

## SEMINARY AND BIBLICAL COUNSELING

ERIC LASCH<sup>1</sup>

Since childhood I have loved and studied God's Word, but as I got older I began to realize that my understanding of Scripture was more eclectic than systematic. Not until my late thirties did I find a theological focus in Reformed theology. By my early forties, my family and I were attending the Grand Island (NY) Bible Presbyterian Church. We soon heard announcements at church about a biblical counseling course offered locally, taught by our pastor, an adjunct professor at Western Reformed Seminary. As I sat in that first introductory course, our pastor/professor Dr. Kevin Backus said one evening to the class that if you really want to be an effective counselor, you'll need to be well grounded theologically and biblically. While I doubted whether God would ever use me to counsel others, I had for several years hoped one day to receive a Reformed seminary education. In addition, I had been recently ordained as a ruling leader and I knew that to fulfill an elder's duties of caring for the flock, a seminary education would help in many ways. A few months later, I met the president of Western Reformed Seminary, Dr. John Battle, and soon thereafter decided to enroll in their distance learning, pastoral mentorship masters program for biblical counseling.

The coursework at WRS I found to be well designed to give a person interested in biblical counseling a systematic understanding of Scripture. There were many courses: five biblically rich counseling courses, five theology courses, four Old Testament survey courses, four New Testament survey courses, four church history courses, as well as evangelism, discipleship, and hermeneutic courses. It took me four years to complete the course work, which included reading texts and classroom notes, writing papers, taking exams proctored by my mentor, and attending concentrated classes once a year. I continued to work full time and studied in the morning, evenings, and Saturdays. It was a challenge at times, but the Lord gave me strength and time to finish. By God's grace and with the full support of my pastor, wife, and daughters, in May 2005, I was awarded the degree of Master of Christian Ministry.

In God's providence, I did become a biblical counselor, certified by the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors in October 2004. In the cases that I have encountered, it is very clear to me that Dr. Backus was absolutely right about the necessity of being well educated in theology and Scripture. So many types of issues come up every single counseling session. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point. First, it is not uncommon for counselees to misunderstand what a certain passage means. Using what I learned in seminary, I am often able to explain a difficult passage because of understanding the context of the book, the historical setting, the purpose of the author, or even the genre of the literature. Second, believers who seek counseling are struggling with various problems, pain and turmoil, whether it be in the home, work or church. But the real issue is always buried in their heart. It may involve any number of sins, sinful thoughts, or sinful reactions; but it also includes misconceptions and

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric Lasch (M.C.M. 2005) is an active elder in the Bible Presbyterian Church of Grand Island, New York. As a Certified Member of the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors, Eric assists his church counseling ministry. He also serves as the treasurer of the Presbyterian Missionary Union.

misunderstandings about God, about themselves, about sin, about priorities, about marriage, about children, about emotions, or about circumstances. In order to help believers, I need to have a broad and comprehensive understanding of all of Scripture, including a good foundation in theology, in the law of God, in wisdom literature, in the gospel, in the writings of Paul, even in church history at times. The heart issues we struggle with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are no different than any prior period of time. Scripture is timeless with excellent examples from real life, didactic instruction, common sin patterns, and hope. If we are going to effectively counsel, we must be skilled in using the best tool of all—God’s Word.

During my four years of study at WRS, I was humbled in two significant ways. First, the in-depth study of theology proper, the attributes and works of God, of his dealings with mankind, served to deepen my view and appreciation of the one true God—and decrease my high view of me! My view of God had been too low for decades, which caused all sorts of problems in my thinking, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships. Interestingly, the people God has placed before me to work with in the counseling center also have too low a view of God. One of the things that I often find necessary to emphasize is for the counselee to gain a more lofty view of his Maker. The horizontal (human/human) problems and conflicts that we wrestle with are often rooted in the vertical (God/human)—a faulty view of God and his ways, reflecting a weak personal relationship with him. The second way I was humbled was the more I studied and learned, the more I realized how little my mind was, how little I knew, and what little capacity I had to learn. What great theologians and pastors God has raised up in the past to benefit his church to this day! My own faltering pilgrimage helps me to work gently and humbly (as opposed to highhandedly or arrogantly) with others struggling on their path of sanctification. I often muse as I am preparing for the next session that the reason God has given me this particular counselee is because God is reminding me of my weakness in this area and granting me the gift of sanctification in the same or similar area. How can I counsel an angry husband without being reminded of my weakness in this area? How can I counsel someone depressed without remembering that I too react sinfully to circumstances I don’t like? The education I was blessed to receive from WRS has paid and is paying big dividends for me spiritually and to those I counsel.

Since graduation from Western Reformed Seminary three years ago, I continue to read widely both theological and practical counseling books. I have especially enjoyed reading Puritan literature (e.g., *A Body of Divinity* by Thomas Watson, *Mortification of Sin* by John Owens, and *The Anatomy of Secret Sins* by Obadiah Sedgwick). These godly Puritan pastors clearly understood the machinations of human nature. All have a high view of God, Scripture and the church and an equally low view of man due to his sinfulness. In addition, I have gained much insight over the years from the solid Reformed preaching in my local congregation. Such constant biblical instruction has given me a deeper understanding of myself, of God and his Word; this helps me to counsel others more effectively.

Are you interested in growing as a student of God’s Word, being changed by that Word, and helping others to grow spiritually? Then consider getting advanced education at Western Reformed Seminary. Young men are usually able to go to Tacoma and study directly under the professors. Working family men should consider the distance learning program. For both groups, a seminary education will increase your ability to be used by God in the service of

others. I am so thankful to my Father for the strength, time and opportunity he provided to do the seminary work, as well as the privilege of counseling other believers.