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom. 5:5)

God desires for each of His children to come to Him with a broken and dependent heart that pleads for God's mercy and grace to love like Christ. The mission of the gospel flows out of these two overarching love commands.

The First Love Command

'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' (Matt. 22:37; cf. Deut. 6:5; 10:12)

We are to know and love God with our whole life (cf. Rom. 12:1). Since we no longer live, but Christ lives in us, we are to live no longer for ourselves but for Him who died and rose again for us (cf. Gal. 2:20, 2 Cor. 5:14-15; Matt. 16:24). Jesus is our greatest treasure (Matt. 6:21; 13:44; 19:21). Knowing Him is of surpassing value (cf. Phil. 3:8) and in His presence, we experience ultimate joy and eternal pleasures (Ps. 16:11).

Given the first love command, we are called to help our members grow in their personal, intimate knowledge of and affections for God. God's primary means for such growth in grace are His Word and prayer in private and in community.

The Second Love Command

'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' (Matt. 22:39; cf. Lev. 19:18)

We are often fooled by our assessment of how well we love God. We think we love God when we pray with eloquence, when we teach with all knowledge, or when we sacrifice all of our possessions for the sake of the gospel. But if we do not love others, we do not love God (1 Cor. 13:1-3; Jas. 3:9-10). God issues the second love command as a watertight pathway demonstrating our true love for God—Jesus states if we love one another, we love God and will be known as His children and disciples (John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:10, 14; 1 John. 4:12-21). According to the second love command, before we can love others according to the gospel, we must know how we should love ourselves in a way that glorifies God.

Loving Self

Inherent in God's created design is a sense of self-care. There are many practical ways we love ourselves—eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, and sleeping when tired. Avoiding danger and seeking safety, pursuing relationships, and grieving the death of loved ones are additional examples of how we love ourselves. However, because of our sinfulness, our created design for self-care is twisted as our self-love rule our thoughts, affections and will. Christ took our sin, died our death, and made us one with Him so that His love would rule our hearts.

So how should we love ourselves in light of the gospel? We love ourselves the best when we love God the most. God, as our Creator and Redeemer, loves us more than we can ever love ourselves. God, through His Spirit and living word, gives life and satisfaction to our souls. Therefore, the first love command is the key to loving ourselves. But there is a paradox associated with the gospel life:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.—we must lose our life to gain our life; we must deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Christ.
(Matt. 16:24-25)

The gospel calls us to a life of self-forgetfulness so that we can worship God with our whole heart, living fully for Him, trusting He will care for us and satisfy us above and beyond what we could ever imagine or think.

Given this understanding of self-love in light of the gospel, we are called to preach the gospel to ourselves as we struggle in our relationship with God due to our unbelief ...

"Is God who He says He is?" "Does God really care about me?" "Does He love me?" "Why did God let this happen to me?" "God seems so far away." "God seems like an angry judge, a disappointed father, etc." "God will never forgive me for what I have done!" "His promises don't apply to me ..." "Why doesn't God answer my prayers ..." "Why doesn't he change me?" "I don't believe God's will and commands are best for me or good for me."

We need to fight for the gospel to define and guide our most intimate relationship, our most true and important identity, and our divine calling to love and be like Christ.

Loving Others

By God's design we are not meant to live the Christian life alone, but with others. God designed us as relational beings, as a reflection of our triune God. God's primary means for growth in grace are relationships—with Him and with others. Now that we know how we should love ourselves, we now know how to love others in light of the gospel. We are called to love others in such a way that helps them to know, experience, and believe in God and His redeeming love through the finished and forgiving work of Christ. Such rich mercy and gracious love compels others to love the Lord with their whole lives (2 Cor. 5:14-15; Rom. 12).

Given this understanding of how we are called to love others in an intentional, redemptive way, we are to engage others with the love and forgiveness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:31-5:2), as we bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2) and live united as the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-6). Such redemptive relationships equip us for gospel ministry and serve as a means to accomplish the two-fold mission of the gospel.

THE GOSPEL MISSION

In view of God's two-fold command to love, **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.

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!

A Battle of Unbelief

There is a relentless battle raging between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. Our struggle to live out the gospel is a spiritual battle (cf. Eph. 6:12), a battle of faith. Put negatively, our struggles in the Christian life deal primarily with our **battle with unbelief**—unbelief in the God of the gospel and the relevancy of His presence, the guarantee of His promises and the reality of His power. Our unbelief directly impacts the *affections of the heart*, the *thoughts of the mind*, and the *decisions of the will*.

(Heb. 3:12-14)—*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, **unbelieving heart** that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.*

(Rom. 15:13)—*Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace **in believing**, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

(1 John 3:21-23)—*Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: **to believe** in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and **to love** one another as he commanded us.*

Therefore, a growing **belief** in the God of the gospel is what is at the core of change and our struggle with **unbelief** is at the core of our sinfulness.² But praise God that our faith is a gift that comes from Him versus us trying harder and harder to do better!

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8)

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

Martin Luther wrote in the preface to his commentary on Galatians:

No external work of sin happens, after all, unless a person commit himself to it completely, body and soul. In particular, the Scriptures see into the heart, to the root and main source of all sin: unbelief in the depth of the heart...Furthermore, before good or bad works happen, which are the good or bad fruits of the heart, there has to be present in the heart either faith or unbelief, the root, sap and chief power of all sin

Charles Spurgeon highlighted the treachery of our unbelief:

Spurgeon, Morning, November 7
"Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands." Isaiah 49:16

² See Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life*, Ch. 7, Piper, *Future Grace*

No doubt a part of the wonder which is concentrated in the word "Behold," is excited by the unbelieving lamentation of the preceding sentence. Zion said, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my God hath forgotten me." How amazed the divine mind seems to be at this wicked unbelief! What can be more astounding than the unfounded doubts and fears of God's favoured people? The Lord's loving word of rebuke should make us blush; he cries, "How can I have forgotten thee, when I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands? How darest thou doubt my constant remembrance, when the memorial is set upon my very flesh?" O unbelief, how strange a marvel thou art! We know not which most to wonder at, the faithfulness of God or the unbelief of his people. He keeps his promise a thousand times, and yet the next trial makes us doubt him. He never faileth; he is never a dry well; he is never as a setting sun, a passing meteor, or a melting vapour; and yet we are as continually vexed with anxieties, molested with suspicions, and disturbed with fears, as if our God were the mirage of the desert. "Behold," is a word intended to excite admiration. Here, indeed, we have a theme for marvelling. Heaven and earth may well be astonished that rebels should obtain so great a nearness to the heart of infinite love as to be written upon the palms of his hands. "I have graven thee." It does not say, "Thy name." The name is there, but that is not all: "I have graven thee." See the fulness of this! I have graven thy person, thine image, thy case, thy circumstances, thy sins, thy temptations, thy weaknesses, thy wants, thy works; I have graven thee, everything about thee, all that concerns thee; I have put thee altogether there. Wilt thou ever say again that thy God hath forsaken thee when he has graven thee upon his own palms?

A Definition of Gospel Counseling³

Given that unbelief is at the heart of our struggle to live out the gospel ...

*Gospel counseling is a way of loving one another by **understanding** the struggles of unbelief and lies in the midst of life and suffering through listening to and exploring the heart, while **proclaiming** how Christ and His gospel truths apply in deeply personal and particular ways, so that we can live out and grow in the gospel by faith in community, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.*

Gospel counseling is an aspect of gospel ministry that represents the inter-personal ministry of the Word in which every Christian is called to participate. In less "technical" terms, the essence of counseling is helping one another to understand and apply the gospel to the details of life so that we can live the gospel. The term "gospel" used as a verb (to gospel) is synonymous to the activity of counseling—"we are called to gospel (counsel) one another."

This gospel-driven definition of counseling is broken down and explained phrase by phrase. Each phrase after "loving one another" describes the details of how and why gospel counseling fulfills the second great commandment and is a critical component of gospel mission.

Loving One Another ...

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things: ⁸Love never fails; (1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

The gospel calls us to love others. However, because of our own sinfulness, coupled with living in a sinful world dominated by evil forces, we fail to love God whole-heartedly and to love others in a way that helps them to love God whole-heartedly. This call to love is a reflection of the second love command. Jesus talks straight by telling us that we are called to live by a new commandment, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34).

³ The term "gospel counseling" is from Steve Timmis, 2005 counseling training—The Crowded House Network.

Love takes time. Love initiates. Love requires patience and mercy. Love speaks gospel truths. Love requires sacrifice. Love requires redemptive vision. Love points to Christ for hope. These aspects of love are themes of the gospel. Getting involved and bearing the burdens of others in the realities of life and relationship is an act of love (Gal. 6:2). Such love is a living portrait of Christ and the gospel.

By Understanding Through Listening and Exploring the heart ...

He who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him (Prov. 18:13).

*A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, But a man of **understanding** draws it out (Prov. 20:5)*

*But everyone must be **quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger**; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. (Jas. 1:19-20)*

Listening is a gospel practice—we must listen to God, self, and others. Good listening goes hand-in-hand with good questions. We tend to talk more than listen. We tend not to explore what we hear and often make assumptions that lead to a wrong understanding of the complexities of their struggle. The goal of listening and exploring is to better understand the person's story, which includes sin, weakness, and suffering, and point them to Christ and the gospel so that they can come to understand their own story in light of God's larger story of redemption.

The Struggles of Unbelief and Lies in the Heart in the Midst of Life and Suffering ...

*Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an **evil, unbelieving heart** that falls away from the living God. But **encourage one another** day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12-13ff).*

*... we work with you **for your joy**, because it is **by faith you stand firm** (2 Cor. 1:24b)*

*I will continue with all of you for **your progress and joy in the faith**, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. ²⁷Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you **stand firm** in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel (Phil. 1:25b-27)*

Our stories reveal a tangled web of beliefs about God, self, and others. The way we interpret life and its struggles shape how we see and respond to life. The finite and corrupt human heart can latch onto misunderstandings and/or lies (wrong beliefs) and can struggle to believe that which is true (unbelief). Our beliefs shape every aspect of life—how we relate to others (intimacy), how we see ourselves (identity), and how we choose to live (imitation). The struggles of wrong beliefs and unbelief must be evaluated and compared to the truths of God and His gospel. We must fight to live by faith so that we can stand firm in Christ with joy, but we cannot do this alone. We need others to help us in this fight for joy and faith in Christ.

While Proclaiming How Christ and His Gospel Truths ...

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that **bear witness about me** (John 5:39)*

*For the word of God is **living and active**. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it **judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart**. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Heb. 4:12-13)*

All we have to offer one another of eternal significance is Christ and His gospel, which is conveyed most effectively and powerfully through the word of God. We must seek Christ and be reminded of

His presence, power, and promises seen most clearly in the Scriptures. We must remind one another of Christ's continual invitation:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30)

We must share a powerful, redemptive vision of hope, change, and love rooted in the gospel. We must present our Redeemer in all of His glory!

Apply In Deeply Personal and Particular Ways ...

¹³*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*
¹⁴*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*
¹⁵*My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*
¹⁶*Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them. (Ps. 139:13-16)*

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil... For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:14, 17-18)

Just as Christ lived amongst us in deeply personal and specific ways, He ministers to us in deeply personal and specific ways through His word and people by His Spirit. Gospel truths are meant to hit broadly and specifically—for example, gospel truths speak to all marriages, yet apply to the issues of each unique marriage.

So That We Can Live Out and Grow in the Gospel by Faith in Community ...

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb. 11:1, 6)

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Gal. 2:20).

... everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23b)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Gal. 5:6)

When we are saved by grace, not only do we have supernatural life in Christ, but God places us into His family so that we can help one another to live out the gospel. This is by design. Our God in His infinite wisdom designed us to receive help, care, comfort, encouragement and love in community. There is a simple, yet powerful pattern of care described in the gospel:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor. 1:3-4)

The God of all comfort is the source of comfort in all of our troubles! But notice the pattern—God comforts us so that we can comfort others with the comfort received from Him. God is glorified when we care for one another's burdens in community (cf. Gal. 6:2).

In the end, it's all about the church being the church, demonstrating what it means to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, helping each other live out the gospel by faith—this is the essence of the two-fold mission of the gospel: (1) to build up the body of Christ in love and (2) to advance the kingdom of Christ in the world. We cannot live out the gospel alone but we need one another in gospel community. This is why we strongly encourage every member to be a part of a Community Group (CG).

By the Grace and Power of the Holy Spirit

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:13)

1I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms ... (Eph. 1:18-20)

4For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. (1 Thess. 1:4-6)

Living out the gospel by faith in community requires the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit who lives and works in us. We have to be reminded that we no longer live but it is Christ who lives in us, compelling us to love by faith. Our hope and joy is not found in our circumstances or relationships, but in Christ—his Spirit reminds us of these profound truths over and over again as live by faith and help others to do the same.

What Gospel Counseling Is Not ...

- *Just quoting or prescribing Bible verses and prayer as the primary method of counsel.* God's word is living and active and He hears and responds to our prayers, but He also uses His people and difficulties to help us to understand how word and prayer can be applied not only to the specific struggles of life, but ultimately to our relationship with the living God.
- *Simply pointing out outward sins or simply pointing out idols of the heart.* (see excerpt from Ken Sande's chapter "Gently Restore: Just Between the Two of You" from his book *The Peacemaker*, found in appendix).
- *Following a fixed paradigm of method and sequence—session 1, 2, 3, etc.* Despite some predictable dynamics of human nature and sin, life and relationships cannot be lived out by a strict formula. We have to remember God is the only one who is in control and we are called to point others to Christ as we help them better understand and apply the gospel to every aspect of life.
- *Merely teaching biblical principles in general and expecting the same "results" in each person.* Even though we are all made in the image of God, we are each uniquely made, have different life stories and experiences. God calls us to understand each other's stories and He works according to His timetable and means.
- *Done by one who has arrived and has already figured out life.* Only Jesus lived a perfect life and had the mind of God. We are all desperately wicked and hopeless and are all in desperate need for Jesus!

Counseling is the Ministry of the Word

David Powlison offers a helpful distinction between the **public** ministry of the word, which we experience during Sunday gathered through gospel-saturated liturgy, songs, prayers, and sermon; the **personal** ministry of the word, which we experience as we get alone with God through His word and prayer—this is commonly referred to as our private devotions or “quiet time;” and the **relational** ministry of the word, which we can experience in every one of our relationships—with our friends, family, spouse, children, co-workers. Counseling should be understood as the relational ministry of the word, which can occur casually or intentionally in everyday conversations. These conversations can take place in an informal setting in a home or coffee shop, or in the more formal setting of an office.

A quote by Richard Baxter, a pastor in England during the 17th century known for his faithful service in the ministry of the word, makes a shocking statement regarding gospel ministry:

“I have found by experience, that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse in half an hour’s close discourse, than they did from ten years’ public preaching. I know that preaching the gospel publicly is the most excellent means, because we speak to so many at once. But it is usually far more effectual to preach it privately to a particular sinner ...” (Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 18)

J.I. Packer, a contemporary theologian, comments on Baxter’s assertion ...

“Therefore personal catechizing and counseling, over and above preaching, is every minister’s duty: for this is the most rational course, the best means to the desired end. So it was in Baxter’s day. Is it so now?” (J.I. Packer, introduction—*The Reformed Pastor*, 18)

These thoughts offered by Baxter and Packer reminds us of Paul’s statement in Colossians 1:28-29, “*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*” Paul understood the challenge and goal of gospel ministry. The question is, “To what end do we labor and give our whole lives to God for the sake of the gospel?”

COUNSELING BY THE CHURCH

Counseling that flows from the gospel, reflects the essence of gospel ministry and must be done by the church—the people of God. God calls every member of His church to the relational ministry of the Word where people labor with their entire lives to help those in the church family to grow in maturity in Christ (cf. Col. 1:28-19) and to help those outside the church family to see their need for Christ as Savior and Redeemer.

Counseling doesn’t have to be done inside the four walls of a “church building” but by the church. Helping others to live out the gospel and to submit to the gospel is what it means to “be the church.” Therefore, the renewal of counseling is not to have such a ministry done **in** the church but **by** the church, so the church can **be** the church.

But what is the big deal about counseling being done by the church? With the growing influence of modern psychology over the past century, the people of God turned to therapists to seek help with their struggles. Pastors and church members lost confidence in God and lost sight of how gospel truths are relevant and critical in dealing with the difficulties of life in a sinful world.

According to an article reporting on secular research findings, there are four major therapeutic factors associated with change:⁴ (1) 40% - social support, life events outside of counseling, (2) 15% - expectancy of receiving help (placebo effect), (3) 30% - common factors in counseling - warmth, empathy, acceptance, encouragement of risk-taking, etc. and (4) 15% - particular counseling

⁴ Siang-yang Tan, research article in *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, “The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy: Implications of Outcome Research Findings for Clinical Practice,” Volume 14.

techniques. Looking at this list while comparing “apples to apples,” the church can provide the first three therapeutic factors, totaling 85% probability of helping someone to change. Given the last factor of particular counseling techniques, we believe the deep, robust and dynamic counseling that flows from the gospel eclipses the integrated psychotherapies. In reality, God is not limited to these four factors when it comes to helping someone who is crying out for mercy, since our battle is not against flesh and blood and our arsenal supersedes anything of this world.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Eph. 6:10-14).

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Why should the church be involved with counseling? Sojourn and every church throughout the world are called to be involved in the relational ministry of the Word known as counseling. God is doing a mighty work, not only in bringing His church back to the gospel for both Christians and non-Christians, but also equipping and mobilizing His people to build up the body of Christ and to advance the kingdom of Christ in and through the gospel.

SOJOURN COUNSELING MINISTRY

Sojourn Counseling is not to be misunderstood as a counseling center, but as a ministry focused on equipping members and leaders to live out the gospel and help others to do the same—this is gospel ministry.

Sojourn Counseling has four broad components: (1) **caring** for those in the midst of life struggles and suffering, (2) **equipping** members and ministry leaders in gospel counseling through two primary venues: Group Life (for church renewal) and SEED (for city renewal) (3) **engaging** the therapeutic culture inside and outside the church, and (4) **networking** with ministry leaders from other churches across the city and country through a gospel counseling network.

Caring in the Midst of Life Struggles and Suffering

Caring in Community

The primary context for providing care for our members is through our community groups. So whenever someone expresses a need for counseling, we work to provide gospel care through our Sojourn Groups structure. We take this approach for several reasons: (1) We believe God designed us individually and as His church to learn and grow in gospel community (cf. Col. 1:28-19); (2) We believe “private counseling” (which meets for 1 hour per week with a counselor) is insufficient. We need to be immersed in a community where we experience mutual love, encouragement, and challenge to live out the gospel by faith (cf. Heb. 12:10); and (3) We are committed to a equipping our members to do the work of ministry (cf. Eph. 4:12-16).

For those requesting care who are already in a community group, they are encouraged to take the following steps:

- (1) They are asked to share their struggle with their Community Group (CG) leader. They are encouraged to invite other trusted group members and/or friends to journey with them. Most will be surprised to learn when they share their struggles, others will be able to relate and help them in the same way they have been comforted by God and others (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-5).
- (2) If their CG leaders are not able to help, the leaders are instructed, with the requestors’ permission, to ask for help from their Group Coach, who is more experienced and equipped.

At this point, the Coach may get directly involved in offering care and will guide the CG leaders, or designated individual/couple, through the process of care and counseling.

- (3) If additional help is needed, then the coach may ask a Counseling Coach or Elder for assistance. The Counseling deacon would then take lead in the care while a CG leader(s) and/or group member(s) or friend(s) observe, learn, and participate in the redemptive process.

The Pastor of Care and Counseling and Shepherding Elders get involved if there is a counseling crisis that cannot be handled by the community group and coaching leaders.

The Elders also get involved when those requesting care are not in a community group. The Shepherding Coordinator will pass on a care request to one of the Elders and the Elder will work with his assigned Group Coaches to connect those requesting care to a specific community group based on the following decision process: (1) Who will lead in the counseling? (2) Who should be equipped—the Group Coach, the CG leader, and/or CG member(s)? (3) Who needs to come alongside and journey with those receiving the care? Other factors involved in determining the answers to the questions above: (1) Who is available? (2) Who is equipped? (3) Who has the experience to deal with this particular situation? (4) Are there any geographic considerations for gospel community.

For those requesting care who are not in a community group, they are encouraged to take the following steps:

- (1) Complete the Sojourn Care Request Form on the Sojourn Website.
- (2) The Shepherding Coordinator will review their Care Request Form and assign them to a Groups Pastor who will work with his Group Coaches to connect them with a hand-selected CG based on geography, existing friendships and/or counseling needs.
- (3) Once in the community group, they will (1) receive the immediate benefits of living life in gospel community and (2) begin working begin journeying with assigned ministry leaders who will help them understand and apply the gospel to their particular life struggle. The ministry leader(s) counseling may be a part of Sojourn Groups or Sojourn Counseling, or both.

Caring During a Crisis

In urgent cases when crisis counseling is needed, the most trained ministry leaders will get involved immediately to provide triage, then pull in the necessary people from the relevant church community as soon as possible. In all cases, the elders will be involved to ensure the person(s) receives the best possible care. In some cases, the severity of the situation may require the person(s) in need to be referred to someone in the medical or mental health field for additional testing and/or treatment.

Caring for Our Neighbors

Sojourn's mission is to seek gospel transformation in individual lives, the church, and the world. We believe God grows us not only as we build one another up in love as the body of Christ, but also as we love and serve those outside the church. SEED is Sojourn's intentional mercy ministry aimed at declaring and demonstrating the gospel through relationships and service to our neighbors in the community. Sojourn Counseling works closely with SEED to equip ministry leaders in gospel counseling and provide care to those in the surrounding neighborhoods who express need.

Mercy Monday is set up so that neighbors can be visited in their home, counseling is offered to those seeking help, and redemption groups are offered on Wednesday evenings to help those struggling specifically with drug and alcohol addictions and sexual-related struggles.

Equipping Members and Ministry Leaders in Community

Equipping for gospel ministry is not primarily focused on skills and competencies. Training as emphasized in the Scriptures focuses primarily on growth in knowledge of God and maturity in Christ that results in godliness (Phil. 3:7-11; Col. 1:28; 1 Tim. 4:8; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), or living a life of total dependency and faith in Christ alone—i.e. loving Him above all, deriving our identity in Him and in nothing else, and imitating Him in all respects—resulting in a radical love for others, all for His glory

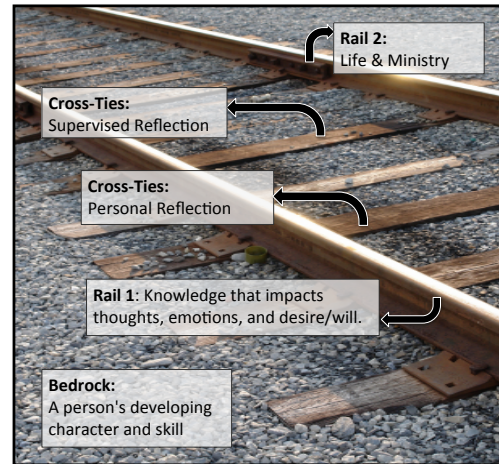
and the advance of His kingdom. But given our sinfulness, the gospel life also includes continual repentance as we turn and cling to Christ in all of life. All such training is preparation for our eternal life with Christ.

A Three-Prong Approach to Equipping

Effective equipping cannot be accomplished with mere classroom or textbook training. Knowledge has to be applied to life and ministry, which in turn, requires personal and supervised reflection to maximize learning and growth. Therefore, equipping strives to incorporate three components: (1) knowledge, (2) experience-life and ministry, and (3) reflection—both personal and supervised.

Sojourn Counseling focuses on equipping the body at three levels: (1) **every member level** where members can learn how to love God and live out the gospel in their own lives and begin to help others do the same at the one-on-one level, (2) **deacon level** where ministry leaders are trained to deal with and equip community group leaders and members to grow in the midst of life difficulties that surface within gospel community, (3) **elder & trainer level** where those who are gifted and have extensive ministry experience train others in gospel counseling. The goal is to have all shepherding elders reach this level of training.

The profound beauty and power of gospel counseling is that the same definition and essence of counseling applies to all three levels. The only element that distinguishes each of the three levels of counseling is depth of character, skills, experience and giftedness.



*Gospel counseling is a way of loving one another by **understanding** the struggles of unbelief and lies in the midst of life and suffering through listening to and exploring the heart, while **proclaiming** how Christ and His gospel truths apply in deeply personal and particular ways, so that we can live out and grow in the gospel by faith in community, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.*

Each person who expresses a desire to serve in Sojourn Counseling will be required to go through standardized training that flows from the gospel message, is consistent with gospel mission, and involves gospel community. For those with previous formal counseling training, we acknowledge and appreciate both their gifts in helping others and their rich experience with human behavior, relationships, and suffering. Those trained in differing schools will find gospel counseling addresses each of these areas in greater depth and intimacy because of the profound and powerful nature of the gospel.

Sojourn desires every person to be on the same page with regards to both our counseling approach and the church's mission. This is why the elders require ministry leaders to go through the Campus Shepherding Training. Those previously trained in counseling may progress, by God's grace, through Sojourn's training with a higher level of astuteness and wisdom as a result of their education and practical experience. Others may be hindered in their development in gospel counseling if they are not able to think and practice beyond their previous formal training and think within a gospel-centered framework.

Engaging the Therapeutic Culture

Whether we are aware of it or not, the contemporary church and culture interprets and responds to life from within a modern psychological framework—not from within a framework shaped by the gospel. This clash of worldviews leads to confusion both within and outside the church. Church members or attendee may battle with competing views on how to understand and deal with their struggles: They may be convinced their problems stem from their circumstances or from some biological disorder or tendency; they may be deceived into thinking that they can get love and support

from the church but they need to see a professional therapist for 'real' help; they may not see that others within the church share the same struggles or think only those who do share the same struggles can understand them; they may think God is nowhere in the details or difficulties of life, or if He is, He might be seen as irrelevant, apathetic, judgmental, or impotent.

Sojourn Counseling is poised to engage the therapeutic culture in several strategic ways by:

- (1) Providing care and counseling to our members and neighbors by showing them how the profound and powerful gospel truths apply to their personal and specific struggles;
- (2) Offering concise resources (books and booklets) that speak to particular life issues;
- (3) Equipping Group Life, SEED, Student and Family, and Counseling ministry leaders through the Campus Shepherding Training;
- (4) Collaborating with psychiatrists and psychologists from within Sojourn and in the Louisville area who understand and believe in the gospel, through on-going discussions and writing projects—showing their field's offerings and limitations in dealing with life struggles such as depression, addictions, anxiety, etc.;
- (5) Working alongside the mental health community and social agencies as we minister to Sojourn family and friends in the surrounding neighborhoods.
- (6) Partnering with the city of Louisville with marriage initiatives aimed at fighting the destruction of marriages and families through divorce. We are prayerfully asking the Lord to raise up people of peace to help us accomplish this gospel initiative.

Networking with Other Churches

Sojourn cannot bring about citywide gospel transformation without locking arms and laboring with sister churches in gospel mission. Sojourn has been blessed with many resources and we have a vision for establishing networks for church-planting, music, the arts, mercy, and gospel counseling. Christ's church cannot be entangled in territorialism and self-promotion. Instead, we must all learn and grow together, battling for the advancement of the kingdom and the building up of the body in love.

Sojourn Counseling has led in building a network of leading churches and pastors engaged in gospel counseling and aims to raise awareness and equip churches in gospel counseling through several strategic ways: (1) offer free courses in gospel counseling to local ministry leaders; (2) train local ministry leaders through collaborative counseling efforts; (3) establish a collaborative gospel counseling website, perhaps through A29 Resurgence, as well as work to strengthen Sojourn Counseling's website; (4) supervise local pastors in gospel counseling; (5) coach and train pastors and ministry leaders in A29 network; and (6) partner with SBTS to develop a modular Master of Arts in Gospel Counseling that incorporates church-based counseling training—curriculum, observation, and supervised counseling.

How Does Gospel Counseling Differ From Typical Christian Counseling?

Most people assume if they see a Christian counselor, they will receive sound biblical guidance. But there can be significant differences between those who call themselves Christian counselors. It is our conviction at Sojourn that some typical approaches to counseling are less than biblical:

- (1) Typically, Christian counselors do not operate from a thoroughly biblical framework but instead practice by integrating modern psychology with theology. Such counseling may offer some helpful guidance but does not begin with, work through, nor end with God and the gospel.
- (2) Typically, Christian counselors considered themselves "professionals"—trained academically and clinically to integrate the various theories of psychology and psychopathology, resulting in correlating psychotherapeutic methods. Trained gospel counselors deal with the depth and complexity of human struggles in a way that frames the situation with God at the center and explains the human predicament in terms addressed by the gospel. The gospel not only speaks to issues addressed by the various models of personality, abnormality, and change, but also eclipses such models by offering life, hope, and redemption found only in the person of Jesus Christ.
- (3) Typically, Christian counselors operate in a private setting separated from the community life of the church. Gospel counseling takes place anywhere and between any Christians who strive

to live out the gospel in community. Gospel counseling intentionally involves others who can journey with those receiving counseling because one hour per week just between counselor and counselee is insufficient. God designed us to grow and change in community as we learn to love and care for one another by faith in Christ.

- (4) Typically, Christian counseling often focuses on disorders as described and diagnosed with the help of the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders); whereas, gospel counseling focuses on the struggles in the relationships between God, self, and others, the dynamics of the heart, and the spiritual dynamics of the flesh, the world, and Satan—such struggles can lead to disorders in the soul and body. As such, gospel counseling requires a deepening knowledge, experience, and belief in the biblical and theological truths of God, self, sin, salvation, suffering, growth in grace, and spiritual warfare.

A Different Vision of Counseling

In modern culture the term "counseling" has come to imply a one-on-one 'professional relationship' between a psychotherapist and a 'patient' or 'client.' Traditional "therapists" or "counselors" are typically licensed by a local or national accrediting body and are subject to the restrictions set by their licensing boards. Therapists usually meet with a 'client' on a weekly or bi-weekly basis in an office setting, provide some form of psychological assessment using secular tools and DSM-IV criteria, set restrictions on personal interactions outside the office, keep a written record, and charge a fee.

We here at Sojourn have a different vision of what counseling can and should involve. In fact, we seek to redeem the term "counseling." It is our belief that meeting once a week with a therapist for one hour does not provide enough support for those who are suffering. Counseling, we believe, can and should take place in a community. We are called to counsel each other on a daily basis – encouraging, challenging, redeeming, and building one another up in the gospel. Nonetheless, we recognize that there are times when we may need someone to journey with us in a more intentional and in-depth way.

God has raised up men and women at Sojourn to provide such care. These individuals have been selected because we believe they have been blessed with the gifts of listening, compassion, wisdom, and insight. Our Gospel Counselors come from a broad variety of backgrounds – some have received training in the mental health disciplines, but many come from other professional backgrounds. All of our counselors have been trained to utilize a gospel framework for understanding and responding to life struggles.

Gospel Counseling and Psychotropic Medication

God designed our body and soul to function in an integrated manner. As a result, soul disorders can contribute to bodily disorders and vice versa. Moreover, given the pervasive effects of living in a fallen world, we recognize there are times in which the body/brain does not function as God designed—in such cases, medical treatment and/or psychotropic medication may be necessary. On the other hand, we DO believe that medications are sometimes overprescribed as a means of providing a "quick fix" for life problems—this results in part from our fast-paced, economically driven medical and therapeutic systems that do not operate from a gospel framework. However, we also recognize that counseling approaches that discourage the use of psychotropic medications may prevent people from seeking treatments that are at times appropriate and necessary. Therefore, we are careful not to advise against the use of medications to counselees since gospel counselors are not trained medical personnel. Additionally, we see the use of medications as an issue of Christian liberty that in some cases may be necessary. Nonetheless, we assert that psychotropic medications alone rarely function as a 'cure all' for life's complex issues.

A helpful way of thinking through the struggles of the body and soul is to consider a spectrum. On one end, the issues are primarily heart and relational in nature (issues such as anger, fear, and escapism). On the other end, the issues are primarily physiological in nature (issues such as dementia and brain injury). There are some issues that can fall in the middle of the spectrum (such as ADHD, depression, etc.). But given the reality we are all made in the image of God, even struggles that are primarily physiological in origin co-exist with heart and relational issues.

No matter where you are on this spectrum, God knows you and His gospel message relates to your situation. Our sovereign God knows our hearts, our bodies, our capabilities, and ultimately our responsibilities before Him and others. Though disordered bodily function sometimes blurs matters of responsibility and capability, we still live in God's world and are called to live in accordance to His ways. Despite whatever weaknesses we may experience, we remain responsible to our call to love God and love others so that God is glorified through our lives.

Sojourn Counseling's Relationships with the Mental Health System and Other Providers

We recognize our members can exercise gospel freedom by choosing to seek care and counseling outside of Sojourn. Therefore, we do not discourage or keep counselees from receiving treatment elsewhere but it is important for them to know the counseling they may receive may not be consistent with counseling that flows from and focuses on the gospel. Moreover, counselees are welcome to work with outside agencies even while receiving care from us; however, we believe the elders and/or ministry leaders can play a vital role in the redemptive process by working with the outside agencies, given that the person receiving counseling provides written consent for such collaboration.

GOSPEL COUNSELING AND MODERN SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY

The following table highlights how counseling that flows from the gospel differs from modern secular psychology, which attempts to understand, explain, and help people in the midst of life’s difficulties apart from God and the gospel:

Comparing Modern Psychology with the Gospel Counseling ...

The Issue	Modern Psychology	Counseling Focused on God & The Gospel
Who Are We? What Drives Us?	Model of Personality— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychologies based on observations and theories about human functioning • Psychologies are analogous to theology 	The Creation of Humanity— [Relationship Created] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created to be dependent and to worship • Created by God, for God, and in the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27; Eph. 2:10) • Created for relationships—God & Others
What is Wrong with Us?	Model of Abnormality— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychopathologies attempt to explain what they perceive to be wrong and the causes of personal struggles and disorders • Typically a disease or disorder model • This worldview can see the chronic struggles of life as mental illness 	The Fall of Humanity— [Relationship Broken] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total Depravity—every aspect of body and soul are disordered by sin. Functional disorders of the body can impact the soul. Soul struggles can also impact the body • Flesh Dynamics—a battle of unbelief—impacts the affections of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, and the decisions of the will • The body & soul fall into disorder when we are not living per God’s design and purpose • [Self—Esteem/Worth/Love/Confidence/Trust] = Worship language (Powlison) • [Self—Image/Concept] = Creation language (Powlison) • Spiritual Battle—Not against flesh & blood (Eph. .6:12)
How Can We Change?	Model of Change— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychotherapies attempt to correct what is wrong through various methods and practices based on a given psychology • Psychotherapies are analogous to practical or applied theology 	The Redemption of Humanity— [Relationship Restored & Reconciled] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The redeeming love of God bears gospel fruit through our relationship with Christ (Rom. 7:4; Col. 1:5-6,10; Gal. 5:22-23) • Individual and body renewal (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:14-16) • Relentless warfare—battle for the heart (cf. Eph. 6:12; Matt. 6:19-24; Rev. 2:4) • A life of faith and repentance and love in the midst of blessings and difficulties of life (Gal. 2:20; 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; 2 Cor. 4:1-18). • A radical notion of suffering that leads to intimacy (Phil. 3:7-10) and glory (Rom. 8:17)

The Issue	Modern Psychology	Counseling Focused on God & The Gospel
What is the Ultimate Destination?	<p>No Hope in Future Life—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to make the best of our bodies, relationships, and existence since this life is all there is—no belief in eternal life, heaven or hell • No theology of suffering except for not allowing one’s suffering or death to go unnoticed or in vain 	<p>The Consummation of Humanity— [Relationship Finalized]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ultimate and final marriage: Christ & His bride (Rev. 19:7-9) • The glory of God will illuminate the new heaven & earth (Isa 60:19; Rev. 21:23; 22:5) • Glorified bodies, perfect submission, increasing joy & pleasure, with no death, pain & crying (1 Cor. 15:42ff; Rev. 21:1-4) • God’s final Judgment & vengeance (Rev 19:2; Rom. 12:19)
The Role of the Helper	<p>The Therapist—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professionally trained, specialist ▪ “Neutral,” “listening, empathetic ear,” “value-free” ▪ Patient—therapist confidentiality ▪ Tends to be eclectic in approach ▪ People can develop great trust and dependency upon the therapist 	<p>God and Others—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Father—Godhead, Sender ▪ Son—Savior, Shepherd, Advocate in Union with the believer ▪ Holy Spirit—Sanctifier, Helper, produces gospel fruit • Others—one another and community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Every follower of Christ is a minister of reconciliation -- an ambassador for Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5: 17ff) ▪ A healthy body caring for itself—“one another” ministry—sharing appropriately (with permission) to best love the other

The Gospel Speaks in a Deeply Psychological Way⁵

- “The Bible is as much about understanding human nature as it is about understanding the divine nature. True self-knowledge and true knowledge of God are reciprocal (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*).”
- “A true psychology must capture how our hearts are hard-wired to love, fear, trust, believe, obey, live for, seek, take refuge, need, serve, worship... either God or anything else.”
- The Scriptures address biblical issues that are psychological—“motivation, behavior, identity, suffering, socialization, self-deception, the gamut of emotions, the content and significance of cognitions (intention, planning, memory, anticipation, attitude, etc.).”

⁵ The following points are taken from David Powlison’s syllabus for Theology and Psychology (PTC 243), February 2005.