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EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING: THE SUFFICIENCY
OF CHRIST FOR SAVING SINNERS

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**EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING: THE SUFFICIENCY
OF CHRIST FOR SAVING SINNERS**

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This thesis is dedicated to all the Saints of God who desire to “speak the truth with his neighbor” (Eph 4:25). Whether a pastor handling the Word of God weekly from the pulpit, a mother speaking God’s truth to her children, the counselor laboring to help a brother or sister put sin to death, or the Christian proclaiming the word of the gospel to the lost, in whatever context truth is spoken, I hope this thesis will greatly enrich your ministry. May God bless your labor.

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PREFACE

As a pastor in the heart of the Bible Belt, nominal Christianity is the norm. Countless people call themselves Christians merely because they attended church as a kid or prayed the sinner's prayer at VBS once upon a time. However, in most of these "professors," the lack of biblical living and conviction is shocking. At the same time, however, we live in a "mental health crisis," wherein countless people believe they have mental disorders, and as a result, counselors, psychologists, and therapists are often seen as authorities concerning matters of the psyche. No matter how secular and materialistic our society becomes, people still and will always deal with the noetic effects of their own sin, the sin of others, and the results of living in a fallen world. Simply put, people are looking for answers as to why they feel so bad, why bad things happen, why they commit so many wrongs, and why people commit so many wrongs against them. And, yes, they are looking for solutions. This thesis is birthed out of a dream to see the church of Jesus Christ rise up in this current day, in the midst of our specific cultural breakdown and psychologized age, and counsel sinners toward faith in Jesus Christ. It is my prayer and hope that the Biblical Counseling Movement, which has labored fervently over the last four decades to defend the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture and to recover the practice of helping people change through scriptural counsel, will use this same fervency to equip churches in pointing sinners and sufferers to Jesus Christ through counseling.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Not all suffering is a result of one's own conscious sin. Many people, Christians included, suffer because of events or circumstances over which they have little or no control such as natural disasters, traffic accidents, and unexpected medical diagnoses. Along with this, generally all people will suffer to some degree because of someone else's sin against them. However, it is also true that people suffer because they believe, desire, and act contrary to God's design.¹ Even when uncontrollable circumstances bring great trials into people's lives, their responses to these circumstances, if contrary to God's design, can increase the magnitude of their suffering and lead to anxiety, anger, depression, drunkenness, sexual immorality, and other sinful responses. As America increasingly rejects biblical values and adopts ideologies and worldviews that are opposed to God's design, physical and emotional suffering will increase as well. Christians should expect their unbelieving neighbors, coworkers, and family members to reap the consequences of "doing what is right in his own eyes" (Deut 12:8) rather than submitting themselves to God's will as revealed in the Bible.² While it is normal for the church to want to see revival in America so that society's norms and values align with God's, the church must also see the present moral crisis as an opportunity to point sinners and sufferers to Jesus Christ and the salvation that comes through faith in him.

¹ See Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 3.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *English Standard Version*.

One of the primary presuppositions of biblical counseling is that the Scriptures are sufficient to address people's problems and to call them to respond in such a way as to please and honor God.³ With this presupposition in mind, biblical counseling naturally should happen in the church. In one sense, biblical counseling is discipleship wherein Christians counsel one another toward greater obedience to Christ informally, using the Scriptures. In another sense, biblical counseling happens when a trained counselor addresses isolated problems in the lives of fellow Christians, who have come to him or her voluntarily, by concentrating on what the Scriptures say about the problems and what the Scriptures say the Christian must do to change. Few biblical counselors would disagree with this. The question that arises, however, is whether a *non-believer* can be counseled biblically.

Although more and more Americans are adopting and living according to unbiblical worldviews, the concern about mental health has increased in the last few years, especially with the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, many major mental health categories such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts have increased dramatically.⁴ While most biblical counselors reject the presuppositions, methods, and even the language of current secular psychology, the evidence is clear that more and more people, especially young people, are being told and believe that they have mental health issues. Again, while the church should mourn this and pray for revival, it must see this rapid increase in mental health concerns as an opportunity to speak gospel truth to people looking for answers to and hope for their problems.

³ See Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, "Our Values," accessed May 28, 2021, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/our-values/>.

⁴ Mental Health America, "The State of Mental Health," accessed May 28, 2021, <https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>. The page reads, "From January to September 2020, 315,220 people took the anxiety screen, a 93 percent increase over the 2019 total number of anxiety screens. 534,784 people took the depression screen, a 62 percent increase over the 2019 total number of depression screens."

The answer to the question of whether biblical counselors can effectively counsel non-believers is multi-faceted. Biblical counselors should not address non-believers' problems in *exactly* the same way they address Christians' problems because this would include instructing non-believers in the biblical principles of "putting off and putting on." Biblical counselors help Christians demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit as opposed to the works of the flesh and call them to live consistently with their newly created life in Christ, life which non-believers do not possess. So, if this is what one means when asking if biblical counselors should counsel non-believers, then the answer is emphatically *no*. Non-believers cannot change in the same way that Christians can change for various reasons that this thesis will address later. Because a bad tree cannot bear good fruit (Matt 7:18) and because "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23), it is futile to call non-believers to produce fruits of righteousness that are inconsistent with their own corrupt nature. Even if the counseling seemed to be effective and the non-believer began to experience better circumstances and feelings, this would be totally a product of the blessing that comes when people live consistently with God's design.⁵ However, these changes will not be pleasing to God because they are not done out of faith in Christ, and calling non-believers to obey God's law without calling them to faith in Christ is legalism, not the holiness that pleases the Lord. This thesis does not suggest that biblical counselors should receive non-believers who are dealing with problems and merely try to help them feel better. As Jay Adams says, "Such people need to discover the meaning that is found in Jesus Christ alone."⁶ Counseling non-believers

⁵ We see this, for example, in marriage. When a husband and a wife commit to a monogamous relationship wherein they seek to love one another and meet one another's needs, they will experience a much more blessed marriage than two people who are unfaithful to one another or who sin against one another in grievous ways. Though they may be non-believers, the closer people live to God's design, the more meaningful and happier their lives will be. However, merely making people happy is not the goal of biblical counseling.

⁶ Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 37.

by calling them to obedience without first bringing them to Christ will not be effective, and counselors should not engage in this practice.

On the other hand, can biblical counselors establish trusted and safe relationships with non-believers wherein the counselors strategically use the non-believers' perceived problems as access points to show them their sin and the results of sin, both temporarily and eternally? While doing this, can counselors point these counselees to find salvation, hope, healing, and restoration in the person and work of Jesus Christ and the gospel? This thesis will demonstrate that there is scriptural warrant for a positive answer to this question.

Familiarity with Literature

Literature in the field of biblical counseling has greatly increased over the last few decades. As the movement has moved away from being confined to pastoral ministry, and as seminaries have created biblical counseling departments and placed great emphasis on the field, a vast array of resources has been written on a host of topics, including theological treatments of issues that regularly come up in counseling situations such as anger, anxiety, depression, pornography, marital issues, parenting, substance abuse, and many others. Though somewhat sparse, there is existing literature on the topic of biblical counseling and non-believers.

Sources on Biblical Counseling and Non-Believers

Bob Kellemen and Kevin Carson edited a book titled *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care through God's People*, which was released in 2015. The book contains a series of chapters written by various authors that deal with several biblical counseling topics. Three chapters in this book are of particular interest to this thesis.

First, Randy Patten and Kevin Carson's chapter, "Biblical Counseling and Evangelism," explores the relationship between the counselor, counselee, and the gospel,

with the focus on the counseling being evangelistic. They argue that, whether the aim of the counseling is for salvation or sanctification, “sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ is of first priority in biblical counseling.”⁷ Whether the counselee is a believer or not, biblical counselors must be faithful to put the gospel of Jesus Christ before their counsees, for only through it can men and women please God. The gospel is the foundation for change for everyone, and counselors must strive to remain gospel-centered. In their chapter, “Biblical Counseling, the Church, and Community Outreach,” Rob Green and Steve Viars detail how they saw an opportunity to use their church’s biblical counseling ministry to serve the community at large. Not only were they interested in serving other Christians in their community, but they argue that “biblical counseling for the community represents an opportunity to win others to Christ.”⁸ These counselors see counseling outreach as a possible way in which the mission of the church may be fulfilled, as the church puts the gospel of Jesus Christ before those who are outside. We tend to think of outreach as door-to-door evangelism or various mercy ministries. While these can very well fall under the category of outreach, counseling as well should be considered a vital opportunity today for effective gospel outreach.

Lastly, Ed Welch and Sam Williams’s chapter, “The Missional Vision of Biblical Counseling,” explores the same themes but focuses on biblical counseling as a means of accomplishing the church’s mission to preach Jesus to all peoples. While biblical counseling starts in the church, it moves out, “beyond the borders of the church” and seeks to “speak winsomely about the counsel of Jesus to the world.”⁹ Welch and Williams “project a vision for biblical counseling as one part of God’s compelling and

⁷ Kevin Carson and Randy Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God’s Care through God’s People*, ed. Bob Kellemen and Kevin Carson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 316.

⁸ Rob Green and Steve Viars, “Biblical Counseling, the Church, and Outreach,” in Kellemen and Carson, *Biblical Counseling and the Church*, 336.

⁹ Ed Welch and Sam Williams, “The Missional Vision of Biblical Counseling,” in Kellemen and Carson, *Biblical Counseling and the Church*, 382.

global mission for this world” by considering biblical counseling in the church, in local communities, and in the world.¹⁰ While all of these chapters have slightly different foci, and though this thesis is not particularly interested in community outreach, these authors all argue that the church should see biblical counseling as a means to win the lost and that it is a biblically responsible form of evangelism.

In addition to these sources, Robert D. Jones has also written extensively on the issue of evangelistic counseling. His article, “Biblical Counseling: An Opportunity for Problem-Based Evangelism,” warns that “counseling and evangelism are ministries that too often remain segregated” and that “the segregation is unbiblical” because the Great Commission entails winning people to Christ and teaching them to obey him daily.¹¹ Jones’s article aims to encourage counselors to seek evangelistic opportunities through the means of counseling and encourages evangelists to learn counseling skills as a means of accomplishing greater success in winning souls for the kingdom. Jones also has a short article titled “Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?” In this article, Jones again argues that biblical counseling, because of its Christ-centered approach, is a sufficient and necessary part of “Christ’s marching orders for every local church.”¹² All churches should be faithful to obey the Great Commission, and many churches could be much more fruitful in this endeavor by seeing their counseling ministry as a means of obeying Christ’s command to preach the gospel to all people and to teach them how to obey.

Lastly on this topic, Steve Viars’s article, “Biblical Counseling as a Community Bridge,” also offers a way forward for churches to think biblically about

¹⁰ Welch and Williams, “The Missional Vision of Biblical Counseling,” 383.

¹¹ Robert Jones, “Biblical Counseling: An Opportunity for Problem-Based Evangelism,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 75.

¹² Robert Jones, “Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?,” Biblical Counseling Coalition, July 17, 2019, https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2019/07/17/does-the-great-commission-require-biblical-counseling/#_ftnref1.

using their counseling ministries as a way not only to serve those within the church but also to reach their communities effectively. Viars argues that biblical counseling allows churches an opportunity to present the gospel compassionately but thoroughly before lost people and to gain trust and good standing with their communities.¹³ Likewise, his book, *Loving Your Community: Proven Practices for Community-Based Outreach Ministry*, explores these themes more exhaustively.¹⁴ As stated earlier, while this thesis is not primarily concerned with counseling as community outreach, evangelistic counseling and community outreach share many of the same assumptions. Because it deals with ministering Christ to sinners and sufferers through counseling, Viars's book is a necessary source for this topic.

Sources on the Sufficiency of Christ and the Sufficiency of Scripture

Along with literature that deals directly with the topic of biblical counseling and evangelism, there is also much work on the topics of the sufficiency of Scripture and the gospel in counseling. Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes's chapter, "The Power of the Redeemer," shows the sufficiency of Christ to save, restore, and grant change. The authors unpack parts of Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and argue that "Jesus Himself was the answer the woman was seeking."¹⁵ This chapter shows that the supremacy of biblical counseling is based upon the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, a major issue of interest for this thesis. Continuing with the theme of the sufficiency of Christ, Robert Cheong's chapter, "The Centrality of the Gospel,"

¹³ Steve Viars, "Biblical Counseling as a Community Bridge," Biblical Counseling Coalition, May 4, 2011, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2011/05/04/biblical-counseling-as-a-community-bridge/>.

¹⁴ Steve Viars, *Loving Your Community: Proven Practices for Community-Based Outreach Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2020).

¹⁵ Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes, "The Power of the Redeemer," in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God's Changeless Truth*, ed. James MacDonald, Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 45.

shows the need for counselors to understand and unpack for counselees the story of God's redemptive purposes in Christ in the gospel. Counselors must beware of approaching the Scriptures with some sort of therapeutic hermeneutic, wherein passages of Scripture are not interpreted in context and through the hard work of exegesis but through the lens of counseling application. Cheong argues that "whether we are dealing with a lust-driven heart, pride-infused slander, or bitterness-laced division, we need the same gospel. Whether we are counseling a non-believer, a newly baptized believer, or a grandmother who has been walking with Jesus for decades, everyone needs the same gospel."¹⁶ And, along the same lines, Robert D. Jones and Brad Hambrick's chapter, "The Problem of Sin," shows the effects of sin in people's lives, which fuels the counselor's work to constantly be pointing counselees to the gospel.¹⁷ Dane Ortlund's *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* is a thoughtful treatment that focuses not so much on the work of Christ and its implications but on Christ's attitude and heart toward people.¹⁸ As Ortlund points out, there are many excellent treatments on what Christ has done; however, works on "who he is" are far more scarce in modern Christian literature.¹⁹ Ortlund's biblical treatment on Christ's heart for sinners and sufferers is a necessary work for a discussion dealing primarily with evangelistic counseling.

Void in Literature

While the authors noted above have produced helpful literature on the biblical warrant and necessity for biblical counseling as a means of evangelism, literature that

¹⁶ Robert Cheong, "The Centrality of the Gospel," in MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars, *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, 158.

¹⁷ Robert Jones and Brad Hambrick, "The Problem of Sin," in MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars, *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, 139-52.

¹⁸ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

¹⁹ Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 15.

carefully examines Jesus's evangelistic encounters in the book of John in order to understand the theology and method for *how* this kind of counseling should be understood and accomplished is lacking. The authors that have focused on evangelistic counseling and outreach have concentrated more on encouraging the Biblical Counseling Movement (BCM), and by extension the local church, in the fact that the Scriptures do allow for biblical counseling to be an acceptable means for winning souls to Christ. They have exhorted counselors in this endeavor and put forth a vision for evangelistic counseling but have not necessarily provided an exegetical framework that demonstrates evangelistic counseling as biblically legitimate. The flavor of this literature has been more exhortative than explanatory, more apologetic than practical. While this work is persuasive, the void in the literature is that counselors and churches need to see, from Scripture, the precise theology and methodology that lies behind counseling non-believers, with the intent on winning them to Christ.

In addition, there is a lack in literature that deals directly and extensively with Jesus's evangelistic and, even therapeutic, calls in the book of John. It is interesting that while much of the BCM's emphasis has been on counseling believers, the Gospel of John, at least in chapters 1-11, shows Jesus primarily engaging with non-believers and calling them to come to him. John 20:30-31, which acts as the Gospel's purpose statement, says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Numerous New Testament scholars and commentators have highlighted the evangelistic function in John's Gospel, many with which this thesis will interact.²⁰ What is needed is a work that

²⁰ For example, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Andrea J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, New American Commentary, vol. 25A (Nashville: B&H, 1996).

connects the ways in which Jesus interacts with non-believers in John's Gospel and ways in which biblical counselors should counsel non-believers today. This thesis is necessary because it seeks to show from the Gospel of John how biblical counselors should understand their counseling relationships with lost counselees.

Thesis

Though American society is becoming increasingly disinterested in Christianity, it is growing favorably toward secular psychology, psychiatry, and counseling. Therefore, the church should meet this desire for help by offering to non-believers a counseling approach that points sinners and sufferers to Jesus Christ and his gospel. Through analyzing the evangelistic encounters of Jesus in the Gospel of John, this thesis offers counselors a biblically faithful counseling approach and practical applications for ministering the gospel to non-believers in counseling.

Outline of Chapters

The following outline of chapters starts with the thesis's introduction, which introduces the conversation surrounding biblical counseling and evangelism, articulates a void in literature, and states the thesis's primary argument. Next, the thesis moves into a defense of biblical counseling and evangelism by interacting with and analyzing the biblical arguments of those who do not see biblical counseling as warranted for unregenerate people and those who do, while ultimately taking the conversation further by offering the Gospel of John's contribution to the conversation. Chapter 3 deals with the exegetical foundations of evangelistic counseling by analyzing Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5. Chapter 4, then, takes the exegetical framework from chapter 3 and analyzes it for theological themes that are significant in evangelistic counseling. Lastly, chapter 5 builds out of the exegetical and theological material from the previous two chapters pertinent methodological considerations for evangelistic counseling. This chapter focuses on the methods that will help Christians develop a

vision for counseling sinners toward faith in Christ as they use Jesus himself as their ultimate example.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This introduction chapter surveys the various literature that deals with biblical counseling as a form of evangelism. Researchers have generally surveyed the BCM by beginning with Jay Adams and his nouthetic approach, then by examining how David Powlison and the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation's (CCEF) approach to counseling built on or moved away from Adam's various methods and beliefs, and finally on to the current state of biblical counseling.²¹ This introduction will not depart from this approach but will seek to enter the discussion surrounding evangelistic biblical counseling. The introduction then demonstrates a void in the literature regarding in-depth, exegetical work on various passages of Scripture that support an evangelistic approach to biblical counseling and then state a thesis that argues that Jesus, in his evangelistic encounters in John's Gospel, counsels the lost to come to him by faith and provides the theological and methodological example for counselors today to operate in this ministry.

Chapter 2: A Defense of Evangelistic Counseling

While chapter 1 introduces the conversation surrounding evangelism and biblical counseling, chapter 2 enters this conversation and gives a defense for the view that biblical counseling is a biblically warranted means of evangelizing the lost, ultimately arguing that Jesus counsels the lost toward belief in him. To do this, I interact primarily with Jay Adams in *Competent to Counsel* and with Wayne Mack in *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling*. I analyze their skepticism toward counseling

²¹ See Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

non-believers and acknowledge their legitimate theological concerns but ultimately present a different perspective that calls us to counsel non-Christians. Furthermore, I interact with other biblical counselors and writers in the field, particularly Robert D. Jones, who do see biblical counseling as an acceptable means of evangelism.²² Also essential to this chapter will be Kevin Carson and Randy Patten's essay, "Biblical Counseling and Evangelism." As I engage in this conversation, however, this chapter establishes my ultimate argument that we see Jesus exemplifying evangelistic counseling in the Gospel of John and that counselors today should similarly counsel sinners to faith in him.

Chapter 3: Exegesis of John's Evangelistic Encounters in John 3, 4, and 5

After contributing to the conversation surrounding counseling and evangelism and contributing this thesis to this conversation, chapter 3 provides biblical warrant for the argument that Jesus shows counselors the method and theology for calling sinners to come to him. I analyze Jesus's evangelistic encounters in the book of John exegetically, consulting various commentaries on the Gospel of John and other theological resources and interacting with New Testament scholars. Chapter 3 examines Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus in John 3, his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, and his encounter with the lame man by the pool in John 5. This chapter focuses on Jesus's interaction with people who are lost. How does Jesus speak to a religious person who does not yet see the glory of the Messiah? How does he speak regarding sin and belief, and in what way does he call those people to himself? How does Jesus interact with those who are clearly in sin and are searching to be satisfied by the things of this world? How does he minister to those with physical problems? How does he use their sin and needs to

²² See Jones, "Biblical Counseling," 75-92; Jones, "Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?"

show them their ultimate need, which is a relationship with him? This chapter addresses these questions by providing the exegetical material for building an evangelistic counseling framework.

Chapter 4: Themes in Jesus's Evangelistic Encounters in John 3, 4, and 5

While chapter 3 deals with Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5 at the textual level, chapter 4 then takes the textual data and analyzes it for evangelistic themes. Various themes that are pertinent for evangelistic counseling arise out of the exegesis of Jesus's evangelistic conversations in John. This chapter, however, is still very theological in nature but does at times show how the themes are significant in evangelistic biblical counseling. Because these evangelistic themes arise out of Jesus's evangelistic conversations with Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman at the well, and with the lame man by the pool, they inevitably address similar counseling situations. For example, analyzing the exegetical data from Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 for evangelistic themes leads to conclusions most pertinent to counseling religious non-believers. The same is true for Jesus's encounters with the Samaritan woman and with the lame man by the pool.

Chapter 5: Toward an Evangelistic Counseling Methodology

With the exegetical and thematic foundations established in chapters 3 and 4, chapter 5 begins to build an evangelistic counseling model. However, this chapter does not claim to establish a comprehensive evangelistic counseling system, as the only evangelistic situations addressed are those arising out of John 3, 4, and 5. Therefore, under consideration are methodological implications for counseling religious non-believers (Nicodemus), seeking non-believers (Samaritan woman), and physically afflicted non-believers (the lame man by the pool). Chapter 5 admits that the counseling methodology offered is limited and that further work needs to be done in order to produce

an exhaustive evangelistic counseling model. The goal of this chapter is to show how this evangelistic counseling system can begin to be established but assure readers that much more work is necessary.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to show biblical counselors that their ministry of the Word is sufficient not only to help struggling Christians but also to lead unregenerate sinners to Jesus. The Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ's heart toward sinners and sufferers, and the Gospel of John specifically shows Jesus calling the lost to find life, joy, and satisfaction in himself. Jesus himself gives counselors a methodology and theology for counseling evangelistically. The hope is that, because of this thesis, biblical counselors will resolve to welcome the lost and their problems into the counseling setting, put the Scriptures before them, and lovingly and gently counsel them toward salvation in Jesus. Along these same lines, my hope is that churches would see it as a worthwhile and necessary cause to equip counselors for ministry both to those within and outside the church.

CHAPTER 2

A DEFENSE OF EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING

If there is any opposition to this thesis, it is most likely that the argument is invalid because unregenerate people are enslaved to their sin and do not have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, therefore rendering fruitless any attempt to counsel them with the Scriptures. However, the foundational means to change is the same for non-believers and believers alike, namely, faith in Christ and his work and belief in his gospel. No matter how mature Christians become, counselors must always remind their counselees that salvation is by grace through faith and that true change that honors the Lord starts with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The same is true for counseling non-believers.

In that same vein, one may argue that helping non-believers improve their circumstances or helping them change their behavior is merely legalism and an unbiblical focus on outward behavior while the heart remains unchanged. Biblical counselors commit great error if they are content with helping lost counselees merely come to better momentary circumstances or if they over-emphasize changing behavior without pointing their counselees to Christ and his gospel. However, all sin and suffering provide an open door for biblical counselors to bring to light the biblical doctrine of sin, along with sin's effects and consequences, and to show their counselees that the only way to be reconciled to God, delivered from sin, and truly satisfied, is through faith in Christ. In our modern day, when "mental health" is at the forefront of social thought and counselors are esteemed as authoritative in dealing with the soul, the church has ample opportunity to handle the Word of God rightly and bring sinners and sufferers to Christ, for the advancement of the kingdom and for the glory of God.

The gospel call of faith and repentance is for all people and is the only way by which sinners can be reconciled to God (Acts 4:12; 20:21). Whoever desires to know God the Father must access him through the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Scripture clearly teaches that all people from all nations and socio-economic classes, despite their education or lack thereof, despite their upbringing or whether they are considered “good” people by cultural standards, have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). However, the Scriptures also clearly reveal that salvation and redemption for all people have been given through Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24). Through taking their sins upon himself and suffering the wrath of God in their place, Jesus has made atonement for the sins of those who come to him in faith and repentance (Heb 9:11-14). All orthodox Christians affirm these truths, including those within the BCM. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ does not cease to be important for born again Christians. Paul tells the Christians at the church in Rome that he desired to “preach the gospel” to them when he came to them (Rom 1:15). Yet, just a few verses earlier, Paul says that these Christians’ “faith is proclaimed in all the world” (Rom 1:8). Evidently, for Paul, preaching the gospel to already-fruitful Christians was an endeavor that was well worth his time and fervent prayers (Rom 1:9-10). We can conclude that for the non-believer and believer alike, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the central message and the foundation for discipleship.

It is doubtful that any biblical counselor would disagree with this conclusion; however, some counselors do not see biblical counseling as a useful means for counseling non-believers toward faith in Christ. However, these same counselors see the necessity of making the gospel the emphasis of their counsel to struggling Christians. As a matter of fact, much emphasis in most biblical counseling settings is placed on helping Christians struggling with sin or with suffering to understand and believe more deeply the implications of the work of Christ so that it transforms the way they live. Biblical

counselors have produced much helpful literature on this topic and rightly so.¹ However, if the gospel must be central when counseling Christians, and if the gospel is the only message that reconciles sinners to God, then why would gospel-centered counseling not be a warranted ministry to non-believers? This chapter interacts with the discussion surrounding evangelism and counseling, beginning with Jay Adams to the present, and offers further treatment on what Robert Jones calls “problem-occasioned” counseling, while showing the need for further theological and methodological work on the topic of evangelistic counseling.²

Adams and Nouthetic Evangelism

Jay Adams, who many consider the father of the modern BCM, devoted about seven pages in his 1970 work *Competent to Counsel* to evangelism in counseling.³ Adams’s sparse treatment in this text on evangelistic counseling may be one of the reasons that literature on this topic has been so sparse up until very recently. Seven years later, in *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, Adams says, “Salvation is what makes Christian counseling possible” and says that counseling unbelievers is impossible.⁴ The appendix of *A Theology of Christian Counseling* includes a talk that Adams gave in 1977 before a room of nouthetic counselors. In this talk, Adams said the following concerning counseling non-believers: “‘What then can you do for an unbeliever? It looks as though you can’t counsel him.’ You’re right. That’s what I’ve been telling you. You can’t

¹ See Robert Cheong, “The Centrality of the Gospel,” in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God’s Changeless Truth*, ed. James MacDonald, Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 153-65; Stuart Scott, “The Gospel in Balance,” in MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars, *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, 167-79.

² Robert D. Jones, “Counseling Non-Christians,” in *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Counseling*, by Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green (Nashville: B&H, 2021), 234.

³ See Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 67-73.

⁴ Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 177.

counsel an unbeliever; no, you can't. You've been concluding that all along, and I agree with you; you can't counsel an unbeliever. There's no way to counsel an unbeliever."⁵ One may conclude from the quote above that Adams was absolutely opposed to having any interaction with non-believers in a counseling setting. While Adams says that "counseling becomes truly nouthetic only when that counselee is a Christian. Otherwise, it is always something less," it appears that he saw evangelistic counseling as worthwhile.⁶ However, Adams thought the word "counseling" itself should only be used when describing the nouthetic process wherein a Christian counselor helps a Christian counselee change. If Christian counselors do take up the task of meeting with a non-believer, they must remember that "anything and everything that you're doing before he comes to know Jesus Christ as his Savior is not counseling."⁷

Adams preferred to call the time in which the Christian counselor meets with a non-believer "precounseling," which he described as "some problem-oriented evangelism."⁸ While this chapter will later interact with the discussion of what Robert Jones has more helpfully called "problem-occasioned evangelism," it seems that Adam's negative stance toward counseling non-believers has more to do with semantics and method than concept. His concern was that trying to improve non-believers' lives through exhorting them to obey God's Word in specific areas was a fruitless endeavor, since man's greatest need is to understand his sin, repent, and believe the gospel. In agreement with Adams, biblical counselors cannot hold out God's truths to non-believers and call them to a life of biblical faithfulness apart from the grace of God in the gospel. However, even Adams himself said in the talk mentioned above, "Counseling—whether Christian

⁵ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 320.

⁶ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 68.

⁷ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 320.

⁸ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 320.

or non-Christian—has one goal in view: to change people,” and this thesis argues that biblical counselors have scriptural warrant for having this same goal when counseling non-believers.⁹ Though this goal will have different emphases at different stages, the counselor’s task remains the same: to show people that their great need of reconciliation to God is met only through the work of Christ in the gospel and that genuine change that pleases the Lord comes only through having union with Christ (2 Pet 1:3-7).

Because of the way Adams makes a hard and fast distinction between counseling believers as opposed to non-believers, biblical counselors likely have not given much thought either to the theological parameters nor the methodological practice of effective evangelistic counseling. Therefore, work that analyzes and expands on Adams’s discussion of evangelistic counseling is necessary if the current BCM is going to see evangelistic counseling as a worthy endeavor.

The Divide between Counseling and Evangelism

For Adams, truly Christian counseling must be evangelistic because it must be redemptive, focusing on what God has done for sinful man in Christ.¹⁰ However, Adams believed that truly nouthetic counseling can happen only when both the counselor and counselee are regenerate. The reason for this is twofold: (1) God calls believers, in the context of the local church, to the work of admonishing (*noutheteō*) one another with the scriptural truth (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16), and (2) genuine change wherein a person may put sin to death and be transformed into the image of Christ requires the regeneration and ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ For Adams, attempting to “effect changes apart

⁹ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 309.

¹⁰ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 67.

¹¹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41, 68.

from God’s power, is a colossal mistake.”¹² What Adams defines as evangelistic counseling, then, is what one might consider traditional evangelistic conversation: “Evangelism is confronting men with the gospel and commanding them to repent.”¹³ According to Adams, when doing evangelistic counseling this way, counselors should bring God’s law to bear on the counselee, call him to repentance, expose his guilt before God and within his own soul, and present the gospel of Christ as the only means to be pardoned from sin and guilt.¹⁴ If this is what is to be known as evangelistic counseling, it is no wonder biblical counselors see evangelism as a separate ministry from counseling, and it is no wonder that biblical counseling has been primarily restricted to caring for struggling Christians.

Counselors have undoubtedly been tempted to make a hard and fast distinction between counseling believers and non-believers. While many have understood nouthetic or biblical counseling as using the Scriptures to counsel believers toward godliness, counseling non-believers has largely been seen as something different altogether, as if biblical counseling concerns Christian sanctification only, while counseling non-believers fits better under the category of evangelism. Wayne Mack, in his recent book that culminates decades of counseling ministry, makes the following statements regarding counseling non-believers:

We cannot counsel people biblically if they are not believers in Christ. Unbelievers do not acknowledge the authority of Christ or the Bible, and are under no compunction to follow the principles taught by Scripture. In fact, we’re told in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” So, the first task of the biblical counselor is to ascertain the spiritual standing of the one who comes for help. Is he a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is that person prepared to come under His authority and, thus, the authority of Scripture? If that person has, in fact, come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior, the counselor can move on. If not, evangelism must be the first agenda.

¹² Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 68.

¹³ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 68-69.

¹⁴ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 69-70.

Without the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, true biblical change is impossible. Without it, all that can be accomplished is some semblance of behavior modification, which likely will fade as soon as the counselee's immediate problem is resolved. Therefore, biblical counseling is evangelistic.¹⁵

Mack in many ways represents the first-wave resurgence of biblical counseling that took place because of Adams's work. The quotation above shows that Mack's thinking is very similar to Adams's thinking on the topic of evangelistic counseling. Both acknowledge that change cannot occur apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and that mere behavior modification for non-believers is ultimately displeasing to the Lord and not the goal of biblical counseling. Mack along with Adams makes a clear distinction between evangelism and biblical counseling, arguing that evangelism must take place first before biblical counseling can begin. However, Mack seems to contradict his own argument when he says that biblical counseling is evangelistic. What exactly does Mack mean when he says the counselor may "move on"¹⁶ if the counselee professes faith in Christ? Does the counselor turn into an evangelist for a moment and cease to be a counselor, only to then turn back into a counselor if he believes the counselee has a true profession of faith? Mack's conclusions are confusing and practically problematic for counselors, especially for those, like me, ministering in the Bible Belt where professing to be a Christian is by and large the cultural norm. He first says that biblical counseling cannot be done with non-believers, but then follows that by saying that "biblical counseling is evangelistic."¹⁷ How can biblical counseling be evangelistic if it can be practiced only with believers? In fact, the context of this quotation is in a section wherein Mack argues that biblical counseling accomplishes the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). Biblical counseling, according to Mack, "enables the people of God to make

¹⁵ Wayne Mack, *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling: Utilizing the 8 "I"s to Promote True Biblical Change* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2021), 37-38.

¹⁶ Mack, *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling*, 38.

¹⁷ Mack, *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling*, 38.

disciples of all nations.”¹⁸ However, he goes on to say, “we cannot counsel people if they are not believers in Christ.”¹⁹ There seems to be an evident contradiction in Mack’s thinking. He argues that the church can employ counseling as an efficient means of accomplishing the Great Commission, yet also argues that the church cannot counsel non-believers. But the first command in the Great Commission is precisely about non-believers, as we are called to make disciples of them. In fact, Craig Blomberg argues that “the main command of Christ’s commission is to ‘make disciples.’”²⁰ The primary thrust of the command is to make disciples of non-believers.

The question is begged, then: how can biblical counseling be a faithful means of accomplishing the Great Commission if it cannot be practiced with non-believers? It is true, as Hal Freeman says, that “disciples are commissioned to teach the new disciples to keep what Jesus commanded.”²¹ However, does it follow that biblical counseling can fulfill only one portion of the Great Commission, namely, the third section about teaching disciples to observe Jesus’s teaching? If so, it seems strange to argue that biblical counseling is a faithful means of accomplishing the Great Commission. There seems to be a clear inconsistency in the line of reasoning for Mack and Adams, who argue that we must not counsel non-believers but must first evangelize them. In this line of reasoning, evangelism seems to be reduced down to a very basic ministry that misses the complexity of the human situation that biblical counseling understands so well. It also relies far too much on the counselee’s profession of faith.

¹⁸ Mack, *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling*, 37.

¹⁹ Mack, *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling*, 37.

²⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 431.

²¹ Hal Freeman, “The Great Commission and the New Testament: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 19.

How are we to know that the person has come to know Christ so that we can “move on,”²² as Mack says? Under this belief, we are choosing “evangelism” or “counseling” based upon a profession of faith alone; however, it is also very possible, even likely in some contexts, that we may find ourselves “counseling” those who are truly unregenerate simply because we have trusted their profession of faith! I agree that counselors cannot know the hearts of their counselees and must by and large trust the profession of the counselee; however, in Mack’s line of reasoning, knowing whether the counselee is a believer or not seems to be deduced down to a quick conversation at the beginning. Should we make any judgments about the state of their soul based upon the problems they are facing and the symptoms they are experiencing? What if the counselee gives what seems to be a genuine profession of faith but his or her life, over a long period of time, suggests that the person is led by the flesh rather than the Spirit? If the counselee can say enough correct answers, are we to assume we can now counsel him biblically rather than evangelize him? This methodology, though well-meaning, presents all sorts of practical and theological problems and confusion. It would be helpful if more theological research and methodological suggestions were produced to aid counselors in thinking more deeply about and responding appropriately to the question of whether to “evangelize” or “counsel” a counselee. Unfortunately, those who draw a hard line between evangelism and counseling and argue that counseling cannot be done on non-believers typically have not dealt with the issue thoroughly from a theological or practical standpoint. The human condition is very complex and often soteriological moments in a person’s redemptive history are blurred and confusing, especially in places where nominalism is prevalent and where cultural Christianity is normal.²³

²² Mack, *A Practical Guide for Effective Biblical Counseling*, 38.

²³ As a pastor in the South, I have had many conversations, often in membership interviews and often with those who grew up in church and professed Christ and were baptized at a young age, who later question whether they were truly saved at that moment or not. Many of them confess to going astray for a time, only to “rededicate their lives to Christ.” As a Reformed Christian who rejects the language of

This inconsistency I have shown is likely a result of various biblical counselors, like Adams and Mack, wanting to make clear that the church should not seek merely to change the outward behavior of non-believers and that the Spirit must be the agent through which true change is wrought. These are points well-taken and points on which I agree. However, what is needed is thorough biblical examination and more nuanced thinking regarding the nature of evangelistic counseling. We cannot argue that biblical counseling is evangelistic and that it is a sufficient means of making disciples and obeying the Great Commission, yet in the same discussion say that biblical counseling can only be accomplished when the counselee is a Christian.

The BCM needs a consistent line of reasoning when discussing the evangelistic nature of biblical counseling and its usefulness in fulfilling the Great Commission. Leading biblical counselors in the church today are wary of this inconsistency and skeptical of this unnecessary divide between counseling and evangelism. Robert Jones highlights this tendency within the BCM to make a black and white distinction between counseling those within the church and those without. He argues that “counseling and evangelism are ministries that too often remain segregated. It seems counseling is only for people inside the church with ‘problems’ and evangelism is only for people outside the church who don’t yet profess faith.”²⁴ Though the segregation is obvious, Jones argues that it is unbiblical. He argues this by pointing to the Great Commission and citing the lack of separation between Christ’s commands to make disciples through preaching the gospel and to teach them to obey Christ’s commands (Matt 28:19-20).²⁵

“rededication,” the issue then becomes one of trying to discern whether the person was actually saved as a child and was later sanctified mightily, or if they were in fact a false professor for years and were regenerated later in life when they began to “get serious” about their faith. These are challenging pastoral questions, and I say this only to show the complexity of the human heart and the danger we can run into when we try to determine whether a person is a believer or not based solely upon a quick testimony.

²⁴ Robert Jones, “Biblical Counseling: An Opportunity for Problem-Based Evangelism,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 75.

²⁵ Jones, “Biblical Counseling,” 75.

Unnecessarily dividing “counselors” and “evangelists” has “robbed the church of the shared energies, skills, and training each can contribute to each other.”²⁶

Other biblical counselors have highlighted the unnecessary divide between counseling and evangelism. Kevin Carson, who entered his ministry being told that counselors should not counsel non-believers, argues that counseling believers is, in fact, no different than counseling non-believers.²⁷ To be clear, Carson, like Adams, understands that genuine change that pleases God “is impossible without a relationship with Christ;” however, the methodology that counselors use when counseling other Christians should be the same as when counseling non-Christians. When speaking of this counseling methodology, Carson says, “The *process* is the same: you enter into conversational ministry with an individual who needs the truth of God’s Word, the power of the Spirit, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the patience of a biblical counselor engaged in the process with them.”²⁸ Whereas Adams’s and Mack’s tendency is to draw a clear distinction between the nouthetic ministry of one Christian to another and the evangelistic ministry of a believer to a non-believer, modern biblical counselors such as Jones, Carson, and Patten see strong similarities between these two counseling scenarios. These modern biblical counselors understand that, while the ultimate need of the non-believer is to be reconciled to God through the gospel, this is not comprehensively different than the greatest need of the struggling Christian: to understand the implications of the gospel of Christ for Christians and to believe them. For the non-believer, this leads to salvation (Rom 1:16); for the believer, this leads to greater conformity to Christ (2 Cor 3:18), yet Christ and the gospel remain the focus for both. While the emphases and goals may be

²⁶ Jones, “Biblical Counseling,” 75.

²⁷ Kevin Carson and Randy Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God’s Care through God’s People*, ed. Bob Kellemen and Kevin Carson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 315.

²⁸ Carson and Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” 315.

slightly different, the methodological process for counseling Christians and non-Christians is very similar.

Though Adams and Mack see it as impossible to make truly biblical counsel evangelistic (in the sense that the counselee is a non-believer), the major premise of this thesis is that evangelistic counseling is in fact biblical and necessary. As stated above, other biblical counselors also see the divide that Adams and Mack make between evangelism and counseling as unnecessary and unbiblical. Even by Adams's own admission, truly Christian counseling must be evangelistic. Consider the following quotations from *Competent to Counsel* and take note of the words and phrases I have italicized for emphasis:

But what may be said of *counseling directed toward unbelievers*? Any such *counseling* that claims to be Christian surely *must be evangelistic*. *Counseling is redemptive*. What God has done for sinful man in Christ conditions what the counselor does. *Counseling* should follow and reflect God's order in redemption: grace, then faith; gospel, then sanctification. *Counseling must be redemptive*.²⁹

Here, Adams states plainly the nature of Christian counseling. It must be evangelistic because it must take sin seriously, and it must point the counselee toward redemption in Christ alone. Whether the counselee is a believer or not, the nature of Christian counseling, by Adams own admission, is evangelistic. He goes on to say the following:

The way Paul proceeded in the book of Romans, for instance, affords clear direction. He showed all (Gentile and Jew) that they have sinned. Next he refuted false ideas of redemption through attempted law keeping, and established the truth of justification by faith alone; finally he exhorted to personal holiness. What Paul did *is what counselors must do*. *Nouthetic confrontation* requires the deepest involvement; deep enough to take people seriously when they mention their sin even when they fail to identify it as sin. Sin cannot be minimized or glossed over. God took sin so seriously that he sent his Son to die for sinners. God's great involvement with his people is evident in Christ's death. Matters such as law and love, irresponsibility and responsibility, relationship and alienation, guilt and forgiveness, hell and heaven make up the *content of counseling*.³⁰

²⁹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 67-68 (emphasis added).

³⁰ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 67-68 (emphasis added).

Again, Adams clearly sees the nouthetic counseling he puts forward as evangelistic, using Paul's structure in his epistle to the Romans as an illustration of the process of nouthetic counseling. Thus far, it seems clear that the nature and content of biblical counseling is sufficient to deal with non-believers and believers alike. Adams here makes no hard and fast distinction between "evangelism" and "counseling." Rather, he speaks of counseling in such evangelistic terms that one would be hard-pressed to see how his view of counseling could not include ministry to non-believers. He goes on to define counseling and the counselor more thoroughly:

Counselors must be careful not to represent Christ as the member of a first-aid squad who offers bandaids to clients. *Redemptive counseling* is radical surgery. Because of the radical nature of man's problem, radical measures are required. The diagnosis leading to radical surgery must be open, frank honest, and to the point—man has sinned and needs a Savior. Nothing less than death to the past and resurrection to a brand new way of life can really solve one's problems (cf. Romans 6). Consequently, a proper concept of *nouthetic counseling* must have a deeply embedded in it *the premise that the man cannot be helped in any fundamental sense apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ.*³¹

From the lengthy quotations above, it appears that Adams, like Mack, sees evangelism as a necessary component of nouthetic counseling. The interchange of "nouthetic counseling" with "nouthetic confrontation" and "redemptive counseling" shows that Adams clearly sees the great task of the counselor to be to bring counselees to a proper understanding of their sin and need to repent and believe the gospel, while understanding that Christ's death and resurrection is the only hope for reconciliation to God and the only foundation for living in God-honoring ways. This is precisely what evangelism is, and here *Adams calls it counseling*. Yet, strikingly, in the very next sentence, he says, "Actually, counseling becomes truly nouthetic only when the counselee is a Christian."³² Adams follows his own premise that "man cannot be helped in any fundamental sense apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ," which is "a proper concept of nouthetic

³¹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 67-68 (emphasis added).

³² Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 68.

counseling” by saying that truly nouthetic counseling can happen only when the counselee is a Christian, seemingly negating his own argument.

It is possible that Adams and Mack suggest here that counselors make the focus of their meetings with believing counselees redemptive and evangelistic, a notion with which the author of this thesis agrees, as was stated earlier. However, the question follows: if counselors should counsel Christians with this evangelistic and redemptive focus, why would they not be able to counsel non-believers with the same focus? Either Adam’s own reasoning was contradictory, or he was simply uncaring with his terms. What is clear, however, is that the categorical distinction between evangelism and counseling is superficial and unbiblical, seeing that redemption in Christ should be the focus no matter the spiritual state of the counselee. Because biblical counseling should be, in agreement with Adams, inherently evangelistic and redemption-focused, further work must be done that explores the evangelistic opportunity for biblical counselors. In the next section, I propose that the BCM should see the method known as “problem-occasioned evangelism” as a prime opportunity to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ people to non-believers in the counseling setting.

Problem-Occasioned Evangelism as Counseling Opportunity

What Adams calls a “problem-oriented approach” to evangelism, Jones calls “problem-occasioned evangelism.”³³ Because the term “problem-occasioned evangelism” keeps Christ and the gospel as the basis of the evangelism rather than the problem, I urge the BCM at large to adopt and use this term when referring to evangelistic counseling.

³³ Jones, “Counseling Non-Christians,” 234. Per our private correspondence on May 30, 2022, Robert Jones informed me that though the term “problem-based evangelism” was used for his 2017 *Journal of Biblical Counseling* article, “Biblical Counseling: An Opportunity for Problem-Based Evangelism,” he originally preferred the term “problem-occasioned evangelism” but deferred to the editor’s preference for “problem-based.” Jones prefers “problem-occasioned” over “problem-based” (or “problem-oriented”) because he sees Christ and his work in the gospel as the basis for our evangelism and people’s problems as creating the occasions for counselors to minister Christ and the gospel to them in the counseling setting. In his subsequent co-authored work *The Gospel for Disordered Lives*, his chapter on “Counseling Non-Christians” employs his preferred term, “problem-occasioned evangelism.”

Making this term the normal phraseology will help minimize the unbiblical stigmas regarding evangelistic counseling and deconstruct the unnecessary divide between the ministries of evangelism and counseling. Jones says that in this counseling approach, “we enter the non-Christian’s world, understand their struggles, and bring them Jesus and his gospel-soaked answers” while adapting “our goals, strategies, and methods to their spiritual condition.”³⁴ Not only does Jones see counseling as an important means of evangelism, but he also argues elsewhere that biblical counseling “is part of Christ’s marching orders for every local church,” suggesting that biblical counseling entails what Jesus commands in the Great Commission.³⁵ Similar to how Christ commands us to make disciples and teach them in the same sentence (Matt 28:19-20), the biblical counseling method to non-believers and believers is closely related.

Leaders within the BCM have seen that biblical counseling provides an exceptional opportunity for evangelism. Because of its nature of dealing with people’s problems, non-believers may often be willing to come to a counseling session and hear the Word of God when they may not be interested at all in reading a tract or having a conversation with an evangelist who knocks on their door or listening to a street preacher. This does not mean these methods are wrong; however, in the postmodern, post-truth age in which we live, many people in the West do not understand themselves or their problems in relation to God and his Word, and they have largely forsaken Christianity. While this is a reality, there has also been an explosion of interest in “mental health” and people understand that they have problems and “feel bad.” Steve Viars rightly says, “One of the greatest needs in many of our communities is a place where people can sit down

³⁴ Jones, “Counseling Non-Christians,” 234.

³⁵ Robert Jones, “Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?,” Biblical Counseling Coalition, July 17, 2019, https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2019/07/17/does-the-great-commission-require-biblical-counseling/#_ftnref1.

with a trained, compassionate individual and discuss their problems.”³⁶ Because of this, the biblical counseling approach known as problem-occasioned evangelism may be one of the most effective ways of reaching the twenty-first-century person with the message of the gospel.

Problem-occasioned evangelism provides opportunities for counselors to speak gospel truths into broken lives, both that of non-believers and believers. Jones defines clearly what he means by problem-occasioned evangelism:

We seek to win to Christ people who struggle with life and seek counseling help for their personal and relational problems. We help each person know and follow Jesus—the unbeliever is presented initial ways to do so, and Christians are presented deeper, ongoing ways. In this sense, we point every counselee to Jesus and his Word within their specific, problem-filled situation. We teach both unbelievers (Acts 4:2; 5:21, 42) and believers (Acts 11:26; 18:11; 20:20), proclaiming the gospel and its implications to both groups (Rom 1:14-15). As in the case of Christians we enter the non-Christian’s world, understand their struggles, and bring them Jesus and his gospel-soaked answers; the main difference is that we adapt our goals, strategies, and methods to their spiritual condition.³⁷

Jones rightly closes the gap between counseling believers and non-believers that Adams and Mack over-emphasize. While again, there *must* be some differences, the theological process of counseling non-believers and believers is far too similar to make an airtight distinction. In both counseling scenarios, the counselor uses the counselee’s perceived problems as access points to their heart, which then allows the counselor to bring to bear on the counselee the reality of sin and guilt and the solution in Christ and the gospel. While the implications are vastly different for non-believers and believers, the doctrines of God, man, sin, eternity, and redemption are all valid for counseling.

Though leading biblical counselors see biblical counseling as a prime opportunity to show unbelievers their sin and need for Christ through reframing their problems from a biblical perspective, the primary question that must be answered is

³⁶ Steve Viars, *Loving Your Community: Proven Practices for Community-Based Outreach Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2020), 68.

³⁷ Jones, “Counseling Non-Christians,” 234.

whether there is sufficient biblical warrant for this understanding. Does Jones's claim, that the Lord Jesus's Great Commission for the church includes biblical counseling, hold true biblically? In the following section, this thesis argues that the Great Commission does include the biblical counseling approach known as problem-occasioned evangelism.

Biblical Support for Problem-Occasioned Counseling

The Great Commission is the marching orders for the church until Jesus returns (Matt 28:16-20). One may wonder, however, how the Great Commission informs the ministry of biblical counseling. Since its resurgence³⁸ under Adams in the 1970s, biblical counseling has been understood as an expression of the "one another" ministry that involves "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). Several texts, such as Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 3:16, and, perhaps most explicitly, Romans 15:14, teach that New Testament believers are to minister the Word of Christ to one another in the context of local fellowship. The body of Christ is to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ," and this happens primarily as the body of Christ ministers the word of Christ to one another (Eph 4:15). While it is unlikely that any faithfully trained biblical counselor would disagree that the ministry of biblical counseling falls under the category of discipleship, there is disagreement on biblical counseling's place in *making* disciples. Some are opposed to using the term counseling in an evangelistic sense, as I have shown earlier, rightly arguing that a person must become a Christian and receive all the benefits of the redemptive work of Christ to change in an authentic sense.³⁹ However, others have argued that "making disciples" and "discipling" are so closely related that biblical

³⁸ I use the term "resurgence" because though the term "biblical counseling" did not exist, the practice of pastoral soul care has been present in the church since its beginning, especially in the era of the Puritans.

³⁹ See Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 177; Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 67-73.

counseling is a warranted means of evangelism.⁴⁰ As this thesis has shown through the examination of the teaching of Adams and Mack, there is an inconsistency in the way some biblical counselors advocate that biblical counseling is an effective means of accomplishing the Great Commission but also advocate that biblical counselors must not counsel, but evangelize, non-believing counsees. Counselors who reject such a rigid divide between counseling and evangelism, however, are consistent when they argue that biblical counseling rightly falls under the category of the Great Commission.

While the local church is certainly called to pray for, support, and send out missionaries to preach the gospel to all nations, it must also collectively evangelize the lost within its own locale. The local church is called to be a shining light for Christ in whatever context it currently maintains (Matt 5:14). Blomberg suggests that some Christians have over-focused on the word “going” or “go” (Matt 28:19), which has led to an over-emphasis on cross-cultural missions to the neglect of churches being a faithful evangelistic witness in their own locations.⁴¹ He goes on to say, however, that “‘to make disciples *of all nations*’ does require many people to leave their homelands, but Jesus’ main focus remains on the task of all believers to duplicate themselves wherever they may be.”⁴² The church must certainly take Christ’s imperative to “go” with utmost seriousness and be committed to causing the gospel to go into all nations. However, Christ’s command to the apostles in Acts 1:8 suggests that Christ’s mission is both local and global. Though churches seeking to be faithful to the Great Commission in their respective locations often organize evangelism and outreach efforts, problem-occasioned evangelism within the biblical counseling ministry is a faithful approach to obeying the Great Commission.

⁴⁰ See Jones, “Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?”

⁴¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431.

⁴² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431 (emphasis original).

The first command to the church is to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Again, this certainly includes the frontlines of cross-cultural evangelism and church planting that we see in the book of Acts; however, it is not limited to these because the Great Commission includes more than simply evangelizing. In commenting on the Great Commission, Thomas Schreiner says that the commission is not “complete with initial evangelizing, for the command to make disciples includes teaching all that Jesus has commanded the disciples.”⁴³ While Schreiner unpacks the Great Commission in general, local churches can faithfully obey the Great Commission in their own locale through problem-occasioned evangelism. Problem-occasioned evangelism carries the potential to both make disciples and teach newly made disciples to obey Christ in the respective areas of local churches. In fact, evangelistic counseling offers a sort of hybrid of evangelism and teaching that fits nicely within the parameters of the Great Commission. Blomberg sees this hybrid as well, as he says, “The verb ‘make disciples’ also commands a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith.”⁴⁴ This ongoing evangelism that Blomberg rightly sees commanded in the Great Commission is precisely what problem-occasioned evangelism offers.

Whether the counselee is a Christian or not, the counselor may use the perceived problems as access points to discuss a whole host of biblical topics having to deal with salvation and redemption. If God in his mercy saves the counselee, the counselor does not suddenly switch from evangelism to counseling. He rather, as Blomberg suggests, continues to “evangelize” the counselee through teaching him (counseling) about Jesus and his commandments. However, many of the topics remain the same whether the counselee has been regenerated or not, including, sin, idolatry, God’s wrath, the gospel, justification by faith, and obedience. Whereas the view that

⁴³ Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 685.

⁴⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431.

Adams and Mack hold forces biblical counselors into an unnatural and impractical position to either evangelize or counsel (teach), problem-occasioned evangelism removes pressure from counselors to try to discern whether or not a counselee is filled with the Spirit or not and gives them freedom to minister Christ's Word in not only a redemptive but also an instructive manner. If open air preaching, handing out tracts, and sharing the gospel in interpersonal settings are all considered to part of fulfilling the Great Commission, why would biblical counseling, or problem-occasioned evangelism, not be considered fulfilling the Great Commission? This thesis has argued that biblical counseling is a textually consistent and practically faithful means of evangelizing and teaching.

Upon closer examination of the textual specifics of Christ's command to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, it is clear that biblical counseling is a faithful way in which the church may obey the Great Commission. Much evangelism, and even many mission attempts, faithfully obey the first part of our Lord's commission, and possibly even the second through baptizing converts, but many often fail to obey all our Lord's directives in the commission because the teaching component is missing. However, Jones argues that biblical counseling provides "a third and often overlooked component implied in the Great Commission's call to teach."⁴⁵ Biblical counselors "not only teach believers *what* Jesus commands and *that* they must obey his commands" but they "also teach them *how* to obey his commands."⁴⁶ Though the *message* that makes disciples does not change, the *method* may vary across cultures, locations, and times. Rob Green and Steve Viars argue that "counseling offers a tremendous opportunity for folks to do evangelism rather than talking about doing evangelism" and that "when an unbeliever seeks biblical

⁴⁵ Jones, "Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?"

⁴⁶ Jones, "Does the Great Commission Require Biblical Counseling?"

counseling, it's an opportunity to present Christ as the answer to their needs."⁴⁷ Because of its nature, problem-occasioned evangelism faithfully fulfills not only the first part of the Great Commission but also the teaching aspect as well. This ministry allows the church to, as Robert Plummer says, "make mature followers of Jesus Christ from people of every ethnicity," and it allows young or immature disciples to "be schooled in the apostles' teaching."⁴⁸ Whether ministering to non-believers or believers, biblical counseling precludes the full orb of the New Testament discipleship structure.

When understood using biblical language and categories, biblical counseling is clearly one aspect of faithful discipleship. This ministry allows the church to evangelize non-believers and to teach them to obey Jesus. Commenting on the Great Commission, Charles Lawless says, "The process includes leading a non-believer to trust in Christ and repent from sin, followed by directing that new Christian in the lifelong task of walking with Christ in obedience."⁴⁹ This ongoing lifestyle of obedience to Christ takes place in the church and is a vital aspect of biblical counseling. In Romans 15:14, Paul says to the church at Rome that "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another." Paul is writing to Christians who he believes can sufficiently instruct other Christians. His confidence in this is that the Christians in the church at Rome are "full of goodness" and "filled with all knowledge." Goodness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22), and Christians are filled with Christ, in "whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 1:9-10). Because the Romans demonstrate Spirit-led and knowledge-filled lives, they possess the capacity to instruct (teach, admonish) one another in the truth of Christ.

⁴⁷ Rob Green and Steve Viars, "The Biblical Counseling Ministry of the Local Church," in MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars, *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, 231.

⁴⁸ Robert L. Plummer, "The Great Commission in the New Testament," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 4.

⁴⁹ Charles E. Lawless, "'To All the Nations': The Great Commission Passages in the Gospels and Acts," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 18.

The word that the ESV renders “instruct” is the Greek verb *noutheteō*. This verb is the foundation for Jay Adams’s label “nouthetic counselling.” Along with Romans 15:14, Colossians 3:16 also suggests that the ministry of counseling is a biblical means of discipleship: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” As the church at Colossae allows the “word of Christ” (the teachings of Christ and the gospel) to categorize their worship gatherings and permeate their lives, they are able to offer wise counsel to one another with regard to the Word of God and its application to life. In commenting on Romans 15:14 and Colossians 3:16, Adams says, “Paul pictured Christians meeting in nouthetic confrontation as normal every-day activity So the first fact is plain: nouthetic activity is a work in which all of God’s people may participate.”⁵⁰

In light of the discipleship structure laid out in Ephesians 4:11-16, all Christians within the church should be growing in Christlike character (goodness) and receiving equipping (being filled with all knowledge) as the Spirit of God works through the teaching ministry of the elders of the church. This equipping enables them to then minister the Word *nouthetically*, or, to *counsel* one another. However, just as *making* disciples and *teaching* disciples are tied together closely in our Lord’s Great Commission, this vision of discipleship within the local church need not be unnecessarily removed from the ministry known as problem-based evangelism. In fact, biblical counselors that minister to non-believers are wise to require their counselees to attend church services and see what life in the local church is like. Though they will not have been baptized into the body and empowered with gifts until conversion, it is the same gospel message and teaching that both non-believers and believers alike must receive and obey.

⁵⁰ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 42.

The most explicit biblical example of problem-occasioned evangelism in the New Testament is the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John 4. The ministry setting itself reminds one of a counseling setting, as Jesus sits down and speaks with a woman one on one (John 4:6-7). Rather than taking the Samaritan woman to the Ten Commandments to expose her sin and preach the gospel (as he frequently does in his ministry), Jesus reframes her current life situations as opportunities to reveal her need of the true satisfaction and joy that only he can give. The physical problem is that the woman is thirsty and has come to the well to draw water, yet “on a hot a dusty day, Jesus takes what is available and uses a simple need to dig deep into the heart of this woman.”⁵¹ Though Jesus starts the conversation by asking for a drink, he quickly turns to addressing the woman’s spiritual need, which is that she understand him and ask him for living water (John 4:7-10). Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes rightly see that Jesus “pushes for more than just an earthly, temporal resolution to the Samaritan woman’s problem.”⁵² Rather, Jesus uses these temporal issues to address the problem of the woman’s heart, which is that she has attempted to meet her soul’s need for God with various relationships with men (John 4:16-18). Through exploring the woman’s felt needs, Jesus successfully reframes her perceived physical needs as deep-seated spiritual needs: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:13-14). Though the woman believed she needed physical water (John 4:15), “at the end of the day, Jesus himself was the answer the woman was seeking.”⁵³ This thesis addresses John 4 and other sections of John’s Gospel more deeply in the following chapters. What is clear, however, is that

⁵¹ Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes, “The Power of the Redeemer,” in MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars, *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, 44.

⁵² Baker and Holmes, “The Power of the Redeemer,” 44.

⁵³ Baker and Holmes, “The Power of the Redeemer,” 44.

Jones’s “problem-occasioned evangelism” fits the parameters of the Great Commission and is modeled by the Lord Jesus in his ministry. When assessing the biblical data, effective and compassionate biblical counseling is a faithful means of evangelism.

Practical Application

In imitating Jesus’s example in John 4, trained biblical counselors can similarly use the perceived “felt needs” of unbelieving counselees to show them their true need, which is to receive Christ’s offer of salvation in the gospel and repent from their idolatry. Counselors must “read” the counselees perception of their problems and “reframe” those problems using scriptural language, categories, and themes.⁵⁴ Viars also sees that “often the counseling process results in a person realizing that the problem that brought them to the counseling room is actually just a symptom of a far greater issue—their separation from God.”⁵⁵ Rather than merely helping the non-believing counselee “feel better” or make positive life changes, problem-occasioned evangelism “provides a marvelous opportunity for the counselor to compassionately speak about the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the free gift of salvation available in and through him.”⁵⁶

Regardless of the worldview or belief system of the counselee, his or her problems enable the counselor to expose the realities of the heart and point the counselee to lasting hope and reconciliation to God in Christ. For example, consider a situation wherein a biblical counselor is counseling a married couple but is doubtful that the husband is a believer. The presenting problems that brought them to counseling are typical: finances, parenting differences, children from previous marriages, time and

⁵⁴ Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2016), 180-191.

⁵⁵ Viars, *Loving Your Community*, 72.

⁵⁶ Viars, *Loving Your Community*, 72.

scheduling issues, etc. However, though the counselor should listen to the husband describe what he perceives to be the problems in his marriage and even offer biblical wisdom that will alleviate some of the marital pressures they are facing, he ultimately must work to show the husband that his great need is not a better wife, better behaving kids, or a more stable financial position. He must labor to show him from Scripture that the problems in his home, while seemingly external, stem from the fact that he is currently living in rebellion to God and God's design for life. No temporary changes, met goals, or circumstances will meet the true need of his soul. Like the woman at the well, this husband needs to see that only by coming to Jesus in repentance and faith can he receive living water that results in eternal life. Only by forsaking his sin and bowing the knee to Christ can this man ultimately honor God as a husband and father. While people in similar situations may never consider their lives before God or understand their problems in light of their relationship to God, the counseling setting provides a place for wise counselors to use the problems sinners face as open doors to show these sinners their true need for Christ and to lead them to him. Viars says, "Biblical counselors listen to the stories of the men and women who come to see us and then compassionately point them to truth from the Word of God."⁵⁷ What I have described above most falls under the category of "disciple making."

The process of problem-occasioned evangelism is essentially the same as counseling a believer. Kevin Carson provides helpful commentary on the discussion between the similar process of counseling unbelievers and believers:

When I (Kevin) first started counseling, I was told that you cannot counsel an unbeliever. But over the years I have found that this is not true. I have discovered, in fact, that the *process* of counseling unbelievers is no different from counseling believers. The *process* is the same: you enter into conversational ministry with an individual who needs the truth of God's Word, the power of the Spirit, the grace of

⁵⁷ Viars, *Loving Your Community*, 71.

Jesus Christ, and the patience of a biblical counselor engaged in the process with them.⁵⁸

As this thesis stated earlier, Carson also sees that unbelieving counselees cannot change apart from the empowering presence of Christ; however, biblical counselors can “patiently help them as they maneuver through life’s pressures while pointing them toward the life-giving, life-sustaining, life-changing grace of Christ (2 Pet 1:2-4).”⁵⁹ Evangelistic biblical counseling also enables the church to pursue non-believers with the gospel, as Lawless says about Matthew 28:19, “The disciples are not to wait for non-believers to come to them; rather, they are to take the initiative to evangelize.”⁶⁰ When churches offer free biblical counseling in their communities or even go outside the local church to minister the Word such as in hospitals, nursing homes, or when crisis situations strike a community, the church is faithfully obeying the Great Commission. The more one understands the nature, process, and goals of biblical counseling, the clearer it is that problem-occasioned evangelism and compassionate, competent biblical counseling are very closely associated, so much so that we can responsibly place counseling ministry to unbelievers under the category of “biblical counseling.” This chapter has addressed the form of biblical counseling known as problem-occasioned evangelism and has explored how this ministry is a faithful expression of obedience to the “disciple-making” aspect of the Great Commission. In the next chapter, we will analyze Jesus’s personal evangelistic encounters in the Gospel of John exegetically and work toward a more developed counseling ethic and methodology that biblical counselors may employ as they seek, through problem-occasioned evangelism, to minister the Word of Christ to the lost.

⁵⁸ Carson and Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” 315 (emphasis original).

⁵⁹ Carson and Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” 315.

⁶⁰ Lawless, “To All the Nations,” 18.

CHAPTER 3
EXEGESIS OF JESUS’S EVANGELISTIC
CONVERSATIONS IN JOHN 3, 4, AND 5

Evangelistic counseling, or “problem-occasioned evangelism,” is biblically warranted and should be practiced by biblical counselors who seek to minister the gospel to the lost through their counseling ministry. However, merely defending and justifying the permissibility of evangelistic counseling, as was the focus of the previous chapter, is not sufficient. The biblical counseling world needs not only to know *what* evangelistic counseling is and *why* it should practice it—but also needs to know *how* to practice it. How should counselors speak to unbelievers? Should counselors deal at all with the felt needs of the counselee, or should they seek to focus solely on bringing the gospel to bear and encouraging conversion to Christ? What are the goals of evangelistic counseling, and what methods should the counselor employ to meet these goals? What is the role of the Holy Spirit when counseling non-believers? These questions, and more, must be answered if the biblical counseling world is to develop a robust theology and methodology for counseling non-believers.

While chapters 4 and 5 deal specifically with the different theological and methodological aspects of evangelistic counseling, this chapter deals with the exegetical foundations of evangelistic counseling by analyzing Jesus’s evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5. Before a wholistic evangelistic counseling system can be produced, sufficient exegetical and theological work must be done to provide the material upon which to build such a system. This thesis aims to offer this exegetical and theological work. Thankfully, biblical counselors do not have to turn to their own wisdom or devices to develop a methodology for evangelistic counseling. Nor do they have to awkwardly

reframe evangelistic strategies, such as the Romans Road, with a counseling spin and call it evangelistic counseling. While generalities will certainly need to be filled in with specifics, the Holy Spirit has left us a sufficient theological framework in the Gospel According to John on which to develop a robust methodology for evangelistic counseling. This chapter analyzes three of Jesus's evangelistic encounters in the book of John exegetically, highlighting his interactions with two typical kinds of unbelievers: Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 (the religious non-believer), his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 (the non-believer seeking satisfaction in worldly things), and his encounter with the lame man by the pool in John 5 (the non-believer with a chronic physical ailment). After analyzing each encounter exegetically in this chapter, I then take the exegetical implications and suggest in chapters 4 and 5 theological and methodological implications for biblical counselors today who find themselves ministering to non-believers who are in similar situations as those in the Gospel of John.

Before exploring these texts in these ways, one important qualification must be made. First, the passages with which this chapter deals do not depict Jesus in official biblical counseling sessions the way we understand them today. Jesus was not a biblical counselor in the way one might claim to be a biblical counselor today (one who meets privately with counselees over the course of a few weeks or months and assigns homework, etc.). Jesus did many things in his earthly ministry and accomplished many purposes, and this thesis does not intend to make an awkward and unrealistic one-to-one ratio between Jesus's evangelistic encounters with modern day biblical counseling sessions. Rather, from dealing with these texts exegetically, this thesis seeks to unpack the theological and methodological *implications and possible applications for biblical counseling*. However, even though Jesus's evangelistic encounters are not formal counseling sessions, it does not follow that counseling practice cannot emerge from these texts of Scriptures. Neither does the Bible give exhaustive focus on preaching sermons;

however, preachers and homiletics professors rightly observe passages of Scripture that show the ministry of proclamation when teaching or developing their own practice of preaching. Likewise, biblical counseling not only is consistent with the Bible, but the very practice emerges from the text of Scripture. Jones rightly summarizes this belief when he says,

When done properly, our core concepts and methods don't merely align with or not contradict Scripture; they *emerge from* Scripture as we interpret it wisely. The Bible does more than guide, inform, or control our counseling model; it proactively forms it. Scripture generates our understanding of God, people, and their situations. Biblical counseling is biblically driven counseling.¹

Biblical counselors argue that the Scriptures are not only sufficient for addressing and providing solutions for life's problems but also for developing a counseling methodology for addressing and providing solution for those problems. They do not mean, however, that the certain texts of Scripture offer a nuanced counseling manual for certain problems.² No biblical counselor claims that the Bible puts before us a model counseling session. However, texts of Scripture, and for the purpose of this thesis, Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John's Gospel, provide the necessary framework (beliefs, speech, language, solutions) for building a robust and thoroughly biblical evangelistic counseling model. Because building this counseling model is the focus of this chapter, the exegesis of the biblical passages that follows will focus only on what is most pertinent for biblical counselors. The exegetical analysis of these texts is not intended to act as a technical commentary. Rather, I will focus primarily on exegeting the passages for the materials with which to build this evangelistic counseling model.

¹ Robert D. Jones, "What Is Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling?," in *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Counseling*, by Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green (Nashville: B&H, 2021), 15 (emphasis original).

² For a discussion on how the Scriptures are sufficient for counseling practice, see Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 51-63, Kindle.

Jesus's Encounter with Nicodemus: Counseling Religious Non-Believers

Jesus ministered in a religious day to a religious people. Israel was a theocracy, and Yahweh worship was mandated. Giving worship to any other god was forbidden (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). However, while Yahweh worship was the norm, most of the Jews in Jesus day were unregenerate and ultimately opposed Yahweh as they opposed his Christ (Matt 23:37). Moses prophesied over a thousand years prior that God had not yet given Israel “a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear” (Deut 29:4). Even though Israel had the Law, Jeremiah prophesied of a day when God would put the Law in the hearts and minds of his people (Jer 31:33), and Ezekiel told of a day when God would replace Israel's hard, disobedient hearts with hearts renewed by the Spirit (Ezek 36:26). Yet, Jesus makes clear that the religious leaders of Israel had not received this new heart. Rather, his charge to the Pharisees and scribes was that they were hypocrites who worshipped God with their words and religious traditions while their hearts were far from him (Matt 15:1-9). They were “whitewashed tombs” who outwardly appeared religious yet inwardly were dead (Matt 23:27-29). Not only did this hard-heartedness characterize the religious leaders, but Jesus attests that the people in general were spiritually blind, deaf, and void of spiritual understanding (Matt 13:13-15).

The reality of Israel's spiritual ineptitude, despite being fervently religious outwardly, is an important backdrop for understanding Jesus's personal encounter with Nicodemus. As the Pharisees admitted by their own admonition, Jesus was not swayed by the appearances of anyone, even Israel's religious leaders (Mark 12:14). He attests later in John that he only speaks what the Father has commanded him to speak (John 12:49). Therefore, his interactions with Nicodemus provide for biblical counselors a necessary framework for interacting with those who appear to be religious but who are inwardly unregenerate. This section of the thesis analyzes Jesus's evangelistic interaction with Nicodemus in John 3:1-15 exegetically, suggesting a biblical counseling framework for counseling religious but unregenerate counselees.

Exegetical Analysis

Before a sufficient evangelistic counseling methodology is developed, sufficient exegesis of relevant biblical texts must be done from where this methodology can arise. This section of the essay offers an exegetical treatment of Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus in John 3.

Nicodemus the Religious Man

Nicodemus was “a man of the Pharisees . . . a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). The ruling party mentioned is likely the Sanhedrin, the “highest national body in charge of Jewish affairs.”³ Nicodemus’s name affords scholars the possibility of constructing his identity more precisely. Edward Klink suggests that Nicodemus “was wealthy, powerful, and born into an honorable and influential aristocratic family who, along with high priests, composed the ruling group of first-century Judaism.”⁴ Not only was he a member of the ruling elitists, but Nicodemus was also “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10). His aristocratic status and teaching position made Nicodemus a “rare Jew” who was “at the very center of Judaism, as the most representative voice possible.”⁵ While his exact historical identity is speculative, Nicodemus was the epitome of Jewish religiosity in Jesus’s day.

For the purpose of this thesis, however, it is important to highlight the fact that Nicodemus, at the time of his conversation with Jesus in John 3, is unregenerate. Upon a superficial reading of the chapter, one may conclude that Nicodemus is secretly a believer because he seeks Jesus out, calls him Rabbi, and confesses that “no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). However, Jesus says to him, “You

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 118.

⁴ Edward W. Klink, *John*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 194.

⁵ Klink, *John*, 194.

must be born again” (John 3:7). Although the “you” in this verse is plural, Jesus surely includes Nicodemus as having a need for this new birth. Moreover, the fact that John introduces Nicodemus as “a man of the Pharisees” rather than simply “a Pharisee” suggests that readers should understand the conversation in John 3 in light of what John had just written in John 2:23-25: “Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”⁶ Nicodemus, “a man of the Pharisees” is included in the group of “all people” to whom Jesus did not entrust himself, though they believed in him because of his signs. Carson suggests that, at this point in the narrative, “Nicodemus, though interested, is not particularly open to the truth.”⁷ Though Nicodemus’s language at times suggests that he is on the path of discipleship to some degree, Andreas Köstenberger concludes that “his lack of spiritual rebirth, in the context of 1:12-13, marks him off as an unbeliever.”⁸ Despite whether one believes Nicodemus eventually becomes a true disciple of Jesus or not, the textual data suggests that Nicodemus, as this point in the narrative, is a unbeliever. Thus, we can rightly say that Jesus has an evangelistic conversation with a man who is influential, wealthy, and well-versed in Judaism.

Nicodemus’s True Need

The basis for Nicodemus’s attraction to Jesus is not that Nicodemus is regenerate but because of the signs that Jesus performed. He believes Jesus has come

⁶ See Klink, *John*, 193: “The use of ‘man’ . . . in an unusual expression is almost certainly intended to link this pericope with the closing words of the previous pericope (2:25). The insight given in 2:25, and more importantly 1:11, regarding the nature of humanity (‘a man’) gives insight into the dialogue between Jesus and this ‘man.’”

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 186.

⁸ Köstenberger, *John*, 118.

from God because no one can perform such signs “unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Despite the fact that the reader knows Jesus has come from God and was with him in the beginning (John 1:1-3), Nicodemus probably has in mind that God was with Jesus in a way similar to the way he was with Moses.⁹ Furthermore, that fact that he calls Jesus a teacher shows that Nicodemus has a high view of Jesus’s standing as one who leads the people in the ways of God. Klink suggests that “on the lips of Nicodemus, the terms suggests that Jesus is to be viewed as a religious authority to the highest degree.”¹⁰ Craig Keener goes so far as to suggest that Nicodemus “remains a secret believer at this point, not a disciple.”¹¹ While Nicodemus bestows upon Jesus a high religious honor and shows that he is more virtuous than most of the Jewish religious leaders, further examination suggests still that Nicodemus fails to understand who Jesus is or bestow upon him the most proper titles. Carson argues that Nicodemus’s “assessment of Jesus must be judged disappointing” because of the fact that he “does not suggest Jesus is a prophet, still less *the* prophet or Messiah, but simply a teacher mightily endowed with God’s power.”¹² John tells the reader more about Nicodemus’s spiritual state by what titles he does not render to Jesus than by the ones he does. This failure to title Jesus appropriately is exacerbated when compared to Phillip and Nathanael’s designations of Jesus in John 1. In evangelizing Nathanael, Philip calls Jesus “him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth” (John 1:45). Just a few verses later, after Jesus gives Nathanael a glimpse into his prophetic power, Nathanael responds to Jesus by saying, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel” (John 1:47-49). Phillip and

⁹ Klink, *John*, 195.

¹⁰ Klink, *John*, 195.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 536.

¹² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 187 (emphasis original). Carson goes on to say that “Nicodemus was openly curious about Jesus, but still fell a long way short of confession that he was the uniquely promised Coming One.”

Nathanael are incomparable to Nicodemus in terms of religious prowess, yet they confess Jesus significantly more accurately. Furthermore, they had not yet been exposed to the greater works that Jesus promised to perform (John 1:50). Yet, Nicodemus has had greater exposure to Jesus's signs and comes to him precisely because of these signs. However, though he had seen greater signs than Phillip and Nathanael had by the time of their conversion, Nicodemus falls short of confessing Jesus's true identity.¹³

While Nicodemus's religious fervor is on display as he comes to Jesus and initiates this conversation by bestowing on Jesus favorable titles, Jesus, however, does not engage with Nicodemus on Nicodemus's own terms or take him up on his own categories. Rather, through entering into a dialogue, Jesus "instantly gets to the heart" of Nicodemus's real problem.¹⁴ Nicodemus's true need is that he needs to be born again. Despite being a wealthy, popular, ruling teacher in Israel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Nicodemus's response betrays him, as he shows that he does not yet possess the new birth of which Jesus speaks. He thinks in merely natural terms, whereas Jesus speaks in heavenly categories (John 3:4). Despite misunderstanding Jesus the first time, the Lord reiterates Nicodemus's fundamental problem: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:5-6). Seeing the kingdom of God and entering the kingdom of God are the same reality. This conversation reveals that, despite Nicodemus's religious knowledge, he needs something that is outside of himself, namely, the new birth that only the Spirit gives. Without the Spirit-given life, Nicodemus remains outside the kingdom of God. The suggestion that someone with Nicodemus's religious stature and leadership status would find himself outside the

¹³ Köstenberger, *John*, 120.

¹⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 185.

kingdom would have been a foreign concept for leading Jews in the first century. Keener helpfully summarizes this reality:

The level on which 3:3 responds directly to 3:2 is a summons to a greater depth of insight: by being born “from above,” Nicodemus can truly “see,” that is, understand, the kingdom of God. “Teacher from God” is inadequate, as is a worldly understanding of Jesus’ kingship (18:36-37); only supernatural insight can enable one to grasp the character of Jesus’ identity. Jesus insists that Nicodemus be born from God—that is, become a child of God and a child of Abraham. The implication that Nicodemus did not already have this status proved inconceivable to Nicodemus and becomes the focal point of harsh debate between Jesus and Jerusalem leaders in 8:37-47.¹⁵

The fact that Jesus repeats to Nicodemus that only those who are born of the Spirit can be in the kingdom suggests how critical this reality is. Despite being “a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1) and “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:9), Nicodemus is nevertheless “born of flesh” (John 3:7) and subsequently incapable of accurately understanding spiritual matters. Jesus has told Nicodemus “earthly matters,” yet he still does not believe, rendering him totally unable to believe if Jesus tells him “spiritual matters” (John 3:12). Jesus here makes an important connection between verse 12 and the preceding discussion about being born of the flesh and needing to be born again. Being born of the flesh goes hand in hand with unbelief. Being born again enables one to believe “spiritual matters” (John 3:12). The conclusion of Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus is that Nicodemus does not believe the heavenly things of which Jesus speaks because he is born of the flesh. He needs the new birth of the Spirit in order to believe and come into the kingdom of God.

The Need to Believe in the Son

Nicodemus is unable to believe the heavenly realities of which Jesus speaks unless he is born from above. He further proves Jesus’s point and shows that he is not truly born from above when he asks the question, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9).

¹⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:537.

Jesus interacts with Nicodemus but does not allow him to control the conversation and dictate it based on his own terms and understanding. Jesus shows him that his religious stature and position of authority in Israel have no impact on whether the Spirit “blows” on him (John 3:8), as he replies, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). By exposing Nicodemus’s spiritual ignorance, Jesus flips Nicodemus’s religious position on its head and shows him that he needs something that his religious intellect cannot achieve. Carson summarizes this sentiment:

Nicodemus has found Jesus’ teaching hard to understand, but Jesus turns that incredulity into a fundamental Christological question. Nicodemus had approached Jesus with a certain amount of respect (v.2), but he had not even begun to appreciate who Jesus really was. At bottom, Nicodemus’s failure was not a failure of intellect but a failure to believe Jesus’ witness: *you people do not accept our testimony*. The failure to believe was more reprehensible than the failure to understand, since it betrayed a fundamentally inadequate appreciation of who Jesus is.¹⁶

Referring again to the comparison between Nicodemus’s response to Jesus and that of Phillip and Nathanael, the former, although they clearly do not understand Jesus’s identity perfectly, as the narrative shows as it progresses, they do however *believe* in Jesus. They take him at his word; hence, they accept his testimony. Nicodemus, however, as “*the teacher* of Israel” (John 3:10) undoubtedly is familiar with the prophecies about the Messiah and has taught frequently on the reign of God, yet Jesus “takes away the title Nicodemus would have claimed for himself: ‘the teacher of Israel.’”¹⁷ Klink sees Jesus giving more than a mere correction to Nicodemus, but rather a mocking rebuke: “With the definite article, the title is an appropriate mockery of this God challenger who has spoken out of turn and claimed for himself a title and position that does not belong to him.”¹⁸ With this rebuking question, the dialogue ends, and Jesus, the true teacher, shows Nicodemus that he alone is the one who has come from heaven and reveals truth (John

¹⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 199 (emphasis original).

¹⁷ Klink, *John*, 200.

¹⁸ Klink, *John*, 200.

3:13). Jesus, the Son of Man, has existed from all eternity with God and is God (John 1:1-2) and has come down from heaven as a man and dwelt among humans (John 1:14). His glory is “as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Yet, Jesus does not leave Nicodemus without hope in his spiritually compromised position. Rather, he gives Nicodemus the solution to the problem Jesus has exposed in the dialogue: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). The Son of Man who has “descended from heaven” (John 3:13) is the same Son of Man who will be the object of salvation for Israel and “whoever believes in him” (John 3:15). Jesus’s statement alludes to Numbers 21:4-9. Though Nicodemus cannot comprehend the heavenly things of which Jesus speaks, he certainly knows the narrative of Numbers 21:4-9. In this Old Testament narrative, the children of Israel “spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food’” (Num 21:5). Because of Israel’s rebellion, God sends upon them serpents that bite them, and many die as a result (Num 21:6). When the people acknowledge and confess their sin, Yahweh tells Moses to “make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Num 21:9). Moses did so, and anyone who was bit by a serpent could look upon it and would live (Num 21:9). Nicodemus, like Israel, seems to be making a mockery of God in the person of Jesus Christ. However, also in comparison to the Old Testament text, God has raised up an intercessor for the people to cry out to when they realize they have sinned.¹⁹ Just as God, through Moses, provided physical salvation for the children of Israel in that if they looked upon the serpent, they would live, God has provided, through Jesus Christ, eternal, spiritual life for all who believe in him. The Israelites in Numbers were not healed because there was some superstitious power in

¹⁹ For a discussion on the parallels between the two narratives, see Klink, *John*, 202-3.

the bronze serpent itself but because they looked upon God's provision for them by faith. They believed that if they looked at it, they would be healed. In the same way, if Nicodemus would be healed of his corrupted spiritual position and be given eternal life, he must "believe" in the one God has sent from heaven (John 3:15). Being born of above results in believing in the one who has come from above, as Keener says, "For John, birth from above depends on the exaltation to heaven of the revealers from above."²⁰ However, it is important to note that this believing is not abstract, but rather a belief in Jesus Christ the person and his atoning death on the cross. "Lifted up" according to many commentators has a dual meaning. Christ will be lifted up, literally, in history, on a Roman cross (John 19), yet this being lifted up in death also denotes his exaltation and glorification. Though the religious leader Nicodemus in John 3 has not been born from above and is yet outside the kingdom, by believing in Jesus and his work on the cross, he may receive eternal life and share in the exaltation of the Son of God. This section of the thesis has argued that John 3:1-17 gives biblical counselors an exegetical framework for problem-occasioned evangelism with religious but unconverted counselees. The next section will make the same argument for counseling non-believers but focus on Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:7-26 to build the counseling framework.

Jesus's Encounter with the Samaritan Women: Counseling the Seeking Non-Believer

People come to counseling because they have perceived needs and problems. They sense that something is not right about their life, usually because they have faced unwanted circumstances or are behaving in ways that produce negative emotions or harm for others. The perceived needs of the counselee, whether true needs or not, are the issues through which evangelistic counselors get to the counselee's heart and discern their true

²⁰ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:563.

needs as defined by Scripture. Allowing the counselee's perceived needs to be a window into their spiritual heart is pivotal in faithful problem-occasioned evangelism, as Jones says, "In problem-occasioned evangelism, the person's difficulties become opportunities to present Jesus as relevant to their presenting problems and the transformative to their deeper ones."²¹ For one reason or another, non-believers may seek out biblical counseling, and they will likely come in with a host of problems along with wants and desires that they perceive to be real needs. A wife may say, "I need my husband to love me better," or a man may suggest that he has a mental illness and must get a proper diagnosis and treatment, or he will never be able to be a responsible citizen. Jones states that while addressing the counselee's perceived needs, which counselors should deem important, they "must not allow them—even if severe—to obscure your gospel-centered counseling vision."²² Because non-believers are blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4), they are incapable, apart from the Spirit working through the Word, to interpret their experiences accurately and see that their true need is to know Jesus Christ. This was the experience of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Her believed needs were not her true, or at least her most vital, needs. Jesus, however, allows her perceived needs to be an opportunity to expose her sinful desires and show her that he alone can meet her true need: spiritual satisfaction in God. This section of the thesis analyzes Jesus's evangelistic interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:7-26 exegetically, suggesting a biblical counseling framework for unregenerate counsees.

Exegetical Analysis

As shown throughout this thesis, leading biblical counselors have argued effectively for evangelistic counseling, or problem-occasioned evangelism. However,

²¹ Robert D. Jones, "Counseling Non-Christians," in Jones, Kellen, and Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives*, 239.

²² Jones, "Counseling Non-Christians," 238.

what is needed in the BCM is not merely an affirmation of the legitimacy of evangelistic counseling, but an evangelistic counseling framework that arises out of the pages of Scripture. In the same way that an exegetical analysis of John 3:1-17 is needed to build a counseling framework for ministering to religious but unregenerate counselees, an exegetical analysis of John 4:7-26 is needed for building an evangelistic framework for ministering to seeking counselees.

Jesus's Initiation and Questions

One of the more shocking displays of the love of Christ in the Gospels is his dealing with the Samaritan women in John 4. Jesus initiates a conversation with the women, as he, sitting at the well, says to her, "Give me a drink" (John 4:7). While perhaps modern readers may read over this verse and see nothing abnormal, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus's day was very hostile. Jesus's initiation with the woman is intended to shock original readers.²³ Klink describes the hostility between the Jews and Samaritans in the following way:

The Samaritans adapted the worship of the God of Israel with the gods of Babylon, which created direct theological confrontation with the Jewish religion. If that were not enough reason for hatred between the Jews and Samaritans, but the early first century there had already been around two centuries of conflict and strife between the groups, with both sides committing violent war crimes against the other.²⁴

It is important to keep the backdrop of the ethnic tension between the Samaritans and the Jews in mind as we further analyze this section exegetically.

After initiating a conversation with the Samaritan woman, the woman responds to Jesus understandably in astonishment (John 4:9). Because of the current Jewish views on Samaritans and on women, and possibly because of her own social shame,²⁵ the

²³ Klink, *John*, 235.

²⁴ Klink, *John*, 235.

²⁵ Köstenberger suggests that because the woman came alone and during the middle of the day, she was "looked down upon by her community on account of her low reputation." Köstenberger, *John*, 148.

woman cannot fathom that a true Jewish male would make such a request of her.²⁶ Yet, Jesus responds with an even more shocking proclamation: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10). Still confused because a Jewish man who asked her for a drink now claims to have “living water,” the woman responds by giving a defense of the well from which she came to draw and by challenging Jesus’s greatness (John 4:12). She, much like Nicodemus in chapter 3, fails to see the glory of the Son of God. In the beginning stage of this conversation, the woman interacts with Jesus with merely earthly categories. She views Jesus through the lens of the current ethnic tension between the Jews and the Samaritans, and she fails to comprehend that Jesus does not speak of literal water, of which the woman has access, but about the “living water” that has spiritual and eternal value.

Jesus makes a clear distinction between the two types of “water” in view: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up into eternal life” (John 4:13-14). Köstenberger concludes the verb “give” “dominates this section, occurring seven times between 4:7 and 4:15.”²⁷ This theme suggests that the focus of the conversation is not on the woman’s abilities in anyway but on Christ’s willingness and ability to give this living water freely to those who ask for it. Still confused and thinking in worldly terms, the woman, believing Jesus will meet her temporary needs, says, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirst or have to come here to draw water” (John 4:15). The woman “transforms Jesus’ promise of a gift to come into a request that provides her with

²⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 217-18.

²⁷ Köstenberger, *John*, 149.

immediate physical satisfaction.”²⁸ Carson sees a correlation to Nicodemus, as she “continues to think on the purely naturalistic plane.”²⁹ Like Nicodemus’s inability to discern what Jesus means by being born again, the Samaritan woman likewise fails to see Jesus offers her something tremendously more valuable than literal drinking water, even though fresh water is an extremely important commodity, especially in desert areas. However, the woman up to this point “wants to get in on any blessing that will enable her to abandon these trips to Jacob’s well.”³⁰ Though she may be hiding from public ridicule or shame, the Samaritan woman up to this point is interested in Jesus’s ability to spare her from these daunting trips to draw water. However, she does not understand that Jesus promises her a heavenly gift that only he can give.

Theological Confusion

Already surprised by the fact that Jesus, a Jewish man, would speak to her at the well, the Samaritan woman comes under greater astonishment when Jesus tells her that he has water to give her that is better than that from which she came to draw. She fails to realize that Jesus is not speaking of literal water, but spiritual, as she responds by saying, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep” (John 4:11). After asking him where he gets the living water of which he claims to be able to give, the woman turns the conversation theologically when she asks the question, “Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock” (John 4:12). Köstenberger and Carson both suggest that the mention of Jacob giving the well is tradition and has no explicit mention in the Old Testament.³¹ The

²⁸ Köstenberger, *John*, 152.

²⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

³⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

³¹ Köstenberger, *John*, 151; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 219.

focus again is on the verb “gave,” as the woman seems to rebuke Jesus for suggesting that he can offer water better than that given by the patriarchs.

Just as Nicodemus cannot comprehend how someone with the religious and social status that he has could be outside the kingdom, the Samaritan woman cannot comprehend how Jesus could be greater than Jacob. Only one person in the Old Testament could fit this description: the Messiah. The Samaritan woman seems to make this connection simply by asking the question. Also, she says to Jesus later in the conversation, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things” (John 4:25). While it is difficult to know how much of the woman’s theological statements are legitimate or whether she merely wants to defend her Samaritan heritage against the Jewish man speaking to her, what is clear is that the woman, albeit confused, has some theological understanding about the Messiah, which leads to the conclusion of the conversation in verse 26. Consider Klink’s observations on the woman’s theological response to Jesus:

With what is probably another cutting rejoinder, the woman chides Jesus not simply for forgetting his personal Jewish heritage (by speaking to a Samaritan), but for forgetting the roots of Jews (and Samaritans) as a whole. Her question assumes a negative answer, denoted by the use of “not” . . . [I]t would be inconceivable for a person to consider themselves to be greater than the patriarchs. The negation is not merely denying that Jesus is anything like the great one of the past but also anything like the coming great one. Only one person in the Torah could fit this description, the one who after having “nothing to draw with” gave Israel “living water” at Rephidim (Exod 17:1-7) and Kadesh (Num 20:2-13), where “water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank” (Num 20:11). The Samaritan woman us implicitly asking—even while disbelieving—if Jesus is the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15-10).³²

Klink rightly sees that while the woman is skeptical about Jesus’s claims, she nevertheless has in her mind that one is coming who is in fact great like Jacob.

Though the woman turns the conversation away from Jesus’s offer of living water to her theological understanding of Jacob and the well he supposedly gave, Jesus

³² Klink, *John*, 240.

nevertheless does not allow her statement to sidetrack him from his main agenda. Jesus does not get into a theological squabble over Jacob, the well, or her right to drink from it. He responds by pressing his point even further: “Everyone who drinks of thus water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). Upon hearing this, the woman walks back her rebuke, drops her theological conundrum, and asks Jesus to give her this water so that she no longer must come to the well (John 4:15). The woman, despite what she just said about Jacob being great, is willing to back off this position and ascribe to Jesus this greatness if he is able to keep her from coming back to the well to draw water. The Samaritan woman here shows that her true desire is no longer to have to come back to the well to draw water and shows that her interest in Jesus involves his ability to meet this need.

As the conversation progresses, however, Jesus does in fact expose the woman’s theological ignorance and teaches her the accurate way to understand what God is accomplishing. After accurately proclaiming to her that she has had five husbands and is now living in adultery (John 4:18), the woman submits that Jesus is in fact a prophet (John 4:20). It is interesting that while the Samaritan woman makes multiple theological assertions in her conversation with Jesus, the only time Jesus tells her that she is correct and has spoken truly is when she says, “I have no husband” (John 4:17-18). Jesus’s primary goal in this conversation is to expose not only the woman’s faulty theology but also to expose her underlying problem with seeking fulfillment in men. Carson believes the interpretation that sees the woman put forth another point of theological dispute “to distract Jesus from the sin-question she finds so embarrassing” as possibly “psychologizing the text.”³³ He prefers rather to see the woman responding to Jesus’s prophetic knowledge by raising another point of sharp theological tension between Jews

³³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 221.

and Samaritans.³⁴ It seems unlikely, however, that Jesus's astonishing prophetic knowledge of her private life would prompt her to challenge him even further theologically. Also, the theme of the narrative focuses on the woman's desires, both physically, and now, romantically, and Jesus's ability to give her ultimate fulfillment. Köstenberger, therefore, rightly suggests that Jesus's prophetic knowledge of her marital situation prompts her to change the course of the conversation again, hiding behind more theological discussion to avoid facing the reality of what Jesus knows to be true about her.³⁵

While the woman seeks to debate with Jesus over a centuries-old disagreement with the Jews regarding whether temple worship should be in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim,³⁶ Jesus again refuses to allow the woman's theological squabbles distract him from his agenda. Rather than arguing for Jerusalem, the standard Jewish position, Jesus says,

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4: 21-24)

Much like in his preceding conversation with Nicodemus, while the conversation begins in dialogue, with Jesus intently listening and allowing the woman to speak, by the end of the conversation, Jesus takes full control and asserts himself as the authoritative voice. He confesses that he is in fact *the* prophet when he predicts that "the hour is coming" when worship will not be confined to any temple on any mountain (John 4:23).³⁷ The mountain on which one worships is not the issue. The way and the spirit in which Yahweh's

³⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 221.

³⁵ Köstenberger, *John*, 153.

³⁶ For a discussion on this debate, see Köstenberger, *John*, 153-55.

³⁷ See Köstenberger, *John*, 155.

followers worship him is what will ultimately matter. The woman concedes that the Messiah, whom she believes “is coming” will settle the matter about how to worship Yahweh (John 4:25). In emphatic fashion, Jesus declares to her that he is this Messiah of whom she speaks. However, not only does he claim to be the Messiah, but he implicitly identifies himself with the God who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3, as Klink says, “The self-revelation God gave to Moses through a bush in Exodus 3 has now been spoken to a Samaritan woman through the incarnate God.”³⁸ After a long dialogue that involves the physical need of drinking water, theological disputes, and a prophetic revelation about the Samaritan’s woman’s marital status, Jesus reveals his true identity to the woman plainly. Though the conversation began with Jesus requesting a drink and telling the woman that he had living water to give her if she would ask, the woman now knows that “Jesus is the Messiah, and the Messiah is Jesus.”³⁹ Though the woman, in order to fulfill a legitimate physical need, walked to the well in the middle of the day to avoid the social shame of her own people, she left with a full knowledge of the Messiah who gives soul-satisfying water.

Adultery Exposed

One of the most significant aspects of Jesus’s interaction with the women at the well, especially for the purposes of biblical counselors, is when he exposes her marital dysfunction. After seemingly backing off her challenge to Jesus regarding his greatness compared to Jacob, whom she believes gave the Samaritans the well, the woman requests from Jesus the water of which she speaks so that she “will not be thirsty or have to come to draw water (John 4:15). Jesus, intending to switch the focus from temporary, physical problems to the woman’s spiritual issues, replies, “Go, call your husband, and come here” (John 4:16). By telling the woman to call her husband, Jesus

³⁸ Klink, *John*, 246.

³⁹ Köstenberger, *John*, 158.

changes the dynamic of the conversation entirely. However, as Carson points out, the abrupt change in conversational direction is not superficial, and Jesus has an explicit purpose in doing so.⁴⁰ Much like Nicodemus, the woman has failed to comprehend who Jesus is and what he means. Thus, Jesus turns the conversation toward her marital issues because he knows she has “misunderstood the true dimensions of her own need, the real nature of her self-confessed thirst.”⁴¹ Lying behind Jesus’s command to call her husband is to expose the woman’s true needs and desires, and to show her that he is the solution to them all.

In what is probably an attempt to “thwart off any further investigation,” the woman tells Jesus that she has no husband (John 4:17).⁴² Köstenberger suggests the woman’s statement is “technically truthful,” but that it is “potentially misleading.”⁴³ Commentators differ regarding the nature of the woman’s issue in this instance. Carson sees the woman as having had five husbands who either died or divorced her,⁴⁴ whereas Köstenberger sees the possibility of a wordplay on the word used for man. He suggests that Jesus could be telling the woman that she has been with five *men* who were *not her lawful husbands*, and that the one she now has is also *a man and not her husband*. Therefore, “the woman is a serial fornicator.”⁴⁵ Klink, however, argues that there is nothing in the text to support her being a prostitute, and that it is possible that the text implies that “she is a victim of an abusive system where husbands can freely divorce their wives, leaving a woman used and so helpless that even her most recent ‘man’ will not

⁴⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

⁴¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

⁴² Klink, *John*, 241.

⁴³ Köstenberger, *John*, 152.

⁴⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

⁴⁵ Köstenberger, *John*, 152-53.

marry her.”⁴⁶ The woman, nevertheless, currently is cohabitating with a man who is not her husband, rendering her guilty of sin under God’s Law (Exod 20:14). Whatever specific sins or societal issues are in view are not the main point of the text. The main point is that Jesus is the true prophet who knows her secret lifestyle and has come to her to offer her the remedy for her brokenness.

After exposing her romantic dysfunction and revealing his prophetic knowledge of her most delicate and painful realities, Jesus unforeseeably affirms the woman for speaking truthfully in saying she has no husband (John 4:17:18). Klink is right in pointing out that Jesus’s acknowledgment and affirmation of her speaking truthfully and correctly (John 4:17) “serve to heighten her sensitivity to good judgments, to truth, to reality.”⁴⁷ As stated in the above section, Jesus does not tell the woman she is “correct” about any of the theological points she has raised; however, after telling Jesus that she has no husband, Jesus affirms her statement as “true.” The theme of the entire conversation has focused on what is true and correct. The woman has pressed her beliefs confidently, yet Jesus affirms none of them. While the woman is interested in debating with Jesus over whether he is greater than Jacob and upon which mountain Yahweh should be worshiped (John 4:20), Jesus is interested the woman seeing her sin rightly and seeing him rightly. The woman looks for the Messiah to come and settle the theological points of dispute between Jews and Samaritans (John 4:25), but Jesus, who is the Messiah, wants to satisfy the woman’s greatest spiritual need. As Jesus, *the* prophet and *the* Messiah, exposes the woman’s secret life and greatest desire, “Her life and her sin is exposed—which is exactly what the water of salvation was intended to quench.”⁴⁸ Klink sees here an allusion to Zechariah 13:1: “On that day there shall be a fountain opened . . .

⁴⁶ Klink, *John*, 241.

⁴⁷ Klink, *John*, 241.

⁴⁸ Klink, *John*, 241.

to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”⁴⁹ Jesus offers this prophetic living water to the woman in himself.

In this interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus speaks truth unashamedly to the woman, despite her ignorance of his true nature and the nature of the water he offers. However, he also listens intently and even interacts with her theologically to some degree. He also, however, moves beyond superficial theological disputes between Jews and Samaritans and exposes the woman’s secret life and exposes her true need. Though physical drinking water is necessary for life, the spiritual water that Jesus gives is necessary for eternal life and everlasting satisfaction. She knows the Messiah has been prophesied about and is coming into the world; he will tell the world the truth. Jesus, the one who knows all truth and is truth (John 14:6), has come to her, in the midst of her shame, as she has come to draw water from the well in the middle of the day, and gives her what she most deeply needs.

Jesus’s Encounter with the Lame Man by the Pool: Counseling Non-Believers with Physical Afflictions

As seen in the Samaritan woman at the well, the perceived needs of non-believers provide access points for biblical counselors to minister the gospel and offer the counselee lasting hope and sufficient answers to their problems. This practice is foundational for problem-occasioned evangelism. However, these felt needs are not always confined to perceived material or relational needs, as was the case for the Samaritan woman in John 4. The ultimate “problem” for many non-believers is in the realm of physical ailment, and their great perceived need is healing or relief from this physical difficulty. Whether the physical affliction⁵⁰ is a chronic disease, a hereditary illness, an injury, or what might be considered a minor but continual physical nuisance,

⁴⁹ Klink, *John*, 241.

⁵⁰ By “physical affliction,” I have in mind any physical/bodily problem that brings pain and subsequent stress on the person.

people desire physical relief and will often go to great lengths to obtain it. This “need” for physical relief drives people to pursue it not only from medical care but oftentimes in substances. The opioid epidemic suggests just how highly people value freedom from pain. If biblical counselors see evangelistic counseling as a biblically warranted means of ministering the gospel to the unconverted, as this thesis has argued, then they must have a biblical foundation for counseling non-believers who seek help in dealing with their physical challenges. Counselors may wisely position their ministry in areas that are characterized by poor health or in areas where pain medication addiction is rampant. In John 5, Jesus encounters a man who has been lame for thirty-eight years (John 5:6-7). The man, trusting in a superstition, has been waiting by a pool but has no way of getting into the pool when the water is stirred, supposedly making it sufficient to heal whoever gets in first (John 5:7). Jesus not only heals the man of his physical disability but also ministers to his greater need, making him whole and counseling him to “sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). Though briefly recorded, Jesus’s interaction with the lame man offers help much to biblical counselors for ministering to non-believers with physical problems.

Exegetical Analysis

As this chapter has demonstrated, Jesus’s personal encounters with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman at the well provide biblical material to build a sufficient evangelistic counseling system. While the exegetical analysis of John 3:1-17 and John 4:7-26 provides counselors a biblical framework for counseling religious non-believers and for counseling those who are seeking satisfaction outside of God, an exegetical treatment of Jesus’s encounter with the lame man in John 5:1-17 is necessary for developing a counseling framework for counseling non-believers who have chronic physical disabilities. This section of the thesis offers that exegetical analysis of John 5: 1-17.

The Pursuit of Wholeness

The pool at Bethesda in Jerusalem was a popular place for people with physical problems. Likely because of a superstition that the first person to get into the pool when the water was stirred would be made well, there were numerous “blind, lame, and paralyzed” people lying beside the pool hoping to be put in (John 5:3).⁵¹ Whether desperate, deceived, or complacent, these physically ill people came to the pool in hopes that they may be put in the water and restored from their ailment. Jesus, however, sees the man and knows his condition (John 5:6). The language suggests that Jesus either learned about the man’s condition through inquiry or via supernatural knowledge.⁵² Either way, Jesus’s encounter with this “one man” (John 5:5) was not arbitrary but intentional. Jesus knew about his condition and specifically sought him out over against the other numerous people lying at the pool. As is the case in nearly all of Jesus’s signs in the Gospel of John, Jesus initiates the encounter, which leads to the miracle.⁵³

Similar to the way he interacted with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus asks the man a question: “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6). Many see Jesus’s question as a sort of rebuke to the man. If this is so, Jesus intends to provoke a sense of urgency in the man who has had an ailment for thirty-eight years yet has become complacent with merely coming to the pool. If this interpretation is correct, then the man’s response in verse 7 can be seen as an excuse. The conclusion is that the man has come to see himself as a victim, and Jesus has come to heal him to get him back to a place of sufficiency. While this interpretation might be attractive to the self-sufficient mind, and while it may be appealing to a counselor who is ministering to one who has

⁵¹ While manuscript tradition suggests that verses 3b-4 are almost certainly not original, they may provide insight into the superstitious beliefs about the water. For a discussion about the pool at Bethesda and the water motif, see Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:636-39.

⁵² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 268.

⁵³ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 269.

become complacent in their situation or to those who have come to view themselves as a victim, this interpretation is unlikely given the context and the themes of the rest of John's Gospel. Carson rightly argues against this interpretation and suggests that "Jesus' question is best taken as one of the elliptical offers he is constantly making in this Gospel."⁵⁴ Jesus's offer repeatedly in the gospel of John is to come to him freely and receive. Hence, Jesus's question does not challenge the man to "put his foot forward" before receiving his healing. Rather, Jesus's question is meant to expose the fact that, despite wanting to be healed, no one has thus far put him in the water. The man's answer in verse 7, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me," is precisely the point the question is meant to provoke. The man has been lame for thirty-eight years, and no one will help him get into the water to be healed.⁵⁵ However, according to Klink, "The reader is meant to be struck by irony. The 'one'—the 'man' . . . that the lame man needs is standing before him, but the manner of help he will provide will be entirely different."⁵⁶ Jesus does not proceed to help the man get into the water, but, as the Son of God, he heals the man with a word: "Get up, take up your bed, and walk" (John 5:8).

Very similar to the narrative of Peter and John's healing the lame beggar in Acts 3, Jesus, not content with merely helping the man physically get into the pool, demonstrates his power over physical ailments and heals the man immediately. The man is able to take up the bed that he had long been laying on, waiting for someone to help him, and walk (John 5:9). However, as the narrative progresses and Jesus encounters the man again in the temple, it is clear that Jesus does not intend to merely heal the man

⁵⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 243.

⁵⁵ Köstenberger, *John*, 180.

⁵⁶ Klink, *John*, 271.

physically. In fact, the physical healing leads to an interaction about the much more significant matter: the man's spiritual state.

Spiritual and Physical Wholeness

After a controversy with the Jews over carrying his bed on the Sabbath, Jesus “found him in the temple” (John 5:14) and continues his ministry to him. Klink notes that this is not a “chance encounter.”⁵⁷ In his sovereignty, Jesus always finds those for whom he looks. Just as Jesus sovereignly positions himself to meet the Samaritan woman at the well at the most unlikely time, he seeks the man he just healed because he is not content with the man's physical restoration alone. Jesus's proclamation, “See, you are well!” (John 5:14) harkens back to his question in verse 6 that was intended to provoke within the man the sober reality than he had been “unwell” for thirty-eight years with no one to help him be made well. Jesus, however, made the man well in an instant, not with the mysterious waters of the pool, but by his own word. The question in verse 6 and the proclamation in verse 14 both point the man to Christ's sufficiency. Though this section in the narrative reveals less about the man's background than Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 and is much less detailed than his encounter with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, all three encounters reveal the same reality: Jesus Christ is the sufficient source of life, both physical and spiritual. Where Nicodemus's religious pride gives him a sense of identity and value that hinders him from truly entering the kingdom, Jesus calls upon him to believe in him and receive eternal life. Where natural water fails to fully satisfy the woman's physical thirst, her adultery also fails to satisfy the longing desires of her heart. Jesus, however, gives her living water by satisfying her deepest longings and desires. Likewise, whereas the man by the pool could not receive physical healing, even as he waited by the pool, clinging to a superstition, longing for someone to

⁵⁷ Klink, *John*, 274.

put him in, Jesus alone makes him “well.” Jesus’s proclamation also points to the fact that the man is still well after a period of time.⁵⁸ While other healings from the pool likely proved to be temporary, the healing Jesus provided is permanent and sufficient.⁵⁹ A vitally important theme that arises out of an exegetical analysis of Jesus’s evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5 is that all of the individuals cling to some wrong notion that hinders their access to God and keeps them from enjoying true satisfaction in them. However, in all three encounters, Jesus plainly shows that he has come to restore their access to God and satisfy them eternally.

After finding the man and drawing his attention to his new physical state, Jesus turns his focus to the man’s spiritual state, as he says, “Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). Commentators differ on whether Jesus’s exhortation suggests that the man’s infirmity was the direct result of a particular sin, or whether, consistent with John 9:3, the statement should be understood in light of the fall’s effects on the physical body. Both interpretations provide helpful counseling material. In the chapter 5 on methodology, I will discuss how biblical counselors should minister to unbelievers who are physically ill and also those who are currently living in grievous immorality that, because of physical consequences, must be immediately repented of and stopped, even before the person comes to a saving faith in Jesus. Carson, Morris, and Köstenberger believe Jesus’s statement suggests that the man’s infirmity is related to his sin.⁶⁰ In fact, Carson argues that “Jesus finds the cured man *at the temple* . . . and explicitly connects the healing with the urgent need for moral reformation.”⁶¹ Just as Jesus was ultimately interested in exposing the Samaritan woman’s sin so that she would

⁵⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 273.

⁵⁹ Köstenberger, *John*, 182.

⁶⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 245; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 273; Köstenberger, *John*, 182.

⁶¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 245 (emphasis original).

repent and turn to him in faith, Jesus shows this man that ultimately his body's condition is secondary to his moral standing before God. While Jesus has the power to heal bodies, he also knows the man's spiritual state and commands repentance. While the warning, "so that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5:15) may certainly mean that if the man goes back to particular sin, he may very well end up with a worse physical condition, readers of the New Testament know that ultimately, if people neglect Jesus's call to repentance, they, in the body, will experience ongoing eternal judgment.⁶²

In his interaction with the lame man by the pool of Bethesda, Jesus demonstrates his concern not only for the man's physical wholeness but also his spiritual wholeness. Whereas the man has had an infirmity for thirty-eight years, Jesus heals him completely in an instant. Though the man has his hope set on being put in the pool when the water is stirred for healing, he has no one to put him in the water at the appropriate time (John 5:7). Jesus, however, exposes the man's dire condition and vain hope and ultimately points him to the one who can truly make him whole. However, after the miracle, Jesus again seeks out the man, reminds him of what has happened to him, and warns him not to go on sinning any longer (John 5:14). Whether the man's physical ailment was a direct result of his sin or not is debatable, but what is clear is that the Son of God has authority to heal the body and demand repentance. It is significant to note that Jesus healed the man before the man made any moral changes and before he even knew who Jesus was (John 5:13). The man contributed nothing to his healing; he merely received the grace of Christ. However, Jesus's second interaction with the man shows that he is not content with making people well physically merely while they continue to die spiritually. In telling the man to "Sin no more" (John 5:15), Jesus shows the man that he purposefully sought him not only to make him "well" physically but in his entire being.

⁶² Köstenberger, *John*, 182.

Conclusion

Jones, Patten, and other seasoned biblical counselors who have argued positively for evangelistic counseling know that true and lasting change cannot be wrought apart from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. They do not suggest that counseling non-believers should be merely therapeutic or focused on “fixing” the temporary needs of the counselee. Rather, evangelistic counseling, or problem-occasioned evangelism, is a biblical counseling paradigm that seeks to imitate the evangelistic methods of the Lord Jesus Christ. This evangelistic counseling paradigm allows counselors to minister to their counsees’ temporary problems and situations while ultimately focusing on using these problems as access points for the gospel. Although the legitimacy of evangelistic counseling has been convincingly argued over against the view that biblical counseling should not be ministered to non-believers, the need for a robust exegetical, theological, and methodical evangelistic counseling framework remains. This chapter has sought to lay a foundation for this evangelistic counseling framework by analyzing Jesus’s evangelistic encounters with Nicodemus in John 3, with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, and with the lame man by the pool in John 5.

CHAPTER 4
THEMES IN JESUS'S EVANGELISM
IN JOHN 3, 4, AND 5

Not only does analyzing Jesus's interactions with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the lame man at the pool on an exegetical level provide material for building an evangelistic counseling system, but it also brings to the surface doctrinal themes that are necessary for constructing an evangelistic counseling system. Analyzing John 3, 4, and 5 thematically is essential for establishing a comprehensive counseling approach that is aimed at unbelievers. The rich doctrinal themes of Scripture that arise from these texts show biblical counselors the themes that they should address, most particularly when they counsel nonbelievers. While the previous chapter analyzed three of Jesus's evangelistic encounters on a merely textual basis, this section analyzes these passages for key biblical doctrines and themes that are vital for biblical counselors to understand in evangelistic counseling. The treatment that follows will not be exhaustive nor analyze the passages in order but, building upon the exegetical foundation laid in chapter 3, will focus on key theological themes that are pertinent for counseling unbelievers.

Spiritual Blindness

A major theological theme that arises out of Jesus's interaction with Nicodemus is that of spiritual blindness. While being a component of the larger doctrines of sin and man, we see Nicodemus's spiritual blindness explicitly in John 3:1-15. Nicodemus shows his spiritual blindness first of all when he approaches Jesus as "Rabbi" and as "a teacher come from God" (John 3:2) rather than referring to him as "the Christ" or by a title that more explicitly shows his position as God's chosen prophet and Messiah. Carson also sees Nicodemus's confession of Jesus as "disappointing" and that it "fell a

long way short of confession that he was uniquely the promised Coming One.”¹

Nicodemus’s inability to see Christ accurately becomes more pervasive as the narrative continues. He cannot comprehend what Christ means when he says one must be “born again” (John 3:4). Nicodemus believes Jesus speaks of one physically being born a second time, whereas Jesus means a spiritual birth (John 3:6). As a leading Jew who is very religious, the idea that Nicodemus would be outside of the kingdom would have been foreign to him. When operating on a merely worldly paradigm, religious people, like Nicodemus, seem as if they are the primary members of God’s kingdom. However, Jesus presses the point to Nicodemus all the more as their conversation progresses.

Biblical counselors, especially those ministering in areas where Christianity is the social norm, will likely minister to religious people who are in fact unregenerate. Being spiritually blind is akin to being spiritually dead. The apostle Paul teaches that before the new birth, we are “dead in the trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). We live on in these sins, “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:2-4). The reason humans voluntarily live in sin, follow Satan and his ways, and live to please their fleshly lusts is that they do not see God, the world, or their sin accurately. Because of sin people are “futile in their thinking” and their hearts have been darkened (Rom 1:21). The human mind is “hostile to God” (Rom 8:7) and “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of heart” (Eph 4:18). This darkened understanding and alienation from God leads to an ongoing hardening of heart and a desire to commit sin and live to please the flesh (Eph 4:19). The biblical testimony is that

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 187.

sin has catastrophic effects on our thinking and ability to interpret God, ourselves, and the world rightly. This damaging effect is known as “the noetic effects of sin.” Heath Lambert, in his *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, argues that sin’s impact on our thinking warps our ability to reason morally and casts confusion on what should be clear.² Sin affects people’s thinking and moral reasoning whether they are religious or not. In fact, being religious often stems from selfish pride and often works to blind people to their need for a savior even more, especially when Jesus’s death on the cross as the only means of salvation is considered. The gospel of Jesus Christ was “a stumbling block to Jews” (1 Cor 1:23) in the first century, and it is likewise undermined by many who profess to be “Christians” today. Because we love our sin and are content to remain in our pride and rebellion against God, we need God to initiate the work of regeneration in our hearts.

One major implication of the fact that people are born into this world spiritually blind because of sin is that they cannot come to God for salvation on their own. The problem is not that God has not revealed himself to humans sufficiently, for he has revealed himself generally in his creation and specially in the Bible (Ps 19; Rom 1:19-20). The problem is that human beings “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” and have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:18, 23). Left to themselves, humans, being “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3) will go in rejecting God and press on in their sins toward eternal destruction (2 Thess 1:9). In order to be saved, the Spirit must impart supernatural life into the hearts of humans so that they can see the glory of Christ in the gospel and be saved (2 Cor 4:4). Theologians call this supernatural work of the Spirit “regeneration.”

² Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 222, Kindle.

Regeneration

Because people, whether religious or not, are spiritually blind because of sin's effects upon their mind and heart, they cannot come to God for salvation on their own. Theologians call this "total inability." Downstream of total depravity, total inability is "the absence of spiritual goodness and the incapacity to reorient oneself from self-centeredness to God."³ God's Spirit must perform the work of regeneration in a person's heart before they can come to Christ in saving faith. Regeneration is "the mighty work of God by which unbelievers are given a new nature, being born again" and is "particularly ascribed to the Holy Spirit working through the gospel."⁴ As Jesus told Nicodemus, regeneration is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and cannot be brought upon by the flesh (John 3:3-8). Spiritual inability is a major theme in John, as Thomas Schreiner says, "John emphasizes that salvation is God's work and cannot be accomplished or effected by human beings" and that "the new life is bestowed supernaturally by God himself."⁵ No one, not even Nicodemus, the religiously prestigious teacher of Israel, can enter the kingdom of God by his own merit. Regeneration is a free gift of God's grace that is given by the Holy Spirit totally dependent upon God's sovereignty in election (Rom 9).

In the Reformed tradition, regeneration precedes conversion because it presupposes that the person is dead in sin and cannot come to God on their own (Eph 2:1-3). After describing their hopeless spiritual state in Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul says to the Ephesian believers, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (Eph 2:4-5). What is most striking about these verses is that, though the Ephesians *were dead*, God has *made them alive*. This is regeneration, and it is totally a work of

³ Gregg R. Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith: A Guide to Understanding and Teaching Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 139.

⁴ Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith*, 226.

⁵ Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 134.

God's mercy. To take up again the theme of "blindness," Paul tells the Corinthian church that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). Being spiritually blind renders one unable to see the glory of Christ and his salvific work in the gospel. Again, this verse makes clear that not only are those who fully reject any notion of God and live in total rebellion to his moral law spiritually blind, but all people, even very religious people, who do not see the glory of Christ and respond to his gospel call are spiritually blind. However, Paul goes on to say that "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:5). This Pauline description of regeneration shows that no one can simply make themselves be able to see Christ's glory. But God "shines" his light in their hearts so that they can see his glory in the person of Christ.

Dead Religion

For the purpose of this section, however, it must be emphasized that spiritual blindness because of sin is not only a reality for pagans and atheists but also for devout religious people, even some professors of Christianity. The shocking truths of Romans 1 do not merely characterize the atheist scientist relentlessly working to disprove a biblical view of creation, the blasphemous musician promoting the works of evil, or the abortion "activist" screaming and cussing at a rally. They are also characteristic of those who are religious outwardly but dead inwardly.

In fact, Jesus showed the greatest disdain toward the religious Jewish leaders of his day, the group to which Nicodemus belonged. In Mark 7, when challenged by the Pharisees as to why his disciples did not follow the tradition of the elders by ritually washing their hands before eating, Jesus, citing Isaiah 29:13, says regarding the Pharisees, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain

do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:6-7). He goes on to charge them with “rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition” (Mark 7:9). Likewise, in Matthew 23, Jesus pronounces a series of “woes”—divine judgments—on the scribes and the Pharisees. These scribes and Pharisees were by no means socially insignificant but “enjoyed popular respect and authority as the recognized experts in understanding the Old Testament law and its subsequent elaborations.”⁶ The thrust of Jesus’s condemnation is that the religious people are “hypocrites (Matt 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29). They teach the ways of God yet do not live in accordance with them (Matt 23:3). They pray and perform religious works in order to be seen and praised by others (Matt 23:6-7). They do not enter the kingdom themselves, and they also hinder others from entering (Matt 23:13-15). Interestingly enough, Jesus characterizes these religious leaders as blind and dead. He judges them as “blind guides” (Matt 23:16, 24), “blind fools” (Matt 23:17), “blind men” (Matt 23:19), and “blind pharisees” (Matt 23:26).⁷ Perhaps most shocking of all is that Jesus accuses them of being “whitewashed tombs, which are outwardly beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matt 23:27).

Despite their knowing the Scripture and teaching the Scripture and despite their outward religious practices, Jesus condemns the religious leaders and describes them as being spiritually blind and spiritually dead. Jesus’s interaction with Nicodemus in John 3 and with religious leaders all throughout the Gospels clearly shows that one’s religious commitments, if not done out of a heart of faith in Jesus Christ, are worthless and cannot merit right eternal standing with God. Biblical counselors must not succumb to the temptation of thinking that religious people or unregenerate professing Christians

⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 858.

⁷ See France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 871: “The use of ‘blind’ three times in this pericope draws attention to their lack of spiritual perception.”

are somehow in a better spiritual condition than unbelievers who are totally ignorant of the Bible. The Pharisees and scribes of Jesus's day certainly believed themselves to be doing the will of God. D.A. Carson says concerning Jesus's woes in Matthew 23, "The point that Jesus was making is not that the scribes and Pharisees were deliberate and self-conscious but that in their scrupulous regulations they appeared magnificently virtuous but were actually contaminating the people."⁸ In fact, their religious commitments may in fact make them less receptive to the gospel because they may foster a spirit of pride and arrogance that further blinds people to see their need for Christ alone.

One of the great challenges of ministering to religious people is that they may be tempted to believe that their religious practices or conformity to some moral code merits God's acceptance of them. Performing "Christian practices" apart from the Spirit of God and apart from faith in Christ produces arrogance and often keeps people from acknowledging their depravity and total dependence on God. Like Nicodemus, they do not understand their spiritual state, do not see Christ and his gospel as the only satisfaction for sin, and remain outside the kingdom. Contrary to the works-based attitude that nominal Christianity often produces, the "new life comes not from human effort or human accomplishment but from the miraculous work of God's Spirit."⁹ This concept may seem foreign to religious people who believe they are right with God because they go to church or uphold some sort of moral code. Following the example of Jesus, however, biblical counselors must resist the temptation to withhold the scriptural themes outlined in this chapter simply because the counselee goes to church or has some sort of religious knowledge. They must continue to press the ultimate need of the counselee: a restored relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

⁸ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, *Matthew and Mark*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 25.

⁹ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 463.

Longing for Satisfaction

Another evangelistic theme that arises out of Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5 is that humans by nature are worshippers seeking to satisfy the spiritual longings of the soul. God designed humans to, among other things, worship him as the only true God and Creator. Because humans were made to worship God and relate to him and his world properly, humans have an innate sense of dissatisfaction and longing within themselves because they come into the world separated from God and blinded by sin (Eph 2:12; 2 Cor 4:4). This innate desire for worship makes sense because nature itself bears witness that all people are responsible to worship God.¹⁰ In Romans 1:21, Paul renders all people guilty before God because "although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." Paul goes on to say in the same epistle that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, have the moral law of God written on their hearts and that their consciences bear witness to this (Rom 2:14-15). This is true even though humans are fallen and sinful as a result of the fall.

The history of the world shows that people from all different tribes and locations on the planet have sought to worship something as God. Paul says in Acts 17: 26-27, "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him." Because God designed us as worshippers, he also created us so that our deepest longings of the soul can be satisfied only by having a right relationship to him. When this internal desire for spiritual satisfaction is not filled through having a peaceful relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1), humans seek elsewhere to find satisfaction and meet this desire. Paul David Tripp notably captures this sentiment when he says, "The deepest issues of

¹⁰ Chapter 22 of the Second London Baptist Confession states, "The light of nature shows that there is a God, who has lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good and does good to all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and the soul, and with the might."

life are issues of worship. Worship is more fundamental to our essential nature than the pain, pressures, or pleasures of our experience. What we worship determines our responses to all our experiences.”¹¹ The narrative of the Samaritan woman at the well illustrates these theological truths explicitly.

Perhaps the most pertinent Old Testament text that comes to mind upon exegeting John 4:7-21 is Jeremiah 2:13: “For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” While this verse should not be taken out of its covenantal context, it nevertheless shows us the reality of the fallen human situation. Before a supernatural work of regeneration wrought by the Holy Spirit, human beings reject the true and living God and pursue satisfaction in other things (Rom 1:18-25). In the case of the Samaritan woman, she was seeking physical satisfaction in drinking water, but the narrative seems to use the imagery of drinking water to depict a spiritual reality: the woman was “thirsty” for spiritual satisfaction. Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes are again helpful here when they say the following:

Jesus insightfully and skillfully says that the thing which she needs to be set right is the disposition of the hearts to seek our love and acceptance in someone or something other than ourselves. For so long this woman has been looking for meaning and significance in all the wrong places. The men she had known and the past relationships they represent are really just empty cisterns which can never truly satisfy her heart desires. Yet, here before her is the Man, Jesus Himself, living water incarnate.¹²

When Jesus tells the woman to go get her husband (John 4:16), which works to reveal that the woman has had five husbands and is currently living with a man who is not her husband (John 4:17-18), he seeks to expose the fact that she not only longs to be satisfied from her physical thirst but that she has also been seeking, in men, to be satisfied of her

¹¹ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 67.

¹² Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes, “The Power of the Redeemer,” in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God's Changeless Truth*, ed. James MacDonald, Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 45.

spiritual thirst. Because humans are by nature worshippers who seek for spiritual satisfaction, yet because they are also born with a sinful nature which darkens their understanding, they often default to attempting to satisfy their spiritual longings with temporary measures.

Obsession with the Temporary

One of the primary characteristics of fallen humanity is that it is overly concerned with temporary matters to the neglect of caring sufficiently of eternal matters. Jesus rebukes this way of thinking when teaching his disciples about prayer in Matthew 6:7-8: “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” While the primary focus of this passage is on prayer, the sentiment of Jesus’s instructions is that the Gentiles, those outside the community of faith, pray with many words because they are primarily concerned with material things. Christ’s disciples, however, are to pray first and foremost that the Father’s name would be hallowed and that his kingdom would come and his will would be done (Matt 6:9-10). Their material concerns should not exceed what is needed for the day (Matt 6:11). They should not live their lives primarily for the sake of storing up temporary and earthly goods; rather, they should live their lives in such a way that they would store up “treasures in heaven” (Matt 6:19-20). Jesus then moves into teaching the disciples not to worry or be anxious over such temporary things as food and clothing (Matt 6:25-34) and concludes by giving his disciples the ultimate ethos that his followers must live by: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt 6:33-34). Life in Christ’s kingdom requires a radical departure from obsession over temporary things in exchange for a dedication for and pursuit of the advancement of God’s glory.

Non-believers, however, fail to see the impending judgment and concern themselves primarily with their temporary needs and desires. Like the wicked in Psalm 94, the attitude of non-believers is often that “The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive” (Ps 94:7). While they may not say these words with their mouths, non-believers, like the fool, live as though “there is no God” (Ps 14:1). As discussed above, apart from the work of divine grace, the moral-cognitive component of the human makeup is enslaved to sin and strained from viewing and understanding reality properly. Because of sin, humans do not think clearly about God, about themselves, about his creation, or about eternity as they ought. This problem is seen when people focus solely on momentary realities while giving very little thought or concern to the inescapable reality that life is frail and the judgment looms. We suppress the reality of death in exchange for obsession over the temporary.

In Jesus’s personal evangelistic encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the lame man, this theme of temporal obsession is pertinent. Nicodemus’s religious and social position make it difficult for him to grasp the “heavenly things” of which Jesus speaks (John 3:12). He cannot fathom how he, “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10), with all his prowess, needs to be “born again” (John 3:3) in order to enter God’s kingdom. Nicodemus’s obsession with temporary matters proves to be a hindrance to him, as he cannot comprehend how he, of all Israel, could be outside of God’s kingdom. This mindset was problematic for many of the Jewish leaders during Jesus’s lifetime and is highlighted in the Gospel of John. Schreiner captures this reality when he says, “The Jews who did not believe in Jesus are indicted because rather than prizing God’s glory, they lived for the approbation and respect of human beings.”¹³ Prizing temporary riches and receiving glory from others often blinded the religious leaders of Jesus’s day from living a life “not animated by love for God (John 5:42), but rather they lived to please

¹³ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 135.

themselves.”¹⁴ Jesus warns elsewhere that riches often hinder people from entering God’s kingdom (Matt 19:23). Temporary obsession over wealth building or social prestige often blinds people from seeing their true need, which is to be rich toward God (Luke 12:13-21).

The Samaritan woman likewise sought to fulfill her spiritual longings in men. Even her confused but eager request that Jesus give her the living water of which he spoke shows that she is overly concerned about her temporary needs. Before her conversion, she wanted Jesus’s living water so that “I will not be thirsty or have to come back here to draw water” (John 4:15). Her primary concerns were for satisfying her ongoing need for water and also for not having to come back to the well to draw water, which, as the previous chapter showed, she came at the most undesirable part of the day likely because she was known for her promiscuity and was socially detested. Moreover, the fact that she came at the most undesirable part of the day shows that she was greatly concerned about what others thought of her and wanted to avoid scrutiny and embarrassment.

While less explicit, this theme of obsessing over temporal things is seen in the lame man by the pool in John 5 as well. By the time Jesus encountered him, he had been waiting by the pool “a long time” (John 5:6), presumably because he wanted someone to put him in the pool so that he would be healed. While we know little about the man’s life, it seems from the text that his primary desire was that his body be made well. This desire for physical healing likely blinded him for his true need: forgiveness of sins and a restored relationship to God. While these three characters show great concern of temporary matters, Jesus’s questions to his “counselors” in John 3, 4, and 5, however, work to expose an inescapable reality—only he can satisfy the spiritual longings of the human heart.

¹⁴ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 135.

Satisfaction only in Jesus

Though humans pursue joy and seek satisfaction in a variety of ways, Jesus ultimately is the only one who can truly fulfill man's deepest longings. He has the "living water" that is eternally satisfying (John 4:14). Jesus's offer of living water to the Samaritan woman harkens back to Isaiah 55:1-2, as Yahweh says to Israel,

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Much like the Samaritan woman, humans seek to fulfill their spiritual thirsts and hungers with physical things such as food, alcohol, or possessions. Like the woman, we are also often guilty of trying to fill the deepest spiritual longings of our souls with relationships. However, when these different things do not satisfy us, we go on to the next pursuit. Much has been written in the BCM on the biblical theme of idolatry. Biblical counselors have rightly noted how unbiblical beliefs, desires, and behaviors are likely a result of seeking to find ultimate joy and satisfaction in something or someone other than Jesus Christ. Jesus, however, came to satisfy humanity's greatest need by dying on the cross for our sins to restore us to a loving relationship with our Creator, as Peter says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet 3:18). From John 4:7-26 arises a key theological theme for evangelistic counseling: that non-believers, though fallen and sinful, have a spiritual longing that only God can satisfy. Though these non-believers seek to satisfy this desire with all sorts of pursuits, Jesus Christ offers "living water" in himself that truly and finally satisfies the deepest longings of humanity.

This theological theme that Jesus alone can satisfy the spiritual longings of the heart is central to the gospel itself. Jesus's offer to satisfy the woman's spiritual thirst is not separated from his offer to save from sin or any other benefit of the gospel. Biblical counselors must refrain from over-emphasizing certain aspects of the gospel over against

others. In his interaction with the woman at the well, Jesus emphasizes the woman's spiritual thirst and how she has sought to satisfy it in unbiblical ways. Yet, "Jesus comes to the woman with an invitation of something which will not only satisfy her greatest yearnings and desires, but also transform her at her very core."¹⁵ He does not walk her through the Ten Commandments and show her how she has broken God's Law and needs a savior from his wrath. This is not to say that these matters are not important and should go unspoken in an evangelistic counseling situation. However, it does mean that biblical counselors must have a robust understanding of Christ's benefits and not settle for truncated views of the gospel. Seasoned biblical counselor Stuart Scott warns biblical counselors of being unbalanced with the gospel in his chapter "The Gospel in Balance."¹⁶ In this chapter, he exhorts biblical counselors to "strive to know fully the person and the situation in front of us" and that "there must be emphasis and balance in all aspects of the gospel when it comes to change or living the Christian life."¹⁷ Jesus himself gives us this paradigm in his own ministry. As we study the ministry of Jesus, we see that he interacts with different people in different ways and makes different emphases accordingly. However, the common thread in them all is that he alone is the sufficient savior and provider.

The Universal Gospel Call

A crucial evangelistic theme that arises from Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John is that the gospel call is universal and not restricted to certain types of people. Alluding to Numbers 21, Jesus tells Nicodemus that just "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may

¹⁵ Baker and Holmes, "The Power of the Redeemer," 46.

¹⁶ Stuart Scott, "The Gospel in Balance," in MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars, *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, 167-79.

¹⁷ Scott, "The Gospel in Balance," 167, 169.

have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Immediately following this statement is the famous John 3:16-21 section, which again states Jesus’s offer of salvation to all without partiality, for “whoever believes” in the Son “should not perish but have eternal life” and “whoever believes in him is not condemned” (John 3:16-18). Yet, we see the theme again in John 5. Though he does not make a universal gospel statement directly to the lame man, he does so in the long discourse which arises out of the miracle: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). This theme that “whoever believes has eternal life” is consistent and repeated in the Gospel of John, and Jesus’s evangelistic encounters under consideration all demonstrate that one of John’s primary purposes is to show that Jesus’s redemptive work is available to all who will believe.

That the gospel is impartial and is offered to everyone, despite ethnicity, gender, age, or social status, is a major New Testament theme. In Acts 11, when Peter declares to the Jerusalem church how God had poured out the Spirit on the Gentiles, the people “glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18). Paul states in Ephesians 3:6 that the mystery of the Christ is that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” God’s inclusion of the Gentiles among his redeemed reveals his glory.¹⁸ Not only are Christ’s benefits offered to all ethnic groups but also to women and people of low societal position. God does not desire that any group of people should perish (2 Pet 3:9). He desires that kings and people of high positions of authority come to know him (1 Tim 2:2), but he also calls those who are not wise according to worldly standards or of noble birth (1 Cor 1:26). The promise of the Messianic Age is that the Spirit will be poured out on “all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Jesus’s

¹⁸ See Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 143.

evangelistic encounters in John, along with the clear testimony of the entire New Testament, show that an evangelistic biblical counseling method must have at its core the truth that Christ's offer of living water and eternal salvation is to all people, whether religious, wealthy, physical ill, or socially outcasted. Biblical counselors who practice problem-occasioned counseling must remember that no matter who comes in for counseling, and no matter how successful or broken their lives seem to society, Jesus Christ shows no partiality in giving salvation. The promise of John 4:14, that "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again," is for all who will come to him and receive him by faith.

While Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus highlights this theme of the universal gospel call in a striking way, Jesus, however, makes a universal gospel call in his evangelistic encounter with the Samaritan woman as well. Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5 consistently demonstrate this important theological theme for developing an evangelistic counseling model: that his gospel call is universal and is not partial. As was stated in the exegetical analysis section above, Jesus breaks multiple cultural barriers in speaking to the Samaritan woman. Jesus's evangelistic conversation with the Samaritan woman shows that Christ's offer of salvation and eternal satisfaction is not merely for religious men such as Nicodemus but also for the most frowned upon people of society such as the Samaritan woman who has no husband and is likely sexually immoral. When John tells us that Jesus "had to pass through Samaria" (John 4:4), the implication is that "God was sending him to Samaria to seek some people to worship him in Spirit and truth."¹⁹ Christ, who himself bears witness that he does only what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19), ensures that he is at the exact well at the exact time that the Samaritan woman would be there to draw water. Though her social shame

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 590.

likely led to her coming to the well at such an undesirable time, Jesus pursues her in order to have this encounter with her that would change her life and lead to the salvation of an entire town (John 4:42). It is important to note that the story does not end with the woman's salvation only. Her transformation leads to her evangelizing the same people she once avoided for shame, leading to the people's interest in and seeking of Christ (John 4:28-30). As a result of her witness, "many Samaritans from that town believed in him" (John 4:39). Jesus gives the Samaritan Woman "an offer of new life and a new heart" and "calls her to forsake those things which she has clung to for meaning and significance and embrace life in him."²⁰ Yet, his powerful work in her leads to the entire town's welcoming Christ to stay with them, a two-day stay which leads to many Samaritan conversions (John 4:40-42). Even Jesus's disciples "marveled that he was talking with a woman" (John 4:27). However, in doing this, Jesus shows that he came to offer his salvific benefits to every type of person.

The Promise of Eternal Life to Those Who Believe

Not only do we see from John 3, 4, and 5 that the gospel call is universal and not limited to certain types of persons, but we also see from these chapters that Jesus promises eternal life to all those who believe in him. Arising out of the conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:13-15, Jesus likens the benefits of his own sacrificial death on the cross with the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (Num 21:4-9). In Numbers 21, Yahweh provided a means by which the Israelites who were bitten by the fiery serpents of his judgment could have their lives spared. Yahweh tells Moses that "everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live" (Num 21:8). God's promise of healing is for all the Israelites indiscriminately, and it is certain, as the narrative goes on to say, "So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone,

²⁰ Baker and Holmes, "The Power of the Redeemer," 46.

he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (Num 21:9). Likewise, God has provided in Jesus a means by which all sinners, impartial of category, can have eternal life. Jesus not only offers this eternal life but also promises it to all who believe, as he tells Nicodemus that just as the serpent was lifted up, he must be lifted up (on the cross and in his exultation), “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15). Just as all who were bitten by the fiery serpents in Numbers 21 had a sure word from God that if they looked at the bronze serpent they would be healed, so also all those who look to the crucifixion of Christ for pardon from sin and believe in Jesus Christ will be saved from the penalty of sin and receive eternal life. By alluding to the bronze serpent narrative in Numbers 21 when explaining to Nicodemus his own salvific ministry, we see that Jesus provides salvation that not only is *offered* to all people but is sufficient to *provide* eternal life to all who respond effectually to his offer.

Jesus’s promise of eternal life to all those who believe is not limited to Nicodemus, for Jesus makes a similar claim to the Samaritan woman in John 4. This time using physical drinking water as an illustration to press a spiritual point, Jesus says to the woman, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). While the context, wording, and specific emphasis of Jesus’s claim to the Samaritan woman is slightly different than Jesus’s claim to Nicodemus (John 3:13-15), the parallels are striking. In both encounters, Jesus’s offer is to “whoever,” showing that his salvific work is indiscriminate of persons, and the benefit of receiving the offers is eternal. In commenting on John 4:14, Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley say, “The Greek phrase rendered as ‘shall never thirst’ employs a double negative for emphasis, with the phrase meaning ‘forever’: he will *certainly never* thirst.”²¹ The emphasis on the eternity

²¹ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Spirit and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 702 (emphasis original).

of the satisfaction that Jesus offers shows believers and non-believers alike that there is nothing temporary that can remotely compare with the eternal joy that is promised to those who believe in Jesus. Beeke and Smalley go on to say, “Those who receive ‘everlasting life’ will never be deprived of God’s life-giving, heart-satisfying grace.”²² Whether forsaking self-righteousness, wealth, and religious prestige, or forsaking the fleeting pleasures of multiple relationships, all who believe in Jesus are promised abundant life that can never be taken from them (John 10:10).

While proclaimed first to Nicodemus (John 3:15) and then to the Samaritan woman (John 4:14), Jesus’s offer of eternal life to all who believe continues to be a major theme in the Gospel of John. Consider the repetition of this theme by noting the italicized words and phrases in the verses in what follows. After healing the lame man by the pool in John 5, Jesus says to the Jews, “*Whoever* hears my word and believe him who sent me *has eternal life*” (John 5:24). In John 6, after feeding the 5,000, Jesus tells the crowd, “I am the bread of life; *whoever* comes to me shall not hunger, and *whoever* believes in me shall *never thirst*” and that “*whoever* comes to me I will *never cast out*” (John 6:35,37). Jesus goes on to conclude these points by saying, “For this is the will of the Father, that *everyone* who looks on the Son and *believes* in him should have *eternal life*, and I will raise him up on the last day.” In the follow up controversy with the Jews, Jesus says, “*whoever believes* has *eternal life*” and that “if *anyone* eats this bread, he will *live forever*” (John 6:51). Because he has life in himself, “*whoever* feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood *has eternal life*” (John 6:54), and “*whoever* feeds on this bread will *live forever*” (John 6:58).

The theme continues on into John 7 and 11. On the last day of the Feast of Booths, “Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If *anyone* thirsts, let him come to me and drink. *Whoever believes* in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of

²² Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:702.

living water”” (John 7:38). After Lazarus dies, and Mary brings up the theme of resurrection, Jesus says to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. *Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die*” (John 11:25-26). Readers familiar with the Gospel of John will note that Jesus makes many similar statements throughout the Gospel which have not been noted. Indeed, these and like statements are a major theme in the Gospel of John. However, this section of the chapter is concerned with highlighting Jesus’s claims that specifically highlight that whoever *believes* in him will have *eternal life*. In fact, John cites this theme as the primary reason for writing his Gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31). Jesus’s promise of eternal life through believing in him is a major theme in the Gospel of John and should be a major theme in evangelistic counseling.

Conclusion

If the BCM is going to develop and put into practice a robust and effective evangelistic counseling method, then counselors must be familiar with the many evangelistic themes of Scripture that are pertinent when counseling non-believers. Comprehensive and detailed exegesis of evangelistic passages is necessary for building this robust evangelistic counseling system; however, drawing out of these same texts evangelistic themes is also vital for this purpose. The previous chapter of this thesis analyzed Jesus’s evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5 on an exegetical basis. This chapter has analyzed those same texts for common themes that are necessary for counselors to understand in counseling the lost.

The commonality of these themes is noteworthy. Jesus’s encounters in John 3, 4, and 5, along with the rest of Scripture, show that all people are born into this world

spiritually blind. Because of indwelling sin and the noetic effects of sin on their thinking, humans are incapable of seeing God and his creation accurately and instead distort reality and idolize the creation. This is true even of people, like Nicodemus (John 3), who are deeply religious but fail to come to Jesus and submit to him as Lord. All people, religious or not, must have their hearts regenerated by a sovereign work of God if they would see Christ rightly and come to him in faith. Along with these themes, Jesus's evangelistic encounters also show that people, though sinful and fallen, are worshippers by nature and long for satisfaction; however, before coming to Christ, they search for this satisfaction in the things of this world, like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), and never experience true joy and life. Because this is true, people often obsess over temporary matters such as their health, job, relationships, etc., and become complacent in this world while failing consider their lives are short and that judgment looms. While all these themes are present, it is clear from these texts that true satisfaction is only in Jesus. He offers true meaning, hope, and pleasure, and he offers these in the universal call of the gospel. The gospel is not only for Jews but for all ethnic groups. It is offered freely to all people despite religious background, socio-economic status, or gender. Jesus's consistent promise in his universal gospel call is that all those who believe in him have eternal life. These glorious evangelistic themes should be much on the lips of counselors who have the privilege of ministering the Word to non-believers in an evangelistic counseling setting.

CHAPTER 5

TOWARD AN EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING METHODOLOGY

As with all theological disciplines, attention must be given to how the biblical truths under consideration should be obeyed and applied to the lives of believers. This thesis has analyzed Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John 3, 4, and 5 exegetically and thematically and has argued that these encounters provide the biblical material necessary to build a robust evangelistic counseling approach. Considering the exegetical and thematic conclusions from chapter 3 and chapter 4, this final chapter offers a way toward developing this evangelistic counseling approach.

The scope of this chapter is limited. Thus, I assume that counselors who read this chapter are confident that their counselee is in fact unregenerate. Therefore, I do not give focus to the kind of inquiry necessary for the first session or two in seeking to determine the spiritual state of the counselee. The necessary assessment of a person's spiritual state is very important but has been developed rather fully by multiple authors and does not need to be reestablished here. Therefore, this section does not offer suggestions for determining the counselee's spiritual state.¹ What follows are methodological implications and practical instructions for counselors who find themselves counseling the three types of non-believers that have been under consideration: the religious non-believer, the seeking non-believer, and the physically afflicted non-believer.

¹ For a detailed resource on assessing a counselee's relationship to Christ, see Robert D. Jones, "Counseling Non-Christians," in *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Counseling*, by Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green (Nashville: B&H, 2021), 235-36.

Methodological Implications for Counseling Religious Non-Believers

By the grace of God, if biblical counselors find themselves in counseling situations with those who, much like Nicodemus, profess to be Christians, have an extensive background knowledge of the Bible, but fail to respond to Jesus biblically, they would be wise to remember Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-17. They must keep in mind that, if the counselee is unregenerate, they are spiritually blind and have no ability in themselves to come to God and believe. Sin has affected their thinking, and their hearts have been hardened by sin and pride. The counselor, like Jesus, must labor to show the counselee their true need, which is to look upon Jesus Christ and his work and trust in him as the only means of salvation. Before, during, and after sessions, the counselor should seek God and ask his Spirit to work the miracle of the new birth in the life of the counselee. While biblical counselors must have a robust understanding of the major theological themes that influence how they counsel unregenerate but religious counsees, they must also consider key methodological aspects to ministering to such persons. This section of this thesis, while considering the exegetical and theological analysis from chapters 3 and 4, offers three methodological considerations for counseling religious non-believers.

Establishing Guilt over Sin

The first component to counseling an unregenerate religious person evangelistically is to establish the biblical truth that they are in fact guilty before God because of their sin. Despite being devotedly religious, unregenerate counsees must see themselves from God's perspective. The problem with humans is not that we need to follow religious practices more carefully or be more devoted to ceremonial observances. The problem is that we come into this world born into Adam's sin and rebel against God by nature. Religious people may believe that God owes them his favor because they

observe certain rituals or perform certain duties *for him*. However, the Bible is clear that all people are dead in Adam's sin.

Romans 5:12-21 is an imperative passage for people who, like Nicodemus, cannot fathom that they stand as enemies of God and will not be accepted by him because of their religious works or social status. Counselors may find it profitable to take their counselee to this passage and work to show them that they are in fact dead in Adam and that their religious practices in no way can produce spiritual life. In this passage, Paul states clearly that death entered into the world through Adam's sin and, because Adam is the federal head of the human race, death has spread to all people (Rom 5:12). Because of Adam's sin, death "reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam" (Rom 5:14). Not only are all people sinful in Adam, but they are all under the condemnation that God's judgment over sin brought about (Rom 5:16). Adam's sin does not merely express itself in pagans or those who blatantly reject God, but Adam's one "trespass brought condemnation for all men" (Rom 5:18). Even those who live decently moral lives and express some belief in God, outside of Jesus Christ, are sinners in Adam and are under God's judgment. In this vital section, Paul gives the reader no hope outside of Jesus Christ of fleeing this judgment.

Biblical counselors who have the privilege of ministering to an unregenerate but religious person must not assume the counselee knows these truths. Nominal or legalistic "Christians" who say they believe the Bible may quickly affirm these truths but not actually believe it applies to them. They may believe that Paul speaks of those who do not go to church or those who cuss or get drunk and not of them simply because they are devoted to certain religious practices. Kevin Carson and Randy Patten consider an unregenerate counselee's belief that they live a "moral lifestyle" as a major challenge to evangelistic counseling:

Many times counselees come to counseling because of a troubling issue, yet on the whole they feel that they are living a relatively good or moral lifestyle. Counselees may rehearse to you their kindness to others, their reliability in business, their

loyalty to friends, or try to show that they have integrity in character. And it might be true, that according to worldly standards they are living a morally acceptable lifestyle. Of course, this fosters a self-righteousness, and, similar to the Pharisees, the counselees fail to see their need for salvation in Jesus Christ because of their own spiritual blindness. This blindness is nurtured through their own positive lifestyle choices. Again, as a counselor you need to lovingly confront this self-righteousness and help counselees to recognize their need for the gospel of Jesus Christ.²

It may be difficult for the counselor, especially if they do not like confrontation, however, to heed Carson and Patten's exhortation and confront the counselee. It may be tempting to accept a quick affirmation of the doctrine of sin from the counselee rather than to take them to a passage like Romans 5:12-21 and linger there, walking verse by verse through Paul's flow of thought, and asking personal and pointedly applicable questions through the process. However, laboring to show the counselee from the Scriptures their participation in Adam, guilt before God over sin, and deserved condemnation is vital for evangelistic counseling. These conversations need not be intimidating or sound overly theologically academic. After listening well, the counselor may say something such as the following to the counselee: "Friend, thank you for opening up about your situation. The good news is that God has given us wisdom from his Word. May I share with you a Bible passage that, based on our conversations about your life, I believe will help you think about your relationship with God?" The counselor can then go to the applicable passage with the counselee and read it aloud or ask the counselee to read it aloud. From here, opportunities abound for the counselor to ask heart probing questions and interact in conversation which will help the counselee understand their position before God from a biblical perspective.

Religion without Faith Is Dead

While laboring to show religious, non-believing counselee's their guilt before God is vital, also critically important is showing them that their religious works, outside

² Carson and Patten, "Biblical Counseling and Evangelism," 321.

of faith in Christ, have no eternal value before God. These counselees may come in for counseling because they are experiencing difficulty in life and believe that God owes them something better because they perform religious duties. Likewise, they may believe that because they go to church, or even read their Bible from time to time, that they are right with God. However, the Bible is clear that God does not accept religious deeds from those who do not know him by faith. Proverbs 15:8 says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but he loves the prayer of the upright.” The wicked, those who do not have saving faith in Yahweh, may offer sacrifices according to the prescriptions in the book of Leviticus, yet the Lord sees them as an abomination. Likewise, Isaiah confesses that even the “righteous deeds” of rebellious Israel “are like a polluted garment” (Isa 64:6). This thesis showed earlier Jesus’s attitude toward the religious but hypocritical leaders of Israel, including his insistence that Nicodemus be “born again” (John 3:3-8). The biblical testimony is clear that “works for God” done apart from faith in God is sin (Rom 14:24), and biblical counselors must work to show their counselees these truths of the Bible.³

This work is especially important when the counselee professes to be a Christian. Counselors in areas where Christianity has been the norm, such as in the Bible Belt, will inevitably face counseling situations in which the counselee professes to be a Christian not because they have experienced true conversion but because they were raised to go to church or because Christianity is a family norm. Pastoring in Pensacola, Florida, I have personally experienced the challenges of caring for people who are culturally Christian but live lives largely inconsistent with the teachings of the New Testament. On top of this, so many churches in areas like this foster nominal Christianity because they have sought to have large numbers rather than to make authentic disciples. I fear many of

³ For a thorough articulation of how biblical counselors should understand the sin in their counselees, see Jones, “Disorders,” 71-82.

the large churches in my city are largely full of unregenerate people. However, I have also cared for people who I believe are regenerate but have had such shallow discipleship at their previous church that they truly do not know basic biblical concepts and truths. It can be extremely challenging to discern whether a person has truly believed in the Lord and experienced biblical conversion but has lacked basic discipleship or if they are merely “Christian” in word only and need to be born again.

In areas that were particularly influenced by a type of revivalism and decisionism that relies heavily on the “sinner’s prayer” and other methods that seek to bring people to a “decision for Christ,” counselees often believe they are going to heaven and have unbiblical assurance of salvation. Carson and Patten see this reality as a major challenge to evangelistic counseling:

Sometimes one of the biggest challenges in this regard is the counselee who has been raised in the church and is already a professing Christian. You may come to recognize that the person seeking counseling is an unsaved person. It’s important to understand that many counselees will come to you with a great deal of Bible knowledge, sometimes even an academic degree. They have heard the stories, learned Grandma’s rendition of the Proverbs, and have received an inaccurate sense of security through religious rituals. They have a functional theology of living, based on their church of origin.⁴

Biblical counselors must break through this “inaccurate sense of security” by working through relevant biblical passages that show that “Jesus challenged the idea that any kind of righteous work would make one eligible to enter into heaven.”⁵ Because religious but unregenerate counselees may believe that they are right with God because of their religious devotion, biblical counselors must labor in relevant biblical texts to show the counselee their guilt over sin and that their religious works cannot save them from God’s wrath or earn them favor with God. Doing this successfully allows the counselor to point the counselee toward their only hope of salvation: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Carson and Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” 321.

⁵ Carson and Patten, “Biblical Counseling and Evangelism,” 322.

Salvation Is in Christ Alone

While biblical counselors must labor to show these counselees that they are guilty of sin before God and that their religious works and practices cannot save them nor merit God's favor, they must point their counselees toward salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In John 3, after showing Nicodemus that he was lost and outside the kingdom, Jesus did not tell Nicodemus that if he were more devoted as a pharisee he would get into the kingdom, nor did he tell him to go try harder and come back later and talk to him again. Rather, he closes the dialogue with Nicodemus and shows Nicodemus how he can be saved and enter the kingdom: "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:13-14). While Jesus hears Nicodemus and interacts with him conversationally, he ultimately takes control of the conversation and speaks gospel truth directly to Nicodemus.

Counseling unregenerate counselees to look to the work of Jesus Christ in the gospel and believe in him is paramount in evangelistic counseling. There is no substitute for proclaiming the gospel in any counseling situation, much less when the counselee is unconverted. Their great need, no matter how difficult the trials or problems in their life may be, is to be reconciled to God by faith in Christ (Rom 5:1). Rob Green sees the urgency of proclaiming Christ in evangelistic counseling; consider his pointed exhortation in the following quotation:

There is no room for compromising the role of Christ as Savior in the counseling room Counselees who do not know Christ may be focused on various problems they are facing. Their largest problem, however, is their lack of relationship with Jesus—being "without Christ in this life (Eph 2:11-13) and thus facing the "penalty of eternal destruction" in the life to come (2 Thess 1:8-9). Biblical counseling, then, is in part an evangelistic ministry. We are seeking to "win" others to Christ (1 Cor 9:24-27). We are pleading with them to confess "Jesus is Lord," and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9). As churches and individuals make counseling available in their communities, lost people will seek help. Some have a religious connection to the church that is rooted in childhood; others were drawn to the possibility of free help; and still others attempted other solutions that

were not satisfying to them. But whatever the reason for coming, we as biblical counselors proclaim Christ and him crucified to those we counsel (1 Cor 2:2).⁶

Biblical counselors who counsel evangelistically must heed Green's exhortation and proclaim Christ. While it may be tempting merely to help the religious but uncovered counselee with their problems, biblical counselors are ultimately not meeting the true need of the counselee if they withhold truth about sin, guilt, and the gospel of Christ.

Practical Application and Conclusion

As this thesis has argued, Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 gives biblical counselors a methodological framework for evangelistic counseling. While not a one-to-one ratio with a counseling session, John 3:1-17 suggests an evangelistic counseling methodology that goes as follows:

- Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he is interested in him and his signs (John 3:1-2). His heart toward Christ is not yet to yield to his Lordship and believe in him, yet there is a genuine curiosity in Christ's person and work. He is confused about Christ, the kingdom, and his own spiritual state.
- Jesus receives Nicodemus and enters into a conversation with him (John 3:3). He does not avoid Nicodemus's real problem or settle for theological debate.
- Jesus labors to show Nicodemus that his fundamental problem is that he is of the flesh and must be born from above, which is a birth that comes from the Spirit, not the flesh (John 3:3-8). He interacts with Nicodemus's question by unpacking the reality of one's natural state and the necessity of receiving Spirit-wrought regeneration.
- Jesus answers Nicodemus's objections and shows him that his position as a teacher and religious knowledge are faulty and cannot save him (John 3:9-12). Nicodemus wrongly understands the Old Testament. All religious non-believers wrongly understand their Bible.
- Jesus uses the Scripture to point Nicodemus to himself and his work on the cross as the only hope (John 3:13-14). They have a shared conviction that the Torah was the Word of God, so Jesus shows how the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied about his work of salvation.

⁶ Green, "The Significance of God, Christ, and the Spirit," 52-53.

- Jesus makes a gospel call to Nicodemus and promises eternal life to all who respond to that call (John 3:14). Jesus places Nicodemus, despite his religious and socio-economic prowess, in the same position as all people. He is born of the flesh and needs the new birth to enter the kingdom. The Spirit gives this new birth, and it is synonymous with believing in Jesus and his salvific work.

When biblical counselors find themselves in counseling situations with people like Nicodemus, they must counsel them in a Christ-like manner, and John 3:1-17 gives us a sufficient methodology to build on. While counselors need not neglect to show compassion or address the struggles of the counselee, they “must always allow those struggles to point counselees to the cross of Jesus Christ.”⁷ Because Jesus is perfectly loving and is our ultimate example, biblical counselors must strive to minister to religious unbelievers the way he did. This section of the thesis has argued that John 3:1-17 gives biblical counselors an exegetical, theological, and methodological framework for problem-occasioned evangelism with religious but unconverted counselees. The next section will make the same argument for counseling-seeking non-believers and will focus on Jesus’s interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:7-26 to develop the counseling framework.

Methodological Implications for Counseling-Seeking Non-Believers

This thesis has argued that not only does the Bible give the church sufficient warrant for using biblical counseling as a means of evangelizing the lost but that it also gives us sufficient material upon which to build an evangelistic counseling model. We saw in John 3 that Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus gives biblical counselors a foundation for counseling religious but unregenerate counselees. Likewise, Jesus’s interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 gives biblical counselors a foundation for counseling unconverted counselees whose lives are in shambles. John 4:7-26 gives biblical counselors a textual paradigm for using the perceived needs of the

⁷ Green, “The Significance of God, Christ, and the Spirit,” 53.

counselee as a window into the depths of the heart and ultimately for showing these counselees their true need and pointing them toward the one who alone can satisfy that need. While much more could be written on how Jesus's interaction with the woman gives biblical counselors a model for problem-occasioned evangelism, this section offers key components of building this evangelistic counseling methodology.

Entering the Counselee's World

When unconverted counselees come to biblical counseling for help, biblical counselors must move toward the counselee with compassion and enter into their world. Jesus moves toward the Samaritan woman by not only purposefully going to her by being at the well when he knew she would be there but also by initiating the conversation by telling her "Give me a drink" (John 4:7). As we saw above, Jesus's speaking to her at all broke many social norms. Jesus lays aside the non-biblical social expectations of his day and enters into conversation with a woman who is ridden with shame and lives in perpetual relationship dysfunction. Biblical counselors who take up the ministry of problem-occasioned evangelism must likewise be willing to lay aside pre-conceived notions and judgments, for they will likely find themselves in counseling situations wherein the counselee has committed grievous sin or has been sinned against grievously, which has resulted in destructive consequences. When offering suggestions for counseling non-Christians, Jones says, "Like Jesus, you must enter [the counselee's] world, understand her needs, and bring her his saving help."⁸ He also recommends that counselors view themselves as "one of God's instruments to offer Jesus" to lost counselees.⁹ Biblical counselors, filled with the Spirit of God and equipped with the Word of God, have all the resources needed to bring comfort and conviction to non-Christian counselees and to offer them salvation and eternal satisfaction in Jesus Christ.

⁸ Jones, "Counseling Non-Christians," 239.

⁹ Jones, "Counseling Non-Christians," 239.

If counselors are to minister to the lost in the name of Jesus, they must, like Jesus, do so with gentleness and compassion. The Gospel writers emphasize Jesus's compassion. Consider the italicized words in the following texts from the Gospel of Matthew:

- Matt 9:36: “When he saw the crowds, he had *compassion* for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”
- Matt 14:14: “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had *compassion* on them and healed their sick.”
- Matt 15:32: “Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have *compassion* on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.’”
- Matt 20:34: “And Jesus *in pity* touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.”

In commenting on Christ's ability to deal gently with sinners from Hebrews 5:2, Dane Ortlund says “Jesus deals gently and only gently with all sinners who come to him, irrespective of their particular offense and just how heinous it is.”¹⁰ One may think that Jesus would be much gentler toward Nicodemus, a very religious and culturally moral man, than he would the sexually immoral Samaritan women. However, Jesus deals with them with largely the same ethos. He listens to them, interacts with them conversationally, tells them the unadulterated truth about their sin, and offers them salvation in himself. Biblical counselors likewise must not make unbiblical assumptions about people because of their situation nor show partiality based on the perceived degree of the sin. Whether a counselee seems to be a fairly moral and upright citizen but struggles occasionally with pornography or seems to be in utter rebellion toward God and is living in blatant sexual sin, biblical counselors must move toward them gently and with

¹⁰ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 54.

compassion yet speak the objective truths from Scripture about their sin and need for Christ.¹¹

Perceived Needs to Spiritual Needs

Along with welcoming non-Christian counselees and ministering to them with gentleness and compassion while speaking the truth of Christ, biblical counselors must also not get distracted in dealing solely with the person's perceived needs. On the contrary, they must allow these perceived needs to serve as open doors to minister to the counselee's spiritual needs. In using Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes argue that "Jesus makes good use of what is around Him as He evangelized and counsels the Samaritan woman."¹² In similar fashion, biblical counselors must make "good use" of the perceived needs and problems of the counselee in problem-occasioned evangelism.

Just as "discussing the topic of water provides a door for Him to enter into a deep, spiritual conversation about a thirst which can never be quenched," biblical counselors who open their ministry to non-Christians will be provided countless scenarios for discussing the counselee's fractured relationship with God and need to repent and believe the gospel.¹³ This, of course, does not mean that biblical counselors should not care about the perceived needs of the counselee, nor does it mean that biblical counselors should not seek to help the counselees find relief from their symptoms or offer biblical counsel for the problems the counselees face. However, as Jones says, "Only an

¹¹ This, of course, does not mean that no distinctive qualifiers can be made in counseling situations. For example, the urgency in ministering to someone contemplating gender-transition surgery or engaging in prostitution is greater than ministering to a married woman struggling with depression. By and large, the major themes of the counseling session will be the same, and the truths of the gospel will not change. However, the most loving thing the counselor may do early on in a counseling relationship is to warn the person that their lifestyle choices must change or lead to catastrophic consequences.

¹² Ernie Baker and Jonathan Holmes, "The Power of the Redeemer," in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God's Changeless Truth*, ed. James MacDonald, Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 44.

¹³ Baker and Holmes, "The Power of the Redeemer," 44.

encounter with Jesus can save and satisfy [the counselee].”¹⁴ Biblical counselors must not pull a “bait and switch” by advertising their counseling for all of life’s problems but then disregard these problems as they impose the gospel. On the contrary, moving toward counselees with compassion, as Jesus does, biblical counselors can care deeply about the counselee’s temporary trials and distresses while also knowing that these trials and distresses are symptoms of much deeper problems. They can minister to the temporary needs of the counselee while also communicating that only Jesus can satisfy their eternal needs, and they can lovingly use the counselee’s perceived needs as access points to share the good news of Christ.

Practical Application and Conclusion

As shown earlier, and as shown in the previous section on John 3, Jesus has an explicit purpose that lies behind his responses. He will not be content to “chase rabbit trails” with either Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman at the well. As Jesus works through the conversation with the Samaritan woman, his questions and responses ensure that “her life and her sin is exposed—which is exactly what the water of salvation was intended to quench.”¹⁵ Whether the woman’s sin or her victimhood is primarily in view by the fact that she has had “five husbands” is beside the point. Jesus responds to her gently but in such a way that her sin is exposed.¹⁶ Carson effectively describes Jesus’s ministry encounters in the following quote:

Both in the Fourth Gospel and in the Synoptics, the sheer flexibility of Jesus leaps from the pages as he deals with a wide array of different people and their varied needs. No less startling (though more often ignored) is the manner in which Jesus commonly drives to the individual’s greatest sin, hopelessness, guilt, despair, need.

¹⁴ Jones, “Counseling Non-Christians,” 239.

¹⁵ Edward W. Klink, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 241.

¹⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 221.

This should not be surprising: if he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of those who express some interest in knowing and following him.¹⁷

In following the example of their Lord, biblical counselors must minister to the temporary needs and struggles of their non-Christian counselees but, as Carson says, “drive” to their greatest needs and offer them life in Christ. Baker and Holmes warn biblical counselors in these situations that “one can have a conversation that is *intentional, interactive, insightful, and illustrative* but still not offer that which can truly effect biblical change” before going on to say that “Jesus *is* the power for change.”¹⁸ Biblical counselors must beware of overly focusing on ministering to the symptoms and temporary ailments of the counselee but failing to bring Christ to them.

As did the Samaritan woman to Jesus, non-Christian counselees may seek to deflect their counselor when secretive or painful aspects of their situation are pressed on. When Jesus told the woman to go get her husband, exposing the woman’s relational shame and sin, the woman responded with a half-truth: “I have no husband” (John 4:17). When Jesus revealed the depths of her marital situation, the woman moved the conversation away from herself and onto theological disputes (John 4:18). Likewise, when biblical counselors move beyond the counselee’s perceived needs and begin to press upon more tender issues of the counselee’s life, these counselees may seek to change the direction of the conversation. In settings where Christianity is culturally normal or if the counselee is somewhat familiar with Christianity, the counselees, like the Samaritan woman, may prefer to focus on different theological distinctives to avoid secretive or painful areas of their life. However, like Jesus, biblical counselors must not get distracted with winning theological arguments or allowing the counselee to dictate the direction of the counseling. Counselors must compassionately and gently remain focused

¹⁷ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 221.

¹⁸ Baker and Holmes, “The Power of the Redeemer,” 45.

on the task at hand: to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ and all its benefits to the non-believer.

Below is a list of steps that shows the flow of the conversation a biblical counselor may have with a non-believing, seeking counselee:

- The counselor, showing the counselee dignity and respect as an image bearer of God, asks heart probing questions related to the symptoms and felt needs of the counselee (i.e., “Do you think your loneliness or lack of fulfillment in life has led you to having many sexual relationships? You stated that you do not feel complete and are quickly dissatisfied with your relationships. Would you say you may be trying to fill an inner void through different romantic relationships?”)
- The counselor, after listening well and asking more follow-up questions, takes the counselee to a relevant passage of Scripture and reads it aloud or asks the counselee to read it aloud.
- Being careful not to dismiss the pain and sorrow the counselee has experienced as a result of their sin, the counselor gently reframes the person’s situation using biblical language and examples from the passage of Scripture they just read together.
- The counselor directs the counselee to specific verses in the passage and asks the counselee to interact with them (i.e., “When Jesus tells the woman to go get her husband, which exposes her shame and guilt over having had many relationships, what do you think he is wanting her to see about her spiritual state? Does this have any connection with Jesus’s earlier promise to give living water to those who ask him? What kind of fulfillment do you think Jesus offers the Samaritan Woman; how does Jesus describe the water he claims to give?”)
- After directing the counselee to interact with the Word of God, the counselor brings the Word to bear upon the counselee’s specific situation (i.e., “Do you think you have anything in common with the Samaritan Woman? If Jesus shows her that her greatest need is not a satisfying romantic relationship, or even water itself, but to know him and be satisfied in him and have eternal life, what is Jesus showing you about your greatest need?”)
- From here, the counselor, using wisdom and discernment, goes further into conversation about sin, separation from God and God’s judgment, Jesus’s redemptive work, and the gospel.

Counselors must be wary of speaking to these kinds of counselees as they would talk to a Christian struggling with these sins. They should not assume the counselee is familiar with Scripture or has a well-developed theological vocabulary. However, the counselor should not shy away from asking the counselee to interact with the biblical text or from using it substantially in the counseling session. It is the Spirit of God, working through

the Word of God, who brings Christ’s redemptive benefits to sinners. The counselor must pray before, during, and after the session that, as the counselee interacts with Scripture, that God would shine in their heart “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

Methodological Implications for Counseling Physically Afflicted Non-Believers

Taking the truths of Scripture and wisely ministering them to sinners and sufferers is the great task of the biblical counselor. Though often much more challenging than ministering the Word to believers, we have seen that Jesus gives us a model in the Gospel of John for ministering the Word to non-believers as well. In his conversation with the lame man by the pool in John 5, Jesus gives biblical counselors sufficient material for building a counseling framework for ministering to non-believers who suffer physically challenges. Just as this chapter has offered counselors methodological implications and practical applications for counseling religious non-believers and seeking non-believers, what follows are the same considerations for counseling physically afflicted non-believers.¹⁹

The Dual Nature of Man

When counseling physically afflicted non-believers, biblical counselors must be grounded in the Bible’s teaching regarding the dual nature of man. Despite the increasing standardization of the “medical model” of counseling, the Bible teaches that human beings are more than physical bodies. Human beings are also spiritual beings in the sense that a vital component of their being is what the Bible calls “the inner being” (Eph 3:16), “the soul” (Ps 42:5), and “the heart” (Matt 12:34-40), among other names.

¹⁹ This chapter focuses on counseling implications that arise from the contents of John 5 and will not be a comprehensive treatment on ministering to the physical challenged. For a helpful summary on ministering to people with physical challenges, see Robert D. Jones, “Physical Diseases, Injuries, and Disabilities,” in Jones, Kellen, and Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives*, 434-44.

The BCM, in keeping with the Reformed Protestant view of humanity, affirms that human beings are made up of both soul and body and that these two components, though distinct, greatly affect each other.²⁰

This doctrine in particular has vital implications when counseling physically afflicted non-believers. Because the secular humanistic view of man has become so woven into the fabric of modern anthropology and is assumed without question in much of the dominate discourse in psychology, education, medicine, and science, it is likely that physically afflicted counselees may come to biblical counselors assuming that their physical affliction is their greatest problem. They may be operating under the assumption that if their physical condition could be fixed, they would be happy, and all would be well. However, as we see in John 5, while Jesus cares for the man's physical condition and heals his body, he also cares about his spiritual condition.

After healing the man so that the man is questioned by the Jews as to why he is carrying his bed on the Sabbath (John 5:10-12), Jesus pursues the man and finds him in the temple (John 5:14). Jesus points to the man's obvious physical wholeness as a result of the miracle: "See, you are well!" (John 5:14). However, Jesus does not settle for sending the man on his way with physical wholeness only. He goes on to say, "Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5:14). Following the example of their Lord, counselors must have compassion on their physical afflicted counselees yet not settle for making the counseling revolve around the physical problems. Biblical counselors must lovingly admonition their physically afflicted counselees that even in the midst of pursuing physical wholeness, their great problem is their sin against God and unbelief in his Son.²¹ Even if they do get well physically, if they persist in sin and

²⁰ For a discussion on dual nature of man and its implications in counseling, see Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 191-203, Kindle.

²¹ I will discuss the concept of counseling the non-believer toward repentance more fully in another section below.

unbelief, something worse may happen physically, or, more assuredly, they will face God's eschatological judgment as his enemy.

When counseling physically afflicted non-believers, biblical counselors must be careful not to fall into error at two levels. First, they must restrain the tendency to focus solely on the counselee's heart responses and need for repentance to the neglect of showing compassion and seeking to have genuine understanding of the counselee's physical trials and the effects they have. Jones encourages counselors to seek to educate themselves about the counselee's physical problem and also to listen to the counselee to learn how the ailment affects their daily lives.²² Jesus demonstrates this concern for the physical body by healing the lame man by the pool. The man has done nothing to merit healing, yet Jesus graciously restores his ability to walk. Second, however, the counselor must resist the temptation to focus solely on the physical, temporal circumstances to the neglect of addressing the more important spiritual state of the unbelieving counselee. Again, it is very significant that Jesus later pursued and found the lame man and warned him to repent of his sin (John 5:14). Jesus cared about the man's physical wholeness but cared more about his spiritual wholeness. Jesus's concern for both the man's physical and spiritual status provides an example for biblical counselors who have the opportunity to minister the Word to physically afflicted, unbelieving counselees.

Placing Saving Faith in Healing

While biblical counselors must address their physically afflicted counselee's whole person (soul and body), they must also learn whether or not their counselee is placing their ultimate hope in the means by which healing might come. This concern likewise arises out of Jesus's conversation with the lame man by the pool in John 5. Jesus encounters the man, who has been lame for thirty-eight years, knowing the man had been

²² Jones, "Physical Diseases, Injuries, and Disabilities," 434.

lying there “a long time” (John 5:4-5). The man had been lying there hoping that someone would put him in the water (John 5:7) likely because a superstition held that an angel would come down and stir up the water so that whoever went into it first would be healed. Rather than seeking to live his life for the glory of God as much as possible in his physical challenged state, the man places his ultimate hope in the possibility that someone may have compassion on him and put him in the water. Furthermore, his hope is in a Jewish superstition that does not have grounding in the Old Testament Scriptures. We see a similar situation in the story of the women with the issue of blood in Luke 8. The women suffered from significant and abnormal menstrual bleeding for twelve years, rendering her constantly unclean according to the Levitical purity laws. In an effort to be made well, the woman “spent all her living on physicians,” yet, “she could not be healed by anyone” (Luke 8:43). The unchanging or worsening state of physical afflictions, along with the societal, spiritual, and emotional tolls they take, can provide sufferers with temptations to put their ultimate hope in different means of healing and place their focus solely on their physical improvement.

While biblical counselors should understand this temptation and show compassion, they must ultimately show the counselee that placing a saving-type faith in medicine or other treatments while rejecting God’s plan of salvation in Christ is idolatry. Counselors who minister to physically challenged non-believers will likely encounter those who have sought various forms of treatment and spent thousands of dollars on different treatments, tried different doctors and medicines, and have spent hundreds of hours researching various treatment options but yet find that their condition is either the same or digressing. Yet, with every new option there is a fresh hope that perhaps this treatment will provide the cure. Such counsees have placed their faith in the possible means of physical healing rather than in Jesus Christ. Jones exhorts counselors to encourage physically afflicted counsees to seek “skilled medical care” and to “wisely

steward their God-given body.”²³ However, he also warns that “while God uses physicians and medications, we must not put our hope in them.”²⁴ Wise biblical counselors in these situations should seek to compassionately listen to and understand their counselee’s physical condition and encourage them to seek appropriate and wise medical care, yet they must labor to show their counselees that Christ alone is worthy of their trust and that much more important than their physical healing is that they repent of their sins and turn to God by placing their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Call to Repentance

While much more should be explored in developing a comprehensive biblical counseling approach for counseling non-believers with physical afflictions, Jesus’s interactions with the lame man in John 5 give biblical counselors a sufficient example for building this approach. Biblical counselors must minister to their physically afflicted counselee as a dual-natured person, not neglecting to care about the body or neglecting to minister to the more important spiritual needs of the heart, and they must discourage their counselees from placing their ultimate hope, which only Christ is worthy of, in means of healing or on their healing. The final counseling implication this chapter addresses likewise arises out of Jesus’s evangelistic encounter in John 5: the call to repentance.

After some time had passed since Jesus miraculously healed the man by the pool, Jesus finds the man in the temple. Jesus draws attention to the man’s physical wholeness as result of the miracle: “See, you are well!” (John 5:14). Jesus’s words remind the man that he had been lame for thirty-eight years and could not obtain healing by lying by the pool. Yet, Jesus made him well in a single moment. As with Jesus’s other signs in the Gospel of John, the healing in John 5 works to validate Jesus’s claims, claims which testify to his deity and authority. After drawing attention to the man’s healing that

²³ Jones, “Physical Diseases, Injuries, and Disabilities,” 438.

²⁴ Jones, “Physical Diseases, Injuries, and Disabilities,” 436.

he provided, Jesus calls the man to repentance: “Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). Carson believes Jesus’s command to sin no more implies a connection between the man’s sin and his infirmity.²⁵ If this interpretation is correct, biblical counselors should pray for opportunities to show their counselees, very graciously, how their current physical afflictions may be the result of previous or current sins.²⁶ However, Klink sees a more general connection between the man’s physical affliction and the effects of living in a sin-cursed world.²⁷ Though the counselor’s particular interpretation of Jesus’s words will have counseling implications, the overall sentiment of Jesus’s admonition is clear: even though Christ has made the man’s body well, if he continues on in sin, something worse may happen. The “worse” (John 5:14) thing Jesus has in mind may be a worse physical affliction or, more likely, “the final judgment.”²⁸

The Bible teaches very clearly the doctrine of eternal destruction. Those who do not believe in God and “who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus . . . will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (1 Thess 1:8-9). The only way for the non-believing counselee to avoid this eternal destruction is through turning to God in repentance and placing one’s faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12; 20:21). In light of the rest of the Gospel of John, Klink sees the primary sin in view in John 5 as the sin of unbelief.²⁹ Biblical counselors must work their way toward lovingly warning their physically afflicted counselees that

²⁵ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 245-46.

²⁶ I have in mind situations where the person’s physical affliction is clearly the result of sin, such as AIDS being the result of sexual immorality or lung cancer being the result of smoking. However, I highly caution biblical counselors here from slipping into mystical practices and claiming a kind of divine knowledge of whether a person’s physical affliction is the result of some past or current sin. Great harm can be done by such practice.

²⁷ Klink, *John*, 274-75.

²⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 246.

²⁹ Klink, *John*, 274-75.

whether they obtain physical healing or not, unless they repent of their sin and turn to God by trusting in the work of his Son, far worse torment awaits them as they receive the just condemnation for their rejection of Christ.

In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus himself warned against too closely associating one's plot in life with their spiritual condition. Some people in this life suffer horrific circumstances, many which are totally outside of the control of the people, and others suffer to a lesser degree. Yet, Jesus says to all, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). Jesus was not content to heal the man and then let him go on sinning as he approached eternal destruction. Rather, he pursued the man, pointed the man to himself, and admonished him to repent, lest he be swept away in an eternal destruction far worse than his thirty-eight years of disability. Likewise, biblical counselors, while showing compassion and concern for the person's physical suffering, must, after the example of their master, warn the non-believing counselee that whether they find physical wholeness in this life or not, unless they repent of their sin and unbelief and turn to Christ in obedience to the gospel, they will experience torment far worse than anything they can imagine. Here is where the counselor, with a heart full of grace and love for the counselee, must plead with the counselee to obey the gospel, and it is here where we must pray that God would give "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

Practical Applications and Conclusions

The problem of physical suffering in the form of disease, illness, and disability will continue until the Lord returns and the new creation becomes fully consummated. While we should be thankful for God's kindness in working through medicine and for the increased medical abilities that God's image bearers have developed, the reality is that the practice of medicine will remain imperfect and will never totally reverse the effects of living in a world cursed by sin. Biblical counselors should view non-believers who

struggle with physical challenges, whether chronic or temporary, whether severe or minimal, as prime candidates to receive the grace of Christ in the gospel unto salvation. As Christians, we know that while some physical afflictions are the result of some specific sin, others are “that the works of God might be displayed” (John 9:3). Physical afflictions point in so many ways to the problem of sin and the biblical story of redemption that biblical counselors should have no shortage of opportunities for problem-occasioned evangelism with their physically afflicted counselees.

Because humans are dual-natured beings, counselors can graciously show their physically afflicted, non-believing counselees how their physical challenges are ultimately a result of living in a world broken by sin. This illustration flows right into the biblical teaching that Adam’s transgression, as the federal head of all humanity, has been accredited to all humans (Rom 5:12-14). Though all humans have sinned and deserve God’s eternal wrath against sin, God sent his Son, the “last Adam” (1 Cor 15:45) to do what the first Adam failed to do and to purchase eternal life for his people (Rom 5:15-21). Furthermore, physically afflicted counselees, operating under the presuppositions of secular humanism, have no foundation to make satisfactory sense of physical suffering and its effects on the person’s soul or how to respond to it properly. The Scriptures, however, provide biblical counselors the foundation to reinterpret the counselee’s physical suffering in light of God’s plan of redemption. In a counseling setting, biblical counselors not only account satisfactorily for *why* suffering exists but also for *what* God’s purposes are for it. God uses the physical suffering in his children’s lives to make them more like his Son (Rom 8:28-29), and the physical trials in their lives work to prepare them for “an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

While not neglecting to care about their counselee’s physical afflictions, they must constantly challenge their non-believing counselees to see their physical afflictions from the Bible’s perspective. They must lovingly show them that placing their hope in healing while rejecting the one who came to bring eternal healing is dishonoring to the

God who made them and requires their worship and allegiance (Exod 20:3). Counselors must lovingly teach these non-believing counselees that their great need is not physical healing but for God to forgive their sins and that he has provided this forgiveness in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, they must lovingly warn their counselees that even if their condition does get better and they do obtain physical healing, unless they repent of their unbelief in Christ and rejection of God, they will perish for eternity in separation from God.

Below is list of steps that shows how biblical counselors may navigate conversations with non-believing counselees who have physical afflictions:

- The counselor seeks to know the counselee’s situation thoroughly by asking questions related to the person’s condition and how it affects their whole person, listening intently and showing compassion (i.e., “How does your condition affect your ability to complete ordinary tasks such as work or house chores? How has it impacted others who are close to you? Does your condition hinder your sleep or lead to unwanted emotions?”)
- After listening well and obtaining a good understanding of the counselee’s immediate situation, the counselor asks heart-probing questions that may reveal the counselee’s thoughts, desires, and spiritual condition (i.e., “What would you give in order to be made well? Is it possible for you to be happy in life while remaining in this condition? What if your condition gets worse? Are you afraid of death?”)
- After the counselee has answered some of these questions, the counselor reframes the counselee’s perceptions from a biblical perspective (i.e., “I can see how this physical ailment is very challenging and has led you to experience much grief and pain. I also imagine you are very confused about the future and have pondered various scenarios. I believe God has shown us how to understand physical afflictions and how to respond to them in a way that pleases him. Actually, physical affliction was not part of God’s original design but is a result of human sin and rebellion. May I take you to a couple of passages in the Bible that I believe will help you understand your physical affliction from God’s perspective?”)
- The counselor takes the counselee to some relevant passage of Scripture, such as Genesis 1-3 or Romans 5, and reads them aloud or has the counselee read them aloud. The counselor then asks questions designed to have the counselee interact with the text (i.e., “From the perspective of these passages, is your physical affliction totally random or is it a part of a much larger human problem?”)
- Once the counselor has shown the counselee the Bible’s view of physical afflictions, they may seek to press the conversation further toward eternal judgment, showing the consequences of sin far exceed the person’s current physical suffering (i.e., “What does the apostle Paul say about the link between death and sin? Does he exclude anyone from being under God’s judgment? Does that include you and me? Friend, I say this as someone who loves you and cares for not only your body but your soul:

the Bible is very clear that the penalty for our sin is far worse than any physical affliction we experience here on earth. May I show you a few passages about eternal judgment?")

- After prayerfully showing the counselee the eternal consequences of sin, the counselor begins to point the counselee toward Christ and the gospel (i.e., "I know these passages are very sobering. But we cannot stop there. The Bible also shows us the good news! God has sent his Son into our sinful, broken world in order to restore and save us!")
- The counselor labors to minister the gospel of Christ to the counselee, praying for the Spirit to work powerfully in the counselee as they read and interact with various passages.

While this is sobering work, biblical counselors should see it a great privilege that they may minister in like manner to their Lord and point their non-believing, physically afflicted counselees to the one and only true hope.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that biblical counseling is a biblically warranted means of evangelizing the lost. Because faithful ministerial methods must be grounded in biblical warrant, I have sought to ground the evidence for my thesis not in pragmatism or wishful thinking but in exegesis and theology. At the pinnacle, I have labored to show that we see the biblical justification for evangelistic counseling in the life of our Lord himself. To state it plainly, Jesus's evangelistic encounters in the Gospel of John not only justify evangelistic counseling but also show counselors how to perform such a ministry.

The implications of the above conclusions are substantial, and my hope is that the BCM will take them seriously. While this thesis cannot answer every question or get overly specific methodologically, there are a number of implications that the BCM should consider. First, problem-occasioned evangelism must transition from a proposal to be considered to a necessary ministry to perform. We see clearly in John 3, 4, and 5 that Jesus entered into the world of non-believers, interacted with them with heart probing questions, and used their perceived needs and problems as access points to show them their true need which only he can meet. If our Lord ministered to the lost in such a way,

biblical counselors should no longer debate whether we *should be* counseling non-believers but rather be developing the best methods for *how to* counsel them.

Second, evangelistic counseling must become a much larger focus in biblical counseling training, teaching, and literature. While I am thankful for the few articles and chapters devoted to this topic, the reality is this topic is largely undeveloped. The authors with which I have interacted in this thesis have merely started the conversation. This thesis has hopefully developed this conversation further and demonstrated that the BCM should think more deeply about it. However, the movement at large is far from being equipped with a comprehensive and well-developed evangelistic counseling system with which we can step into our psychologized age and win people to Christ.

Third, while the BCM has made progress in its understanding of the complexity of the human situation, we need further development in the areas of familiar topics such as anthropology, regeneration, conversion, etc., and we also need further development on the relationship between evangelism and counseling. The fact that we still make such a hard and fast distinction between the two shows that we are operating in overly simplistic paradigms and need to pursue further thinking, study, discussion, and development.

Lastly, if this thesis is true, the BCM should be optimistic about the potential of seeing thousands of souls won to Christ through offering evangelistic counseling. Living in a therapeutic and psychologized culture results in people believing they need help, which makes them willing to ask for help and receive help. While we cannot expect people to view unlicensed ministers in the local church as authoritatively as they do licensed therapists and psychologists, we can expect people with no access to affordable mental health services to be willing to receive help from the church under the ministry of counseling. Likewise, as modern psychiatry becomes more centered on treating symptoms not with counseling or therapy but with psychotropic drugs, we should expect people to be willing to try alternative options. As the secular humanist project continues

to fail, and people turn toward religion or toward more “natural” ways of living, we should expect the lost to be willing to sit down with a biblical counselor.

This thesis has had a substantive impact on me. I, like many reading this thesis, have been significantly burdened by our society’s growing opposition to Christianity, the rise and triumph of the modern self, and the destructive consequences that have followed. I also have wondered how the church will effectively witness to non-believers in an age that is no longer warm to Christ or the church. This thesis has stirred in me a fresh optimism about ministering the gospel in our day. Likewise, as a pastor in the Bible-Belt, I see the reality of false conversion and the bad fruit of assuming one’s right standing with God because of a superficial profession of faith or association with Christianity. Because of this reality, determining one’s spiritual state in an initial counseling session is not as easy as one might think. I have been burdened more than once in counseling scenarios wherein the counselee professes to be Christian but their answers to life’s questions and their behavioral patterns suggest they do not know the Lord. This thesis, however, has freed me from the pressure to discern perfectly a person’s spiritual state before I can rightly do biblical counseling. All people, Christian or not, are sinners, experiencing the effects of living in a fallen world, whose only hope is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whether for salvation or for sanctification, counselors and counsees alike are in desperate need of the Spirit of God to work miraculously through the Word of God to bring about God-glorifying results.

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ABSTRACT

EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING: THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST FOR SAVING SINNERS

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This thesis argues that evangelistic counseling is not merely biblically permissible but that it is demonstrated in Jesus's evangelistic encounters in the Gospel of John. Chapter 1 surveys the various authors and literature that have engaged in the discussion of biblical counseling as a means of evangelism, while demonstrating a void in this literature with regard to an exhaustive exegetical and methodological analysis of Jesus's evangelistic encounters in John. Chapter 2 enters this conversation surrounding evangelistic counseling by analyzing the argumentation of proponents for and against it, while ultimately arguing that biblical counseling is in fact a warranted and biblical means of evangelism. Chapter 3 analyzes on a textual basis Jesus's evangelistic encounter with Nicodemus in John 3, with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, and with the lame man by the pool in John 5. This chapter analyzes these passages exegetically and provides the biblical material for the work of chapters 4 and 5. After laying the exegetical framework for these passages in chapter 3, chapter 4 analyzes the major evangelistic themes which arise out of these passages, especially those themes which are most pertinent in evangelistic biblical counseling. Finally, chapter 5 builds out of the exegetical and theological conclusions of chapters 3 and 4 methodological considerations and practical applications for biblical counselors who counsel unbelievers similar to those in we see in John 3, 4, and 5. Chapter 5 ultimately begins the work of building a comprehensive evangelistic counseling framework and methodology.

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