A Biblical Counseling Model for Counseling Women in Theological Higher Education

Julia E. Bickley, Ph.D.

(Dr. Bickley is the Dean of Women and Director of Campus Life at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary.)

Introduction

On more than one occasion, I have been sitting at my desk engrossed with the finer details of lecture preparation, planning a student event, or seeking to understand certain requirements set forth by our accrediting body, when a female student lightly knocks on my door, walks in with her books and laptop bag, and settles on my couch with tears streaming down her face. In those moments my attention has to shift quickly from an academic administrator to a patient, loving, and biblically informed counselor. Impromptu counseling sessions have the potential to feel overwhelming, and, therefore, the role of an academic administrator in theological higher education is not unlike that of the local church minister. One must be prepared to counsel and be fortified with a deep understanding of the Bible to aid the struggling student. This article seeks to outline a biblical model of counseling for the academic administrator, drawing from theological foundations, and apply the model to a theoretical counseling situation.

Biblical Model

When one Christian approaches another with a burden, he or she seeks reprieve from a world or life that seems hopeless. Hopelessness ultimately finds its root either in the sin of people’s lives, or sin in another person’s life. It is sin and the fallen nature that causes pain, suffering, hurt, and problems wherein one’s relationship with God is hindered. Yet, in love, God uses the circumstances of life and trials to refine His children and bring them to a greater understanding of His great love.

Therefore, a threefold definition of sin is proposed: sin is the failure to trust God, a failure to hope in God, and a failure to love God. These points comprise the breaking of God’s entire law in that by not trusting, not hoping, and not loving God, one is breaking the greatest commandment, which is to love the Lord with all one’s heart, soul, and mind. Trusting, hoping, and loving God comes from faith. Hebrews 11 teaches “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” and that “without faith it is impossible to please [God].”

In reflecting on faith, hope, and love, this model also encapsulates what John MacArthur calls the “triad of supreme Christian virtues.”¹ This description of the virtues comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9, “But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.”

This command to be sober comes within the context of a chapter devoted to the topic of the coming day of the Lord. Paul’s admonition to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of salvation instructed believers how to live in this world while they remain and are
hoping in Christ’s return. In his *New Testament Commentary: Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, William Hendriksen explains that these three “supreme virtues” are the means of fighting sin and temptation:

The question may be asked, “How is it that Paul suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly comes up with these articles of defensive armor: breastplate and helmet?” The answer given by A.T. Robertson may well be correct: “The idea of watchfulness brings the figure of a sentry, on guard and armed, to Paul’s mind . . . .” By the exercise of calm and steadfast faith in and love for God in Christ – which in the midst of a wicked world becomes an aggressive testimony – the watchful and sober person wards off the poisonous arrows of temptation. He puts on faith (“a certain knowledge of God and of his promises . . . and a hearty confidence that all his sins are forgiven him for Christ’s sake”) and love (the yielding of the self to God, the object of His delight, in the spirit of joy and gratitude) just like a warrior would put on his breastplate . . . . What is important to note . . . is that Paul calls active faith and love a piece of defensive armor, a breastplate! The believer’s spontaneous and aggressive testimony of faith in and love for God in Christ keeps him from the dissolute habits of the world.

Therefore, the counselor wants to help the struggling believer put on faith and love and the hope of salvation, because, as MacArthur says, they are “the three great defenses against temptation.” He adds, “(if) you want to deal with temptation in your life, these three things [faith, love, and hope] you must understand and apply.”

Each of the three elements of the triad will be considered, combined with elements from the theological foundations section to form a biblical model. These elements will be applied to a theoretical counseling situation to exemplify how the specific theological foundations and the supreme triad of virtues converge to provide the tools to counsel faithfully and biblically. The goal for the administrator is to direct students to a greater faith in God, which will increase hope within the student and result in a better understanding of God’s love for the students, causing them to love the Lord in return.

![Figure 1. Supreme Virtues Biblical Counseling Model](image)
Faith

The quote from Hendriksen notes that faith is put on through “a certain knowledge of God and of his promises . . . and [through] a hearty confidence that all [our] sins are forgiven . . . for Christ’s sake.” The biblical counselor should be focused, therefore, upon pointing the counselee towards truths that will build up 1) a knowledge of God, 2) a knowledge of His promises, and 3) confidence of sins forgiven.

**Knowledge of God.** As will be seen within the theological foundations section (see “Theology Proper”), one’s knowledge of God comes about through the study and contemplation of the character of God. When a student is confronted with the attributes of God, faith will increase, particularly when the counselor devotes the discussion toward the love of God toward the believer and God’s wisdom and providence over the circumstances of the counselee’s life. Such knowledge about the character of God can only come through special revelation: the Word of God.

**Knowledge of God’s promises.** Also within the theological foundations section (see “Christology and Pneumatology”), several promises of God are clearly outlined to help strengthen the faith of the believer. One such promise is the idea of a believer’s union with Christ, which teaches the believer that the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to him, as his sin was imputed to Christ. Paul taught, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:18). The struggling sinner is also comforted by the truth that God has promised, and has given, His Spirit as the means of sanctifying the believer. Each of these promises will be examined further below.

**Confidence of Sins Forgiven.** The section which discusses the love of God (which highlights His particular love toward people who believe) points out God’s redemptive plan, as seen in chapters 1-3 in Ephesians. This information underscores how a counselor can quickly convey to disheartened students that they may be confident of their sins being forgiven because God has begun the adoption process “to the praise of His glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:6). This truth necessitates that ultimately one’s salvation is dependent primarily upon the work of God. When we believed in Christ, we “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13).

Love

Hendriksen defines love, as seen in 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9, as “the yielding of the self to God, the object of His delight, in the spirit of joy and gratitude.” It is in this vein that the academic administrator should seek to remind students they are to find their ultimate joy not in relationships, financial security, academic or ministerial success, but in God. Offering joy in God as a test of genuine conversion, John Piper opines, “The tree of faith grows only in the heart that craves the supreme gift that Christ died to give: not health, not wealth, not prestige—but God! Test yourself here. There are many professing Christians who delight in God’s gifts, but not God. Would you want to go to heaven if God were not there, only His gifts?”

character, the Christian counselor promotes within the true believer an even greater desire for, and, thus love for, God Himself.

Hope

Not only does 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9 command that faith and love be worn like a breastplate, but it also instructs the believer to wear “for a helmet the hope of salvation.” The section concerning “Eschatology” will aid in bringing forth a greater understanding of how the academic administrator fortifies the student with hope in her ultimate resurrection from the dead and eternal life with Christ.

Theological Foundations

Counseling praxis is not born out of a vacuum. The way a seminary professor or administrator advises students is directly informed by deep-seated beliefs. When a student approaches us, we may hope to interact in a manner that is faithful to and consistent with the teachings of Scripture. Yet, how can we be sure we do so, since the views we hold are not only being informed by the Bible, but also by the culture in which we live? We must be honest about the fact that so much of what we hold to be true is not only built by God’s word, but is ingrained in us from living in a culture which is humanistic, while the Bible is unequivocally God-centered.

Therefore, practical theology must find its basis in a continual study of the nature of God, His Word, His Son, the Holy Spirit, and what His Word says about man. Francis Schaeffer aptly notes, “Christianity is not merely religious truth, it is total truth – truth about the whole of reality.” As theological administrators, we should desperately desire to apply total truth to the reality of student problems. The following section seeks to pinpoint specific elements of Theology Proper, Special Revelation, Christology, Pneumatology, and Anthropology, and bring forth a theologically robust model for counseling women in Christian higher education.

Theology Proper

In his Systematic Theology, Wayne Grudem devotes seven chapters to the doctrine of God. In contrast, this article does not seek to be an exhaustive study on the nature of God, but to highlight two elements of His character: His love and His wisdom. A greater understanding of each helps one to be a faithful and biblical counselor.

God’s Love. In his seminal work, The Attributes of God, A.W. Pink teaches the Scriptures undergird three fundamental truths about God: God is Spirit (John 4:24), Light (1 John 1:5), and Love (1 John 4:8). Regarding God’s love, Pink underscores, “It is not simply that God ‘loves,’ but that He is Love itself. Love is not merely one of His attributes, but His very nature.” The Scriptures are replete with the notion of God’s inherent nature of love:

Psalm 36:7 – “How precious is your steadfast love, O God!”

Psalm 48:9 – “We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.”
2 Corinthians 13:11 – “Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

2 Thessalonians 3:5 – “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”

1 John 4:8 – “God is love.”

Jude 1:21 – “Keep yourselves in the love of God.”

Because God is love, we also see in the New Testament that God pours out His redemptive love to His followers. In his epistle to the Ephesian church, the Apostle Paul highlights the great love of God toward believers in Christ. In chapter 1 of Ephesians, God’s love propelled him to adopt us as His Sons through Jesus Christ (verse 4-5). In chapter 2, we find because of the “great love with which [God the Father] loved us . . . He made us alive together with Christ” (verse 4-5) and therefore saved us by His grace. Then, in the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul culminates the doctrinal teaching of all three chapters with a great pastoral prayer, asking God to strengthen the believers that “Christ might dwell in [their] hearts by faith . . . being rooted and grounded in love . . . and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:14-19).

In contemplating God’s love toward us, we are reminded of the greatest commandment, which commands us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. How can we do this? First John 4:19 answers that question. We love because He first loved us. There must be a beholding of God and His great love in which we are “transformed from one degree of glory to another,” as 2 Corinthians 3:18 hints on how people experience true change.

Engaging with students, however, reminds us that there is a lack of love for God even in a seminary context. Students love theology and enjoy debates about topics such as election and predestination or the end times. Yet, one may observe an intellectualism that feigns love for God, but at times is more inclined to use God as a means to increase one’s reputation as a great thinker rather than to be known as one who loves God.

Pink calls this situation a “low state of spirituality . . . evident everywhere among professing Christians” and commends that “one chief reason for this [low state] is because our hearts are so little occupied with His wondrous love for His people. The better we are acquainted with His love –its character, fullness, blessedness – the more will our hearts be drawn out in love to Him.”

God’s Wisdom. Many believers, when counseling, offer platitudes to one another with the phrase, “God is sovereign.” The employment of this phrase is so overused that it loses its intended meaning of encouragement. Paul Miller remarks that not only is it a cliché term, but “we typically hear the phrase to mean something it doesn't.” Rather than encouraging the struggling sister with a quip about God’s sovereignty over her situation, would it not be more beneficial to engender an understanding of God’s wisdom, thus to point more toward God’s love for the believer, and less on His seemingly distant control of a situation?

Romans 8:28 is the verse normally cited when speaking about God’s sovereignty, but it lends itself more to the idea of God’s wisdom and His goodness in allowing difficulty in the believer’s life. In acknowledging “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,” in the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul:
. . . affirms that God does work wisely in all things that come into our lives, and that through all these things he advances us toward the goal of conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). It should be our great confidence and a source of peace day by day to know that God causes all things to move us toward the ultimate goals he has for our lives, namely, that we might be like Christ and thereby bring glory to him.9

A depth of understanding that God is all-wise, and His wisdom directs our paths, brings us back to renew the mind in the truth that God is orchestrating circumstances for our good, and for His glory. It is good for us to be conformed into the image of Christ because there sin is being uprooted and replaced with a Christ-like heart that is enabled by the Spirit to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Special Revelation

God has revealed himself to humanity in two different ways – through general revelation and special revelation. Psalm 19 is a passage that clearly teaches both. Verses 1-6 speak to the thought that creation reveals God and His glory. Verses 7-10 convey that special revelation is needed for the servant of God to receive warning (verse 11), to be discerning (verse 12), and to avoid “presumptuous sins” (verse 13). Therefore, one who wishes to counsel biblically must remember that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16). Since God’s Word is useful for each of these elements, it is necessary that the Bible be the principal means to confront sin or to comfort the weaker sister in Christ, because “the Holy Spirit expects counselors to use His Word . . . . His counseling work is ordinarily performed through the ministry of this Word.”10

Since the Holy Spirit works through the Word to change and help the believer, the biblical counselor is comforted through the knowledge of special revelation and its implication for herself and the believer seeking help. The counselor does not carry the full weight of discerning the heart of the counselee. Her job is to apply the Word of God to the situation.

The Spirit will work through the Bible in revealing deep-seated beliefs, sins, attitudes, and disobedience to the one who struggles because “the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Because “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9), consolation is found in knowing God works through His word to reveal otherwise indiscernible information.

Christology & Pneumatology

A believer’s union with Christ is the untaught, underestimated doctrine in today’s church. Too many Christians are seeking to work out their sanctification according to Philippians 2:13 (and thereby falling into the trap of performance for God) without first understanding John 15:1-11 (Christ’s performance on our behalf and our abiding in Him). In John 15, Jesus counsels his disciples to abide in him or his Words ten times within the span of ten verses, emphatically underscoring his statement “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Every believer must come to an understanding of this union with Christ for the sake of her joy in God (John 15:11). Louis Berkhof says this union “may be defined as that intimate,
vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation”\textsuperscript{11} (emphasis his). In his sermon, “The Believer’s Privileges, Part 1: Union,” John MacArthur goes on further to describe this abiding as a “spiritual privilege.” He says the privileges of being one with Christ include Christ’s taking “up residence in the life of those who belong to Him” and Christ’s living, loving, speaking, serving, and worshipping God in and through us. Christ’s life in us “provides availability for every need in every situation.”\textsuperscript{12}

The great theological truth that Christ is in the believer and available to the believer needs to be taught in a much deeper way to His children. Ephesians 1:3 teaches that we have been “blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing.” It would benefit and strengthen the believer’s faith in, hope in, and love for God by coming to an understanding of what those blessings are. Not only are blessings to be found in Christ, but also promises from God the Father. Second Corinthians 1:20 proclaims, “All the promises of God find their yes in Him . . . and it is God who establishes us with you in Christ . . . .”

Biblical counselor, Elyse Fitzpatrick devotes an entire book to the topic. In \textit{Found in Him: The Joy of the Incarnation and our Union with Christ}, she provides a chart based upon works by a Puritan author named William Perkins. The chart highlights several elements of the believer’s union with Christ, and covers three areas: the Work of the Trinity, the Work of Faith in Us, and How These Truths Assure Us. The Work of the Trinity lists Christ’s holiness, His fulfillment of the law, His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and intercession, and each illustrates how the Christian life is based upon Christ and what He has done, not ultimately what the believer does.\textsuperscript{13} These truths orient the Christian toward faith, hope, and love in Christ. All of these benefits are applied to the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit:

- In affirming our adoption as sons and bearing witness to us that we are the children of God and heirs of God with Christ (Romans 8:14-17)
- In interceding for us according to the will of God (Romans 8:26)
- In bearing witness to us about Jesus (John 15:26)
- In helping us to “understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12)
- In bearing fruit that is consistent with the nature of God in our lives (Galatians 5:22)

Therefore, the believer abides in Christ through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. The believer’s role in sanctification is not passive, but, according to the command in Philippians 2, it is active to work out salvation with fear in trembling. However, the basis and foundation for growing is by grace. The command of Philippians 2 ends with a promise, “. . . for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

\textbf{Eschatology}

While one may spend copious amounts of time studying the various eschatological views, the truth found in orthodox Christianity regarding the end-times is of the imminent return of Christ. Therefore, a hope in the return of Jesus is an element constantly used by the writers of the New Testament as a call to repentance and a call to faith in one’s ultimate, promised salvation. As previously reviewed, one of the three virtues in the biblical counseling model is hope, which
comes from 1 Thessalonians 5. Paul tells believers to put on the hope of salvation like a helmet because “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.” The use of end-time language in this instance invokes trust within the believer. Despite her struggles in this life, an eternally focused mind will render hope in the hurting heart and mind. This hope stems from the understanding that true believers are destined to live with God.

Second Corinthians 4:16-18 underscores the idea of ensuring hope by looking toward the return of Christ as the goal and end for the Christian who is in despair. Paul instructs, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” Paul uses phrases that intimate our hearts may be assured of hope due to the inner renewal of the inner man. He speaks of renewing the mind to view circumstances differently because “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Encouragement from Titus 2:11-14 speaks to the life Christians are to live while they wait for Christ’s return. When a believer struggles, hope of the future return of Christ has a direct effect upon how one lives the sanctified life: “... for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

From all these verses, the academic administrator can apply the main element of eschatology to the biblical model. Seeking to increase hope in God the counselor can remind the believer that God has promised to send His Son. Hebrews 9:28 implies that true believers not only have hope in the fact that Christ has dealt with their sins, but they eagerly wait for him.

**Application**

In this section, the Supreme Virtues Biblical Counseling Model will be applied to a theoretical situation involving a female student (“Kristy”) who is in enrolled in an institution of higher education, and who is called to missions. The model, which seeks to aid the biblical counselor in instilling within students faith in God, hope in God, and love for God, also draws upon the theological foundations section.

Kristy calls the office, wanting to make an appointment to receive counseling. By the tone of her voice, it is apparent that she is greatly distressed. A meeting is planned for the next morning. When she arrives, she begins to describe what is bothering her. Part of her concern deals with the school’s policy that she is required to witness once a week during the sixteen week semester. She conveys that she is witnessing to secure her grades in school and not because she really has a desire to do so, therefore causing a feeling of distance in her relationship with the Lord. After asking further questions, she discloses that she feels she is trapped in the performance mentality, and that she does not feel accepted by God.

Using the Supreme Virtues Biblical Counseling Model, the academic administrator may help the student reflect upon biblical and theological foundations to increase faith, hope, and love in her Christian walk:
Increasing faith. The student must learn about God’s character since it is evident that she feels her acceptance from God is based upon how she performs. The administrator should seek to enhance faith by teaching Kristy that God’s Word reveals His character and ideas about God are not informed by our feelings. Specifically, knowledge of God’s promises can be highlighted in Ephesians 1, wherein the plan of God to save and adopt her as a child will not stop at the moment of conversion but will take place throughout her life of sanctification. She should also be encouraged to repent of the sin of witnessing in a perfunctory manner. She can ask God to increase her joy in Him and give her a desire to spread the Gospel for His glory. The topic of Kristy’s union with Christ will increase faith, because she will be confronted with the knowledge that she is loved and accepted in Christ and that the Spirit is available to her.

Increasing hope. Kristy may be encouraged to focus her mind on specific Scriptures that speak about the return of Christ. She should know that as a saved individual, she is loved and accepted in Jesus. Renewing her mind in the truths of such Scriptures will increase a love for God that will remove thoughts of performance to achieve acceptance. She will desire godly behavior to please God because of acceptance in Christ. Greater knowledge and wisdom from studying the return of Christ will also lead her to desire sharing the Gospel based upon His imminent return. A love and burden for the lost will replace sharing the Gospel solely for the sake of making the grade.

Increasing love. The student should also be encouraged to meditate and study God’s love toward her. Such a study can come from the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians. Kristy should have the assignment of reading Ephesians 1-3 every day for a week, while writing down what it specifically says about God’s love. A study of this nature will lead her to delight in and have love for God, because she is reflecting first on God’s love for her. Increasing delight in God for who He is will also enable her to witness out of love for God and not for a grade. Her heart will be saturated in biblical truth, which will enable the words of her mouth to speak out of the overflow of her heart.


6 Arthur Pink, The Attributes of God (Kindle Edition), 82.
7 Ibid., 82-83.


