
Affirmations & Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling

David Powlison

Some 1500 years ago, the warrior-chief of a primitive, Germanic tribe bluntly questioned a visiting missionary, "Why should I believe in this Jesus that you tell me about?" The man of God answered, "Because in Jesus Christ you will find wonder upon wonder—and all true."

That same Counselor is full of fresh wonders today. How do any of us come to serve Him well? How do all of us come to serve Him well? We must know some things.

We must *know* the gravity of our condition as human beings. We tend to defect. We are false lovers. We are traitors—compulsively, blindly. We want the wrong things. We are doomed. We need rescue from ourselves and what we bring upon ourselves. This isn't a general problem, a theoretical problem, the other person's problem. It's my specific problem, and yours, and the other person's, too: "There is an evil in all that is done under the sun, in that there is one fate for all. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts while they live, and then they die" (Eccl. 9:3).

We must *know* the sheer glory and goodness of what our Father has given us in Jesus Christ. To know Jesus in truth and love is to

find the one thing worth finding, the one lasting happiness, the purpose of life: "He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new'" (Rev. 21:3-5).

We must *know* the stunning wisdom of the Word of God. God speaks profoundly and comprehensively to the concrete conditions of every person's life. He speaks with intent and power to change us: "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.... Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer" (Ps. 19:7-9, 14).

We must *know* our calling as children of such a Father. Jesus announces His kingdom

with the words, "Repent." That means, "Change." His grace and truth gets about the business of changing us. We are called to realize the new creation onto the stage of history, into the details of our lives. We are called to change, and to change the world. We run a race of repentance and renewal. Jesus intends to teach us how to live as "disciples" (changers, learners, students), so that we become His instruments of change in the lives of others. The Counselor full of wonders makes *Christiano*, "Christ-people," apprentice counselors also full of wonders: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15).

We must *know* that God's way is qualitatively different from everything else available in the bazaar of options, of other counsels, other schemas, other practices, other systems. The only sanity and wakefulness is to know Him-who-is. Anything else perpetuates our insanity, our sleepwalk: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).

We must know these things, live them, minister this Christ to others.

Attempts to define Christian faith and practice more accurately and helpfully always arise in a context of controversy. These affirmations and denials are no exception. They are about "counseling." But a mental health system that knows no Christ dominates the counseling landscape and shapes the mind and practices of the culture. Even the "Christian" counseling field has largely taken its cues from the secular psychologies, as if Scripture did not really have much to say beyond religiosity and morality. But as we look more closely at life, as we learn to look with God's eyes, as we come to know ourselves truly, it becomes clearer and clearer that Scripture is *about* counseling: diagnostic categories, causal explanations of behavior and emotion, interpretation of external sufferings and influences, definitions of tangible and workable solutions, character of the counselor, goals for the counseling process, configuring the professional structures for doing counseling, critique of competing models. These are all matters to which God speaks directly, specifically, and frequently. He calls us to listen attentively, to think hard and well, and to engage in a worthy labor to develop our practical theology of face-to-face, conversational ministry. These affirmations and denials attempt to state what our Lord sees, says, and does.

Section I treats the sufficiency of Scripture. Unless God lies, we have the goods for developing systematic biblical counseling, just as we have the goods for

preaching, teaching, worship, mercy, and missions. In order to counsel others well, we need a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the human condition: Section II. We must bring to bear effective solutions, equally penetrating and comprehensive, the Redeemer who engages the variety of persons and problems appropriately: Sections III and IV. We must embody counseling in social structures: Section V. We must have a standpoint from which to interact with other systems of counseling: Sections VI and VII. Scripture intends to

We affirm that the Scripture defines and speaks to the gamut of problems in living for all people in all situations.

teach us how to know and do these things, that we might cure and care for souls the way Jesus Christ does.

I. True knowledge about people and counseling practice

We affirm that the Bible is God's self-revelation in relation to His creatures, and, as such, truly explains people and situations.

We deny that any other source of knowledge is authoritative for explaining people and situations.

We affirm that the Bible, as the revelation of Jesus Christ's redemptive activity, intends to specifically guide and inform counseling ministry.

We deny that any other source of knowledge is authoritative to equip us for the task of counseling people.

We affirm that wise counseling requires ongoing practical theological labor in order to understand Scripture, people, and situations. We must continually develop our personal character, case-wise understanding of persons, pastoral skills, and institutional structures.

We deny that the Bible intends to serve as an encyclopedia of proof texts containing all facts about people and the diversity of problems in living.

We affirm that the ideas, goals, and practices of counseling must cohere explicitly with the historic creeds, confessions, hymns, and other wise writings that express the faith and practice of the church of Jesus Christ.

We deny that the wisdom of the past sufficiently defines the issues of counseling ministry for today, as if the requisite wisdom were simply a matter of recovering past achievements.

II. The givens of the human condition and the scope of biblical truth

We affirm that human beings are created fundamentally dependent on and responsible to God. People can only be understood when these realities control the counselor's gaze.

We deny that any form of autonomy severs people from dependency on God.

We deny that any form of determinism neuters moral accountability to God.

We affirm that the ideal for human functioning is faith working through love. Such love for God and neighbor is the standard against which to specifically understand what is wrong with people. It is the goal to which counseling must specifically aspire.

We deny that any other standard or goal is true.

We affirm that evil, done by us and happening to us, is the fundamental and pervasive problem in living. Our own sin, in all its facets and dimensions, is primary and self-generating. The circumstances that happen to us provide both provocative context ("trials and temptations") and just consequences ("reap what you sow") for our moral response, but do not determine the quality of our moral response.

We deny that any other diagnostic system is valid, universal, or penetrating.

We deny that nature and/or nurture determine the quality of our moral response.

We affirm that the Scripture defines and speaks to the gamut of problems in living for all people in all situations.

We deny that biblical truth is limited to a narrow sphere of "religious" or "spiritual" beliefs, activities, persons, emotions, and institutions, separated from the other spheres of daily life.

We deny that any particular realm of human life can be sectorized off as the unique province of the theories, practices, and professions of the modern psychologies.

III. The solution to the sin and misery of the human condition

We affirm that the Bible teaches, invites, warns, commands, sings, and tells the solution for what troubles humankind. In the good news of Jesus Christ, God acts personally. In word and deed, He redeems us from sin and misery through the various operations of His past, present, and future grace. God uses many means of grace, including the face-to-face conversations of wise counseling.

We deny that any other solution or therapy actually cures souls, and can change us from unholy to holy, from sinners to righteous, from insanity

to sanity, from blindness to sightedness, from self-absorption to faith-working-through-love.

We affirm that God's providential common grace brings many goods to people, both as individual kindnesses and as social blessings: e.g., medical treatment, economic help, political justice, protection for the weak, educational opportunity. Wise counseling will participate in and encourage mercy ministries as part of the call to love.

We deny that such goods can cure the soul's evils. When they claim to cure the human condition, they are false and misleading, competing with Christ.

We deny that Christless counseling—whether psychotherapeutic, philosophical, quasi-religious, or overtly religious—is either true or good. Their messages are essentially false and misleading, competing with Christ.

*Through speaking the truth in love,
we act as tangible instruments of
God's grace in the lives of others.*

IV. The nature and means of change

We affirm that the growth process for which counseling must aim is conversion followed by lifelong progressive sanctification within every circumstance of life. Our motives, thought processes, actions, words, emotions, attitudes, values—heart, soul, mind, and might—increasingly resemble Jesus Christ in conscious and evident love for God and other people.

We deny that there is any method for instantaneous or complete perfection into the image of Jesus Christ. The change process continues until we see Him face-to-face.

We deny that the processes and goals labeled self-actualization, self-fulfillment, healing of memories, meeting of psychological needs, social adaptation, building self-esteem, recovery, individuation, etc., describe valid aims of counseling, though they may evidence analogies to elements of biblical wisdom.

We affirm that the Bible explicitly teaches the fundamentals of counseling method by precept and example. Through speaking the truth in love, we act as tangible instruments of God's grace in the lives of others.

We deny that the modern psychotherapies rightly understand or practice wise counseling

methodology, though they may evidence analogies to elements of biblical wisdom.

V. The social context and scope of counseling ministry

We affirm that the Spirit and the Word create the church of Jesus Christ, and that the people of God should provide the personal, social, and institutional loci for speaking the truth in love.

We deny that the mental health professions and their institutions have the right to claim any sector of problems in living as their particular prerogative. Even those who suffer mentally-disabling medical problems need godly counseling.

We affirm that the aims, content, and means of counseling ministry are of a piece with public ministry, the spiritual disciplines, and mercy ministry. These are different aspects of the one redemptive ministry of Christ.

We deny that the persons and problems addressed by the activity termed "psychotherapy" fall outside the intended scope of the ministry of Christ in word and deed.

We affirm that the primary and fullest expression of counseling ministry occurs in local church communities where pastors effectively shepherd souls while equipping and overseeing diverse forms of every-member ministry.

We deny that the institutional forms and professional roles of the mental health system provide a normative and desirable framework for counseling ministry.

We deny that current forms of church life and conceptions of the pastoral role are necessarily adequate and normative as vehicles to train, deliver, and oversee effective counseling ministry. The body of Christ needs institutional reformation, development, and innovation.

We deny that parachurch and other cooperative forms of counseling ministry in the body of Christ are inherently wrong.

VI. God's providence and the interplay between His common grace and the intellectual-practical effects of sin

We affirm that numerous disciplines and professions can contribute to an increase in our knowledge of people and how to help them. Scripture teaches a standpoint and gaze by which believers can learn many things from those who do not believe.

We deny that any of these disciplines and professions can align and constitute a system of faith and practice for wise counseling.

We affirm that a commitment to secularity distorts disci-

plines and professions fundamentally and pervasively. People who do not think and practice in submission to the mind of Christ will misconstrue the things they see most clearly, and will miscarry in the matters about which they care most deeply and skillfully.

We deny that secular disciplines and professions are entirely benighted by the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic effects of sin. The operations of God's common grace can cause unbelievers to be relatively observant, caring, stimulating, and informative.

We affirm that the personality theories are essentially false theologies, and the psychotherapies are essentially false forms of the cure of souls. Even the more descriptive and empirical psychologies are significantly skewed by secular presuppositions, and their findings need to be reinterpreted by the biblical worldview.

We deny that psychological research, personality theories, and psychotherapies should be viewed as "objective science," as that term is usually understood. Neither should they be seen as extensions of medicine and medical practice.

*From God's point of view,
even foolish attempts to assert a God-less
"scientific" or "medical" objectivity
register as overtly religious acts.*

VII. Good news for psychologized people in a psychologized society

We affirm that mature, presuppositionally consistent, loving, and efficacious biblical counseling will be a powerful evangelistic and apologetic force in the modern world.

We deny that the most important part of the church's interaction with the modern psychologies is to discover what can be learned from them.

DISCUSSION of Affirmations & Denials

On the face of it, Scripture is *about* counseling. It's about the diagnosis and face-to-face cure of the human condition. It's about trustworthy love, being known by another, a growing self-knowledge, making sense of life's circumstances, an interpersonal process, and specific personal changes. It's about how you understand or misunderstand life, how you behave or misbehave.

It's about what you believe, desire, fear, trust, and value. It's about how you act, talk, and feel. It's about your relationships to others and to Him-who-is. Scripture is also about untrustworthy, inaccurate, misleading, and false messages and persons, about other counsel and other counselors. Seen this way, the dynamic and the subject matter of Scripture is recognizably the activity we term "counseling"—but with a dramatic twist.

You live or die based on the counsel you listen to—and the counsel you give.

What most people think of as "counseling" is controlled by the elitist habits of the modern mental health system: a designated professional with an advanced degree, and with expertise in supposedly objective, non-religious ideas and techniques from psychology or psychiatry; a designated and diagnosed patient/client, who suffers from a syndrome with a medical-sounding label; a formal and consultative relationship that mediates ideas and solutions from science and/or medicine; a fee-for-service exchange occurring in a time-out from real life social relationships; a fundamental asymmetry between doctor and patient, expert and client, healthy and sick. Seen against this backdrop, the Bible seems to say little about the ideas, solutions, methods, and institutional structures necessary for effective counseling.

The Bible is odd music, playing in a different key with different instruments, even on a different scale. God subverts asymmetries, and views us all as basically more alike than different. All of us are "sick" with the madness in our hearts; each of us needs the "physician." And each of us—even the weakest, poorest, and most troubled—is capable of helping any of us in some way when grace gifts us and masters us. And the Bible is too straightforward to be very esoteric in its "techniques"; it's about real life and everyday interactions. Jesus and His apostles are not much impressed with claims to objective superior knowledge, or with claims to specialized authority and professional prerogative. When the Lord uses medical metaphors for life's problems, it's just a grabby metaphor, not reality. The Bible paints all life as inescapably religious, and the kinds of problems psychotherapy deals with every day are particularly obvious examples. From God's point of view, even foolish attempts to assert a God-less "scientific" or "medical" objectivity register as overtly religious acts. To attempt to explain and cure the souls of others while

saying in your heart, "There is no God," is damnably religious. If a blind man leads a blind man, they both fall in a ditch. But people who *see...see themselves, other people, and everyone's life circumstances coram Deo*. And they see God in Christ.

The Bible's vision of everything that "counseling" is about is stunningly different from current cultural habits and received wisdom. It's a bigger and better way of thinking about "counseling." And it's true. The culture says, "We've always done it this way" (though historical memory tends to be very short). But Scripture drastically changes the paradigm—to put it mildly. Counseling doesn't just inhabit clinical settings, nor is it the property of several upstart professions practicing in the wealthier countries. God's view of counseling cuts deeper, applies wider, aims different, lasts longer, matters more. You live or die based on the counsel you listen to—and the counsel you give. Counseling is not just for those who "need counseling." It's not just something that "professional counselors" do with "counselees." You can't escape being involved in the Bible's view of the counseling process. It's happening all the time, whether you know it or not, whether you want it or not. You are doing it to others; others are doing it to you—today, every day, informally, and (very occasionally) formally. All people influence others by what they believe and want; all people are influenced by the thoughts and intentions of others. All of human life is by definition counseling. "The tongue" is a counseling instrument. Every human interaction, from the most trivial to the most formal, arises from the nexus of meanings, values, and intentions that controls the hearts of the participants.

Counseling is never about neutral, objective knowledge. It's committed. It always "imposes values," covertly if not overtly. No one can avoid this. The questions you ask (or don't ask), the emotions you feel (or don't feel), the thoughts you think (or don't think), the responses you give (or don't give) tip your hand and overflow from your heart. Therapists aren't just skillful or clumsy, caring or callous; their counsel (diagnostic categories, interpretative schemas, analyses of causality, ideals of health, particular advice, personal character) is true or false, and leads others into good or evil. God evaluates every word out of every mouth, because these register the thoughts and intentions of every heart as either for or against Him. Counseling is not a matter of neutral technical expertise and an inherently legitimate professional role. Counseling is either wise or perverse, just as all human beings are either sages or fools, either trustworthy or untrustworthy, whatever their professional roles. Either counseling leads truly or it leads astray. Graduate education and professional

role are not decisive criteria. Wisdom is the deciding factor, and the organizing center of wisdom is the fear of Christ. God plays by a different set of rules—and He makes the rules. Theories of human nature and formal counseling practices of any sort are a subset of much bigger things. They are subject both to the terms in which those bigger things transpire, and to evaluation by Him with whom we have to do.

The designated counselors in a culture (or church) may do a poor job of communicating what life's all about. They may tell misleading stories, mislabel life, and instill myths to rule the hearts of those they counsel. But God's story is still what's playing in real time, real lives. His story is not about coping better. You either die to yourself and live for Another, or you live for yourself and die. It's not about meeting your needs, but about turning what you think you need upside-down. It's not about locating causality in historical circumstance or biological process, but about your heart vis-à-vis God in Christ. Moment by moment, from the heart, you and everyone else worship, love, desire, fear, serve, believe, and trust either God or something that is not God. God's story is not about finding refuge and resources in yourself, or in other people, or in psychopharmacology. It's about finding Christ in real times and real places, the only Savior able to deliver you from what's really wrong with you and your world.

By words and actions, God counsels all people. He reveals us for what we are, and either changes our ways or hardens us in our ways. Paul's letter to God's people in Ephesus offers an exemplar and synopsis of the contents, methods, and institutional context for "curing souls." As Jesus Christ's personal agent, Paul communicates what's on the mind of the Searcher of hearts. He dissects the human condition. As a recipient of grace upon grace, he extols the one true and comprehensive solution, the living Lord whom we are made to know, love, and serve, and from whom we learn to know, love, and serve others.

In times of spiritual vitality, the church of Jesus Christ submits to God's definition of both counsel (the content) and counseling (the activity), both counselor and counselee (the persons involved in the process), both problems and solutions, both process and goal. The church submits to the Comforter's definitions of both trouble and comfort.

In the providence of God, the twentieth century saw a time of crisis and conflict about counseling. Over the past hundred years in the West, a persuasive redefinition of the ideas, practices, and institutions of "pastoral care" has taken place. The cure of souls has become significantly secularized by the gaze and intentions of modern personality theories, mental health professions,

and psychological research. They aim to comprehend and treat human life with no reference point outside of ourselves. This attempt radically dehumanizes patients, clients, and subjects. It purges life of its true context (God in Christ), redefines the true drama (Are you good or evil, a servant of truth or lies?), misconstrues causality (the heart vis-à-vis God, amid trials), ignores the true outcome (life or death forever), and represses the one essential truth (To know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent).

God's story is not about finding refuge and resources in yourself, or in other people, or in psychopharmacology.

Brilliant thinkers, skilled practitioners, and careful researchers have built powerful institutions claiming the truth, love, and power to comprehend and cure souls. But their gaze is skewed, is blinded to essential realities. Their cures pointedly exclude the Good Shepherd, as well as the apprentice shepherds and recaptured sheep who serve Him. God so governs history that persuasive alternatives to the Faith always have a double effect. They either compel us to sharpen our own faith and practice, or they compel us to counter-convert.

The psychologies and psychotherapies self-consciously compete with the Faith's interpretations and intentions. Sigmund Freud, for example, conceived of his work this way: "The words, 'secular pastoral worker,' might well serve as a general formula for describing the function which the analyst...has to perform in his relation to the public." Freud saw himself doing "pastoral work in the best sense of the word." But this pastoral ministry did not offer people the mercy and grace of the personal Lord who searches every heart and shepherds souls. Instead, when Freud counseled someone, he would seek "to enrich him from his own internal resources." Freud was a bold evangelist for such trust in human resources, calling for the day when "a new kind of Salvation Army" trained in psychoanalysis would go forth as "a band of helpers for combating the neuroses of civilization."¹ What do these missionary-

¹Sigmund Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis" and "Postscript," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926 and 1927, volume 20), pp. 255f, 250. Freud argued that psy-

counselors do with people?

Nothing takes place between them except that they talk to each other....[The therapist gets the patient] to talk, listens to him, talks to him in his turn, and gets him to listen....And incidentally do not let us despise the *word*. After all it is a powerful instrument; it is the means by which we convey our feelings to one another, our method of influencing other people.²

*Psychotherapists function as
"secular priests," as the more
self-conscious among them freely
acknowledge.*

Psychotherapy is simply intentional conversation occurring "under the guidance of the therapist" who "plays the part of this effective outsider; he makes use of the influence which one human being exercises over another."³ Such conversations are not value-neutral. They are structured by the interpretive gaze and the intentions of the parties involved. Both "therapist" and "patient" (medical terms for the parties involved are singularly inapt, but ideologically useful) bring their assumptions to every word uttered, to every conversational choice point. What do you say next? The mouth speaks out of the overflow of the heart. At every turn, each speaker's point of view and desires will seek to influence the other overtly or covertly. What is wrong and why? What is the meaning of that social experience? How should we interpret those sufferings or blessings, these hardships or pleasures? What is the purpose of life? What is relatively important or unimportant? What definition of success and failure sets the agenda for our conversation? Differing diagnoses of the human condition inevitably demand different "words" of cure, contain different implications, and construct different responses. They call forth different kinds of missionary-pastors. Freud sent forth one kind of salvation army, Jesus another.

chotherapy was not a medical activity, but was fundamentally re-educational and pastoral.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 187f.

³Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1916, volume 14), p. 312.

Carl Jung described a different aspect of the counseling dynamic. "Patients force the psychotherapist into the role of a priest and expect and demand of him that he shall free them from their distress. That is why we psychotherapists must occupy ourselves with problems which, strictly speaking, belong to the theologian."⁴ Psychotherapists must deal with such things because identified counselees are powerful counselors in their own right, and they force, expect, and demand things. This is what every counseling conversation is actually *about*, whatever the pretense to doing something else. In Jung's view, Jesus Christ was yesterday's answer to the human condition; but He is not alive and has no abiding relevance. He will not in fact judge the living and the dead. The hopes of those who eagerly await His appearing are futile and fantastic – privately engaging, perhaps, but irrelevant to curing the souls of strugglers from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. Today and tomorrow demand new answers to the old, abiding theologian's problems of meaning and despair, good and evil, life and death, love and hate, trust and fear. Jung proposes different answers to the old problems that every counseling conversation is about.

Psychotherapists function as "secular priests," as the more self-conscious among them freely acknowledge.⁵ The practitioners of psychotherapeutics are not "scientists" studying subjects with cool detachment, nor are they "medical personnel" treating psychic pathologies, nor are they "technicians" of mental content, emotional state, and behavioral habit. Instead, mental health professionals necessarily act as prophet-theologians, who define human nature and the meaning of life while typically excising God. They necessarily act as priest-pastors, who typically shepherd the human soul to find refuge in itself, in other people, and in psychoactive medication, because they construct a universe barren of the living God and His Christ. They necessarily act as king-elders, who run the institutions of the modern cure of souls: hospital, clinic, office, third party insurer, undergraduate and graduate department, referral network, newspaper column, self-help book, television talk show, licensing law, pharmaceutical company. What kind of thing do these "authorities," "experts," "powers-that-be," "vested interests," and "professionals" in counseling actually *do*? Church-work.

How has the church responded to secular redefini-

⁴Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, translated by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1933), p. 241.

⁵Perry London, *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), chapter 7.

tions of the ideas, practices, and institutions that attempt to cure souls? The church has largely been the borrower and subordinate, not the decided alternative. So what must *you* do to recover the centrality of Jesus Christ for helping people to grow up into the only true sanity? How will you learn to live in the radical extrospections of faith and love, rather than be lulled by the inward-curving inertia of sin? Will you deal gently with other sinners, the ignorant and wayward, and offer them mercy and grace to help in time of need? How will you find meaning, safety, and sustenance in your own sufferings? Will you offer others genuine aid and true refuge in their sufferings? How will you reconfigure face-to-face “helping” relationships to serve as instruments of the only enduring wisdom?

To recover the centrality of Christ and His Scripture for the cure of souls demands conviction worked out into specific contents, skills, and social structures. The conviction? Jesus Christ knows what is in us. Every human being will submit to His final evaluation. His view is the true view. This same Jesus Christ has set his affection on headstrong, confused, and suffering people. No one and nothing else can deliver us from the real-time sin and misery of our condition. He is for us and with us to change us. His Scripture, then, is about understanding and helping people. The sufferings and blessings, needs and resources, struggles and strengths of real people—right down to the details—must be rationally defined and explained by the categories with which the Bible teaches us to see human life. Those problems must be addressed and redressed using the gracious, powerful truth and the effective, loving means that Jesus says and does with us—and teaches us to say and do with others. The mind of Christ looks at life differently; His words and deeds aim in a different direction. The scope of Scripture’s explicit purposes and sufficiency includes those face-to-face relationships that our culture labels “counseling” or “psychothera-

py.” These affirmations and denials attempt to state and to guard the lineaments of such convictions.

Conviction alone simply waves a flag. It eventually degrades into sloganeering and hardens into triumphal defensiveness. But when the intellectual ramifications and practical implications are demonstrated to be penetrating, comprehensive, adaptable, and efficacious, then we’ll have something. Such counseling wisdom

To recover the centrality of Christ and His Scripture for the cure of souls demands conviction worked out into specific contents, skills, and social structures.

will edify the teachable—and even persuade the skeptical. The church needs persuading. And the church needs training to live and counsel the content. The surrounding culture also needs persuading. The matters confessed in these pages will only shine in their glory when adorned with humble, tender, bold, and efficacious ministry that actually cures souls.

The goals of this article are necessarily modest. These affirmations and denials cannot begin to communicate the countless positive details of what it means to counsel in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. But they can at least serve as a beginning, an articulation of what must be worked thoroughly into our faith and practice. They are also up for criticism, debate, and refinement. This is a *proposal*, a current best effort. I sincerely believe it can be improved, with nothing good lost and much good gained. A second part to this article, forthcoming, will discuss the particular affirmations and denials in greater detail.