



95 THESES

*FOR AN
AUTHENTICALLY
CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT
TO COUNSELING*

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After Darkness, Light: Christians and Counseling in the Twenty-First Century

Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in October 1517. He was concerned that the Roman Catholic practice of indulgences undermined Scripture and its teaching on grace and genuine repentance. His act would spark a Reformation that witnessed a recovery of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

On the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I have a similar concern for the recovery of the gospel. I fear that after more than a century of the influence of secular therapy, the Christian witness to the grace of Jesus Christ has been diluted in the crucial ministry of counseling. Luther intended his *Theses* to spark a debate that the faithful needed to have about how the good news of Jesus Christ related to a critical area of church practice. My intent is similar in offering these *95 Theses for an Authentically Christian Commitment to Counseling*. I believe the church today must have the same kind of debate about grace with respect to counseling that Luther wanted to have in his day with respect to indulgences.

And so I offer these theses for the purpose of debate. But they are also offered with a prayer. My prayer is that the spirit of the Reformers to recover the emphasis on divine grace in their day would be the commitment that Christians would have today regarding counseling.

95 Theses for an Authentically Christian Commitment to Counseling

Introductory Matters about Counseling in Contemporary Culture

1. Christians in the twenty-first century live at a time when the counseling practice of many evangelical churches is marked by chaos and confusion regarding the nature of counseling.
2. Secular therapy has defined the nature and terms of counseling for more than a hundred years, and Christians responding to its influence have been confounded by it – not knowing whether to consume this secular therapy in an undiluted form, to combine it in some way with resources from the Christian tradition, or to reject it entirely in favor of an approach that relies exclusively on scriptural resources.
3. The confusion that exists on the part of Christians has been a distressing source of conflict among brothers and sisters in Christ who debate these issues, and has caused pain in the lives of troubled Christians who seek counseling care.
4. It is a matter of urgency that Christians coalesce around an understanding of counseling that is authentically Christian (Col 3:14).
5. A commitment to counseling that is authentically Christian requires believers in Christ to understand the nature of counseling, which resources must be used in counseling, and to possess growing skill in caring for people in need of counseling.

The Nature of Counseling and the Content of Scripture

6. When people experience difficulties as they live in a fallen world, they require wisdom about life to help them face these problems (Prov 19:20).
7. The wisdom to confront life's difficulties is most often communicated in conversations our culture refers to as counseling.
8. The issues of concern in counseling pertain to problems people face as they relate the difficulties in their life to the faith and practice described in Scripture.
9. Because counseling problems concern the very same issues that God writes about in his Word, it is essential to have a conversation about the contents of the Bible to solve counseling problems.
10. The subject matter of counseling conversations is the wisdom needed to deal with life's problems, and so counseling is not a discipline that is fundamentally informed by science, but by the teaching found in God's Word.
11. When the Bible claims to address all the issues concerning life and godliness, it declares itself to be a sufficient and an authoritative resource to address everything essential for counseling conversations (2 Pet 1:3-4).
12. Christians must not separate the authority of Scripture for counseling from the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling because, if Scripture is to be a relevant authority, then it must be sufficient for the struggles people face as they live life in a fallen world (2 Pet 1:3-21).
13. The authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling means that counselors must counsel out of the conviction that the theological content of Scripture defines and directs the conversational content of counseling.

14. The Bible teaches that the person and work of Jesus Christ provide God's sufficient power to solve every problem of humanity so, according to Scripture, he is the ultimate subject of every counseling conversation (Col 2:2-3).
15. Counselors require a standard to know what changes must be pursued in the lives of the troubled people they wish to help and, because the Bible portrays Jesus Christ as that perfect standard for human living, it is impossible to accomplish authentically Christian counseling without reference to him (1 John 2:5-6).
16. The fact that the Bible authoritatively and sufficiently describes who Jesus is, what he has done and currently does, and how his work applies to our problems proves Scripture's authority and sufficiency as a counseling resource.
17. Because the Bible perfectly explains how Jesus has made provision for people to live every aspect of their lives, any statement that imposes limitations on Scripture in addressing the counseling problems individuals face is an implicit attack on the person and work of Jesus (Col 3:16).
18. One evidence of the sufficiency and authority of Scripture for counseling is that it is a sufficient and authoritative guide to sanctification, which is theological language expressing the change pursued in counseling (Phil 2:12).
19. A denial that the Bible is a sufficient and authoritative guide to counseling is a denial that it is sufficient and authoritative for Christian growth.
20. To claim that scriptural resources are insufficient for counseling is to impugn the character of God because he promises Christians that his power is sufficient for life and godliness; that his Word makes the man of God competent for every good work; and that mercy and grace are available from the resurrected Christ to all who draw near to him (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:3; Heb 4:16).

21. To claim that biblical resources are not authoritative and sufficient for the counseling problems people face is to undermine the biblical teaching about the glory of God because troubled individuals need to know how to glorify God in every area of their lives, the Bible commands that all of life be lived for the glory of God, and the Bible demonstrates how God may be glorified in all of life (1 Cor 10:31).
22. To affirm the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling is to affirm the love and wisdom of God in giving his people what they need for life's problems because most Christians throughout history and in most places in the world today have no access to secular therapy, but all Christians have had access to the Word of God.
23. Counseling that does not acknowledge and depend upon the Holy Spirit can never expect success in the fullest sense because the presence and power of the Spirit are required to realize the kind of change that honors God (John 16:7-13).
24. Because the Holy Spirit always works through the Word he inspired, counseling that desires the kind of powerful change ensured by the Spirit will be counseling that utilizes the Scriptures (Eph 1:17-19).
25. Counseling that desires the kind of powerful change ensured by the Holy Spirit must be counseling that constantly points to Jesus Christ because it is the ministry of the Spirit to exalt Christ (John 16:14).
26. The authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling does not mean counseling that utilizes Scripture will remove all difficulties because we live in a fallen world, and it is not necessarily God's intention to resolve all problems in this life (Rev 21:1-4).

27. The authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling does not mean counseling that utilizes Scripture will remove all difficulties because people often fail to listen to biblical counsel and, at times, to carefully implement changes in their lives.
28. The authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling does not mean counseling that utilizes Scripture will remove all difficulties because even counselors who intend a faithful use of Scripture can sometimes demonstrate incompetence.
29. It is crucial for Christians to emphasize the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling because it inspires confidence in broken people that God has revealed how they can have hope in any difficulty they face (Ps 119:105).

Secular Therapy and the Authoritative Sufficiency of Scripture

30. The faithfulness of a counseling system must be judged exclusively by the text of Scripture.
31. Because the Bible is the authority for every situation in life, whenever secular therapists write, teach, or counsel about matters of human living, they address matters that God covers authoritatively in his Word.
32. The authoritative sufficiency of Scripture for counseling means the Bible controls what resources may and may not be used for counseling wisdom and practice.
33. It is not necessary that the Bible comprehensively address biological issues and medical care to be authoritative and sufficient for counseling conversations.
34. It is not necessary that the Bible agree with, or even address, the findings of modern psychology to be sufficient and authoritative for counseling conversations.
35. It is not necessary for the Bible to be an exhaustive source of information to be comprehensively authoritative and sufficient for the work of counseling.
36. One evidence for the authority and sufficiency of Scripture is that Christians around the world without access to secular therapy and throughout history before the advent of secular therapy have been powerfully helped and transformed without access to secular therapy.
37. One evidence for the authority and sufficiency of Scripture is that Christians in the modern West with access to secular therapy have been powerfully helped and transformed by biblical resources far more than by therapeutic ones.

38. One evidence for the sufficient authority of Scripture for addressing the life struggles presented in counseling is that, while the corpus of secular thought will perish, God intends for his Word to endure into eternity (1 Pet 1:23-25).
39. Counselors who desire to have an effective impact on people must use Scripture in their counseling because God promises that his Word will never return void (Isa 55:11).
40. No proof has ever been offered that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are anything less than fully authoritative and sufficient for counseling issues.
41. Christians must be thankful for the display of God's common grace that leads many experts in the field of secular psychology to know much true information, from which Christians can learn a great deal.
42. Christians must be wary of the impact of sin on their thinking, causing people to suppress the truth about God, to misunderstand other kinds of information, and which ensures that the interventions of secular therapy will be harmful as they attempt to mediate counseling care devoid of Christ (Eph 4:17-19).
43. Counseling strategies at odds with Scripture must be rejected as harmful to those whom they are intended to help.
44. While the discipline of psychology may generate much true information, secular therapy—as it offers counseling solutions that differ from Scripture competes with Christian ministry for the care of individuals and harms people by pointing them to solutions that are not grounded in the Word of God or centered in the grace of Jesus Christ.
45. The Bible's lack of technical and secular labels for counseling problems, such as those found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,

does not disprove Scripture's sufficiency and authority for counseling because God uses his own, superior language to describe people's problems (Rom 1:24-32).

46. The lack of biblical language in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* demonstrates that the thinking of secular individuals is insufficient to grasp the true nature of people, the problems they bring to counseling, and the solutions necessary to bring about real and lasting change.
47. The most effective strategies of secular therapy repeat principles already contained in the Word of God.
48. No example from secular therapy has ever been provided of a counseling intervention that is essential to the change process, which is not already in the Scriptures.
49. Information that psychologists know, and which is not included in Scripture, is not necessary for effective counseling.
50. Secular therapeutic strategies leading to desirable counseling outcomes are not evidence of the superiority of those resources to Scripture because numerous paths to change exist that do not please God.
51. Secular therapeutic strategies are wrong, not merely because they sometimes lead to failed counseling outcomes, but because they operate without respect to God's Word and God's Son.
52. Secular therapy is an insufficient source of information to offer counseling care because its resources are marked by blindness concerning the nature of humanity as made in God's image (Gen 1:26).
53. The inability of secular therapy to acknowledge that mankind is made with an immaterial soul cripples its ability to offer meaningful counseling care (2 Cor 4:16).

54. The more eager a counseling system is to implement the resources of secular therapy to understand people's problems, the less likely that system will be to use Scripture in counseling conversations.
55. Christians interested in the study of psychology should not demean the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling to justify their study of that discipline.
56. Christian scholars who have argued against the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling have failed in this argument by declaring that Scripture is insufficient for counseling, without citing evidence for their declaration.
57. Christian scholars who have argued for the necessity of secular resources in counseling have failed in this argument by pointing to scientific information that may be true, but is nevertheless unnecessary for counseling.
58. Christian scholars and practitioners who desire to submit to the authority of the Word of God in all of life should use the Scripture as the exclusive source of wisdom and help for counseling until they can prove that the Bible is not authoritative and sufficient for this work.
59. Christians who contend that the Bible is not a sufficient authority for counseling must also argue for changes in the missionary task because, if their argument is true, they should focus on taking the information from secular therapy to the nations in addition to Scripture, which is purportedly lacking in the resources needed to care for people with counseling problems.
60. Christians who insist on using secular therapy in their counseling have undermined the authority and sufficiency of God's Word by not allowing the form and content of Scripture to dictate the form and content of their counseling conversations.

61. It is a grievous sin for any Christian to avoid speaking about Christ and his Word in a conversation simply because that conversation is labeled as counseling (1 Cor 2:1-2).
62. Because the most significant problem people have is God's displeasure regarding their sin, and since it is impossible to please God without faith, counselors who do not emphasize faith in Jesus are guilty of the most serious kind of counseling malpractice (Heb 11:6).
63. Christians who insist on employing secular language to describe counseling problems, rather than biblical language, have not submitted to the authority of God's Word in describing the problems people confront.
64. Christian brothers and sisters who have undermined the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling care have created a crisis in the church by drawing Christian individuals away from the biblical resources God always intended his people to use in their pain.
65. Christian scholars and practitioners who undermine these truths are brothers and sisters in Christ when they rest in Jesus alone for salvation, but are nevertheless guilty of serious error.
66. God's intention to solve our problems, by his grace revealed in Scripture, means that counselors who offer graceless solutions are in significant error as they attempt to heal lightly the wounds of troubled people.
67. As an act of loving care toward their wayward brothers and sisters, Christians must call to repentance those who claim to follow Christ and yet fail to utilize their counseling conversations to point to him and his Word.
68. When Christians undermine the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for counseling, they should repent of the very serious sin of slander against God, who reveals that his Word is sufficient for all the many and various problems people confront.

69. Christians who have publicly taught that the resources in Scripture are limited with respect to counseling should publicly repent.
70. Christians who have counseled without relying on the resources of Scripture should repent to those they have tried to help.
71. Churches, seminaries, and Christian training centers, which would find it unacceptable to employ ministers who advocate preaching from resources other than Scripture, must also find it unacceptable to employ ministers who advocate counseling from resources other than Scripture.
72. The process of requiring a state license to counsel is not required by the Bible, is used by the state to enforce counseling practices founded on secular therapy, and is unnecessary for those wishing to grow in God's wisdom to counsel.
73. The only authentically Christian motivation for pursuing a state license to counsel is the missional desire of making Christ known to all people in all places, especially in those places where the authority of the state allows only licensed individuals to talk to troubled people.

Scripture, Counseling, and Faithful Christian Ministry

74. Because Jesus and his apostles proclaimed the Word of God in both public and conversational contexts, Christian ministers today must be committed to heralding God's Word in preaching and in counseling (Acts 20:20).
75. Before the advent of modern secular therapy, Christian pastors and other leaders understood it was their responsibility to use biblical resources to meet the ministry needs of people who were experiencing the kinds of difficulties that counseling is meant to resolve.
76. God commands every Christian to the kinds of conversations that our culture calls counseling (Rom 15:14).
77. Christians should not function as though the task of counseling is reserved for only a special class of professionals.
78. Each local congregation must have a commitment to being a place of counseling care at both the lay and pastoral levels.
79. Pastors, in particular, must be committed to increasing their counseling skills, and to equipping congregations with knowledge of how to do counseling (Eph 4:11-16).
80. The fact that specific biblical texts are only sufficient and authoritative for counseling when they are properly understood requires counselors to be excellent interpreters of Scripture (2 Tim 2:15).
81. Christians committed to counseling ministry do not merely engage in "soul care," but in the care of whole persons made with a body and soul.

82. It is a misunderstanding of the essential nature of human beings for Christians to view individuals as an exclusively physical substance, and to assume all problems are medical problems.
83. It is a misunderstanding of the essential nature of human beings—made with a body and a soul—for Christians to present physical interventions as solutions to spiritual problems.
84. It is a misunderstanding of the essential nature of human beings—with a body and a soul—for Christians to minimize the importance of medical treatment in their care for troubled people (1 Tim 5:23).
85. Because many counseling problems occur at the intersection of physical and spiritual issues, counselors must exert humility and avoid unduly dogmatic assumptions about the source of some problems in living.
86. Because life in a fallen world always leads to death, even obvious physical problems should not be treated as fundamentally medical issues, but instead as opportunities for drawing near to God in faith (Phil 1:21-26).
87. Because the Bible does not include the kind of information necessary to create comprehensive expertise in medical science, counselors should avoid using their counseling conversations to engage in the practice of medicine.
88. Faithful counsel must carefully address the spiritual realities of people dealing with internal attitudes of emotion, desire, thinking, and conscience (Prov 20:5).
89. Counseling that does not address internal realities of the human soul will fail to help people change in a way that authentically reflects God's will (Jas 1:14-16).
90. Faithful counsel will carefully address important physical realities of what it means to be a human being by dealing with practical matters of behavior (Rom 6:8-14).

91. It is not moralistic to address practical matters of behavior because the Bible repeatedly does this in ways that are grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:20-32).
92. Because the work of counseling occurs out of public view, churches must be dedicated to enforcing standards of counseling excellence, ensuring that those involved in the practice of counseling engage in the best possible care.
93. Counseling ministry must be committed to dealing with sin and must insist on calling sinners to repentance in conversations about sin (Gal 6:1-2).
94. Counseling ministry must be committed to addressing suffering and must tenderly comfort those experiencing pain in a fallen world (2 Cor 1:3-7).
95. Counseling ministry must be committed to helping the weak and to matching words of counseling wisdom with practical and specific care (Jas 2:14-17).

The Protestant Reformation began 500 years ago with the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Martin Luther hoped his *Theses* would spark a debate concerning the relationship between the grace of God in repentance and the Roman Catholic practice of indulgences.

Today the church is in need of reformation regarding counseling ministry. After a century of the influence of secular therapy the church of Jesus Christ exists in a state of confusion about the nature of authentically Christian counseling. These *95 Theses for an Authentically Christian Commitment to Counseling* are offered to spark a debate in the church about what it means to be reformed according to Scripture in the practice of counseling. They are offered with a prayer that hurting and broken people in need of counseling care would be connected with Christian men and women who would not point them to secular solutions for serious problems, but to Christ and his Word.

