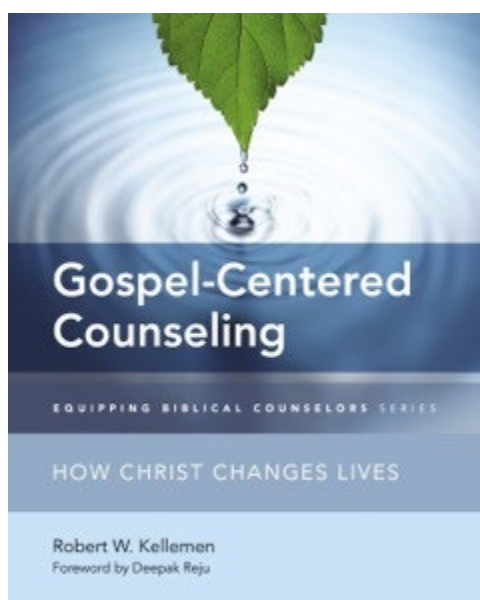


# ***Gospel-Centered Counseling*** ***How Christ Changes Lives***

**Manuscript of Chapters 1 and 2**

**The Sufficiency of Scripture  
and Extra-Biblical Information**



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**Zondervan**

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## Chapter 1

### Mining the Richness of God's Word: Treasures of Wisdom

Ashley and her husband, Nate, met with me at church the day after their twin sons' eleventh birthday. With tears streaming down her face, Ashley shared that twenty-five years earlier, not long after *her* eleventh birthday, a relative had begun sexually abusing her.

Those who knew Ashley would have been shocked. She grew up in a Christian home, was active at church as an adult, served as a leader in the women's ministry, and was always "pleasant."

As Ashley described herself, "Yes, I'm the good girl from the good home. The good mom; the good wife. But nobody knows the ugliness I feel inside. Nobody knows how I've pretended and denied all these years. I just can't keep faking it any longer. I'm a mess. Depressed to the point that at times I've thought of suicide. Always fearful and anxious—terrified I'll displease someone. Terrified someone will find out what an empty but evil thing I am..."

As Ashley's voice trailed off, Nate asked, "Pastor Bob, can you *help*? Does the Bible offer any *hope* for my wife?"<sup>1</sup>

How you or I respond to Ashley's soul struggles and to Nate's life questions depends on how we answer several other foundational questions:

- *Truth Questions*: "Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world? How do we view God's Word for the personal ministry of the Word?"
- *Life Questions*: "What does it look like to live a whole life in a broken world? What is the purpose of life?"
- *Counseling Questions*: "What is the ultimate focus of wise and loving counseling in a broken world—what does *help* look like? How can *gospel-centered* counselors minister to saints who are facing suffering and fighting besetting sins—what does *hope* look like?"

I've written this chapter and this book to address these vital questions. In particular, in chapters 1-2, we're seeking to ask and answer the question, "Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?"

### You *Can* Handle the Truth

When dear folks like Ashley and Nate courageously share their raw concerns with people in the church, I've noticed that we tend to respond in one of three typical ways. First, some *refer*. The stereotype goes something like this: "I'm a committed Christian. I want to help you with your struggle. However, we have to understand that while the Bible provides insight for our 'spiritual lives,' God never intended that we use His Word to address 'emotional and mental' struggles. For relevant help for those issues, we need outside experts." There's confidence in God, but with a corresponding conviction that for "non-spiritual issues" God's Word is not the most appropriate resource.

Second, some follow a *sprinkling* approach. The stereotype goes something like this: "I'm a committed Christian. I want to help you with your struggles. To the insights I've

gleaned from the world's wisdom about your issue, I'll add Christian concern, prayer, and some occasional biblical principles where they seem pertinent." There's confidence in God's Word as important in helping hurting people, but its application lacks an understanding of the vital, comprehensive, and robust nature of God's Word for life in a broken world.

Third, some follow the *concordance* approach. The stereotype goes something like this: "I'm a committed Christian. I want to help you with your struggle. You have a problem. I'll use my Bible concordance to find God's answer." Some have called this the "one-problem, one-verse, one-solution" approach. There's confidence in the Bible, but its application lacks an understanding of the complexity of life and the rich nature of God's Word.

In each case, I have purposefully prefaced my comments with "the stereotype..." Life and counseling are infinitely more complex than three paragraphs can encapsulate. Further, it is *not* my intent to promote an "us against them," or a "good guys/bad guys" mindset. Rather than accuse or antagonize, I hope to invite, encourage, and equip.

Instead of just saying, "Don't do it *that way*," I desire to increase our *confidence* in God's Word for life in a broken world and increase our *competence* in applying Christ's changeless truth to change lives. I believe that we follow other approaches (like *refer*, *sprinkle*, and *concordance*) and turn to other sources because:

- No one has equipped us to understand the richness and robustness of God's sufficient Word for life in a broken world—helping us to develop *confidence* in how we *view* the Bible for real life.
- No one has equipped us to apply God's authoritative truth to life relevantly and relationally—helping us to develop the *competence* to *use* God's Words for real life issues.

I want to equip you to *view* and *use* the Bible in a "fourth way"—the *gospel narrative way*. If we are to view the Bible accurately and use the Bible competently, then we must understand the Bible's story the way God tells it. In chapters 1-2, we'll listen in as God tells His story and ours as the *drama of redemption*. It is a *gospel narrative of relationship*.

The Bible presents a grand narrative in which God is both the Author and the Hero, with the story climaxing in Christ. God begins by telling the story of relationship initiated in Genesis 1-2 and relationship rejected in Genesis 3. After those first three chapters, the rest of the Bible tells the story of God wooing us back to His holy and loving arms, all the while fighting the Evil One who wants to seduce us away from our first love.

Ever since Genesis 3, *life is a battle for our love*—the ageless question of who captures our heart—Christ or Satan. In *Soul Physicians*, I encapsulated all of life as "a war and a wedding."<sup>2</sup> Others have described it picturesquely as "slay the dragon; marry the damsel." The Bible calls it "the gospel."

Our counseling is sterile and dead if we see the Bible as an academic textbook or even as a textbook for counseling. But if we view and use the Bible as the story—the gospel-centered drama—of the battle to win our hearts, then our one-another ministry comes alive.

To help you to grow in confidence and competence, to help you to handle the Word of Truth skillfully and artfully, I'll follow Paul's approach in Colossians. While he did not hesitate to caution people against being taken captive by false approaches (Colossians 2:4, 8), and while he did not hesitate to lovingly confront those who followed false approaches (Colossians 2:16-23), Paul emphasized the incomparable supremacy of Christ and the

unparalleled sufficiency of Christianity. Like Paul, we'll focus on stirring up our confidence in: Christ's gospel of grace (Colossians 1:3-23), Christ-dependent ministry (Colossians 1:24-2:2), Christ's wisdom (Colossians 2:3-23), our salvation and sanctification in Christ (Colossians 3:1-11), and the body of Christ ministering the Word to one another (Colossians 3:13-4:18). When people asked Paul, "Where do we turn for life wisdom among many fiercely competitive worldview options?" he responded with an infinite answer in one word: "*Christ!*"

### Looking for Answers in All the Wrong Places

As Paul wrote to the believers in Colosse, their situation mirrored ours. They were saints—"holy and faithful brothers in Christ" (Colossians 1:2). They were also sons and daughters of "God our Father" (Colossians 1:2). Though forgiven and welcomed home by God through Christ (Colossians 1:13, 22), they were facing suffering—condemnation from Satan (Colossians 1:22), judgment by others (Colossians 2:16), interpersonal grievances and struggles (Colossians 3:13, 15), and family discord (Colossians 3:19-21). They also battled the same temptations to sin that we face—sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, and lying (Colossians 3:5-9). And just like us, many voices were clamoring for their attention, claiming to have cornered the market on the secret steps to wholeness (Colossians 2:4, 8). I imagine Paul receiving a letter something like this from one of these saints, sons, sufferers, and sinners...

Dear Brother Paul,

I'm confused. No. Not about my salvation. I know I'm saved. I've received Christ's grace by faith. What I'm confused about is life. Not only mine, but the Christians around me. I look around and see saints who struggle just like sinners. Our relationships are not just messy, but often a mess. Our homes are sometimes harsh and cold places. At times we seem to handle suffering little differently than those who do not know Christ. I see Christians who have no sense of who they are in Christ. They seem to sway between self-hatred and self-sufficiency.

What gives? So, what is the gospel sufficient for? Heaven only? If grace is so sufficient, then why do we seem to be so ineffectual in our lives and relationships?

But here's where I really get confused. It seems like some folks feel as if the church doesn't have *wisdom for real life*, yet the world sure claims it does! Every time I turn around, I hear about some new answer, some new approach to life, some new philosophy of life claiming to tell me what life is all about, how to live the good life, and how to make sense of my messed up life.

One day it's a group alleging to have some special corner on the truth, some secret success sauce that they've been initiated into that I *must* learn. The next day it's another group saying I have to work harder, follow all their rules and regulations. The third day it's the philosopher-types with all their fine-sounding arguments about emotions, relationships, and right thinking.

While they all contradict each other, they all have one message in common. They all seem to be saying that *my Christianity is not enough*. They all demand that I *mix* Christ's wisdom for living with their wisdom for living. It's like I can keep my Christianity, but I have to add their secrets. I need Christianity *plus* their new way of

thinking. I need Christianity *plus* their new way of living. I'm supposed to use my Christianity and plug in their steps.

So, Brother Paul, is Christianity all I need or what? If Christ is sufficient, do I really need something more? And if the gospel is sufficient not only for eternal life but for daily life now, then why doesn't it seem sufficient to me and the rest of us? I know you're busy, but if you could find time to reply, I sure would appreciate it.

*Brother Theophilus*

### **God's Word: Relational and Relevant**

Though the letter is imaginary, it captures the very real and raw life situation that motivated Paul to craft the letter that we know as Colossians. Using our imaginations again, perhaps we picture Paul stoically pondering, fingertip to temple. Nothing could be further from the truth as Paul himself describes it. In his desire to care for their souls, Paul is struggling to the point of weariness, laboring to the point of exhaustion, and agonizing like an athlete wrestling in the Olympics. The whole time he's clinging to Christ's supernatural power working mightily within him (Colossians 1:29-2:1). Paul models for us counseling that is passionate and compassionate, other-centered and Christ-dependent.

Paul's mission in this life-and-death contest is to relate gospel truth to the Colossians' relationship: *with God*—that they would be mature in Christ, *with one another*—that they would be united in love, and *with themselves*—that they would be encouraged in heart (Colossians 1:28; 2:2). Paul models for us counseling that sees God's Word as relational and relevant to life in our broken world.

### **God's Word: Rich and Robust**

Paul also models for us counseling that is gospel-centered and Christ-focused. Instead of allowing the pressure to provide a quick answer to drive him to simplistic solutions, Paul goes "big picture" by focusing on the larger story—the *largest* story—"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Rather than offering smaller story "steps" or "keys," Paul invites his Colossian friends to journey with him on a treasure hunt so "they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2-3).

Pie-in-the-sky? Too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good? That's what the Colossians were being told. And it's what the world tells us today. The gospel might be good for "spiritual stuff," for heaven, but for life today you need Christ+, or the gospel+, or Scripture+, or Christianity+ the world's wisdom. We might call that view "the Deficiency of Christ, the gospel, Scripture, and Christianity."

Paul, like the apostle John, counters this deficient worldview by pointing people to the all-sufficient Christ who not only offers the amazing grace of eternal life, but also the amazing grace of life lived to the fullest—*today* (John 10:10). This Jesus does not make the false promise of a trouble-free life, but the hopeful promise of peace in the midst of a troubled and troubling world (John 16:33).

It was this Christ-centered worldview that led the Biblical Counseling Coalition to explain gospel-centered counseling as:

We point people to a person, Jesus our Redeemer, and not to a program, theory, or experience. We place our trust in the transforming power of the Redeemer as the only hope to change people's hearts, not in any human system of change. People need a personal and dynamic relationship with Jesus, not a system of self-salvation, self-management, or self-actualization. Wise counselors seek to lead struggling, hurting, sinning, and confused people to the hope, resources, strength, and life that are available only in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

This is the hope that we offer Ashley and Nate. This is the hope that Christ offers us. This is the hope that Paul offered the Colossians.

### **The Gospel for Real Life: Heaven Invading Earth**

Paul's purpose in responding to the real life concerns of the Colossian believers was to call them back to the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, the gospel, Scripture, and Christianity for salvation *and for life today*—rich wisdom for life in a broken world. He does so by helping them and us to understand the gospel narrative—the drama of redemption—that I summarized in the introduction.

This is no academic exercise for Paul. Remember where Paul is as he writes—*in prison*. What keeps him going when life knocks him down? What keeps him serving freely when life locks him up? What keeps him pursuing righteousness when he's the recipient of injustice?

Paul Tripp words those questions like this, "What is the best news you can imagine? What is your reason for getting up in the morning? What is so significant that you will build your whole life around it?"<sup>4</sup> The apostle Paul's answer is "the good news—the gospel."

### **The Good News as the Epi-Center of the Good Book**

When people come to us, we don't just shout, "Gospel!" as if it is some magic wand. Instead, we first must understand the gospel story, then we seek to understand our friend's story, then we journey together to intersect God's eternal story and their temporal story. I picture it as pivoting back and forth with our friends between the larger story of the gospel and the smaller (but real and meaningful) story of their life.<sup>5</sup> We earn the right to bring God's perspective to bear on our friends' lives by first listening well to their life story.

Gospel-centered counseling means that together with our counselees we derive our understanding of earthly life from heaven's viewpoint. We look at life not with eyeballs only, but with spiritual eyes; we live under the Son, not under the sun.

Paul helps the Colossians and us to understand the gospel narrative by placing it within the context of eternity and time. In Colossians, he develops what I called in the introduction the "CCFRCC Narrative" or "The Drama of Redemption."

- Prologue: Community—Before the Beginning/Eternity Past
- Act I: Creation—In the Beginning
- Act II: Fall—The End of the Beginning
- Act III: Redemption—Eternity Invades Time

- Act IV: Church—In the Fullness of Time
- Epilogue: Consummation—After the End/Eternity Future

### ***Community: Listen to the Creator of Life for Wisdom for Living***

Secular psychology by very definition must begin with us—who are we? Gospel-centered counseling begins *before the beginning* with God—who is God and what difference does He make in how we look at and live life in a broken world? That’s why Paul doesn’t start with “once upon a time;” he begins before time, in eternity past by reintroducing the Colossians to the cosmic Christ (Colossians 1:15-19).

Think of it like this: if you have a problem understanding yourself, others, and life, who is sufficient for understanding people and life if not the Creator? It’s as if Paul says, “Okay, you could try to understand the creature by the creature (worldly wisdom), or, you could turn to the Creator to understand the creature.” Since “all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16), turn to Him.

And it’s as if Paul says, “Is your life falling apart? Do you feel like you’re coming unglued? Then turn to the One in whom ‘all things hold together’” (Colossians 1:17).

It’s also as if Paul says, “You want to know how relationships work? Then turn to the Eternal Community of Oneness—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Paul describes it beautifully in Colossians 1:13 when he speaks of the Father bringing us into the kingdom “of the Son he loves.”

Before God created, what was He doing? This vital question exposes the vital quest in the human soul created in the image of God. *Before God created; He related.* “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God” (John 1:1). The Trinity always enjoys the sheer delight of eternal, unbroken communion, connection, and community. Their love teaches us how to love—even in a broken world.

### ***Creation: The Way Things Were Meant to Be***

In describing the Creator, Paul teaches us about creation and the creature—about us. We were not made to live for ourselves or by ourselves. All things, especially image bearers, were made “for him” (Colossians 1:16). All things, especially image bearers, were made to be dependent upon Him—“in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

What a perfect picture of the Garden—Adam and Eve as dependent worshipping beings living in a perfect paradise where everything is held together—shalom, peace, oneness, wholeness, holiness, health, unity. No separation, division, shame, fear, mixed motives, or false love.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did not *need* to create, did not *need* us, did not *need* anything (Colossians 1:19—the Trinity is infinitely full and complete). Not only is our salvation by loving grace-gift (“God so loved the world that He *gave*—John 3:16), even our very creation is a loving grace-gift from our Trinitarian God who chose to invite us into relationship with their Divine community. The essence of life is not only relational, it is a certain type of relational living—*mutual self-giving, self-sacrificing, other-centered living.*

In the flow of God’s grand narrative, Paul’s Creation narrative teaches us how we were meant to live life with God and each other. His other-centered worldview guides us in unique

directions when we seek to help Ashley and Nate answer with wisdom central life questions like, “What does it look like to live a whole life in a broken world? What is the purpose of life?”

### ***Fall: Not the Way Things Are Supposed to Be***

Tragically, it all fell apart when Adam and Eve attempted to live life apart from the Creator of life. As a result of their rebellion, they moved from other-centered, dependent God-worshippers experiencing shalom to self-centered, independent self-worshippers experiencing shame. Paul captures it in a sentence. “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” (Colossians 1:21).

As a loving soul shepherd, Paul speaks the truth to the Colossians and to us. He informs us that apart from Christ our wills are bent only toward Satan’s *sub-version* of God’s grand narrative because our minds are under “the dominion of darkness” (Colossians 1:13).

We can trace every inch and each ounce of separation, shame, sadness, and selfishness to Adam and Eve’s willful choice to choose Satan’s counsel over God’s counsel—to choose Satan over God. That same choice was facing the Colossians. It is the choice we and our counselees face every day, every second—to whose counsel will we commit our hearts and minds?

We must understand that since the Fall life is not just *one* grand narrative—it is a competition between *two* grand narratives that each vie for our attention and commitment. As we’ll see in chapter five, Satan’s grand narrative is filled with *lies*, *self* (self-sufficiency, selfishness, self-effort), *works*, and *condemnation* while Christ’s grand narrative is filled with *truth*, *God* (Christ-sufficiency), *others*, (other-centered), *faith*, *grace*, and *forgiveness*.

So, how we respond to Ashley and Nate’s plea for help and hope depends upon how we answer the question: “Where do we find *wisdom* for life in a broken world?” Throughout God’s Word, He invites us to make a choice between two clear paths—the path of wisdom or the path of folly. Gospel-centered counseling seeks to humbly follow the wisdom path of Christ’s grand grace/gospel narrative rather than arrogantly following the foolish path of Satan’s grand works/condemnation narrative. Our imaginations are held captive to Satan’s lying, condemning narrative (2 Corinthians 10:4-7). Gospel-centered counseling is part of God’s frontal assault on mindsets surrendered to secular stories—the wisdom of the world.

### ***Redemption: Experiencing Abundant Life Today and Eternal Life Forever***

Can you imagine if Paul ended with the Fall—with alienation from God, domination by Satan, and our hearts, minds, wills, and emotions surrendered to evil beliefs and behaviors. We would be hopeless and helpless. We would have *no* hope or help to offer Ashley and Nate. But God’s grand gospel narrative is a *resurrection narrative*. Death dies. Hope lives. Christ rises and we rise with Him.

The epi-center of the book of God—the Gospels—is nothing less than a *victory narrative*. Gospels were a common literary form in the ancient Near East during the time of Christ. Whenever a great king won a major victory, he commissioned the writing of a gospel—a vivid retelling of the good news of the vanquished enemy and the victorious king. This glorious good news was told again and again, often from multiple points of views, to exalt the king and encourage his people.



To the Colossians, struggling to know how to live well and wisely, Paul opens the curtain to the main movement in the drama of redemption—victory, resurrection. Then Paul points the spotlight on the main character in the drama of redemption—*Christ*. He rejoices with the Colossians that they have “faith in Christ Jesus” (Colossians 1:3). He points their attention to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, reminding them what they had embraced “...the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth” (Colossians 1:5-6).

In Jay Adams’ classic work, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, he accurately notes that “all counselors have one goal in common: change.”<sup>6</sup> But what type of change and how does it happen? This is the counseling question that we must answer before we answer Nate’s questions about hope and help: “What is the ultimate focus of wise and loving counseling in a broken world—what does *help* look like? How can *gospel-centered* counselors minister to saints who are facing suffering and fighting besetting sins—what does *hope* look like?”

When the Colossians asked Paul about the best route to change, it’s no contest. It is Christ’s gospel of grace that is bearing fruit all over the world and in the heart of each believer in Colosse.

Paul says, “You want to know about change? About victory? Listen to the gospel announcement of Christ’s victory! And I’m not talking only about past victory over sin, as amazing as that is. I’m also talking about *ongoing* victory in our *daily* battles as we face suffering and struggle against sin.” That’s why Paul reminds them—as *believers*—that this gospel is *continuing* to bear fruit and grow “just as it *has been doing since the day you heard and understood it*” (Colossians 1:6, emphasis added).

Of course, Paul is *not* in any way minimizing, nor am I, the *eternal* significance of the gospel. In Christ “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin” (Colossians 1:14). In Christ we have been reconciled to God (Colossians 1:22).

For me, for a long time, I only applied half the picture of my salvation. Here’s how I pictured it. God is a holy and righteous Judge. I’m on trial before Him because of my sins. God is about to pronounce me guilty when Christ steps up and says, “Charge me instead. Put Bob’s sins on Me, and put my righteousness on Bob.” God the Judge accepts His holy Son’s payment on my behalf and declares me “Not guilty. Pardoned. Forgiven.”

That’s pretty amazing, right? But my picture used to stop there. God is the Judge; He forgives me; then He sends me away on my own and says, “Next case.”

But that’s not at all the full picture of our salvation. That’s not the picture painted by Paul in Colossians 1. In the biblical picture, Christ takes me from the courtroom by the hand and leads me into the Father’s house, walking me into God’s presence. When we enter the living room, the Father, my Father, is not in His judge’s robes. He’s in His family attire. When He sees me, it is just like Luke 15 and the prodigal son. My Father runs to me, throws His arms around me, and kisses me. He puts the family ring on my finger and ushers me back home!

Through Christ, God is not only the Judge who forgives you. He is your Father who *welcomes* you. He has *always* loved you. That’s why He sent His only begotten Son to die for you. And now with the barrier of sin demolished, nothing stands between you and your loving Heavenly Father. You can meet God person-to-Person, son or daughter to loving

Father. It's not simply, "Come on in, the water's fine!" It's, "Come on home, everything is *fine between us!*"

Talk about addressing life's ultimate questions! Life's overarching question is, "How do I find peace with God?" Paul answers: "Christ."

Of course, embracing Christ doesn't stop a fallen world from falling on us—we still face suffering. And embracing Christ doesn't yet end our battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil—we still wrestle against sin. However, embracing Christ does empower us so that we "may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father..." (Colossians 1:10-12). That's the type of real life gospel change I could promise Nate and Ashley.

### ***Church: Love Poised Between Faith and Hope***

As Paul provides spiritual counsel for the troubled and confused Colossian Christians, he doesn't envision them *alone*. Instead, he envisions them and us together "as God's chosen people" (Colossians 3:12), and "as members of one body" (Colossians 3:15)—the Church. Paul shares these words of one-another ministry right in the context of growth in grace (Colossians 3:1-11) because *sanctification is a Christ-centered community project*. "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Colossians 1:28).

We also find in Paul's letter of spiritual counsel that he does not move directly from Redemption to Consummation. Instead, he teaches them and us that we find ourselves as the Church living between two comings—the first and the second coming of Christ. We are poised between looking back with *faith* in our Redeemer and looking forward with *hope* as we await His return as Conquering Groom. What is our role in this dramatic waiting epoch?<sup>7</sup> God calls us to speak and live truth in *love*.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And *over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity* (Colossians 3:12-14, emphasis added).

And how is the Church to love one another? "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16a). Where does the Church find wisdom for life in a broken world? In the Word of Christ! In God's Word where the grand gospel narrative is told. We are to build wisdom's house together as the redemptive narrative dwells deeply within each of us and overflows lovingly between us.

What has the Church to say and do that no other human institution can say and do? We are the Jesus-centered community that speaks gospel truth in love to one another in such a way that it opens a door for sharing the gospel message (Colossians 4:2). In God's grand narrative drama, the Church is, as Kevin Vanhoozer pictures it, *the theater of the gospel*.<sup>8</sup> We are to perform the gospel in our one-another relationships with the world as our audience so that they will ask us for a reason for the faith, hope, and love they witness (Colossians 4:2-

6). As the Church we are to embody communion with God and one another in a manner that entices and invites others to join in.

### ***Consummation: The War Is Won; The Bride Is Wed***

Paul concurs that the Bible's narrative presents life as a war and a wedding, that we can capture the Bible's drama as "slay the dragon, marry the damsel." To people beaten down by sin and beaten up by suffering, Paul says, "Let me tell you the rest of the story—the end of the story. We were under Satan's domain of utter darkness. Helpless and hopeless, Christ has rescued us. Just as earthly rulers transplant a conquered people from one country to another, so Christ has transplanted us from our earthly citizenship to our heavenly citizenship. But he transplants us not from liberty into slavery, but from slavery into liberty. He transplants us not out of darkness into semi-darkness, but out of dismal blindness into marvelous light. So, don't return to enslavement to the world and its so-called wisdom; stay in the light because in Christ we've won the fight! He's disarmed His enemies and yours, triumphing over them by the cross" (compare Colossians 1:13; 2:14-15).

Paul not only pulls back the curtain to show us the end of the war, he also shows us the beginning of the wedding. "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Colossians 1:22). This is almost identical to Paul's wording in Ephesians 5:25-27 where his focus is on Christ's love for the church providing the example for a husband's love for his wife. This is wedding language!

Paul is letting us eavesdrop on eternity. Just like John does. "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear" (Revelation 19:6-8). The victory is announced. God reigns! The wedding march starts. All the scars and blemishes of sin are cleansed. The bride wears white!

Paul and John share the same message: "*The war is won! The bride is wed!*" And both messages communicate the same point: *the gospel is about God radically changing people*. The war Christ wins for us provides *victory* over sin and Satan where once we were their slaves. The wedding Christ prepares us for produces *purity* where there once was sin and shame. And it is all for God's *glory*.

This victory narrative forms the foundation of our counsel and changes the agenda of our counseling. Typically we ask God and seek help from each other to change our feelings and our circumstances. God is in the change business, but a very different type of change—heart change, Christlikeness—presenting everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).

Listen to the song of eternity—it's about *celebrating Christ's victory and the Bride's purity for God's glory!* We look at our lives and want instructions or explanations. What we need is imagination and vision to see life today in light of eternity.

Gospel-centered counseling starts with Easter. The gospel message is not like the White Witch's evil rule over Narnia where it is "always winter and never Christmas." The gospel narrative is Christ's holy and loving shepherding of the universe where it is "always spring and always Easter!"

Confidence as a counselor, as a one-another minister, begins with how we *view* the Bible. The central message of the Bible is God's announcement of our past, present, and

future victory in Christ. Because God so loved us, He sent His Son to slay the dragon and marry the damsel—the Bride of Christ—us!

### **The Good News as the End of the Story**

Though the outcome of the war is sure, skirmishes continue. When our current dreams are dashed, when we surrender yet again to another temptation, we must remind ourselves that we've read the end of the story.

The grand narrative of the Bible shows that life makes sense. History is moving toward a God-ordained purpose. More than that, the stories of our lives have purpose. God is directing all of history toward the final defeat of evil, toward happily ever after, toward His people ruling with Him and in relationship with Him.

Christ's triumph in the drama of redemption guides our interactions in our one-another ministry. We engage one another in gospel conversations encouraging each other to ponder: "Why give up when we lose one battle, since we know we have won the war?" "Why choose mere survival, when we are more than conquerors?" "Why choose the cheap thrills of the pleasure of sin for a season when in the end we rule the universe forever dressed in pure white robes?"

### **Where We've Been and Where We're Headed**

I've summarized life's first ultimate question as, "Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?" Of course, we all would agree on a two-word answer: "God's Word." In chapter 1, I've developed that answer further, but can still condense it into a tweet-size summary: *To view the Bible accurately and use the Bible competently we must understand the Bible's story the way God tells it—as a gospel victory narrative.*

So, when folks like Ashley and Nate ask for help and hope, the church does not have to feel inferior and refer them to "outside experts." We don't have to *sprinkle* in a few Christian principles alongside the world's wisdom. And we don't have to follow the shallow *concordance* approach of one-problem, one-verse, one-answer.

Remedying these approaches involves understanding the Bible's grand narrative and connecting it with wisdom to our daily lives—the Bible's drama of redemption provides *the context from which* we offer wise biblical counsel. Our imaginations must become captive to Scripture so that the Bible's CCFRCC Narrative becomes the governing framework for how we speak truth in love. Our role is to help one another to re-narrate our lives in light of the good news of Jesus Christ.

However, this still leaves some questions. "Does the gospel narrative approach mean that we ignore everything the world has to say about life struggles? Do we ignore valid scientific research? Do we refuse to consider medication if and when life struggles may have a physiological component?" We might imagine that we are the first generation of Christians to have to sift through complex questions like this, but that's not true. In chapter 2, we'll explore Colossians 2 to address these important issues that we must not and cannot ignore.

## Chapter 2

### Wisdom for Life in a Broken World

Ashley's situation was anything but simple, but what is simple when it comes to the human soul in a broken world? Ashley was facing external suffering—the horrors of the abuse that happened to her. She was also dealing with internal suffering—her responses to what happened to her—depression, suicidal thoughts, fear, anxiety, shame... And, Ashley was dealing with heart sin—perfectionism, people-pleasing, self-trust, believing Satan's lies...

In response to her depression and suicidal thoughts, would it be helpful if she saw a doctor? A psychiatrist? Could there be bio-chemical issues? Could medicine be an option? These are vital and valid questions related to the *complex mind/body connection*.

In response to Ashley's fear and anxiety, would it help if I were aware of the latest research on trauma and post-traumatic stress? This is a vital and valid question related to *descriptive research*.

In thinking through causes and cures, symptoms and prescriptions, would it be acceptable for me to blend my biblical worldview—the gospel narrative—with a secular worldview? Would it be wise to merge my biblical understanding of people, problems, and solutions with a secular psychology understanding of those issues? These are vital and valid questions related to *counseling theory and prescriptive therapy*.

These specific questions raise broader questions. Is gospel-centered biblical counseling “Bible only” counseling that naïvely ignores resources that God has lovingly put at our disposal? On the other hand, does the use of any resource other than the Bible involve capitulation to the “wisdom of the world”?

I've found that good people disagree on how to answer these complex questions. I've also found that rather than examining Scripture to explore these questions, we often use reason and logic to discern to what extent, if any, we should blend the world's reason and logic with our biblical interpretations. We tend to do this because we assume that prior to the advent of modern secular psychology Christians did not have to ponder these questions; therefore, the Bible does not address them. Colossians teaches otherwise.

#### A Shepherd's Concern for His Sheep

Recall the real life issues that motivated Paul to write to the Colossians from his prison cell. The Christians in Colosse were facing suffering—condemnation from Satan (Colossians 1:22), judgment by others (Colossians 2:16), interpersonal grievances and struggles (Colossians 3:13, 15), and family discord (Colossians 3:19-21). They were also battling sinful temptations—sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, and lying (Colossians 3:5-9). In today's world, these are the type of life issues that cause us to grab our smartphone and schedule a counseling appointment.

Here's what we must understand: in Paul's world, these were also the type of life issues that caused people to visit first century soul experts.<sup>9</sup> Paul forged Colossians in the heart of active controversy about which source of wisdom could address perplexing life

issues.<sup>10</sup> Like today, first century Christians engaged in heated debates about where they could find wisdom for life in a broken world.<sup>11</sup>

Paul steps onto the debate platform in Colossians to point people to Christ's all-sufficient wisdom because in Him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). What's the context for Paul's reference to Christ's wisdom? It's the same context that brings folks to counseling sessions today—relationship *with God*—that they would be mature in Christ, relationships *with one another*—that they would be united in love, and inner life issues—that they would be encouraged in heart (Colossians 1:28; 2:2).

What's the motivation behind Paul's emphasis on Christ's all-sufficient wisdom? He's concerned that his flock will turn to the world's pseudo-wisdom instead of to the wisdom of the Word. "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments" (Colossians 2:4). "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive *philosophy*, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8, emphasis added).

### **Ancient Philosophy Equals Modern Psychology**

Here's the word that confuses us—*philosophy*. We hear that word and we assume it means abstract, esoteric, academic reasoning about theoretical issues unrelated to real life. That's not how Paul uses the word or how Paul's readers understood the word philosophy.

Philosophy in Paul's day focused on diagnosing and healing diseases of the soul produced by false beliefs and mishandled desires that were cured by expert talk based upon a systematic theory of human wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, *ancient philosophy and modern psychology cover the same terrain*. In fact, ancient philosophy, modern psychology, and gospel-centered counseling all cover the same terrain—but with a very different source of wisdom. So, Paul's first-century caution to beware of deceptive philosophy is also Paul's twenty-first-century caution for us to beware of deceptive psychology that depends on human wisdom and not on Christ's all-sufficient wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

These "expert talkers" of Paul's day claimed they were elite thinkers who possessed superior insight necessary for overcoming suffering and defeating sin. They argued that without their advance teaching, progressive wisdom, and special knowledge, no one could handle life maturely.<sup>14</sup> Paul's shepherd's heart was angered by such elitism. Three times in Colossians 1:28 he repeats that Christ's wisdom is for *everyone*. His message was that "there is no part of Christian teaching that is to be reserved for a spiritual elite. All the truth of God is for all the people of God."<sup>15</sup>

William Hendricksen paraphrases the message the counselors of Paul's day were sharing with the Colossians. "Are you putting up a tremendous but losing battle against the temptations of your evil nature? We can help you. Faith in Christ, though fine as far as it goes, is not sufficient, for Christ is not a *complete* Savior."<sup>16</sup> F. F. Bruce describes it as a "syncretism" (blending, mixing) of Jewish religious ritual with Hellenistic philosophy of living that was fine with adding in elements of Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Paul's shepherd's concern was alarmed by this message of "Christ + human wisdom." It is as if he is saying in Colossians 2:1-9, "*Strangely, we seem prepared to learn how to live from almost anyone but Christ.*"

That's exactly what these first-century counselors were touting—how to live the good life out of a good heart for the good of society.<sup>18</sup> Though their models of the good life and their theories about how to achieve it varied (just as today we have hundreds of counseling

models and theories), these first-century soul physicians all sought to help people to live a flourishing life where they could fulfill their unique purpose by making a meaningful contribution to society. And they sought to accomplish this goal by *talk therapy*—using human reasoning, argumentation, dialogue, discourse, instruction, confrontation, and reproof to change their counselee’s beliefs and behaviors.<sup>19</sup> Truly, there is nothing new under the sun.

## **Beware!**

Ever since Genesis 3, we have faced two competing sources of wisdom about people, problems, and solutions—and Paul provides wise counsel on how to respond. In fact, Paul’s counsel about counseling in Colossians 2:4 would have been excellent guidance for Eve. “Don’t be deceived by fine-sounding arguments!” Paul pictures these first-century counselors as communicators, teachers, and debaters who wooed and wowed people with style that lacked substance. They deceived or beguiled (like Satan) people through false reasoning—human reason apart from divine revelation. They had an appealing sales pitch with an appalling product.

Paul is so concerned that he tells the Colossians to “Beware!” He’s saying, “Wake up! Pay attention. Danger! Danger! Don’t be duped or caught off guard.” That would have been excellent counsel for Adam when he failed to guard the garden. Paul uses military language when he warns the Colossians against being taken captive—carried away as booty in the spoils of war. He describes the weapons of warfare as hollow philosophy—human reasonings that are empty, proud, and lacking content and worth for real-life change. They’re also deceptive—designed to trick or con, to entice through a pleasant illusion.

Paul’s so fiercely against such counsel because it is according to human tradition and the basic principles of the world and not according to Christ. This is once again military language—“basic principles” was used of military units organized for warfare in columns. The term became used for foundational systems of belief upon which people patterned their lives. Paul’s saying, “Don’t be duped by the enemy or your allegiance will be stolen by secular, sin-distorted human reasoning used to try to cure souls. Don’t even think of following people who are separated from the life of God because they can only teach you how to live life separated from God!”

As I stop to re-read the preceding paragraphs, I’m picturing committed Christians who build their approach to counseling with some blending of secular psychology theory with biblical understandings of people, problems, and solutions. I imagine them saying, “Bob, what are you writing! When did your ministry start focusing on the negatives and ‘againstness’? When did you become so ‘anti-psychology’?”

I would respond, “Don’t shoot the messenger—me! I’m simply explaining and applying Colossians 2:1-8 in its historical context. I believe that Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was sending the Colossians *and us* a pastoral letter of concern about blending Christ’s wisdom for living with human wisdom for living. If you study the text and find a different meaning and application, let’s talk. If you study the text and come to a similar conclusion, then perhaps it is time for further reflection about the wisdom of building a Christian approach to people-helping that blends Christ’s wisdom and the world’s “wisdom.”

## Wisdom from the Wisest Person Who Ever Lived

That said, my ministry has never focused on what I'm against, or being anti-this or anti-that. Neither is Paul's ministry. Yes, he's not shy about expressing pastoral concern when his flock is tempted to learn how to live life from anyone but the Creator and Sustainer of life—the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. However, most of Paul's focus in Colossians is decidedly positive. Colossians 1 is all about the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ's gospel of grace for relational living now and forever. Colossians 2 is all about Christ's all-sufficient wisdom to live the good life (life abundant and eternal) out of a good heart (a renewed heart) for the good of society (a life of love for God and others) for the glory of God.

Paul writes Colossians 2 to help the Colossians to ponder, "Who is the wisest person who ever lived?" Not just the most brilliant person who ever lived (though that would also be Christ) who might give the Colossians *information*. But the wisest person who ever lived who offers the Colossians *transformation*. And Paul doesn't just want the Colossians to know *about* the wisest person who ever lived; he wants them to *know Him*. He wants them, and us, to have the full riches of complete understanding that we might know Christ—in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:2-3).

Paul's excited. He says, "Let me tell you about the truly purpose-driven church. It's a community of believers on a search-and-discovery mission, a treasure hunt, to find and uncover the greatest treasure ever—Christ who embodies wisdom, who *is* wisdom for life." It's not so much that Paul is "anti-psychology." It's that Paul is "pro-Christ"!

### Jesus Knows People

Paul's fascination with Christ reminds me of the apostle John's captivation with Christ. At the end of John 2 we find a "textual marker"—like a blazing, blinking neon light demanding our attention. That neon light proclaims, "Jesus Knows People!" Everyone was enamored with Jesus because of His many miraculous signs (John 2:23). But Jesus would not entrust Himself to the fickle crowd because "he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:24-25). Jesus knows people intensively and extensively—He knows everything about everybody. He wasn't googling the latest pop psychology book at Amazon because *Jesus knows people*.

John 3-4 seems to have been penned, in part, to address folks who might have been thinking, "Yeah, right, John. Prove it. Prove that Jesus knows everything about everybody." Who does Jesus minister to in those two chapters? He counsels the two most different people imaginable in John's day—Nicodemus and the woman at the well. Consider their differences: Nicodemus, the *Jewish, male, self-righteous, insider, religious leader* and the *nameless, Samaritan, female, unrighteous, outcast, irreligious follower*.

Trace Jesus' soul care ministry to each of these unique individuals and you'll see many "methods" but one message communicated in numerous person-specific ways. He meets both where they are, but leaves neither where they were. To Nicodemus the Pharisee, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God, being born again, of Moses, and of God's love. To the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus connects through their common humanity—they thirst. Then He speaks to her of living water, of her husband who is not her husband, and of worship in spirit and in truth.



Rightly so, it is the nameless Samaritan woman who rightly names Christ. Her words are like the second bookend around these chapters. “He told me everything I ever did” (John 4:39). That’s simply another way of saying *Jesus Knows People!*

Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor. He’s the ultimate Physician of the soul. His personal ministry with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman depict His understanding of people—thoroughly, His diagnosis of root problems—precisely, and His prescription of soul-utions—perfectly.

### **Impact the Babylonians, Don’t Spoil the Egyptians**

It is to this Wonderful Counselor that Paul points us when he exalts Christ as the only One in whom are hidden *all* the treasures of *wisdom* and knowledge. To understand Paul’s point, we have to understand the biblical portrayal of wisdom. Throughout the Bible, wisdom and folly relate to the whole person living a godly or ungodly life in every area of relationship, thinking, motivation, behavior, and emotions. Wise living from God’s perspective is not “Sunday living;” it emphasizes practical reality 24/7.<sup>20</sup>

Wisdom is shrewd, never simplistic. Rather than offering a mathematical formula or an exact science in every situation, it offers eternal perspective that we are responsible to apply daily as we think deeply and love intimately. Studying the Old Testament’s primary word for wisdom (*hokmah*) and the primary New Testament word for wisdom (*sophia*) reveals a very practical definition: God has given us in His Son, His Word, His Spirit, and His Church all things we need *to live sanely in this insane world in light of the world to come*. We have what we need to live this life—relating, thinking, choosing, doing, feeling—in light of the life to come. Christ, who is Wisdom, offers us all we need to move toward spiritual, relational, mental, behavioral, and emotional healing and health.

This comprehensive definition of biblical wisdom is important because we’re often told that pastoral counseling, one-another ministry, and biblical counseling are fine for “spiritual matters”—for our eternal relationship with God. However, we’re told that how we relate to one another, how we handle our mental and emotional life—that’s primarily the domain of psychology, not the domain of the Bible. That’s like saying some things are not the domain of Christ. That’s in direct opposition to what Paul has communicated throughout Colossians. In *everything* Christ has the supremacy (Colossians 1:18) and for everything we have Christ’s sufficiency (Colossians 2:3).

It is an unbiblical secular-sacred dichotomy to proclaim that Christ is supreme over “spiritual matters” but not over daily life issues of relating, thinking, choosing, behaving, and feeling. Those *are* spiritual matters—everything is spiritual—in relationship to God.<sup>21</sup>

This is certainly Paul’s view as he encourages us to apply Christ’s wisdom to our daily lives and relationships. “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, *continue to live in him*” (Colossians 2:6, emphasis added). Paul then applies Christ’s wisdom for daily living to restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:23). Think about that. When most people think of what to include in the category of “spiritual,” the last item that would enter their mind is the physical body and sexuality. Paul says, “Everything, including our sexuality, our sensuality, is under the Lordship of Christ and is redeemable by grace—salvation grace and sanctification grace.”

Paul then urges us to apply Christ’s wisdom to our emotional life—how we deal with anger, rage, and malice (Colossians 3:8). When most people think of what to include in the

category of “spiritual,” the second-to-last item they would think of is our emotions and feelings. Paul says, “Everything, including our emotionality, our ‘emotional intelligence,’ is under the Lordship of Christ and is redeemable by grace—salvation grace and sanctification grace.”

Paul then teaches us to apply Christ’s wisdom to our relational struggles—to husbands who are harsh and fathers who embitter their children through discouragement. Abusive husbands and fathers—is that only the domain of the secular social worker, or is even that under the domain of the Lordship and wisdom of Christ?

You may be wondering about the header to this section: *Impact the Babylonians, Don’t Spoil the Egyptians*. In the counseling world, the phrase “spoil the Egyptians” has been frequently used to picture the idea of blending the best of what the world has to offer with the best Christ has to offer. It comes from an incident in Exodus where, “Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters. And so you will plunder the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:22; see also Exodus 12:36).

Connecting that verse to counseling theory and practice involves an inaccurate analogy and an incorrect application. In Exodus, God’s people were leaving a pagan nation and were told to spoil them, not of their *wisdom*, but of their *material possessions*. The more apt analogy for counseling would be Daniel in Babylon. Here we have a spiritual analogy of God’s people entering a pagan nation and *impacting it with God’s wisdom*. Thus, Paul’s analogy in Colossians 2 could be called “Impact the Babylonians.” As the church, we are to be salt and light taking Christ’s all-sufficient wisdom into our hurting, broken, and confused world.

This is exactly Paul’s prayer request for himself. “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should” (Colossians 4:3-4). And it is Paul’s prayer for the Colossians and for us that we would impact the Babylonians—impact our world for Christ with Christ’s wisdom. “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversations be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:5-6).

What a beautiful portrait of gospel conversations. The Colossians were surrounded by floundering people who were listening to the “wisdom of the world,” to the philosopher-counselors of their day. Paul said that such worldly counselors lacked wisdom and any value in restraining sensual indulgence. Into this confused world, Paul didn’t say, “Spoil the Egyptians.” Instead, he said, “The Egyptians are spoiled—their so-called wisdom is folly! Impact the Babylonians—pray for wisdom to share gospel conversations that are full of Christ’s grace so that you will wisdom for fellow believers *and* for unbelievers as they face life in a broken world.”

### **Don’t Take a Back Seat to Anyone!**

Chapters 1-2 of this book and Colossians 1-2 are both about confidence in the resources we have in Christ. We’ve explored how to view the Bible—the written Word—with confidence for life. We can have confidence in the supremacy of Christ’s gospel of grace for relational living now and forever. We’ve also explored how to view Christ—the Living

Word—with confidence for life. We can have confidence in the sufficiency of Christ’s wisdom for living the good life out of a good heart for the good of society for the glory of God.

### **The Superiority of the Body of Christ**

Paul has one more major message he wants to share with the Colossians. It’s also about confidence—this time confidence in the Body of Christ for equipping one another to grow in Christ. We can have confidence in the superiority of the Body of Christ for helping the whole person to become whole, healthy, and holy in Christ.

Paul doesn’t choose his topic in a vacuum. The Colossians were being told by others that they needed community *in addition to* their Christian community. Their community in Christ was being judged as insufficient (Colossians 2:16, 18, 20). There was a long history of this mindset in the Ancient Near East. Philosopher-counselors like Epicurus presented themselves as the only savior—the correct guide of correct speech and deed.<sup>22</sup> He invited his pupils-disciples into his “Epicurean Garden” which was an enclosed therapeutic community. “Its members became her new family. And there can be no question as to who the head of this family is: for its members even wear images of Epicurus on their rings and put his portrait on their drinking cups.”<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, the Stoic philosopher-counselor invited their disciples into a community where they became life-long members of a family participating in a way of life ordered by reason. Their god was the god within—the god of rational argument and human reason. They saw the commitment to God and divine revelation to be foolish and illogical.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, there is nothing new under the sun. Today the world seeks to cause the church to feel inferior, communicating that we have to send the “hard cases” to the professionals, to the experts. In exposing this reality, my intent is not to “bash” the professionals, but to raise up the church. For far too long we’ve been sold the lie and bought the propaganda that when the messy issues of life strike a member of our church family, we should hug, pray, *and refer*.

That’s certainly not Paul’s message to members of the Body of Christ.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom... (Colossians 3:15-16a).

We quote these verses often, but frequently out of context. Notice what Paul sandwiches around his encouragement for us to let Christ’s treasure of wisdom richly dwell in us as we engage in the personal ministry of the Word with one-another. On the one side it is deep heart/affection change and mind renewal that leads to lives transformed from sexual immorality, lust, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, and lying. On the other side it is lasting relational change in how husband and wives, parents and children relate to one another.

Where does Paul send people when they need to address counseling issues? To the Church! Where does Paul place his confidence for growth in grace, for progressive sanctification, for deep heart change? To the Body of Christ! And with what resource does Paul arm his flock? The wisdom of the Word of Christ applied first to our lives and then to

each other's lives. Paul says to the Colossians and to us, "When it comes to helping people deal with difficult life issues, don't take a back seat to anyone!"

### **The Résumé of the People of God**

When we discuss who is equipped to address which types of life issues, part of our struggle is that we typically maintain a shallow definition of the personal ministry of the Word (whether we call it pastoral counseling, one-another ministry, biblical counseling, or gospel-centered counseling). We need a definition of biblical counseling that encompasses all of life. Here's one such working definition.

Christ-centered, church-based, comprehensive, compassionate, and culturally-informed biblical counseling depends upon the Holy Spirit to relate God's Word to suffering and sin by speaking and living God's truth in love to equip people to love God and one another (Matthew 22:35-40). It cultivates conformity to Christ (the whole person becoming whole in Christ—our inner life increasingly reflecting the inner life of Christ) and communion with Christ and the Body of Christ leading to a community of one-another disciple-makers (Matthew 28:18-20).

In this working definition, the "spiritual stuff" is everything related to who we are as everlasting, embedded, embodied, emotional, volitional, rational, relational, self-aware, social, and spiritual beings.<sup>25</sup> Biblical counseling focuses on everything related to how the whole person deals with all of life—sin and suffering—with the goal of sanctification—growth in Christlikeness.

This gospel-centered one-another ministry is what Paul calls us to in Colossians *and* in Ephesians. The pastor's calling is to equip God's people for "works of service" (Ephesians 4:12). "Works" has a sense of divine calling and meaningful purpose—vocation and mission. God commissions us for creative, zealous, purposeful work—work that glorifies Him as we serve one another.

Paul's word for "service" involves love in action through sacrificial ministry modeled after Christ's sacrifice. In the context of Ephesians 4:11-16, this service is nothing less than making disciple-makers through the personal ministry of the Word.

We often miss the vital real-life, how-to application of every-member disciple-making that Paul embeds in this text. Exactly what are pastors equipping people to do? Specifically how do members do the work of the ministry? Paul answers: By "speaking the truth in love" we grow up in Christ (Ephesians 4:15). *Christ's grand plan for His Church is for every member to be a disciple-maker by speaking and living gospel truth to one another in love.*

Paul selects an unusual Greek word which we often translate as "speaking the truth." Actually, we should translate it both as speaking and living the truth. We might even coin the phrase "truthing." Paul likely had in mind Psalm 15 where the Psalmist asks, "Who may dwell in your sanctuary?" He answers: "He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, *who speaks the truth from his heart*" (Psalm 15:2). Who can serve in God's sanctuary, the Church—the one who embodies the truth in relationships.

The word for "truthing" that Paul uses means transparent, truthfulness, genuine, authentic, reliable, and sincere. It describes the person who ministers from a heart of integrity and Christ-like, grace-oriented love. It pictures the person whose relational style is

transparent and trustworthy. The tense and context indicates that the Body of Christ should continually, actively, and collectively be embodying truth in love as it walks together in intimate, vulnerable connection.

While the word means more than speaking, it does not mean *less* than speaking. While it means more than sheer factual content, it does not mean *less* than the Gospel fully applied. Paul uses the identical word in Galatians 4:16. There he is speaking of preaching, teaching, and communicating the truth of the Gospel of Christ's grace (salvation) applied to daily growth in Christ (progressive sanctification).

Combine Galatians 4:16 with Ephesians 4:16, both in context, and we find an amazing description of gospel-centered counseling—of the personal ministry of the Word. Speaking the truth involves:

Communicating gospel truth about grace-focused sanctification in word, thought, and action through one-another relationships that have integrity, genuineness, authenticity, transparency, and reliability, done in love to promote the unity and maturity of the Body of Christ for the ultimate purpose of displaying the glory of Christ's grace.<sup>26</sup>

The normal agenda and priority of every Christian is to make disciple-makers. Christ's training strategy for disciple-making involves pastors and teachers equipping every member to embody the truth in love through the personal ministry of the Word—biblical counseling. Body of Christ—don't take a back seat to anyone.<sup>27</sup>

### **Yes, But**

We began this chapter pondering three issues related to Ashley and dear people like her.

- Question 1: Questions related to the *complex mind/body connection*.
- Question 2: Questions related to *descriptive research*.
- Question 3: Questions related *counseling theory and prescriptive therapy*.

We'll briefly examine question three first, as a foundation for the next two questions.

### **What About Counseling Theory and Prescriptive Therapy?**

Everything in this chapter has addressed the third question. Is it acceptable to blend our biblical worldview about people, causes and cures, and symptoms and prescriptions, with a secular worldview? Would it be wise to merge our biblical understanding of people, problems, and solutions with a secular psychology understanding of these issues?

My conviction related to counseling theory and prescriptive therapy should be clear. Paul warns us against "integrating" secular counseling *theory* with biblical counseling *theology*. He warns us against integrating secular counseling therapy with biblical counseling soul care.

I believe that the supremacy of Christ's gospel, the sufficiency of Christ's wisdom, and the superiority of Christ's Church provide us with all the treasures of wisdom we need to develop a comprehensive biblical theology and methodology of biblical counseling. That's exactly what *Gospel-Centered Counseling* and *Gospel Conversations* seek to offer—a rich, robust, relevant approach to real life issues built upon Christ's gospel of grace.

### **What About the Complex Mind/Body Connection?**

But what of questions 1-2? Does the Bible address the complex mind/body connection and issues of medication? Does the Bible give us guidance about whether Christians could or should use the latest descriptive research about life struggles?

I'm convinced it does. Paul more than hints at it when he highlights Christ as Creator of everything, Lord of all. As Abraham Kuyper explained, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"<sup>28</sup>

Paul's words and Kuyper's echo Genesis 1:26-28 and what some have called the "Creation Mandate" or the "Cultural Mandate."

"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:26-28).

I define the Creation Mandate as *the God-given, repeated command that image bearers subdue and rule the earth as God's vice-regents, under-shepherds, and under-scientists*. We are to love God with all our being, including our physical brain and body, thus exalting God by exploring, enjoying, and expanding the physical realm. The scientist analyzing rocks can glorify God just as much as the preacher preaching about the Rock of Ages or the song writer writing *Rock of Ages*.

God created us in His image with the capacities necessary to relate and rule as He relates and rules. When God commanded us to subdue and rule the earth, He was encouraging us to exercise our under-sovereignty over the entire physical universe. We are to be co-creators who tread and knead what God has created—advancing civilization, regulating natural forces, and exploring natural resources. The Creation Mandate is our calling, our vocation, to work like God works—in His power for His glory.

God created and ordered the material universe. Science investigates the material universe and affirms that order. Logically, then, as Christians we should embrace science, research, and medicine as disciplines that examine God's creation in obedience to the Creation Mandate. As Steve Viars states, "...those ministering the Word through counseling should be friends of good science and desire to promote the research and development of hard data in every area of human existence."<sup>29</sup>

Studying and treating the complex mind/body connection is part of the Creation Mandate. Neurological psychology, rightly undertaken, involves the scientific study of the

physical brain, its normal functioning, abnormal functioning, and physical cures leading to a restoration of normal functioning. Such scientific research done in submission to the Creation Mandate has great potential for addressing these complex mind/body issues.

The Biblical Counseling Coalition's Confessional Statement nuanced the complex mind-body issue as follows:

We believe that biblical counseling should focus on the full range of human nature created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28). A comprehensive biblical understanding sees human beings as relational (spiritual and social), rational, volitional, emotional, and physical. Wise counseling takes the whole person seriously in his or her whole life context. It helps people to embrace all of life face-to-face with Christ so they become more like Christ in their relationships, thoughts, motivations, behaviors, and emotions.

We recognize the complexity of the relationship between the body and soul (Genesis 2:7). Because of this, we seek to remain sensitive to physical factors and organic issues that affect people's lives. In our desire to help people comprehensively, we seek to apply God's Word to people's lives amid bodily strengths and weaknesses. We encourage a thorough assessment and sound treatment for any suspected physical problems.

A biblically-based, holistic approach to counseling respects all dimensions of personhood<sup>30</sup> created by God in the full context of the Bible's grand narrative. It is naïve and potentially harmful to treat people as one-dimensional beings. While this means that we must take into account possible physiological contributions to life struggles, it also means that we should never view psychotropic interventions as the sole solution for life issues. Sadly, in a fallen world fallen scientists tend to see us simply as material beings, soulless machines. Thus, what could be part of the curative process can become an excuse to ignore the inner life issues that may well be connected to various emotional and mental struggles.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to legitimate concern with a materialistic worldview, it is also wise to acknowledge that psychotropic medication is still in its infancy. We would be naïve not to take into account their side effects and the low current success rate in actually helping troubled people.<sup>32</sup>

Still, as part of the Creation Mandate, psychotropic medication and neurological psychology as part of a comprehensive, whole-person approach has biblical legitimacy. Psychotropic medication is an issue of Christian liberty and wisdom. Therefore, if Ashley were to decide to take medication for her depression, God's people should respond with compassionate understanding, not with guilt-inducing attitudes.

### **What About Descriptive Research?**

What then of descriptive research or what we might call research psychology. Consider a working definition of research psychology done under the Creation Mandate:

Research psychology is the empirical exploration that describes how people typically tend to respond to life events. It examines how things are, not how things were meant to be. It describes observable trends, categorizes clusters of responses, and organizes

clusters of symptoms. It does not interpret reasons or causes. It does not prescribe cure or care. It avoids theoretical models, problem diagnosis, and treatment plans.

The Christian research psychologist would explore God's world with a confidence that though chaos exists, God has given us the tools to discover order and explore disorder in the physical realm. The Christian research psychologist would humbly and respectfully remain within the expertise of her field. She would practice descriptively, describing what she finds. She would not practice interpretatively. She turns to the Scriptures when she wants to ponder the question of why we are the way we are. She will not practice prescriptively regarding matters of the soul. While she might prescribe physical cures, she would return to the Scriptures to prescribe soul cures.

The Biblical Counseling Coalition's Confessional Statement provides a helpful summary of the role of descriptive research in a comprehensive biblical approach.

When we say that Scripture is comprehensive in wisdom, we mean that the Bible makes sense of all things, not that it contains all the information people could ever know about all topics. God's common grace brings many good things to human life. However, common grace cannot save us from our struggles with sin or from the troubles that beset us. Common grace cannot sanctify or cure the soul of all that ails the human condition. We affirm that numerous sources (such as scientific research, organized observations about human behavior, those we counsel, reflection on our own life experience, literature, film, and history) can contribute to our knowledge of people, and many sources can contribute some relief for the troubles of life. However, none can constitute a comprehensive system of counseling principles and practices. When systems of thought and practice claim to prescribe a cure for the human condition, they compete with Christ (Colossians 2:1-15). Scripture alone teaches a perspective and way of looking at life by which we can think biblically about and critically evaluate information and actions from any source (Colossians 2:2-10; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

In my book, *God's Healing for Life's Losses*, I examined the descriptive research done by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and others on the stages of grief.<sup>33</sup> I saw those five stages as one way of categorizing how people in a fallen world typically journey through their grief process. However, such descriptive research cannot assess whether that typical journey is a healthy one. Nor can it assess, simply through scientific research, whether these responses correspond to God's process for hurting (grieving) and hoping (growing). I used the descriptive pattern as a *catalyst* to take me back to the Scriptures to explore interpretive and prescriptive issues and then developed a biblically-based process for journeying through grief to growth.

### **But What about "General Revelation"?**

Some may raise one final question. "If you allow for neurological psychology and research psychology humbly practiced under the Creation Mandate, then why not allow for theoretical psychology and counseling psychology (understanding people, diagnosing



problems, and prescribing solutions for matters of the soul) under the principle of general revelation?"

This is a legitimate question that unfortunately often includes an inaccurate understanding and definition of "general revelation." In these discussions, people tend to equate human reasoning with general revelation. That's a category mistake. Rather than being a sub-set of general revelation, human reasoning is part of our creation in God's image. Our reasoning has become distorted by our rebellion against God, which is why Paul warns us against blending human reasoning with Christ's wisdom. For matters of the soul, Paul points us to special revelation which is a term theologians use to describe God's inspired, inerrant Word authoritatively and sufficiently setting forth God's standards for human life.<sup>34</sup>

The purpose of general revelation is to declare the existence of the Creator of the natural order—to know *about* the Creator (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-20). The purpose of special revelation is to draw us to *know* the Creator, to reveal how to love like the Creator, and how to live for the Creator (Psalm 19:7-14; Matthew 22:35-40).

The general revelation that people perceive through creation is cursed and fallen—the data people interpret is not pristine (Romans 8:19-25). Special revelation, on the other hand, is inspired and inerrant—the data we interpret is supernaturally blocked from error (though, of course, our interpretations are not inerrant).

Additionally, special revelation—the Word of God—is living and active, powerfully capable of exposing heart issues, cleansing the heart, and changing the heart (Hebrews 4:12-13). Special revelation—Scripture—"is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Word of God, studied by the people of God, under the guidance of the Spirit of God is authoritative and sufficient for matters of the soul—for building a theory/theology of people, problems, solutions, and care of souls.

### **Where We've Been and Where We're Headed**

Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world? Here are two tweet-size answers from chapter 2: *The supremacy of Christ's gospel, the sufficiency of Christ's wisdom, and the superiority of Christ's church provide the wisdom we need for counseling in a broken world. And: We discover wisdom for how to live life in a broken world from the wisest person who ever lived—Christ!*

My prayer as you've read Chapters 1-2 is that your *confidence* in God's Word for real life issues would grow. I want us to have a *view* of God's Word that leads to the conviction that the Body of Christ does not have to take a back seat to anyone in ministering to folks like Ashley and Nate. I also want us to grow in *competence* in how we *use* God's Word to understand people, diagnose problems, and prescribe soul-u-tions. I've designed the rest of this book, along with the second book in this series, *Gospel Conversation*, to equip us to grow as competent biblical counselors.

In addressing life's first ultimate question, we've probed "Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?" Life's second ultimate question transitions us from the *written* Word of God to the *Living* Word of God. Here we answer the question, "What comes into our mind when we think about God?" The most important thing about us is our view of God. What is the biblical view of God and what difference does that make in how we do biblical counseling?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>I develop Ashley's story and a biblical counseling response in *Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Robert Kellemen, *Soul Physicians* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>The Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement can be accessed at: <http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/about/confessional-statement/>.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 1.

<sup>5</sup>*Gospel Conversations*, volume 2 in this series, equips you in this process of relating God's story to our life stories.

<sup>6</sup>Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), ix.

<sup>7</sup>For the role of the Church in God's grand narrative, see Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: WJK).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 167.

<sup>10</sup>Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Volume Two—The Pauline Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), 222-228.

<sup>11</sup>William Hendricksen, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 17.

<sup>12</sup>Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13-28.

<sup>13</sup>Consider the following additional historical insights into the connection between ancient philosophy and modern psychology. "The philosophers in ancient Greece took over from religion the moral direction of daily life.... In ancient times the healer of the soul who emerges in advancing cultures is not typically a member of the medical guild. In Greece he belongs instead to *the fraternity of philosophers*. Socrates was, and wished to be, *iastros tes psuches*, a healer of the soul. These Greek syllables have been recast to form the word 'psychiatrist'.... Socrates understood himself as a religious doctor of the soul. It is primarily as the *physician of the soul* that Socrates regarded himself.... Socrates was a great forerunner of the many who have searched out and sifted the thoughts of men for the healing and well-being of their souls." John T. McNeil, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 17, viii, 20, 41. Epicurus wrote: "Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul." Quoted in Nussbaum, 13. Speaking of first and second century culture, Thomas Oden writes, "The study of psychology was included in what Clement called philosophy—for it included the study of motivation, perception, passion, habit, and behavior modification." Thomas Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care: Volume Three—Pastoral Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 228.

<sup>14</sup>Bruce, 166-167.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>16</sup>Hendricksen, 17, emphasis in the original.

<sup>17</sup>Bruce, 166-167.

<sup>18</sup>Nussbaum, 102-139.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 115-126. These first-century secular counselors even practiced their own brand of secular nouthetic counseling—often using the word *nouthetein* for their need to share strong reproof and correction to express passionate disapproval of their counselee's beliefs and conduct.

<sup>20</sup>Consider passages such as Proverbs 1:2-3, 20-21, 33; 2:11, 16, 21-22; 3:8, 16.

<sup>21</sup>See Chapters 6-7 where we examine a comprehensive biblical understanding of people.

<sup>22</sup>Nussbaum, 127-130.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 353-357.

<sup>25</sup>See chapters 6-7.

<sup>26</sup>Bob Kellemen, *Equipping Counselors for Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 50.

<sup>27</sup>See chapter 13 for a fuller development of the role of God's people in addressing life in a broken world.

<sup>28</sup>James Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

<sup>29</sup>Steve Viars, "Brian" and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," in Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert, eds., *Counseling the Hard Cases* (Nashville: B&H Academics, 2012), 65.

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<sup>30</sup>See chapters 6-7.

<sup>31</sup>These concerns are not limited to the biblical counseling world. Psychiatrists such as Allen Frances Edward Shorter believe that the right medication prescribed in the right dosage at the right time can save a life. But we've convinced ourselves that a variety of merely human experience—temporary bouts of sadness or excitement or distraction—are in fact pathologies that need to be blasted at with drugs. See, Allen Frances, *Saving Normal* (New York: William Morrow, 2013) and Edward Shorter *How Everyone Became Depressed* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>32</sup>For a nuanced perspective on the state of psychotropic interventions, see Charles Hodges, *Good Mood Bad Mood* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup>Robert Kellemen, *God's Healing for Life's Losses* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2010).

<sup>34</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 331.