

# ***What Makes Christian Counseling Christian?***

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Every counselor, Christian or non-Christian, has a desire to help others.

Every counselor has presuppositions about how help is accomplished.

- **Insightful advice:** Some counselors believe that people are helped through self-knowledge.
  - While this is true in part, it does not constitute distinctly Christian counseling because an atheist believes this, too. “Discover the Secrets in Your Own Heart”
- **Helpful advice:** Some counselors believe that people are helped through steps or rules about how to change.
  - Again, while this is true in part, it does not make counseling distinctly Christian because an atheist gives his counselees steps to follow, too. “5 Steps to a More Wonderful You”
- **Scriptural advice:** Some counselors believe that people are helped through taking the imperatives or obligations of Scripture and applying them in concrete ways to his counselees’ lives.
  - Again, this is true. People are helped by knowing what the Bible has to say about how to change. They need to know the “put off’s and put on’s and what God requires of them. But...a Roman Catholic or even a Mormon can use the imperatives of the Bible to lay out a plan. “Putting Off/Putting On” imperatives without remembering the indicatives is not truly “Christian” counseling.
- **Christian Counseling:** Truly Christian counseling is counseling that is founded on the Christ, on His work, on the gospel. The gospel is the ONLY thing that separates Christian counseling from any other form of self-help, because the gospel isn’t self-help. The gospel tells you that you can’t help yourself and that Someone else has had to do everything you couldn’t.
- **The only factor that differentiates Christian counseling from other forms of counseling is the gospel.**
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“...[we] discover the power to defeat sin and sadness, conflict and bitterness, and self-pity and self-contempt, not by walking *beyond* the gospel that first brought us into the favor and family of God but rather by moving more deeply *into* that same gospel.”<sup>i</sup>

- What captivates your gaze? “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Cor. 3:18)
  - How do people change?
    - By looking at the Law.
      - The Law is a “ministry of death.” (2 Cor. 3:7)
    - By looking at yourself. Guilt over former sins *never* impels obedience. There is no transforming power in your list of sins. (2 Cor. 4:17-18).
    - By looking at others.
      - Observing others’ walk can be a good practice but frequently degenerates down into either pride or envy. There is no power to change in observing others.
    - By looking at Christ. (2 Cor. 4:4, 6; 1 John 3:1-3; John 17:24).
  - How do we “see” Christ?
    - The Means of Grace
      - In the Word preached.
      - In the Word as we read and study.
      - In the Sacraments
      - Through transparent and committed relationships in the Body of Christ. (Rom. 15:14)<sup>ii</sup>
  - What will “seeing Christ” do for us? (1 John 4:16)
    - It will make us love him. (1 John 4:19)
      - Every sin we commit is caused by a lack of love. (1 John 5:3) Lack of love makes obedience burdensome.
    - It will make us love others, who have been created in his image.
      - Every sin we commit against others is also caused by a lack of love. (1 John 4:20-21)
    - Seeing Christ enables us to bask in God’s *hesed*. (Ex. 34:6-7; Ps. 103:11-12)
      - Look up! God is effusive in his declarations of love.
    - Seeing Him helps us understand ourselves. (Ps. 36:9)
  - “Gospel-Centered Counseling is the process of one Christian coming alongside another with words of truth to encourage, admonish, comfort, and help – words drawn from Scripture, grounded in the saving work of Jesus Christ, and presented in the context of relationship. The goal of this counseling is that the brother or sister in need of counsel would grow in his understanding of the gospel and how it applies to every area of his life and then respond in grateful obedience in every circumstance, all to the building up of the church and for the glory of God.”
    - Avoiding unbiblical psychological constructs.
    - Avoiding using only imperatives.
    - Applying both declaratives and imperatives. We are sinful and flawed yet loved and welcomed.

#### Gospel Declarations in Ephesians 4:22-24 (because of this...)

- We bear the image of Christ
- We have been recreated in true righteousness and holiness
- We have Christ's righteous record
- The Holy Spirit is working this true righteousness and holiness into our hearts
- He's replacing our corrupt desires with holy ones

#### Gospel Obligations in Ephesians 4:22-24 (do this...)

- Put off the old sinful patterns
- Put on the new Christlike patterns.
- The goal of Gospel-Centered Counseling is sanctification.
  - "Sanctification is the work of God's grace in us that allows us to receive the benefits and power of Jesus, which in turn enable us to overcome the evil that can so burden our hearts."<sup>iii</sup>
- Examples of using both indicatives (declarations) and imperatives (obligations in your counseling) and helping your counselee "see" the gospel as we look at these different topics:
  - Anger: Eph. 4:26-27, 29-32
    - What are the declarations? (Because of this...)
    - What are the obligations? (This...)
  - Bitterness: Heb. 12:15-16, 22-24
    - What are the declarations?
    - What are the obligations?
  - Communication Problems: Col. 3:8-11
    - What are the declarations?
    - What are the obligations?
  - Depression Heb 12:3-4
    - What are the declarations?
    - What are the obligations?

(Now it's your turn...)

- Envy
- Familial relationships
- Fear
- Habitual Sin

“If the message of the gospel does not inform every thought, word and deed, our striving to put off and put on will disintegrate into another way to gain the approval of others, ourselves, and even the Lord. The only factor that can keep us from either grinding obedience spawned by self-love or habitual disobedience also spawned by self love is a different sort of love—the love of Christ for us and our responsive love for Him.”<sup>iv</sup>

*Remember: the gospel is the only thing that can transform our counseling into truly Christian counseling.*

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<sup>i</sup> Fitzpatrick, Elyse and Johnson, Dennis, *Counsel from the Cross: Connecting Broken People to the Love of Christ*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), p. 14.

<sup>ii</sup> Fellowship is not an “official” Means of Grace, per se, but rather means of grace in an important yet not “official” way.

<sup>iii</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace: Delighting in the Joy that is Our Strength*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>iv</sup> Fitzpatrick, *op cit*, p., 108.