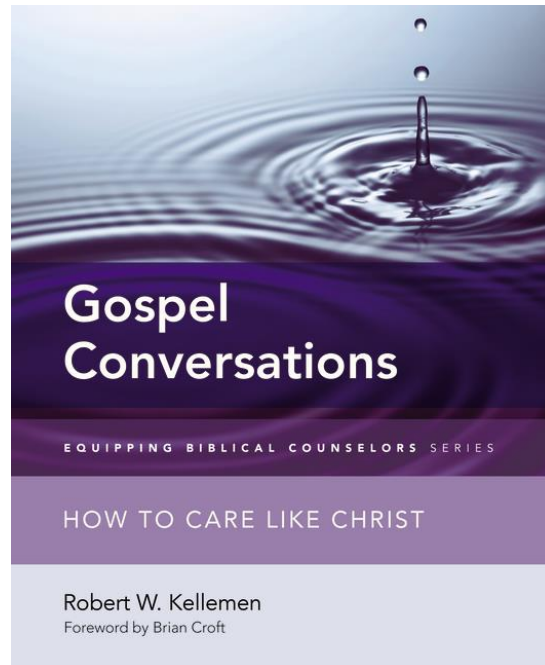


Gospel Conversations *How to Care Like Christ*



Sample Chapter

Chapter 1

5 Biblical Portraits of the Biblical Counselor Sharing Scripture and Soul

© Copyright 2022

**For Additional Free Resources from *Gospel Conversations*
visit [RPM Ministries here](#).**

Chapter 1

5 Biblical Portraits of the Biblical Counselor Sharing Scripture and Soul

Picture Trudy and Tony. Referred to you from another church, you've never met them before today. They've come to you after already having seen a divorce attorney. Trudy tells you that she is "100% motivated to be in counseling," and "desperately wanting to see our marriage saved." Tony is meeting with you because he feels it's his obligation to "make one more attempt to save this marriage."

What do Trudy and Tony need from you *first*? Do they need *truth*—scriptural insight about sacrificial love applied to their marital relationship? Or, do they need *love*—to connect with you, to build a relationship with you so that they are ready to hear truth from you?

Which is most important in biblical counseling? *Is the ministry of the Word primary and loving relationships are secondary? Or, is the relationship central and you need to wait to share truth until you've established a trusting relationship?*

Are these even the right questions? Do the Scriptures divide truth from relationship in ministry? Does the Bible speak in terms of ranking truth and love? Wouldn't that be somewhat like asking, "Which counselor is least effective, the one who ignores the greatest commandment to love God and others, or the one who ignores commands to counsel from the Word?"

The Bible never pits truth against love. It never lays them out on a gradation or ranking system. The Bible presents equal couplets: truth/love, Scripture/soul, Bible/relationship, truth/grace.

Speaking the Truth in Love

And yet...we're forced to ponder these questions about truth and love in every counseling session. I was forced to ponder the issue again recently when I listened to an excellent closing session at a biblical counseling conference. The message was biblical, relevant, and powerful. The wise, godly speaker wrapped the entire message around the theme that the power in our ministry comes solely from the power inherent in God's Word.

His concluding illustration put an exclamation point on his theme as he shared about the Christmas present he purchased for his daughter. The gift arrived two days before Christmas, delivered by "the UPS guy." The speaker's daughter, hearing the UPS truck pull into the driveway, bolted to the door to meet the delivery man. She snatched the package from his hands and raced to place it under the tree, not the least bit focused on the UPS delivery guy. The speaker concluded with the phrase, "We're just the UPS delivery guy. The real gift, the great present is the Word that we deliver. We're just the UPS delivery guy!"

I joined the crowd in "Amening!" I loved the illustration. I "got" the theme—the power is in the Word of God!"

But then...later that evening, I started asking myself, "Is that the complete biblical picture? Don't we always say that God calls us to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), to make our love abound in knowledge and depth of insight (Phil. 1:9-11), and to share not only the gospel but our very own souls (1 Thess. 2:8)? Does the Bible really teach that only the message matters, or does it teach that the messenger's character and the messenger's relationship to the hearer also matter greatly?"

Maturing As a Biblical Counselor

1. Why does it seem so hard to “balance” truth and love? Which do you tend more toward: the truth side or the love side? Why? What implications might that have for your growth as a biblical counselor?

2. In your life, who has modeled well truth *and* love as they have ministered to you? What impact has their “blending” of truth *and* love had on your life? On how you do ministry?

3. How would you answer these questions about what has priority in biblical counseling?
 - a. Which is most important in biblical counseling? Is the ministry of the Word primary and loving relationships are secondary? Or, is the relationship central and we wait to share truth until we’ve established the trusting relationship?

 - b. Are those even the right questions? Do the Scriptures divide truth from relationship in ministry? Does the Bible speak in terms of ranking truth and love?

4. In addition to 1 Thessalonians 2, where would you go in Scripture to answer this question: Does the Bible teach that only the message matters, or does it teach that the messenger’s character and the messenger’s relationship to the hearer also matter greatly?”

5. If you were meeting with Trudy and Tony, what do you think they would need from you during your first meeting? What would your counseling with them during the first meeting “look like” and focus on?

Once these questions started whirring through my mind, I couldn't sleep. Thinking about 1 Thessalonians 2:8 regarding sharing Scripture and soul, I turned in my Bible to 1 Thessalonians 2. As I read those twenty verses, five biblical portraits of the biblical counselor emerged from the pages of my Bible. I saw then what I share with you now:

Biblical counseling involves gospel conversations where we engage in soul-to-soul relationships as brothers, mothers, fathers, children, and mentors who relate Christ's gospel story to our friends' daily stories.

God calls us to love well and wisely. That's why, in biblical counseling, we must weave together in our ministries what is always united in God's Word—*truth and love*—comprehensive biblical wisdom *and* compassionate Christlike care. Biblical counseling is not either/or: *either* be a brilliant but uncaring soul physician, *or* be a loving but unwise spiritual friend. God calls us to be wise *and* loving biblical counselors.

Not Just the UPS Delivery Guy

We are more than just the UPS delivery guy. According to 1 Thessalonians 2, God calls us to share his Word with the love of a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor. This is vital to our ministries today, just as it was vital to Paul's ministry in Thessalonica. Based upon 1 Thessalonians 2:2-3, 5-6, commentator Leon Morris notes that:

It is clear from the epistle that Paul had been accused of insincerity. His enemies said that he was more concerned to make money out of his converts than to present true teaching. The accusation would be made easier in virtue of the well-known fact that itinerant preachers concerned only to feather their own nests were common in those days. Paul was being represented as nothing more than another of this class of preaching vagrants.ⁱ

Morris goes on to explain that in Paul's day:

Holy men of all creeds and countries, popular philosophers, magicians, astrologers, crack-pots, and cranks; the sincere and the spurious, the righteous and the rogue, swindlers and saints, jostled and clamored for the attention of the credulous and the skeptical.ⁱⁱ

That's why the unity of Scripture and soul, truth and relationship, was so vital to Paul. In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul is saying, "You doubt my credentials? Then be a good Berean who examines the message and the messenger—what I say, who I am, and how I relate to you." It's the identical message that Paul sends to every young minister anywhere. If you want to validate your ministry, then "watch your *life and doctrine* closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16).

Paul writes 1 Thessalonians 2 to affirm his ministry as from God and to affirm the nature of all ministry from God by modeling the sharing of Scripture and soul, by embodying truth in love. It is God's plan to use his Word powerfully when we share it *truthfully and lovingly*—like a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor.

Portrait # 1: The Love of a Defending Brother

Paul uses the Greek word for “brother” twenty-one times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. He starts his first letter to the believers in Thessalonica by letting them know that he always thanks God for them “for we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you” (1 Thess. 1:4). Paul is saying they are siblings in God’s family by grace. Imagine hearing from the great apostle Paul that you are family; you are equals—equally loved by God by grace.

Could our counselees say this of us?

“I experience you as a beloved brother embracing me as a fellow, equal member of God’s forever family by grace.”

Paul’s use of the word “brothers” is not limited to a family context, but also extends to an army/military context in the sense of a band of brothers who have one another’s backs. Paul says it like this in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2. “You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.” The word “opposition” means agonizing and struggling together. It was used of teammates training together and of soldiers fighting together in warfare.

Though persecuted, Paul courageously shares because he cares. Paul describes his counseling ministry in similar language in Colossians.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you (Col. 1:28-2:1a).

Because I sell a lot of books out of my home, I know my UPS delivery guy quite well. While he sometimes struggles to lift those boxes up my stairs, it is *not* because he sees me as a brother or a teammate.

Notice that in 1 Thessalonians Paul dares to share *the gospel* with his Christian brothers and sisters, and that in Colossians Paul labors out of love to proclaim *Christ* to his believing brothers and sisters. Paul’s brotherly relationship is *not* devoid of truth content; it is richly focused on Christ’s gospel of grace.

Could our counselees say this of us?

“I experience our relationship as a band of brothers, and I experience you as a teammate who fights for me and agonizes on my behalf as you relate Christ’s grace to my life.”

Portrait # 2: The Love of a Cherishing Mother

In the first portrait, Paul says to his counselee, “I’ve got your back bro!” In this second portrait, Paul speaks as a mother who says, “I long for you with a nourishing and cherishing affection.” We read of Paul’s motherly love in 1 Thessalonians 2:7. “But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.”

Paul's describes his gentle relational ministry as like a nursing mother, literally picturing the tender nourishing of a breast-feeding mother. The word "caring" highlights cherishing, keeping warm, tenderly comforting.

The Reformer, John Calvin, portrays the scene beautifully.

"A mother nursing her children manifests a certain rare and wonderful affection, inasmuch as she spares no labor and trouble, shuns no anxiety, is worn out by no labor, and even with cheerfulness of spirit gives herself to her child."ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1 Thessalonians 2:9 we learn the nature of the nourishment Paul shares. "...while we preached the gospel of God to you." Paul's motherly love is not simply touchy-feely love devoid of content. It is passionate love filled with the meat of God's Word applied to people's lives.

Paul speaks in similar motherly language in Galatians 4:9. "My dear children, for who I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." And he shares similar affectionate language in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13. "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also."

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as a nursing mother nourishing me with gospel truth through tender, cherishing love."

Paul continues his theme of motherly affection in 1 Thessalonians 2:8. "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." I call this a "ministry sandwich" because Paul sandwiches loving them so much and being dear to us around sharing Scripture and soul. The phrase "we loved you so much" means to long for, to affectionately desire, to yearn after tenderly. "Delighted" means to joyfully serve out of pleasure and not out of a sense of duty or obligation. "Impart" emphasizes sharing generously and personally.

Morris summarizes Paul's words well.

"But the real sharing of the gospel implies the total committal of the preacher [I would add "counselor"] to the task. If they give a message, they also give themselves."^{iv}

Speaking about 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Milton Vincent, author of *A Gospel Primer for Christians*, describes well who we are, how we relate, and what we share. "We are significant players in each other's gospel narrative, and it is in relationship with one another that we experience the fullness of God in Christ.... The greatest gift I can give to my fellow-Christian is the gospel itself."^v

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as an affectionate, generous mother giving me Scripture and your very own soul because I am dearly loved by you."

Portrait # 3: The Love of a Shepherding Father

Paul's third portrait of the biblical counselor communicates, "I love you individually and uniquely with a guiding love." We see this beginning in 1 Thessalonians 2:11, "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children." The original Greek highlights the individual, focused attention that Paul gives each person he ministers to—each of you, his own children. Morris notes that this is not just general group concern, but individual pastoral care.^{vi} To Paul, no one was simply a number, or an item on a "to do" list.

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as a father focused on me with individual pastoral attention?"

Paul further describes his fatherly focused attention with these words. "...as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 2:10b-11). Paul's ministry is *not* a one-size-fits-all ministry. To those in need of hope, Paul offers encouraging care—coming alongside to help and to encourage: to implant courage into. To those struggling with loss, Paul offers comforting care—consoling the grieving and fainthearted, sharing in their sorrows. To those in need of insight and direction, Paul provides guidance by urging them—discussing application of truth to the specifics of their lives. Paul offers person-specific, situation-specific, and need-specific counsel (see also Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 5:14; and Rom. 12:15).

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as a wise and caring father, shepherding me with exactly what biblical wisdom I uniquely need at the specific moment."

Portrait # 4: The Love of a Longing Child/Orphan

Paul now turns his portraits upside down. Previously he has described his relationships as a brother to a sibling, a mother to her infant children, and a father to his individual children. What a contrast as he now communicates the love of an orphaned child bereaved of his parents. "But brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of intense longing we made every effort to see you" (1 Thess. 2:17).

"Torn away" is a phrase used of a child left bereft by separation from a parent—an orphan. The Church Father, Chrysostom, depicts the word powerfully, "He sought for a word that might fitly indicate his mental anguish. Though standing in relation of a father to them all, he yet utters the language of orphan children that have permanently lost their parent."^{vii}

It reminds us of Paul's description of his leave-taking with the Ephesian elders.

When he said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos (Acts 20:36-21:1).

And what was the *content* of Paul's relational ministry to the Ephesian believers? It was gospel truth for daily sanctification.

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and house to house.... However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.... For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.... Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:20, 24-25, 27, 31-32).

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as longing for me so much that when we are apart you grieve like an orphan."

When torn away, here's how Paul responded. "...out of intense longing we made every effort to see you" (1 Thess. 2:17b). We could translate the tense and the language of the original like this, "We experienced such non-stop, eager desire to reconnect with you that we endeavored exceedingly to see you!"

Let's be honest. There are some counselees whose struggles are so difficult, and whose way of relating so troublesome and self-centered, that at times we think, "Couldn't someone else counsel this person?" In those moments, we need to pray for the Spirit to empower us with the type of love and longing that Paul writes about in 1 Thessalonians 2:17.

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as desperately longing for deep connection with me as a child longs for connection with a parent."

Portrait # 5: The Loving Respect of a Proud Mentor

Paul's fifth and final portrait of the personal ministry of the Word comes in a military context. He writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:18, "For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us." "Stopped us" literally means a cut in the road—an obstacle placed in the road by a military opponent to impeded or slow the advance of oncoming troops.

Paul continues in this military context in 2:19. "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?" Paul now paints the image of the conquering king or general. Typically that general would gladly, and not-so-humbly, claim all the accolades for himself. Instead Paul turns to the "lowly private" and says, "You earned the victors crown. The glory wreath! You are a spiritual warrior. Well done!"

Sometimes we so focus on confronting the sins of our counselees that we forget that they are, by God's grace, saints—victorious in Christ. And we forget to celebrate with them their victories.

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as a mentor so proud of who I am in Christ that you give me a spiritual medal of honor."

As if to put an exclamation point on his respect for them, Paul concludes, "Indeed, you are our glory and joy." Paul loves them and is proud of them. He publicly honors them for their esteemed service. They are spiritual champions in Christ.

Could our counselees say this of us?

"I experience you as a mentor so proud of who I am in Christ that I am your pride and joy."

"Truth Telling" and "Building Relationships" Are *Not* Counseling Skills

Recall our initial discussion in this chapter regarding which has priority: truth telling (truth) or building relationships (love). One of the reasons we separate those concepts rather than unite them is because we think of them as counseling skills, techniques, competencies, or a stage in counseling. That's a mistake.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20, Paul is not talking about a process of relationship building in the way that we might talk about "establishing rapport." We would use "establishing rapport" as a counseling stage or skill. Instead, Paul is talking about a caring heart that loves out of a family relationship: as a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor. For Paul, and for us, a family relationship with a counselee is not a stage; it is a heart attitude.

Nor is Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20 talking about a process of truth telling the way we might talk about "instruction in counseling." We would use "instruction in counseling" as a counseling stage or skill. Instead, Paul is talking about truth telling as a comprehensive gospel-centered worldview that provides the wisdom for gospel conversations—speaking truth in love, truthing and loving.

Truth and love are not counseling techniques, competencies, skills, or stages. Truth and love are the united framework and heart commitment out of which we counsel. They are broader terms that emphasize scriptural wisdom and Christlike love as the foundation for our approach to biblical counseling and our approach to our counselees.

Counseling relational competencies are not bad. In fact, in *Gospel Conversations* we will develop twenty-one biblical relational competencies. My point is that these relational competencies must be truth/love competencies—they must flow from a heart of Christlike love and a mind growing in Christlike wisdom.

So we can ask, "With Trudy and Tony, do we wait to share truth until we build relationship?" That question assumes that when we say "build relationship" we are thinking of a counseling skill or stage.

But if we are thinking of "build relationship" as a heart issue, then we would say it like this. "We wait to counsel anyone until our heart is progressively moving toward a heart of love like a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor." The Christlike character of the

counselor is the issue. If my character does not increasingly reflect the Christlike relational love of a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor, then I need to “switch chairs.” I need to become the counselee, the disciple.

Or, we can ask, “With Trudy and Tony, if I have a Christlike heart of love, is ‘truth-telling’ the first thing I do in my counseling relationship with them?” Again, that question assumes that when we say “truth telling” we are thinking of a counseling skill or stage.

But if we are thinking of “truth telling” as a comprehensive, gospel-centered worldview, then we would say it like this, “We wait to counsel anyone until our mind is growing in knowledge of God’s truth so that we can share Scripture with the wisdom of a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor.” The Christlike biblical content/conviction of the counselor is the issue. If my biblical wisdom is not increasingly reflecting Christlike wisdom, then I need to “switch chairs.” I need to become the counselee, the disciple.

“Truth telling” is not the first thing I do in counseling, any more than “relationship building” is the first thing I do. Typically, the first thing I do is *pray that I will listen well and wisely out of a heart of love and a mind filled with gospel truth.*

Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Headed

Here’s our tweet-size summary for chapter 1:

It is God’s plan to use his Word powerfully when we share it truthfully and lovingly—sharing Scripture and soul like a brother, mother, father, child, and mentor.

Is that all there is to being competent to counsel? Chapter 2 suggests that we not only need to share Scripture and soul, we also need to listen to the Scripture and the soul. In chapter 2, we’ll learn that in biblical counseling, *the whole Bible story must impact the whole person’s whole story.*

Maturing As a Biblical Counselor

1. Regarding Portrait # 1: The Love of a Defending Brother:
 - a. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as a beloved brother embracing me as a fellow, equal member of God's forever family by grace."*
 - b. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience our relationship as a band of brothers, and I experience you as a teammate who fights for me and agonizes on my behalf as you relate Christ's grace to my life."*
 - c. What needs to happen in your heart and ministry to grow as a biblical counselor who exhibits the love of a defending brother?
2. Regarding Portrait # 2: The Love of a Cherishing Mother:
 - a. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as a nursing mother nourishing me with gospel truth through tender, cherishing love."*
 - b. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as an affectionate, generous mother giving me Scripture and your very own soul because I am dearly loved by you."*
 - c. What needs to happen in your heart and ministry to grow as a biblical counselor who shares the love of a cherishing mother?
3. Regarding Portrait # 3: The Love of a Shepherding Father:
 - a. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as a father focused on me with individual pastoral attention?"*

- b. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as a wise and caring father, shepherding me with exactly what biblical wisdom I uniquely need at the specific moment."*
- c. What needs to happen in your heart and ministry to grow as a biblical counselor who offers the love of a shepherding father?

4. Regarding Portrait # 4: The Love of a Longing Child/Orphan:

- a. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as longing for me so much that when we are apart you grieve like an orphan."*
- b. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as desperately longing for deep connection with me as a child longs for connection with a parent."*
- c. What needs to happen in your heart and ministry to grow as a biblical counselor who embodies the love of a longing child/orphan?

5. Regarding Portrait # 5: The Loving Respect of a Proud Mentor:

- a. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as a mentor so proud of who I am in Christ that you give me a spiritual medal of honor."*
- b. Could your counselee say this of you? *"I experience you as a mentor so proud of who I am in Christ that I am your pride and joy."*
- c. What needs to happen in your heart and ministry to grow as a biblical counselor who demonstrates the loving respect of a proud mentor?

Endnotes

ⁱLeon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 68.

ⁱⁱIbid.

ⁱⁱⁱJohn Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, 28.

^{iv}Morris, 79-80, parenthesis added.

^vMilton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians*, 22.

^{vi}Morris, 84.

^{vii}Ibid., 93.