

The Pastor as Biblical Counselor: Speak the Word

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Josh Blount | Hebrews 1-4

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Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews, chapter one. Let me tell you a story, one of the strangest experiences I have ever had in pastoral ministry. It was 17 years ago; I know the date exactly. I had been in ministry for one year, in Franklin. The summer was 18 years ago. This was one year in, and the church was sending me to the pastor's college. As part of that, they had a lunch after church, down in our town park, to celebrate and send me out with their blessing.

At that event—you need to know we have a small town and when you're at the town park, anybody can show up—this lady wandered into our gathering. She is well-known in our community. We had a five-minute argument about who I was. I lost. You say, how do you lose an argument about who you are? Well, you haven't met this woman. It centered around her belief that I was a different pastor who had helped either her son or her nephew or someone several years previous. She came to thank me. It was a good impulse. But out of integrity, I felt like I couldn't say "you're welcome" because it wasn't me. So, we had an argument. I politely tried to say, "That's so kind of you. I have only been here a year, and you're saying I helped this man three years ago. It's not me." That was washed away in a deluge of gratitude. There was another minor discrepancy. She actually had a photo album and showed me a picture. "No, here you are! You're helping him." Well, that's not me. But that was not to be and that objection did not stand. Eventually, I realized I will never get out of this conversation unless I agreed. So, I said, "I'm so glad he was helped. You're welcome. Have a wonderful day." Like I said, one of the strangest experiences I've ever had. It was a war of words about my identity, and I lost. But the stakes were really low. I didn't leave with identity confusion.

But here's my question. What if the stakes were high? What if the words being spoken altered someone's sense of their identity, their purpose in life, where they were going, who would rescue them, what they needed? What if the stakes were very high for the war of words about identity? Would you speak up? The pastor is called to speak up. Because there is a war of words, a battle for identity, to define what's wrong with human beings, and what can cure and save human beings. My thesis that you can summarize the whole message in is this: the pastor is called to speak the word. To enter that war of words with a word that is superior to all others and tells us who we are and who can save us.

The task I've been given, the topic I was assigned, is the pastor as biblical counselor. Now, maybe when you think counseling, you don't think war of words—conflict and counseling don't seem to be the right metaphor. Or maybe you go to the counseling wars, and where we stand in that. I am convinced that it is appropriate to speak of a war about identity when we talk about the

pastor as counselor. But not because the whole purpose is to be controversial, but because so much is at stake. I wasn't confused about my identity in that moment, but there are voices speaking to your people that do confuse them about their identity. It leaves them wandering on the battlefield of this world without a clear direction to point, to cross the river, and make it safely home.

Here's my task this morning. We're going to develop from the book of Hebrews—you can turn to Hebrews chapter one—a mini biblical theology of the word. Then we're going to turn from that and do a cultural critique of the other words that compete. Then circle back to talk about the pastor's task. The whole point is the pastor is someone who speaks the word to people. But that sentence, without the weight of Hebrews behind it, doesn't carry the weight it should carry.

So, let's begin in Hebrews, beginning in verse 1 of chapter 1:

“Long ago, at many times, in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”

Let's pray together.

Lord, we ask as your people, that now by the power of your word, you would speak to us as you have spoken definitively in your Son. I pray for your help, Lord. I acknowledge my weakness and need of You. Who is sufficient to minister of this word? Lord, make us sufficient by the power of your Spirit through the preaching of your word for the good of the people that we will speak to when we go home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Point one, here's our biblical theology: That Word Above All Earthly Powers

You have probably preached on this text. Even if you haven't preached through the book of Hebrews, it is one of the most majestic openings in all of Scripture. The glory of Christ in this text is luminescent. It shines. But what can be overlooked is how in four verses, the author of Hebrews summarizes his entire argument. It is, in a nutshell, everything he is going to say through the entirety of this glorious letter. It begins with speaking language. Long ago, in many ways, God spoke, but now he has spoken. In that, there is both contrast and continuity.

What makes us one people with all those who have confessed the name of Christ is we are those to whom God speaks. They are our fathers. But what marks the change in time from then to now is the way in which God speaks to us. For all of us who have been in the PC and heard Jeff speak on this verse, he has spoken "in a son" kind of way. The supremacy of this era of salvation history is God now has spoken definitively by his Son.

All the descriptors that he goes on to pack around that opening statement, "God has spoken by his Son," anticipate everything he's going to do in the argument. He is the heir of all things—so

chapter 6, be earnest so that you might become an inheritor of the promises by faith and perseverance. He is the creator, the one who, chapter 11, made the visible things out of the invisible. Jesus Christ shares in that very nature, so place your faith in Him. He made purification for sins—the entire theology of a priest who offers a better, once-for-all sacrifice. It's packed in here. And seated at the right hand of God, that anticipates his use of Psalm 8—all things subjected to man—and Psalm 110: "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my hand." Everything's condensed; it's a magnificent opening.

You know this. I'm preaching to the choir. But here's what we can miss: the speaking language. Because, strikingly, throughout the rest of this book, this opening statement—God has spoken by his Son—defines who we are.

Look now in chapter 2, God has spoken by His Son, Chapter 2 verse 1: "Therefore, we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord—that is probably Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ—and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

You see how he's echoing what he said? God has spoken by His Son, that defines who we are. We are those who hear the message. The phrase "attested to us by those who first heard," it's where debates about the authorship of Hebrews sometimes center—was he one of the apostles, was he the other, the circle outside that circle—as I say in West Virginia, I don't have a dog in that fight, and I don't care. We have the book in this form. But it's striking that for the writer of Hebrews, even the apostles are just the first people to hear. In fact, nowhere does he call humans apostles in this book. The phrase "apostle" was reserved only for Jesus Christ. Three verse six: He is the apostle and the high priest of our confession. Because in comparison to his speaking, everyone else is just—we heard, and now we're telling you. God has spoken by a Son which creates a community of those who hear.

That theme continues. We don't have time to look at all of chapter three and four, but you remember how the phrase throughout there, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." And he warns through chapter 3 of the dangers of an evil, unbelieving heart that does not hear what God has spoken by His Son and turns away. He looks to the wilderness generation and says, they were not joined by faith to what they heard, and so they fell away. He warns his hearers: you could fall away also. We can't look at the warning passages. They are a challenge, aren't they? If you've wrestled with Hebrews, they are a challenge. How do you preach these? But they are warnings because there's a possibility of hearing and yet not hearing.

If you're a parent, you know that paradox. You have said before, "You're just not hearing me." I did not say that this morning to my children, who are hundreds of miles away in Virginia. When they can't hear me, it doesn't matter whether they hear me, but when they can hear me and they're not hearing me, it matters that you hear me. That's the paradox he's bringing out. God has spoken by his Son. We are the community of those who hear that message. And yet that hearing must be

joined with faith, or it will not produce the effect that God intends. Notice how hearing defines who we are.

Which leads to where we're going to land now, chapter 4, verses 11 through 13. After that "today, if you hear His voice" and that extended warning in chapter 3, and then the Sabbath rest illustration and exposition in chapter 4, he ends this, calling us to enter our rest in Jesus Christ, and then he says this:

“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. Disobedience to what we heard but did not receive by faith. For 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. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account—or to whom we must give back a word.”

You see what he does? Definitively, once for all, God has spoken by His Son. Because that is a message embodied and accomplished in the Savior, we become the community of those who hear. That hearing, if it is joined with faith, brings us into the rest; we cross the river. We inherit the promises. But if we do not receive that word by faith, we fall by disobedience. And our end is grievous and terrifying. So, he says that faith responds to the living and active word of God, that we now have in this book. The accomplishment of God in the Son, attested to by our Lord to those who heard, now comes to us in our Bible. It is a living and active word, like none other. The phrases that he heaps up there around Scripture—you can get lost on this, it's a proof text for trichotomy, it's not, we're not going down that road. It's a rhetorical accumulation of terms to say the word of God does what nothing else can do. It goes places no one else can go. It searches out what no one else can see, because it's just the word sent by the one before whom we are laid bare. Everything about us is known, and this word discerns the thoughts and intentions of our heart. There is nothing else in all the world like Scripture.

Which means, point two: This Word Is Superior to All Other Words

I thought about entitling this section "the war of words," but I didn't want to leave the impression that Scripture and the competitors are kind of in the same class and we're betting on Scripture, we hope it wins in the end. There is nothing else like what the Word of God does. It is far superior to all other words, which has massive ramifications for what we say to hurting, suffering, wayward people.

We're going to get to that counseling application. By way of illustration, let me show the superiority of this word. Let me start on neutral territory and work our way towards the things that are more controversial. This word is superior to all others because this word defines human beings and their problems. To quote David Powlison—I should say from this point on, pretty much everything I'm about to say, running footnote, I learned this from David Powlison. Consider this the footnote that never ends. He writes this: “Scripture is about understanding and helping people. You must be one who speaks the word based out of this conviction: the Bible is about understanding and helping people”

Now hang on. Alarm bells should be going off in your mind. The Bible is not about man, the Bible is about God. Christ our glory. The Bible is about the revelation of the glory of God in the Son and people—which is it? Here's the answer: it is about man in relation to God, and no other word tells us that about human beings. Don't hear me wrong. This is not a man-centered text. It's precisely the opposite. It is a revelation of the Triune God who creates all things and saves a people for himself, but what it says about us is we are inescapably God-related. You do not understand human beings if you do not understand God. That's Calvin's brilliant insight in the opening of the Institutes: “All the wisdom we possess that is true and sound wisdom consists in the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves; and which comes first is hard to discern. That's majestic and defines who we are. As one theologian put it, ultimately God is man's environment. You cannot explain human beings without reference to God.

What this text says is that God discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Let me just tell you, that's the gold standard, the holy grail of what every pop psychology, human cognition researcher, and moral philosopher—that's what they're after and they'll never get there. Because they attempt to understand human beings without reference to God.

So two illustrations on why this makes the word superior. First one, it's called the trolley problem. If you've taken an ethics or a morality course 101, a dilemma that's presented to freshmen students is called the trolley problem. Let me tell you about it. You are standing beside a switch on a railroad track—or a trolley, as you prefer—that turns a train down one of two tracks. You are there; you cannot leave. I don't know why that's part of the problem. You're just stuck there. A train is coming from behind you. And you have to decide, which way do I turn the switch to send this train down one of two tracks? The dilemma is set up this way: the train can't leave the track. You can't stop the train. On one side of the trolley, there are five workers who can't get away, and on the other track, there is one worker who can't get away. You must decide, as you turn the switch, whether you sacrifice five people or one person. It's presented as a way of getting at what kind of ethical system do you make choices from? You're meant to feel the weight of the dilemma: what would you do? One or five?

There's another version of the problem that at least has the merit of a clever name—it's called the fat man problem. In this one, the train is coming under a bridge. There's no switch. There are five workers in this little gully; the train can't get out of the way. And there's a conveniently hefty individual standing beside you on the bridge. And you realize somehow that if you push him in the track, he's of large enough bulk to stop the train. So you have to decide, do I sacrifice the hefty man? I've always wondered, if he's big enough to stop a train, can't he stop you from pushing him off the bridge? But that doesn't fit in the equation. You have to once again decide, one or five. The dilemma is meant to expose, again, how you think about moral reasoning.

Now, there's a part of me that hates those kind of things because they act as though we are bystanders to the moral drama of life. And that's wrong. But you can feel something of the weight of the problem, but here's the problem with the problem. I have never read a version of the trolley problem that took into account God's verdict on the man who pulled the switch. But Scripture says, if you create a little black box where humans do things and God is excluded, you don't understand why humans do things. The moral verdict on any action is never two-dimensional—what other people think or what you decided; it is always three-dimensional. God

stands there assessing the thoughts and intentions of the human heart. Without that, you don't understand the morality of any human action. The problem with the problem is that it takes God out of the picture. That cannot be done.

Now then, you might have a question. Are you saying that with the Bible in front of you, you understand everything about human beings? Does this mean discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart makes every human problem simple? Absolutely not. There is a reason the Bible says only God knows the heart. The heart is deceitful and wicked. "I alone search the heart." There is a realm of human experience that only God sees, and you'll never get there on your own heart or anyone else's heart. But that doesn't make the word inferior, it defines how it's superior.

And here's what I mean by that. Second illustration. The Berenstain Bears. Yes, we're going from the trolley problem to children's literature. For our international guests, I hope Berenstain Bears haven't made it internationally. This is a shelf of children's literature about a bear family. That again, I learned this from David Powlison, and I do this every year with our Trinity College students. It's not stories like "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie." It's pop psychology, behaviorism—it's really written to parents about how you fix the problems of little bears without God in the problem. Here's one that we always use in Trinity College: The Berenstain Bears Get in a Fight.

I want to use this to illustrate how every system for understanding human beings has mystery. No one understands human beings perfectly. But the Bible tells you where the mystery is; it puts the mystery in the right place. Here's what I mean by that. In The Berenstain Bears Get in a Fight, the whole story centers around a morning in which Brother Bear and Sister Bear get in an argument that escalates out of control. It starts with the morning: the sun is shining, birds are singing, and Sister Bear swings her feet out of their bunk bed and her feet hang down in front of Brother Bear. Brother Bear wakes up and looks at the feet and says, "Get those dopey feet out of my face." From that moment, they engage in a tit-for-tat battle that escalates to include the whole family.

Now, we laugh when we read this in Trinity. There are some ways in which it's very true to life. It captures the way human children respond in bear form. Maybe my favorite moment is after that little shouting match in the bed, Sister Bear hops out and runs to the bathroom ahead of Brother Bear and takes a very long time brushing her teeth and combing her hair. I call that weaponized innocence. "I'm just doing my morning stuff." By the end of the story, Papa Bear and Mama Bear are in the fight too, and everyone is shouting at everyone. There are beautiful illustrations—the sunny day turns to a storm cloud and lightning is outside the bear house. Mama Bear, who's always the one who has to solve the problem, tells everyone in the end, "conflicts"—she alludes to them like storms—"they just show up mysteriously, and we say things we don't mean, and you need to learn to move on. Because you'll forget about it, and the sun will come out again." By the end of the story, the sun does come back out, and they have resolved their conflict; they are no longer weaponizing their innocence or tearing one another's toys apart. The bear family is back to happy living.

Here's the problem: There is no moral dimension to that conflict anywhere. Where's the mystery in that? Let me zero in on one moment to contrast that pop psychology behaviorism with the Bible. Both would say, there's a sense in which human conflict is mysterious. I can put it this way: Why that morning did Sister Bear's feet push Brother Bear's buttons? You don't have to look into his past history of podophobia, fear of feet—I didn't make that up. You don't need to know his social circumstances and how he was conditioned to think about feet. That's a mystery. I can't explain why Tuesday morning it ticked him off when Monday morning presumably it didn't. The book never explains that, and the Bible wouldn't have you spend too much time trying to figure out the depths. Here's what the book never explains: Why, when feet hang in front of you, does love not come out? Why didn't it lead to a joyful, happy, delighted wrestling match, entertainment, and laughter spilling out of the kid room? Why did evil come out instead of good? The book never explains that. It just says that it's a mystery. That's the mystery that you have to live with. That's the decisive knowledge you need to know: how do I respond to conflict? The Bible says lots about that. Evil comes out instead of good because your desires wage war among you. Until you repent of those desires, the conflicts will not only continue, they'll get worse.

I often tell the students as we read this in Trinity College—can't you imagine a Brother Bear who learns to manipulate this conflict in this way, growing up to be a terrifying person to be around? Because if you don't deal with what the Bible does tell you, you'll never see what's going on fully in the heart. But when evil comes out, here's what you do. All systems have mystery. Only God is an omniscient searcher of the heart. The Bible tells you what you need to know to live a life pleasing to God, even with the depth of the heart that you'll never understand.

Here's how Powlison writes about that task in this passage: “You are called”—he's writing to pastors in this book, but also all Christians—“you are called to do something so simple that only a Christian can do it. Hearts may be unsearchable and insane, but the word of God reveals the thoughts and intentions of the heart. My self-righteous reaction to criticism may be an unsearchable morass of iniquity, but I can learn to name it for what it is, to turn for needed mercies, to seek and find the God who humbles me. We can come to know ourselves truly, though never wholly. Similarly, though the purposes and intentions of another's heart are deep water, a man of understanding draws them out. You can learn what you need to know. Though you have no privilege of access into any soul, though every strategy or truth can be resisted, though you have no power to open blind eyes or to make deaf ears listen, God uses your ministry to cure souls. Human beings are idiosyncratic in every detail. Yet there is no temptation that is not common to all. You can comfort others in any affliction with the comfort that you receive in your particular affliction. Fundamental unities make us comprehensible enough to significantly help each other. There are things a mere Christian can do.”

Isn't that a beautiful paragraph? Read David Powlison. I could stop there. The Word is superior to all others. It won't make you omniscient. You'll never understand your heart fully or any other human heart. But it tells you what you need to know about the human heart. Because it defines human beings with reference to God, it is superior to every other system, every other cure.

Which brings us lastly to point three: The Pastor's Task. Turn to the end of the book of Hebrews, chapter 13. The theme of speaking and hearing continues through the book, though it is not as

prominent from chapter 4 on through chapter 12. But when he gets to the end, in almost a throwaway line, it returns in his description of the pastors of this congregation.

Verse 7: Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you, the Word of God. Hear that with all the weight of what he's done before about the Word of God. Your leaders, congregation receiving this letter—your leaders, they're the ones who spoke this word to you. He says in verse 17, honor those who spoke this word, because they will give a word—the ESV translates I think, "will give an account." They will give an account for your souls. They will give back a word to the Lord for how they have spoken a word to you.

Pastor, here's your task: Speak the word to the people God has entrusted to your care. Speak the word. This word that searches the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We're about to get to the counseling part, but notice we are upstream from both counseling and preaching. You could move from verse 7 to preaching. You could move from verse 7 to counseling, because upstream, back of them all, is a theology of what the word does. It's really important to grasp that because it protects us from two dangers.

You could be the person who hears about a theology of the word and thinks, "I want to preach it," because preaching is declarative. It is objective. It is proclaiming something, which is right. But without this theology of the word, it is possible, especially for a young man, to be drawn to preaching because you like the sound of your own voice. You're not just engaging in the kind of ministry that is one-sided because you don't care about how it lands on the other side. True preaching is preaching the Word to people. For me, the moment when I'm stuck in sermon prep, the most consistent way that I get out of being stuck is I leave my office and I walk over to the empty room where our church will be on Sunday and I begin walking and praying out loud. Because we're a smallish church, I can walk past a seat and know who's going to be there on Sunday and pray, "God, help me to see how this word affects them. I don't yet know why it makes a difference in their life." That means my work is not done. "Would you get me out of this logjam so I can see how the word does something to them?" We speak the word, whether it is preaching and declaring to people and it protects us from the danger of just thinking preaching is one-sided monologue. It's not. It is the word brought to bear—proclaimed, yes, heralded—but to transform people on the other side of it.

Seeing that this is upstream of preaching and counseling will also protect you if you're the kind of person who's drawn to counseling because you like nuance, dialogue, listening, and care. You could be drawn to counseling because you don't want to ruffle feathers. The preacher stirs them up on Sunday and I comfort them on Tuesday. That's not what a pastor does. Counseling is not a mutual dialogue where you work together to decide what you're going to do and how you're going to grow. You can proclaim Christ through a good series of leading wise questions. Because upstream of both the preaching and the counseling task, is the nature of the word that we minister in all aspects.

At one level, my application for the sermon just starts with what the text actually says: Speak the Word. Do you see yourself as someone called to speak the Word to people? That's a pastor's job. But now let me try to push it a little more specifically to counseling and the challenges. Here's what I suggest, in three applications. This is me trying to apply it to our moment.

First thing I would suggest: If this is true, that you, brother pastor, are someone called to speak the Word, you must be someone who knows and loves the Word. I know I'm preaching to the choir here. I have learned to love Scripture, apart from the influence of my dad, from watching Sovereign Grace pastors. But let's not take it for granted. Know and love the Word.

Westminster Seminary, where I studied one of my degrees, has a phrase that pastors are "specialists in the word." That's a really good phrase if we don't make one misunderstanding. We are specialists in the Word, but the Word is not a specialist document. Here's what I mean by that. Those of you who know me know I have some really eccentric hobbies. I am training to be an eccentric old man. I'm on my way well there, apart from being old. One of those is—well, there's a number—but lots of them involve things that bearded old men like. So I enjoy blacksmithing. I have a whole shelf of blacksmithing and knife-making books. "Knife Engineering" by Larrin Thomas is one of the best and most used books on my shelf. I can't tell you how many times I've taken it down to remind myself of the annealing temperatures for 5160 or how you heat-treat ADCRV2. But you don't need to know that book. In fact, you're probably wondering, what do those words even mean? That's a specialist document. This is not a specialist document. It is not something for the narrow slice of humanity who likes talking about doctrine. It is a universally relevant, binding word for every person who comes in your church and every person you encounter on the street. You must know and love this Word for what it is.

One more specific push in that direction. There's a writer named Stanley Fish who has a book called "How to Read a Sentence and How to Write One Too." I think I have that right, maybe backwards. It's a book celebrating the craft of a well-written sentence. He says in that, that if you're a painter, you must learn to love color—the nuances of color, their shades, how they differ, and how they blend. Then he says, to be a writer, you must learn to love words—how they make sentences that sing or don't. You must learn to appreciate what makes a sentence fly or one that just flops at the end. Let me extend that insight: to be a pastoral theologian, you must be someone who learns to love the diverse way Scripture addresses the human condition.

In other words, your ministry of the Word cannot be one-size-fits-all. When God gave us, in speaking His Son, the Word that reveals Him to us, He gave us a big book, and a book with an astonishing diversity of content and form. If you were devising the document that would shape your people forever, would you include poetry, law code, proverb, history, doctrinal epistle, and apocalypse with many-headed beasts? The astonishing diversity of Scripture is not a bug in the system. It is how God addresses us. What does it mean if our application of the word to people always sounds exactly the same? You must learn to know and love the unity in diversity of Scripture. Because you can't speak the word—if this is the word—if everything you say sounds the same. Know and love the word in its glorious diversity as it exalts Christ and saves a people for Him.

Right along with that, you must learn to know and love people. I am so glad that Sovereign Grace has been marked by pastoral care. When people ask around our denomination, "What stands out?" It's the pastoral care. That's a gift. As I said before, I am grateful this is not a course correction, but let's not assume that it continues without care. But I also have something a little more in mind than just "love your church." Part of what I mean—Analogous to loving Scripture in its unity and diversity—I want to challenge us to love people in their frustratingly diverse

ways of coming to us. The people you care for are not one-size-fits-all, and you must learn to know and love them in all their bewildering complexity. This person needs this, and this truth would change their life, but that truth would do nothing over here, because they need something different.

Part of what I mean by this—I'll give you an Ecclesiastes illustration because it's my favorite book of the Bible. I can tell, usually within 20 to 30 pages, especially if I go to select sections in the commentary, if a writer in Ecclesiastes understands human beings or not. Because it's a book about human experience. Someone can know comparative ancient Near Eastern literature and be really good at Hebrew, but not understand people. Usually what that means is, when he gets to the part where the writer says, "And I hated life under the sun," he tries to explain it away. And I say, "I think I know why he says that, because I have seen infant-sized coffins, and I know what that means." You must become a person who understands what life is like for real people. If our use of the word or our understanding of people all fits in one convenient slot every time, we're not understanding the breadth of ways that the word speaks to all the human condition. Press in to know and understand real people.

Next week, I'll be teaching a class Monday and Tuesday by Zoom on Theological Anthropology for the PC. Here's my definition of that term: it is the study of man under the authority of Scripture. Part of what we'll say in that class is with Scripture as the master norm, you can learn from anything about human beings. This sets us up for something about counseling in a moment, because sometimes what is said—a move towards integrationism—is we need insights from other disciplines or we don't really understand people. I would say, we don't need anything else other than the Word. Under the Word, you can learn from anything, but it's a lot broader "anything" than a scientist publishing the latest pop psychology research. Under Scripture, I have learned—from wrestling with theological problems and from talking with my mechanic; from hanging out with bearded old men who shoot black powder and do blacksmithing, and from reading psychology and philosophy; from literature, from poetry—from anything under the authority of Scripture. Be a man, be a Christian. This is not just unique to the pastor's task, though it is something we must excel in, understanding what people are like. Know and love people, so that your ministry of the Word does not become one-size-fits-all.

Lastly, and this is where we come all the way to the counseling topic: know and wisely oppose the alternative voices. Remember what I said at the beginning—there is a war of words for the identity of the people you care for. A war of words that either points them to Jesus Christ or doesn't, and there's no intermediate option. You need a little of Christ and a little something else. No. There are alternative voices, and you must know and wisely oppose them.

If you ask people in your church, "What are you listening to? What's helping you these days? What channels, what influencers, what things are explaining your world?" I often think of that phrase: What has explanatory power for your understanding of your life? I think in many cases we would be surprised by who they list as influencing their understanding of what they need—therapists, self-help, pop psychology, hopefully not the Berenstain Bears. There are other voices, and you must know them so that you can wisely oppose voices that will hinder your people from experiencing all that God has in his Word.

This is the place to acknowledge that sadly, I think our generation is going to have to refight some of the same battles that Jay Adams, and then David Powlison, had to fight in the counseling world. There is an impulse to integration. What does that mean? It's just instinctive assumption that we need the Word, and then we need to be informed by something else to do really good counseling and so on. I can't know the hearts of everybody who says that. Certainly, we don't want to be ignorant in the way we care for people. But I fear so much of that impulse signifies that we are babes in the Word who are excited about other things. So often, informed by and then put in a word, other than the Word. I think we have assumed that biblical counseling is biblical because we have it in our name, and then we run to something else we're excited about rather than being saturated in the Word. Those voices will not lead your people to good green pastures. You must wisely know and oppose them.

Here's why I put "wisely" in the phrase. This does not mean your job is to stand up every Sunday and be controversial about some influence out there that you're against. That's not the point of ministry—of speaking the word. Here's how you wisely oppose. I have been deeply influenced by the vision of pastoral ministry in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Mr. Greatheart, Mr. Valiant-for-Truth—they are pastors, but they are not knights errant wandering the countryside looking for battles to start. They have a calling: get pilgrims to the river. But if anything opposes that calling, they are ready to do battle. Look for those voices that hinder people from thriving in Christ and oppose them.

Again, David Powlison:

“The professional self-image of the talking cure professions shapes our culture's implicit belief that psychotherapy, such counseling, is essentially analogous to medical doctoring. But this complex of meanings profoundly misshapes assumptions of what counseling really is, and ideally ought to be. Counseling per se is not like medical doctoring. It is pastoring. Counseling is not essentially a technical enterprise calling for technical expertise. It is a relational and pastoral enterprise engaging in care and cure of the soul. Both psychotherapy and psychiatry attempt pastoral work; they engage in care and cure of the soul, as their etymologies accurately signify. Sigmund Freud rightly defined therapists as secular pastoral workers.”

Let that linger on you for a moment. He explicitly made the argument that the generation of psychoanalysts he was training, they were secular pastoral workers. They serve in pastorates with no God and no church. They aim to restore straying, suffering, willful, dying human beings, but they consider Christ unnecessary to their pastoral work. As a matter of principle, they will not lead strugglers to the Savior of strays. You know better.

Then again, the church must not give over the care and cure of troubled souls to other voices. Those voices may be well intended, but when they try to fix with God-problems using a without-God message, you have a problem with that. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Consciousness of God is the starting point, the system-aligning principle, the architectonic prerequisite for making good sense of life. When friends, family, co-workers, the mass media, self-help books, or psychotherapeutic professionals ignore reality, they inevitably miss-counsel. In Jeremiah's metaphor, they heal wounds lightly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

I will say it again: pastors must not hand over care and cure of souls to other voices. Any number of people, paid and unpaid, are more than willing to do your work for you. Let me say his message again: you know better. We have a problem with that, because pastors are those who speak the Word of the living and active God, who searches the thoughts and intentions of the heart. There's nothing like this Word.

So, brothers and sisters, may we be people who speak the Word.

Let's pray together.

Father, we would ask that even now as your Word has addressed us, that you would make us more in love with the living and active Word of God, that you would make us more confident in the sufficiency of Scripture to diagnose what is wrong with us, and point us not to a model for coping, but to a living Redeemer. Lord, forgive us when we are reluctant to speak. Forgive us, Lord, when we speak things other than Jesus Christ. Thank you, Lord, that in Jesus Christ, You have spoken such a good Word to us. It saves our souls and will keep us fast until the end. It's in His name we pray. Amen.