

## Biblical Counseling: Gaining a Balanced Picture on God's Counsel By Stuart Scott

Whether we are engaged in the private ministry of the Word of God as pastors, missionaries, counselors, or just a concerned brother or sister in Christ, it is important to answer the question, "What is thorough, biblical help?" Surely, the answer to that question must always be faithfulness and accuracy as we study and apply the Scriptures to our lives and in ministry for God's glory. We must continually adjust the picture of our counsel to that of God's.

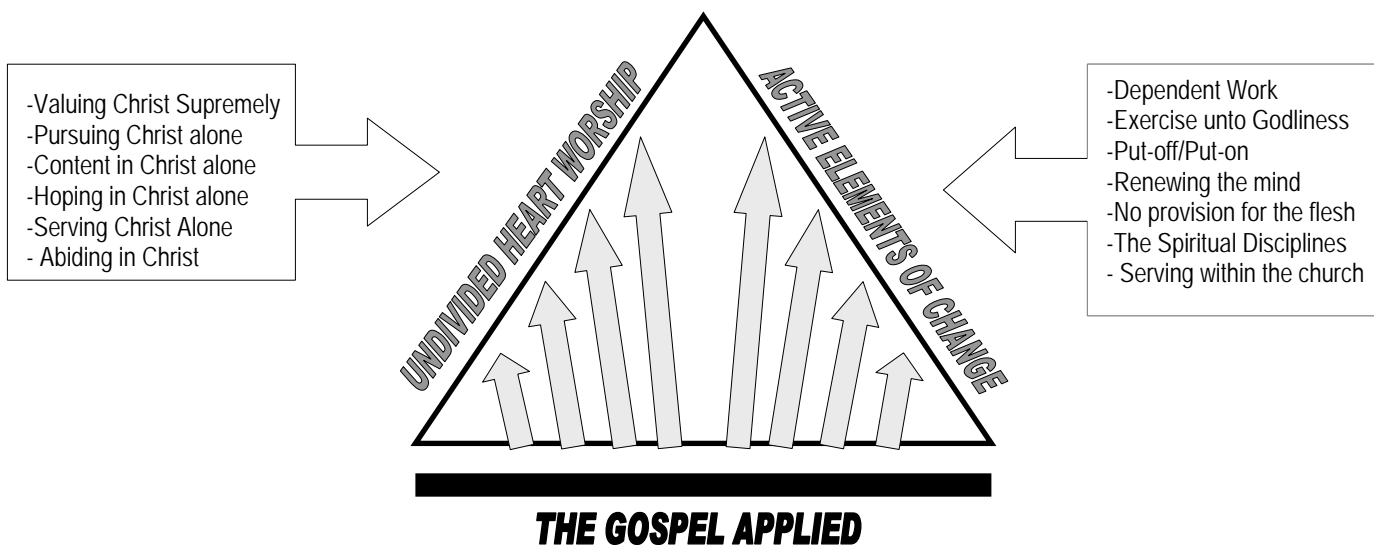
Still, from God's Word we understand so much about how to help those in need. We must strive to know fully the person in front of us, and their situation. We must humbly help them as a compassionate fellow-sinner and sufferer. We must give them Christ and His truth. We must encourage a true repentance from their sins and futile pursuits. We must guide them to a personal knowledge of their God that impacts their heart and the matters of life daily. We must practically assist them in their trials and weaknesses. We must encourage them to be immersed and serving in the community of saints. And surely, we must teach them to live for the Glory of God. But these things in view, from the Word of God, what can we ascertain about the working emphases of our counsel in which these important goals must operate? Is it singular or plural?

### The Gospel of Jesus Christ

At the heart of God's answer to these questions is the key to life itself: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is foundational. It is motivational. It must be pivotal and applicable in every aspect of the counsel we give to those who are not, for one reason or another, living joyfully to the glory of God. It is, of course, pointless to move forward with this application if the issue of salvation has not been carefully explored and established to the best of our ability (1Cor 2:7-14; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Titus 2:11-14).<sup>1</sup>

Though Christ and this Gospel must be the very heart of what we believe, if we take a step back in our view of *God's* counsel, we can see at least *three* clear and crucial emphases in content:

- Gospel Truth Applied (Titus 2:11-14)
- Undivided Heart Worship (Mt. 22:37-40)
- Active Elements of Change (Rom. 12-16; Eph. 4-6; Col. 3-4; etc.).

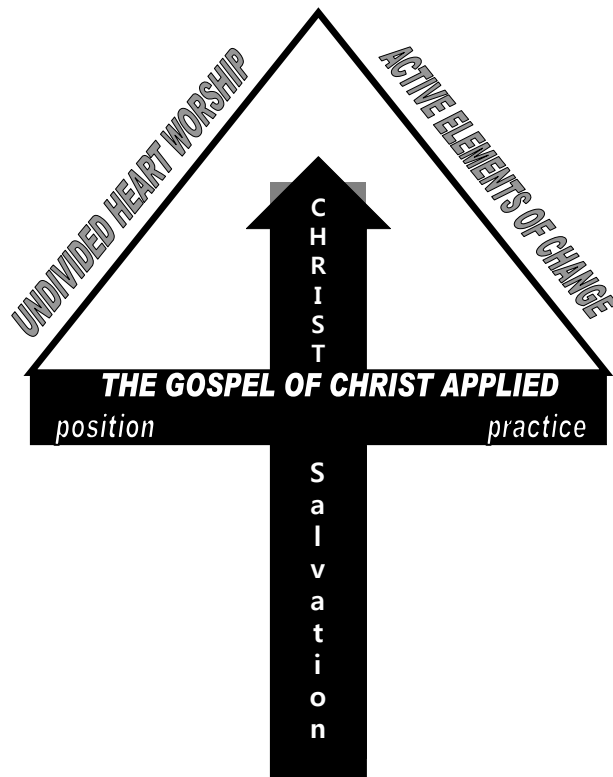


No matter what issue brings a person to counseling, if we as counselors do not affirm the importance of all three of these emphases, nor devote significant session time to them, nor assist those we help in ways to proliferate them, our help is incomplete and less effective than it could be. In this case, the counselee or struggling person is the one who suffers. They are hindered in their victory, their growth, their ability to bring glory to God, in and in their usefulness in God's kingdom.

From the diagram above, we can see that the latter two aspects mentioned are not only vitally connected to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but that they themselves must be affected by the many realities and obligations inherent in it. This means that it is surely our job as biblical counselors to integrate key gospel truths into all aspects of the help we offer. If this is not the case then our counseling is really not gospel or Christ-centered, and therefore not biblical counseling in the truest sense.

### **The Gospel in Focus (HD)**

This Gospel that we must encourage our counselees to appropriate is not just a collection of doctrinal truths or personal benefits. It is not a magical buzzword that must be dropped incessantly in our conversation and counseling. It is all about the pre-immanent person of Jesus Christ, who should make a difference in our daily living. When we take a good look at the Gospel truths that we must make applicable in counseling, we see, foremost, the God-man Christ and all that He is. We see the provision of forgiveness and salvation in him through faith. *Then* we see, all that He has gained for us and made us (our position or the indicatives), but also all that He deserves and has called us to (our practice or the imperatives). As pictured below there is a great deal inherent in this Gospel that we must help others appropriate.

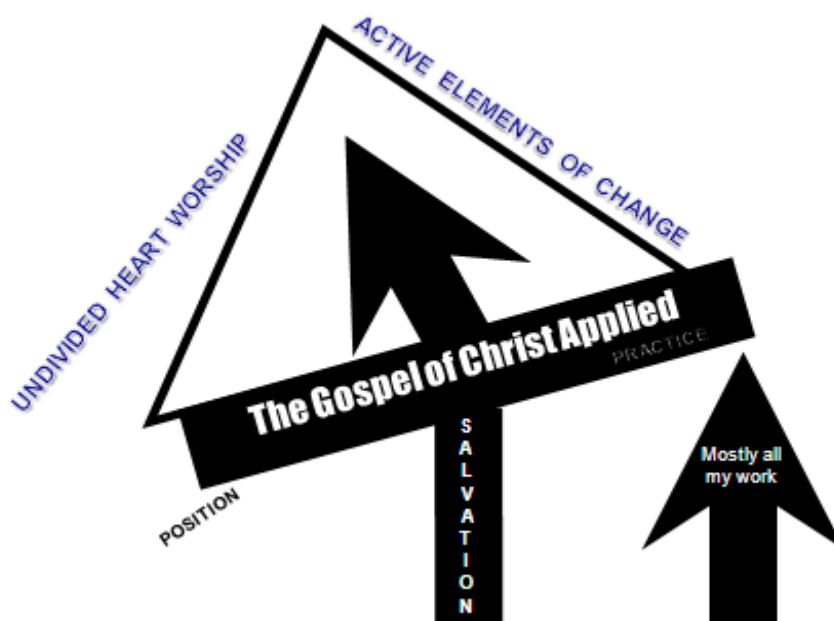


There must be emphasis and balance in all aspects of the Gospel when it comes to change or living the Christian life. Too little emphasis on Christ, our position, or our practice gives one a skewed view of the Gospel itself and the Christian life also. This skewed view will perpetuate some kind of focus on self, and

in this self-focused perspective, we will not perpetuate the full intent of the Gospel—that we live to the glory of God, glorying in *Him*.

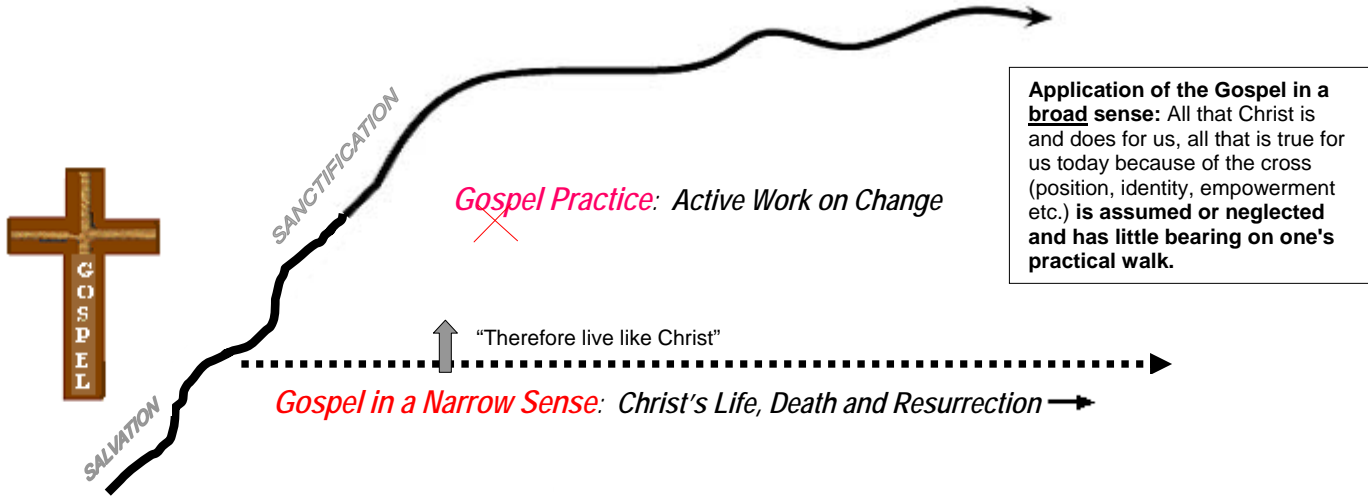
### Don't Rock the Boat

If in our counsel, we center mostly on our obligations (our practice) without our gaze upon the person of Christ and an appropriation of our position in Him, the focus will be on us with either *self*-righteousness or *self*-loathing. It follows then that while attention to our practice or our sanctification may be present, it is also problematic as we miss the pleasures and the power and the righteousness of Christ. This lack of emphasis on our position in Christ creates an overemphasis on *our* work (John 15:5). In this case, true heart worship falls short and or becomes non-existent. The worship of idolatrous lusts and the turning to false refuges is inevitable (Jer. 2:13; Gal. 5:16; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). Here's how we can picture our counseling if it is imbalanced in this way.



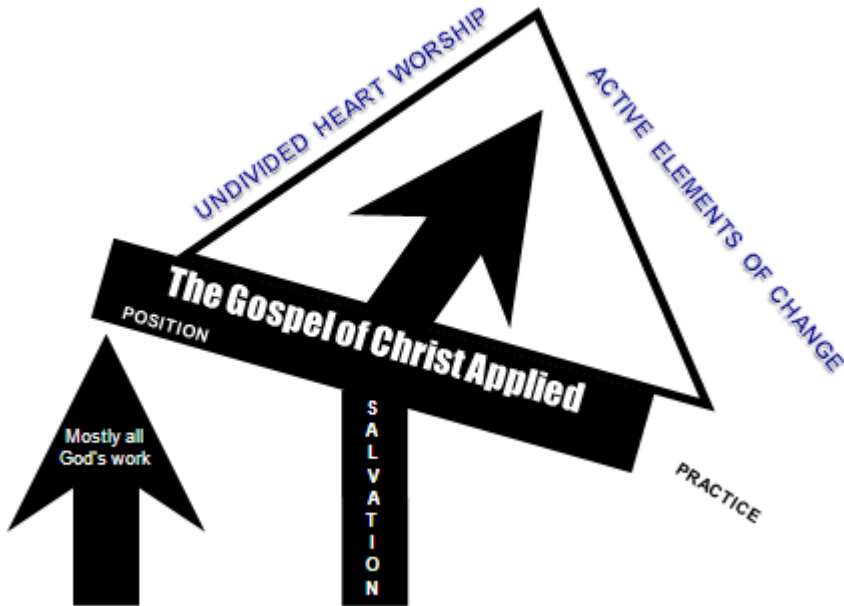
This is not the life that glorifies God and that Christ died to procure for those we seek to help. We certainly do not want to encourage anyone towards this pharisaical and hopeless pursuit. This kind of imbalance fosters pride, a performance driven life, legalism, and moralism. With this imbalance, it is easy to carry on counseling without true salvation. We must continually spotlight all that Christ is and all our position in Him means.

Another way to think about this kind of imbalance in counseling is when we acknowledge the Gospel in the narrow sense (our believing in Jesus—His life, death, and resurrection, 1Cor. 15:1-1-8), while assuming or neglecting the Gospel in a broader sense (all Christ accomplished and what our salvation means for us today, e.g. Eph. 1:3-14). This imbalance leaves the greater emphasis in our counseling on practical life change and on our part of our sanctification. In this case, there is not enough connection of the Gospel in a narrow sense or a broad sense to practical living. And, in reality, there is little true, Christlike growth. But as the book of Ephesians so clearly indicates, the imperatives (chapters 4-6) are based on the indicatives (chapters 1-3). In contrast, here is how we might mistakenly try to apply the Gospel in counseling.

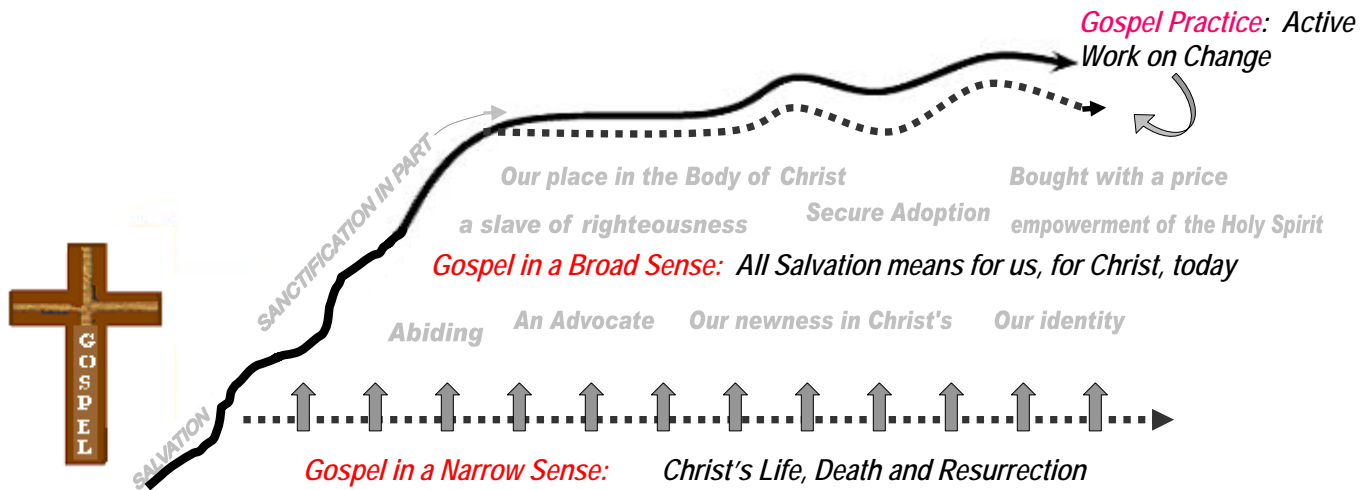


### Overemphasis on Practice

On the other hand, if we center primarily on our position in Christ and all that we have in Him and do not emphasize our practice as well, there is another kind of Gospel distortion and hindrance to growth. Again, the focus is primarily on self, so true worship is affected and emphasis on the active elements of change and ones practice are lacking.



This particular Gospel distortion in counseling addresses the Gospel in a narrow sense, focuses primarily on the Gospel in a broad sense, while matters of practice are seen as minimal or assumed to flow naturally. While the Gospel in a narrow sense and the Gospel in a broad sense are well applied to practical living there is still a Gospel lack. This lack can lead to an almost “Keswick” view of sanctification: “Let go and let the Gospel.”



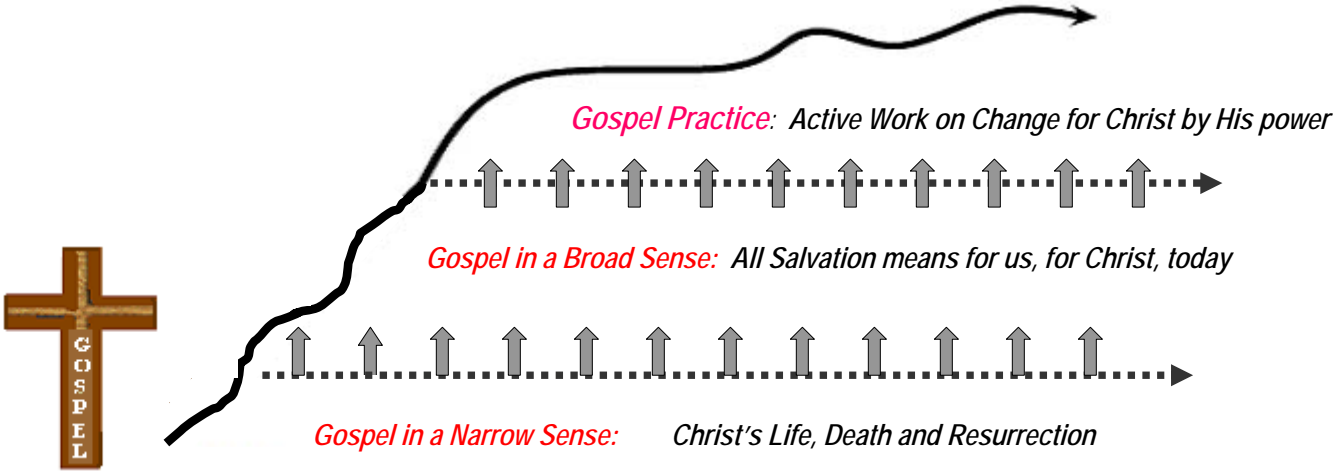
## Overemphasis on Position

In this imbalance, we might perpetuate that undivided heart worship alone is all one needs to change. Or, we may see law (God's moral law) as the enemy of the Cross or grace, rather than understand that living *under* the law or *for* the law or *through* the law (seeking justification by it) are at enmity with the Cross (Gal. 3:21-24). We may become all about grace, but this short-sighted "grace" does not really work to please Christ out of gratitude (Titus 2:11-14). While the Gospel in a Broad sense is indispensable to change, and even though it is our very motivation for Gospel practice, this particular imbalance will not believe in real work (1Tim. 4:7-10), and inevitably will lead to stunted growth or even license. Thomas Schreiner of Southern Seminary offers this important caution that may help us guard against reductionism of all types:

"We must remember that Paul's theology is multifaceted...It is possible to diminish the centrality of justification, but it is also possible to exaggerate its importance so that other aspects of Pauline soteriology are shoved into the background...It is imperative to avoid reductionism, as if justification were the only part of Pauline theology."<sup>ii</sup>

### Keepin' it Real

A balanced and properly emphasized Gospel emphasizes all three aspects of the Gospel, with the Gospel in a Narrow sense being unfolded and practically applied into the Gospel in a broad sense, and the Gospel in a broad sense being unfolded and applied into Gospel practice. The Gospel must be unfolded and exercised in this way for a new *working* worship, identity, mindset, and service. Otherwise, the whole of the Gospel will not be operating with the right motivations or with the right end—to the glory of God (Eph. 1:3-14). With each aspect, we face the fiery darts of the evil one, the world, and our own flesh. While there is a bit of natural flow from one aspect of the gospel to another, there is not enough to impact the Christian walk rightly or to renew ingrained habits without focus in God's Word, prayer, alertness, and dependent, "holy sweat" (work) to renew the mind and choose Christ. This biblical perspective can be pictured like this:

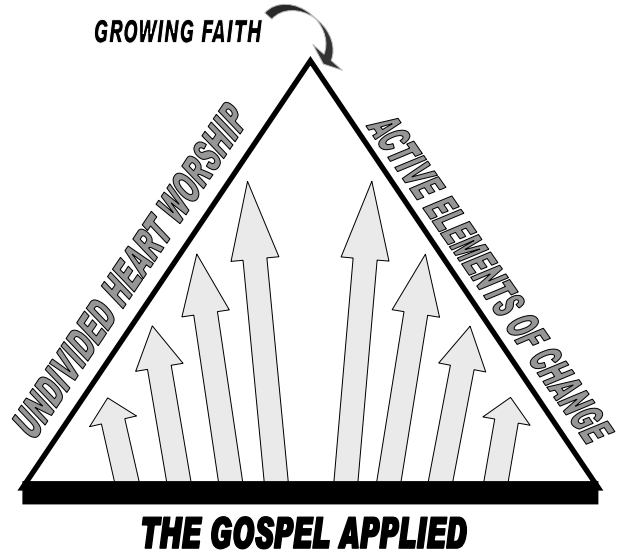


## The Gospel in Balance

Again, Schreiner offers us a good word:

“...the imperatives that dominate this text [Ephesians 4:22-24] should never be sundered from the indicatives. Romans 13:11-14 reminds us, however, that the indicatives do not rule out the need for the imperatives. Even though believers have already “put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:10) and put off the old person (Col. 3:9), *they* must also put on Christ (Romans 13:14)...The tension between the indicative and the imperative is due to the already-but -not-yet paradox that characterizes Paul’s theology.”<sup>iii</sup>

As we have a proper Gospel balance, we are able to employ rightly the other crucial aspects of biblical counseling. This brings us back to the balanced, biblical picture with which we began. There are all kinds of distortions that can arise when any key element is misunderstood, minimized, or missing. Even more basic is the reality that *The Gospel Applied*, *Undivided Heart Worship*, and *The Active Elements of Change* all must be carried out by the vehicle and exercise of *faith* or trust in the triune God ( Rom. 3:22; Heb. 11:6; Gal. 2:20; James 2:26). And so, the character and deeds of God, as in God’s own counsel, must permeate all emphases. And, faith becomes an integral part of the counselees’ apprehension of the biblical help we offer.



## The Bottom Line

What is the bottom line of this article? I am personally and deeply indebted to those individuals, authors, and institutions that have highlighted one or more of the key essentials of scriptural counseling or have spoken to the imbalances that have arisen through the years. These concepts have biblically impacted my own counseling in needed ways, but not without struggle.

I am constantly struck with the fact that we must all work hard to avoid tunnel-vision, reductionism, imbalances, both from ignorance and in reaction to other imbalances or lacks we have experienced or observed. One cannot correct an imbalance with another imbalance. We must guard against seeing only one crucial part of biblical counseling as “the whole enchilada” or extra biblical over-development of concepts. Not just for the counselee, but also for the biblical counseling movement as a whole, a caution is offered:

- We must stay the fragmentation perpetuated by these kinds of perspectives and continue, in humility, to fill out or change any of our own weaknesses or imbalances according to the scriptures. And, with each new or refreshed biblical conviction on how to help people, we must be pressed back to the scriptures to see it in context of *all* God says. We must constantly be bringing God’s whole picture of counsel into focus.

What is the very bottom line of this article? We dare not say (similar to some in the Corinthian church), “I am of applying the Gospel in counseling” or “I am of addressing practical change in counseling,” or “I am of addressing the heart and heart worship in counseling” (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:1-9). Instead, we must be able to say, “I am seeking to be, more and more, a counselor of God’s kind; emphasizing faith, emphasizing the application of all aspects of the Gospel (Christ) and what it (He) means, emphasizing undivided heart worship, and emphasizing all the active elements of change by Christ’s power and for His glory.” We must say, “I am one who will continue to learn, grow and faithfully adjust the emphases of my counsel to what God reveals in his Word.”

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<sup>i</sup> Mark Dever has a simple yet complete presentation of the Gospel on his website at [www.9marks.org](http://www.9marks.org). Or you can find one presented on the Gospel Coalition Website.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law*, p. 140-141

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, vol. 6, p.701