

Answers for the Human Condition: Why I Chose Seminary for Training in Counseling¹



BY DAVID POWLISON

SHOULD YOU GO TO A THEOLOGICAL seminary to train in counseling? Should young men and women with counseling promise pursue studies at a seminary or Bible college? Twenty-five years ago, this might have seemed like a nonsense question. Should you go to Virginia to study the geology of Vermont? Order a Big Mac at Burger King? People went to seminary to study Bible, church history, theology, and preaching. They went there to become preachers, missionaries, chaplains, and Bible professors. But counseling? Serious, intentional, one-on-one talking to people was the property of secular graduate schools. Seminary was about proclamation, not conversation.

But twenty-five years ago I *did* go to seminary to train in counseling. And—with appropriate cautions—I heartily recommend the same today. There was no counseling degree offered at the time, but the theology and Bible courses were strikingly relevant to a young man who came with counseling questions and aspirations. I was taught about human nature; about suffering and God's providence; about the work of Christ's grace to forgive and remake us; about the way fallen thought suppresses true knowledge of self, God, and circumstances; and so forth. Though

most of the courses didn't make "counseling applications" in any detail, they were unmistakably about the "stuff" counseling deals with. What I learned of theology and the Bible, even of church history, has been as significant as the formal counseling courses for my maturing as a counselor.

Conversion to Christ within a Mental Health World

Earlier in my life I had planned to go to secular graduate school in clinical psychology. I studied psychology in college, worked four years in psychiatric hospitals, and spent almost two years in psychotherapy myself. I embraced the claim that Psychology offered the truth about people, and that Psychotherapy implemented this truth with love and power to solve the ills of the human soul. But in the process of becoming a Christian, I became disillusioned with the secular psychologies and psychotherapies. Three things changed my mind and, eventually, changed the direction of my education and counseling practice.

First, I became increasingly conscious that the conflicts existing between psychological theories were fundamental, not incidental. The ground-breakers and system-builders were incompatible with one other, both personally and systematically. I studied my Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, Alfred Adler, Carl Rogers, and psychopharmacology. Those are five different "religions," and they treat each other that way! I was parti-

¹An earlier and abbreviated version of this article appeared in *The 1994 Seminary & Graduate School Handbook* (Evanston, Illinois: Berry Publishing Services, 1994, pp. 22-24, 48).

cularly intrigued by object relations psychology, existentialist psychology, Carl Jung, Anna Freud, Erik Erikson, Irving Yalom, Fritz Perls, and Abraham Maslow. From such masters, I initially created my own loose syncretism. Over time, however, that syncretism proved unstable. The contradictory character of the component parts asserted itself. Who was right? Every theory seemed “sort of right,” until the next theory put a different spin on the same observations or brought different observations to the fore to show up the previous theory as “quite wrong.” The second generation theorists, text-book writers, therapists, and students-in-training like me, often tended to be more tolerant, eclectic, and syncretistic. We tried to integrate incompatible views of human nature into a fuller, truer synthesis. But principled eclecticism, no less than passionate commitment to a particular theory, still installed each person as his or her own ultimate authority, the founder of an idiosyncratic Grand Unified Theory. “Every man did what was right in his own eyes” is the way I’d put it now. I increasingly questioned whether the modern psychologies really offered much beyond common-sense observations of people and an attentive kindness. Meanwhile, Christianity was increasingly making better-sense observations of people and speaking of a far deeper kindness.

Second, my experience in the mental health delivery system fed a growing disillusionment and skepticism. I was working as a Mental Health Worker (MHW) on a locked ward at McLean Hospital outside Boston. One day a young woman named Mary slashed herself with a broken bottle. As we dressed her wounds and sought to calm her, she wailed inconsolably, “Who will love me? Who will love me? Who *could* love me? Who *could* love me?” Drugs eventually quieted her down. But both her anguish and her guilt made the psychologies I had believed and practiced seem like thin gruel. Her distraught cry was realistic and heart-rending. Nothing I knew could really answer her, not her psychiatrist, medication, parents, job, boyfriend, or peers in the small group I led. We could manage Mary—sort of—but neither our theories nor our techniques could really touch what ailed her. Mary’s despair posed an unanswerable question, like a pebble in my shoe. In retrospect, I see that her cry of desolation

could only find specific answer in the mercy and hope of Jesus, one thing that our theories, therapies, and institution made a point never to offer her.

Other experiences also contributed to my disaffection. It was remarkable that the staff member most effective with patients was a career MHW. He was the only staff member who had never gone to college or nursing school, and the only MHW with no aspirations to grad school. With love and firmness he built real relationships and held people responsible for what they thought, said, and did. He neither viewed nor treated them as helpless, irresponsible victims of trauma or mental illness. His method—it was common grace humanity, not theory—flew in the face of psychiatric theory, the institutional ethos, and my career plans.² But patients respected him, laughed with him, loved him, got mad at him, and when they were in crisis they wanted to talk with him.

After two or three years it dawned on me that even our “successes” were at best mild. Some people “coped” a bit better after our help. Some symptoms were ameliorated. But was it because psychological theory and therapy were true, good, and effective? Or was it because symptom-alleviating medication and a 60-day time-out from life’s pressures took the edge off? And why was the recidivism rate so high? And even if what we believed and did made some difference, was this simply because any organized theory about life (even if finally illusory) works better than chaos and obvious delusion? Was it simply because basic human kindness works better than life in the jungle? Although at times I saw symptoms moderated, I saw nothing that I could call deep, life-renewing change. I never witnessed a qualitative difference in any person’s life. The word “cope” pressed me down. It is a dismal word: life is hopeless (“vanity of vanities”), but some people learn to cope better.

Third, I had no answer to my own need. Once “troubled” people are seen as people, not patients, they are not that different from the people who treat them. The differences between

²Peter Kramer’s *Moments of Engagement* contains fascinating portrayals of such a-theoretical, a-professional common grace humanity in the practice of a psychiatrist (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989). Kramer also wrote *Listening to Prozac*.

the most disturbed inmate and the most sane staff-member were differences of degree, not kind. We, too, had our relational breakdowns, our dysphorias and confusions, our escapes and addictions. We, too, lived out the “madness in our hearts” (Eccl. 9:3), lived out our institutionalized and personalized unbelief. We, too, saw our therapists and felt our quiet desperations—though we coped better. I got to know human nature better. The more I observed, experienced, reflected, related, read, counseled others, and was counseled, the thinner my theories seemed. The more I knew of myself and others, the more I saw that the human condition was better described in places other than the modern Euro-American psychologies. I saw things in myself and our “patients” that I had read in Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Faulkner, Dylan Thomas, and T. S. Eliot. I found the human condition: sin and self-deception,

never really reorient the inner gyroscope. They—we—finally misled people, blind guides leading blind travelers in hopeful circles, whistling in the dark valley of the shadow of death, unable to escape the solipsism of self and society, unable to find the fresh air and bright sun of a Christ-centered universe. Scripture took my life apart and put it back together new. The Spirit of sonship began the lifelong reorientation course called “making disciples.” The Father of mercies and God of all comfort gave truth, love, and power. Christ mocked the pretensions of the systems and methods in which I had placed my trust. Even better, Jesus gave me Himself to trust and follow.

The Contours of Wise Theology, The Content of Wise Counseling

Although I went to seminary twenty-five years ago when the only counseling courses were

Biblically wise counsel is permeated with things not necessarily learned in “counseling” courses, basic facts of human existence.

love and candor, suffering and meaninglessness, joys and satisfactions, desire and disappointment, hubris and self-centeredness, humility and self-sacrifice, anguish and confusion, hopes and vain hopes, the loom of death, the longing for redemption. In time, to the praise and glory of God, I found the human condition best captured—not only captured, but entered and redeemed—in Jesus Christ of the Bible.

I had long despised the Word of God, and repressed the God of that Word. I came to Jesus Christ because the God of Scripture understood my motives, circumstances, thinking, behavior, emotions, and relationships better than all the psychologies put together. They stumbled in the dark. They beheld only the surface of things, for all their pretension to “depth.” They described and treated symptoms (in extravagant detail, with wondrous erudition and genuine humanitarian concern), but they could never really get to causes. They misconstrued what they saw most clearly and cared about most deeply. They could never really love adequately, and they could

a few rudimentary electives, I learned much about Scripture, theology, history, and missions that profoundly shapes my counseling today. Biblically wise counsel is permeated with things not necessarily learned in “counseling” courses, basic facts of human existence:

- God sovereignly controls all circumstances. God is man’s environment. He is in every situation and up to something. Every human being is continually dependent on and colliding with the one true God.
- The Lord notices, evaluates, and speaks to every aspect of human life.
- Our Father, Savior, and indwelling Lord is gracious, patient, and powerful. He works with a personal touch in both individuals and groups.
- Sin inhabits and perverts every aspect of human functioning, not just the Technicolor bad behaviors.
- Sufferings, difficulties, deceptions, and temptations in all their forms exist within

God's purposes. He works to bring good out of things meant for evil and experienced as painful.

- Redemptive change is as far-reaching as sin and misery. Christ works change over the long haul, lifelong and progressive.
- The change that most matters most and lasts longest—qualitative change—is into the image of Jesus. Such godliness, such faith-working-through-love, registers in the concrete details of how we think, feel, converse, treat people, choose.
- The Spirit and the Word are the prime change agents. God uses everything else, as well, especially the people who make up the body of Christ and the sufferings we experience.
- All systems of psychological thought and practice are affected by sin and must be critiqued by Scripture's distinctive take on the human condition and on how to redress what is wrong. God's gaze and intentions are fundamentally different from fallen man's various gazes and diverse intentions.
- The same basic truths that apply across cultures and history ("every nation, tribe, tongue, and people"—the stuff of evangelism and missions) also apply across the differences between individuals ("every person, one another"—the stuff of counseling ministry).
- Ministry, whether public or personalized, is a pastoral activity that incarnates and applies God's truth in love to real people.

Those truths are not truisms—though they can be misused and debased. They are the fabric out of which wise counseling is constructed. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." The Word of Christ is that simplicity on the far side of every complexity. It is the simplicity that can face and contain anything. Addison Leitch varied Holmes's words this way: "On the near side of complexity is simplistic. On the far side of complexity is simple." Biblical wisdom is the simple that probes and comprehends the complex, not the simplistic that ignores the complex.

Sure, Bible-sounding things can be made as

simplistic and reductionistic as the worst pop psychology—may God have mercy on us all. And non-Bible things can ramify into labyrinths of insoluble and final complexity. The eclecticism, the post-Kuhnian and post-modern relativism, the "multi-modal" pragmatism of most contemporary psychotherapists is finally an assertion of epistemological despair. But Christ is simple, yet He speaks into all abysses and every nuance. He inculcates a simple gaze and clear thinking, letting us ponder every variation and ambiguity without losing our bearings. He teaches us how to be properly agnostic and self-critical, and yet to be valiant for truth. He forms in us an unwavering redemptive intentionality and an indestructible hope, letting us enter any life, however confused, sordid, anguished, violent, addicted, or terrified. He teaches us how to feel properly weak and overwhelmed, and yet to walk confidently. In a good seminary (and in a fine local church) I learned to give my life for such a simplicity.

During my time at seminary I learned to think about life biblically. I learned to know the innate dynamics of our disorientation and the invading dynamics of our reorientation. I learned about suffering and refuge. I learned Christ's grace. I learned the gifts and calling God had given me. I met people who loved God and who counseled wisely, though they did not think of themselves as "counselors." I learned informally the most important things about counseling as I observed and experienced God and godly people at work.

I then actually learned how to counsel by doing it: sink-and-swim, trial-and-error, asking for advice, talking over cases with others—with some basic orientation and ideas from counseling courses. It's the way you also will learn the most important things. If there had been a fuller counseling program in seminary, my learning curve could have been shortened. Systematic course work, observation, and ongoing interaction and supervision are valuable and desirable. But the heart of counseling was still available to me in a seminary that didn't yet have these things. A person can have all the education and the finest supervision in the world and never understand what counseling is really about. We can be expertly disciplined into the wrong worldview. We can very skillfully and unwittingly

mislead the people we counsel.

So what is the most important ingredient in counseling? Biblical wisdom. Truth and love becoming increasingly case-wise. No seminary can guarantee the acquisition of such wisdom. Far from it. And no secular counseling program—which, by definition, discards the “fear of the Lord” up front—can teach real wisdom. But a good theological education can provide the raw materials of counseling even apart from the counseling courses. Combine that with personal honesty, the fellowship of wise people in a good church, taking opportunities to minister to others, and finding wise counselors for yourself, and your counseling wisdom grows. Good counseling courses then, like good preaching courses, ought to help turn raw and semi-finished materials into more finished goods, connecting God’s truth to real people.

Counseling is a Theological Matter

A theological seminary to train in counseling? In the 2000s that question no longer seems absurd. Counseling programs and courses abound in seminaries. But should you or someone you know go to a theological seminary to train in counseling? How do you decide? Let me offer you a specific way to think about this practical question. I will propose a defining statement, and then pose a series of connected questions.

Statement: You should consider attending a seminary to study counseling not simply because seminaries happen to offer counseling programs, but because *counseling is a theological matter*. Counseling is a theological matter. Hold onto this core principle. Your integrity as a Christian who counsels hangs on grasping this. Counseling programs in any particular seminary may or may not arise from or live up to this core principle. You have to keep your head no matter where you train.

Now the questions. First, *what is counseling?* Broadly speaking, from God’s point of view, counseling is as broad as “the tongue.” Every word out of every mouth communicates values, intentions, and worldview; “the mouth speaks out of what fills the heart.” All human interactions are essentially counseling interactions. Counseling, then, is either wise or foolish. Some words are rotten, destructive, misleading, un-nourishing (Eph. 4:29a); other words are con-

structive, timely, true, loving, grace-giving (Eph. 4:15, 29b). No words are neutral.

More narrowly, counseling is any conversation intended to influence, guide, or help another person solve a problem in living. A lawyer, a financial advisor, a college counselor in high school, a friend to whom you pour out your heart, a pastor, and a psychotherapist may each offer *counsel* (the explicit or implicit content) and do *counseling* (the relational and change processes). You who are thinking of studying counseling are likely most interested in the kinds of things that those last three counselors—the “peer,” the “religious professional,” and the “mental health professional”—tackle, do, and say.

Second, *what purposes do those last three pursue, and what particular life problems do they attempt to address?* That question focuses matters a bit. Such people profess to care, to be disinterested. Their stated purpose is to help you, not to get your money, take advantage of your sexuality, win your admiration, or prove themselves powerful, successful, or superior. They are in principle curious about your life and desirous of your candor. Whether they prove wise or foolish, they will inevitably listen to hopes and fears, discouragement and joy, life’s hardship and sweetness, anger and approbation, loss and blessing, hurt and happiness, guilt and relief, relationships in conflict and at peace, regrets and achievements, out-of-control habits and small or large victories, confusion and clarity. They hear of good and evil, both what you do and what happens to you. They inevitably interact with the whole person: behavior, feelings, thoughts, circumstances, relationships, desires, choices, beliefs, memories, anticipations, values, motives. Such counselors—the sort most would-be “counselors” wish to become—deal with your *story*. In fact, they become players in the story. By word and deed, even by their line of questioning, they inevitably offer some form of editing or rescripting, some reinterpretation of your story. They deal with who you are and how you live and what you face, not with the legal phrasing of your will, the pros and cons of mutual funds, or which college might admit you. Whether as a peer or by profession, such counselors profess to help you by changing something about you as a person.

Now let’s get even more specific. *What sort of sense should would-be counselors make of the life*

problems they encounter and address? That is the third foundational question. What's really happening in lives? What ought to change? What ought to be encouraged? What's the True story? This question recognizes that all counseling is value-laden. Systems differ. Counseling is inescapably a moral and theological matter. To pretend otherwise is to be naïve, deceived, or duplicitous. Whether implicit or explicit, theologies differ. All counseling uncovers and edits stories; what is the true "metanarrative" playing in the theater of human lives? Stories differ. All counseling must and does deal with questions of true and false, good and evil, right and wrong, value and stigma, glory and shame, justification and guilt. The answers differ. All counseling

different, the story different, the agents different. Biblical ministry aims for the only personal growth process that finally matters and forever endures. It aims to restore the image of Jesus, destroying sin and unbelief through the power of the Holy Spirit, who writes love for God and man into human hearts. It sustains sufferers by giving a specific kind of hope, hope attached to a Person with a name, who daily bears us up. The Bible says that He who began this work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus, when every evil—every suffering and every sin—will be replaced by love, joy, peace, and the rest.

Secular psychological models of course employ some of the same words Luther used to

You should consider attending a seminary
to study counseling not simply because seminaries
happen to offer counseling programs, but because
counseling is a theological matter.

explicitly or implicitly deals with questions of redemption, faith, identity, and meaning. The redemptions offered differ.

Ponder this quotation from Martin Luther on the particular kind of redemption that Jesus offers:

This life therefore is not righteousness, but
growth in righteousness;

not health, but healing;

not being but becoming;

not rest but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are
growing toward it.

The process is not yet finished, but it is
going on.

This is not the end, but it is the road.

All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is
being purified.

Luther here defined one possible goal for counseling. It happens to be the goal of *biblical* counseling, of the ministry of Christ. It is not the goal of any other form of counseling. Of course, every form of counseling has some analogous sense of process, of some problem to be resolved. But the destinations are different, the roads are

describe the biblical psychotherapy: growth, healing, process. They would be implausible if they were not somehow analogous to truth. The lie always operates *sub specie boni*, under the aspect of good; the plausibility of any counterfeit depends on its likeness to the real thing. But non-biblical cure of souls is animated by different goals, tells a different story. The same words mean quite different things. Only one Counselor's gaze and intentions aim for the destination Luther describes; only one Counselor walks His children along the road Luther walks. May the great Counselor make the under-counselors faithful.

We have circled back to the crucial statement that should guide your decision about seminary and between seminaries: *Counseling is a theological matter.* Always. All counselors deal with the same human problems to which the Bible speaks. By implication, they are either faithful or false. I am speaking in principle, of course. Because of sin and the varieties of grace, counselors and systems are more or less faithful, more or less false. Often common grace brightens up secular models and practitioners (though sometimes they are utterly false and wicked).

Inevitably remnant sin dims biblical models and practitioners (though by the grace of God His children sometimes shine very brightly). Only Jesus was and is utterly faithful, rich, and simple. You should aim to become a counselor who is more faithful and less false, who is full of riches and less impoverished, who is simpler and less simplistic or complicated. Seek the same from your education and training. Aim to learn and to offer counsel that expresses Christ's gaze and intentions, rather than any other framework for making sense of life.³

Ask Good Questions

Should you go to seminary or Bible college to be trained in counseling? I believe that a good theological education is the education of choice. Which school? Naturally, I'm partial to Westminster Seminary and CCEF here in Philadelphia. We have an experienced and unified faculty, and we offer degree programs in counseling.

attended, as you read an article or book that the school points to as definitive, ask yourself "What am I hearing?" Many kinds of questions can prove helpful. Here is a sampler:

1. What kind of counseling model do you teach? What authors, articles, and books are most influential and representative?

This question helps you "locate" a department on the spectrum of views and practices. It also reveals whether a department has a unified point of view or is eclectic. Obviously, the question does not hand you an evaluation of the information you discover, nor does it familiarize you with the lay of the land. If a department is unified, how do you evaluate that working psychology of counseling? If it is eclectic, is such diversity intentional or unwitting? Of course, reality is often untidy, but in *principle*, there are four options: unified

All counseling explicitly or implicitly deals with questions of redemption, faith, identity, and meaning.

But this article is not a puff piece. Interest in and commitment to biblical counseling is noticeably perking up in the counseling faculties of a number of Bible colleges, Southern Baptist seminaries, and Reformed seminaries—and probably in other places of which I'm unaware. Do your research. You'll find that individual faculty members in many places want the Word of Christ to call the shots in personal ministry, rather than simply augmenting secular psychological models with a bit of Christianese. Be humble and candid as you explore how and whether such intentions are actualized.

Ask good questions of schools. Ask students, graduates, and professors directly when you converse with them. As you reflect on a class you

around biblical wisdom; unified around a defective model; an intentional collection of diverse viewpoints; a mere hodge-podge.

2. Run a case study by students and professors as a litmus test of how counseling theory and methodology appear in action: e.g., What are the causes and cures of "low self-esteem," or an "eating disorder," or bondage to pornography.

This question allows a person to reveal core functional commitments in an anecdotal way. Is the human heart passive and externally determined (e.g., unmet needs) or fundamentally active (e.g., first great commandment)? Is personal history determinative, or does it provide a context in which the active heart reveals itself? Are labels merely descriptive (and often problematic), or do they bear explanatory and objective freight? Is Christ's past, present, and future work immediately essential, or is it restricted to an ancillary spiritual dimension? Does Scripture define the story and the categories that life plays out, or is some other storyline calling the

³With a clear and comprehensive biblical worldview, one can fruitfully pursue further studies in almost every subject, including the social, behavioral, and medical sciences. For example, our counseling faculty here at CCEF and Westminster Seminary includes people whose advanced theological degrees have been supplemented by doctorates in neurophysiological psychology, medicine, sociology of culture, history & sociology of science & medicine, and developmental psychology.

shots? Is Scripture viewed moralistically (and either denigrated or misused), or is it viewed as revealing a Person to know, trust, and obey? And so forth!

3. How is biblical truth actually used in the classroom? The counseling room? The representative article or admired book?

How much is Scripture about what counseling is about? *In what way* is Scripture about what counseling is about? Both the “useful spiritual resource in combination with psychology” view and the “exhaustive source of proof texts for any problem” view are problematic. Scripture is far more comprehensive than the syncretistic first view. God’s distinctive point of view is significantly at odds with research, personality theories, and therapies. His revealed purposes are far more than a “resource” to augment psychotherapies. And Scripture is far more adaptable and demanding than the biblicistic second view. God’s prophets and apostles both model and mandate that we do the hard practical theological work necessary to bring abiding truth to bear in fresh situations. Is Scripture properly sufficient and constitutive for counseling ministry, or is it treated either as deficient or as magical?

4. What is the relationship between counseling and evangelism? Between counseling and discipleship? Between counseling and preaching?

These questions reveal basic and often implicit assumptions about human nature, Christ, counseling, the church—and about the activities labeled “evangelism,” “discipleship,” and “preaching.” Do people with counseling problems inhabit an essentially and pervasively God-centered, Christ-dependent world? Or do they inhabit a world that transpires rather autonomously from God in Christ?

5. What ministries or careers do graduates find themselves prepared for?

This is one of those “actions speak louder than words” questions that often shows whether a program treats serious counseling as part of wise and robust ministry, or whether serious counseling is the prerogative of mental health professionals, with ministry as a somewhat debased junior

partner.

6. What do you think about Meier New Life Clinics? Jay Adams? Larry Crabb? The Journal of Biblical Counseling? Psychoactive medications? A couple of representative secular psychologists? Demon-deliverance ministries?

I don’t intend that there is one “right answer” or “right point of view” on these names and institutions, or that you should get into a debate. Your purposes are information gathering, to enable a wise decision. Get your informants to talk about how *they* see the lay of the land in counseling, and you’ll learn invaluable things that will help you decide with your eyes open. Where are they informed? Ignorant? Balanced? Bigoted? Penetrating? Superficial? The questions and criticisms they raise about others may give you helpful questions to ask those others. One way to get at those “representative secular psychologists” is to ask the person, “Who do you consider to be the most significant secular psychologists, and how do you assess them?” On my own, I’d probably ask about cognitive-behavioral psychology, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Sigmund Freud, and family systems therapy, because these have been so influential among evangelical Christians.

7. What can be learned from secular Psychology? From psychological research, personality theories, or psychotherapies? What are the dangers and cautions? Ask for examples and specifics, not generalities.

Every sort of “Christian” counselor—mainline Protestants teaching CPE, Rosemead psychotherapists, Jay Adams, Martin Bobgan (and everyone else)—believes that Christians can learn something from secular psychologists. How does this person define that “something,” and what priority do they give it? The first question is general, and can bring out how a person defines “Psychology” and its relationship to Christian faith. The second question teases apart the more scientific from the more theological and pastoral aspects of “Psychology” (though even research is far from neutral, usually being

predicated on social or biological determinism). It alludes to the diversity of views and activities lumped under a heading as contentless as "Religion." It reveals how well a person has thought through subtleties and nuances. Even more important than theoretical generalities, what actually happens in practice and emphasis? The "dangers and cautions" question often reveals whether someone thinks of Christian faith as a "gaze," a unified and distinctive worldview that interprets and reinterprets everything, or whether one thinks of Christianity as a "screen" or "filter" that weeds out some particularly bad things (such as endorsements of sexual immorality or New Age spirituality), while leaving many ideas and practices unexamined and intact.

8. What are the weaknesses of this program, and what is being done to redress them?

Candid humility and self-criticism is always an asset and aid to an inquirer seeking to make a fair assessment; bravado and salesmanship are always unsavory.

9. What counseling tradition or perspective is this school coming from historically, and what direction is it heading?

Schools are usually in process, not static. Just as with progressive sanctification of the individual (or progressive degeneration!), direction counts for a lot. You can also tailor this question to an individual teacher to bring out his or her own sense of pilgrimage: "Where have you come from? Where are you going? What matters to you?"

Just as you'll ask questions about other theological positions taught in a seminary or Bible college, so you ought to ask these sorts of questions about the view of counseling.

Many schools import alien ideas and methods into their programs, or have a quite impoverished view of Scripture's purposes and use. They may have never thought counseling ministry through from the ground up, according to Christ's gaze and intentions. The fact that so many seminaries now have "counseling" courses and programs is a mixed blessing. Is the counseling consistent with

sound, biblical theology and pastoral methods? Are statements about Christ and counseling mostly rhetoric and window-dressing, or do they reflect constitutive and growing realities?

You should know one more thing about seminaries and colleges, something that never appears in the catalogue. Surprisingly often, the counseling and/or psychology department operates at cross-purposes to the theology, biblical studies, and preaching departments in the same school. They may contradict one another's views about human nature, suffering, God, and change. Ask professors and students in other departments how they view the counseling courses. Weigh the answers and consider the source—either affirmation or criticism may be offered for any number of reasons, good or bad. But that is one further way to learn all you can before you make your decision.

Choosing a school is a challenge. You must know what you are looking for in order to ascertain whether you have found it. These questions can help. And, remember where this article began. The most valuable things you learn about counseling ministry may come in your Bible and theology courses—as long as *you* do the hard work of application, and never let a wall rise up to sector off the Word of God from human life. I'm grateful that I learned to counsel in a seminary that took the Word of God seriously in its counseling courses. I didn't have to unlearn many things later or to continually sift through what I was being taught. But though problems in the counseling department are significant, they are not fatal to a good and helpful education. Know what you're looking for.

God cares about and evaluates counseling ideas and activities, because counseling is a theological matter. He wants you to learn to do it wisely, and He blesses good counseling. You will find profound joys and worthwhile sorrows in face-to-face ministry. Talking with people one-on-one is as much the property of the church as preaching on Sunday morning. Consider theological education as the education of choice for training to be a counselor. But make your decision with your convictions firm, your eyes open, and good questions on your lips.