

THREE QUESTIONS TO BIBLICALLY ORIENT YOUR COUNSELING

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On April 12th of 1912 the world's largest and most luxurious ocean liner set sail from Northampton, England for New York City. The ship's owners and Captain had the best of intentions: safely transport 2200 passengers to the USA, provide almost every known creature comfort, and set a new cross-Atlantic speed record at the same time. Four days later, in spite of good intentions, state-of-the-art technology and a shipbuilding design that guaranteed unsinkability, the Titanic struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic and sank. 1700 passengers drowned or froze to death. The ship's designer committed suicide a few months later.

Sometimes during counseling it is absolutely overwhelming to hear of the shipwreck people have made of their lives. How do these things happen? Nobody sets out to make a mess of their life or their family. Who sets out in life to become an addict, or to betray their wife or husband and commit adultery, or to become depressed? According to Pascal, "All men seek happiness." So what happened?

Counselees come to counseling wanting solutions: they want to feel better, their child to behave, a spouse to straighten up. Most often they don't understand the root of their problems, they just want solutions. All they know is their ship is sinking and they want help, now!

Three questions can help us sort things out and then provide Godly counsel that transforms lives: Who is this? Who am I? Who is God?

The first question in counseling is, "**Who is this?**" The answer comes in 2 parts. The Bible emphasizes both the dignity and the depravity of every human soul. As you counsel, do you realize that sitting before you is a person made in the very image and likeness of God. The honor and dignity with which they are crowned calls us to **respect and listen to them**. In addition, they are one-of-a-kind. This person, their problems, and their situation are as unique as their fingerprint. Slow down. First things first. You can't fix anything until you know what's broken. What causes them to act/think/feel/be like this or like that? The causal explanation for any human problem carries a ton of freight, because they become signposts pointing toward solutions. Once you know what's wrong, the remedy begins to surface. Therefore, this is an absolutely critical step.

So, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to arrive at final conclusions about the actual source of their difficulties. Ask key questions. Get the whole story. Don't make a final judgment until you've talked to all the relevant people. "*He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.*"¹

The second part of the answer to this first question is found in the doctrine of depravity, which reminds us that we are listening to a sinking sinner (just like you!) whose sins are so offensive to God and destructive to them and others that their only hope is in the power and wisdom of God revealed in His written Word and the Gospel of Christ. Our biggest problems aren't *around* us, they are *in* us. The heart of the problem is the problem of *my* heart. Misery, confusion, and discord proceed from hearts that are full of evil and insanity.² Redemption (for believer and non-believer) is their most essential

need. They need to be rescued. Whether believer or unbeliever, they need the Gospel. Sin is our main problem; Christ is the perfect solution.

The second question is, “**Who am I?**” (or maybe, why me Lord!?) This is not merely a counseling appointment, it is a divine appointment. Is this encounter a part of God’s sovereign plan? Of course it is. Make no mistake about it. You are God’s man for this person at this time. God has orchestrated the intersection between this person, their problems, and your ministry. Practically, what is counseling?

- One-on-one ministry of the Word of God
- Fulfilling the Great Commission, through focused, individualized discipleship
- A redemptive relationship: submitting yourself to be a part of God’s restorative plan in someone’s life; allowing yourself to be a tool in the hands of the Great Carpenter
- An opportunity to love another by speaking the truth and grace of God, directly and personally, into a storm-tossed life

The third and most critical question is, “**Who is God?**” The Bible deciphers problems in two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal dimension is most obvious: personal and relational problems. The vertical or spiritual dimension is less obvious, **but more determinative**. There are no merely personal problems. Every problem of life is God-referenced. In whom or what does the counselee trust, serve, fear, seek, obey and love? God or some substitute? This is the most fundamental and unceasing dilemma for each of us and for counselees. The counselees most pressing need is to know, love, and serve God above all else. It is Jesus Christ that says to the storm, “Hush, be calm.” and then rescues sinking swimmers.

“The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations.”³

Demonstrate confidence in God and His Word. Be realistic about how change proceeds. Explain the process of biblical change (AKA progressive sanctification). Be solution oriented. Tell stories about God’s work in your life and the lives of others. Point out the sovereignty (He is in charge), providence (God is all good all the time), and shocking love of God. Underline present evidence of grace and the future hope of grace. God is over this, in this, up to something and up to something good.

Get practical. Talking alone is not sufficient for change. People do not change overnight, and they do not change in fuzzyland. Change occurs in the details of life. Prescribe clear, direct, specific, and realistic change in the form of homework. Be creative. Challenge them by assigning homework which stretches them and gets them involved in change immediately. Homework should involve both learning biblical concepts (Bible homework) and adapting new behaviors (action homework). Explain the importance of obedient faith. Check up on and utilize homework in subsequent sessions. Be confident of this: He who began this good work in their life surely is able to complete what He started.⁴

¹ Proverbs 18.13

² Ecclesiastes 9.3

³ Psalm 33.11

⁴ Philippians 1.6