

**Theo-Drama and Gospel-Centered Counseling:
God's Redemptive Drama and Our Ultimate Life Questions—ETS 2014
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Abstract

A theo-dramatic approach to Scripture shows great promise for gospel-centered counseling. This paper explores six acts in the drama of redemption that are bookended by two elements central to all counseling: God's Word (our source of truth/wisdom) and progressive sanctification (our understanding of the change process). These six acts and two bookends suggest eight ultimate life questions that every person asks and every counselor must address. The paper proposes that theologians and counselors can bridge the artificial gap between them by understanding how a theo-dramatic approach provides a Christ-centered, comprehensive, and compassionate foundation for relating truth to life in counseling. It further proposes ways in which counselors can value the grand redemptive narrative of the Bible and the counselee's life narrative—relating Christ's gospel story to our life story.²

Ashley, Nate, and How We View and Use the Bible

Ashley and her husband, Nate, met with me at church the day after their twin sons' eleventh birthday. With tears streaming down her face, Ashley shared that twenty-five years earlier, not long after *her* eleventh birthday, a relative had begun sexually abusing her.

Those who knew Ashley would have been shocked. She grew up in a Christian home, was active at church as an adult, served as a leader in the women's ministry, and was always "pleasant."

As Ashley described herself, "I'm the good girl from the good home. The good mom; the good wife. But nobody knows the ugliness I feel inside. Nobody knows how I've pretended and denied all these years. I just can't keep faking it any longer. Depressed to the point that at times I've thought about suicide. Fearful and anxious—terrified I'll displease someone. Terrified someone will find out what an empty but evil thing I am..."

As Ashley's voice trailed off, Nate asked, "Pastor Bob, can you *help*? Does the Bible offer any *hope* for my wife?"³

How we respond to Ashley's soul struggles and to Nate's life questions depends on how we answer a foundational question:

"What would a model of counseling look like that was built solely upon Christ's gospel of grace?"⁴

It's similar to the question Kevin Vanhoozer asks:

"What difference would it make to offer counsel out of a Redemptive Trinitarian Theistic framework?"⁵

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²This paper is developed from materials in, Robert W. Kellemen, *Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014; and Robert W. Kellemen, *Gospel Conversations: How Christ Changes Lives*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, forthcoming in 2015.

³I further develop Ashley's story and a biblical counseling response in Robert Kellemen, *Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes*, Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013.

⁴*Gospel-Centered Counseling*, 15.

⁵Kevin Vanhoozer, "Forming the Performers: How Christians Can Use Canon Sense to Bring Us to Our (Theodramatic) Senses." *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology*, 4, no. 1, 2010, 7.

When we fail to address these foundational questions about what makes counseling truly biblical, we end up with shallow answers to people's complex questions. When people like Ashley and Nate courageously share their real and raw concerns with people in the church, without a gospel-centered theological foundation we tend to respond in one of three ways.

First, some *refer*. The stereotype goes like this: "I'm a committed Christian. I want to help you with your struggles. However, we have to understand that while the Bible provides insight for our 'spiritual lives,' God never intended that we use His Word to address 'emotional and mental' struggles. For relevant help for those issues, we need 'outside experts.'" There's confidence in God, but with a corresponding conviction that for "non-spiritual issues" God's Word is not the most appropriate resource.

Second, some follow a *sprinkling* approach. The stereotype sounds like this: "I'm a committed Christian. I want to help you with your struggles. To the insights I've gleaned from the world's wisdom about your issue, I'll add Christian concern, prayer, and some occasional biblical principles where they seem pertinent." There's confidence in God's Word as important in helping hurting people, but its application lacks an understanding of the vital, comprehensive, and robust nature of God's Word for life in a broken world.

Third, some follow the *concordance* approach. The stereotype goes like this: "I'm a committed Christian. I want to help you with your struggle. You have a problem. I'll use my Bible concordance to find God's answer." Some call this the "one-problem, one-verse, one-solution" approach. There's confidence in the Bible, but its application lacks an understanding of the complexity of life and the rich nature of God's Word.

The Relationship between the Bible's Redemptive Theo-Drama and Gospel-Centered Counseling

Clearly we need a "fourth way" of *viewing and using the Bible*. *If we are to view the Bible accurately and use the Bible competently in counseling, then we must understand the Bible's story the way God tells it.* And God tells His story and ours as the theo-drama of redemption. It is a gospel narrative of relationship.

The Bible presents a grand narrative in which God is both the Author and the Hero, with the story climaxing in Christ. God begins by telling the story of relationship initiated in Genesis 1-2 and relationship rejected in Genesis 3. After those first three chapters, the rest of the Bible tells the story of God wooing us back to His holy and loving arms, all the while fighting the Evil One who wants to seduce us away from our first love.

Ever since Genesis 3, *life is a battle for our love*—the ageless question of who captures our heart—Christ or Satan. In *Gospel-Centered Counseling*, I encapsulate all of life as *a war and a wedding*.⁶ Many others have described it as *slay the dragon; marry the damsel*. The Bible calls it "the gospel."

Our counseling is sterile and dead if we see the Bible as an academic textbook. But if we view and use the Bible as the story—the gospel-centered drama—of the battle to win our hearts, then our counseling comes alive.

But how do we take the Bible's theo-dramatic redemptive narrative and relate it comprehensively and compassionately to the lives of hurting people? How do we take the traditional Creation-Fall-Redemption narrative and use it as a helpful and hopeful foundation for gospel-centered counseling?

Here's how *not* to do it. When people come to us, we don't shout, "Gospel!" as if it's some magic wand.

⁶*Gospel-Centered Counseling*, 24.

Instead, we first understand the gospel story, then we seek to understand our friends' stories, then we journey together to *intersect* God's eternal story and their temporal story. Picture it as pivoting back and forth with our friends between the larger story of the gospel and the smaller (but real and meaningful) story of their life. We earn the right to bring God's perspective to bear on our friends' lives by first listening well and wisely to their life story.

Gospel-centered counseling means that together with our counselees we derive our understanding of earthly life from heaven's viewpoint. We look at life not with eyeballs only, but with spiritual eyes; we live under the Son, not under the sun.

Counseling is biblical when the central message, the sweeping redemptive narrative of the Bible, becomes the controlling lens through which we look at life and through which we listen to a person's life story. We understand people, diagnose problems, and prescribe solutions through the Bible's redemptive theo-drama. In this way, *the whole Bible story impacts the whole person's whole story.*

“Translating” the Theo-Drama into 8 Ultimate Life Questions

A central way to relate the Bible's grand story to our life stories is to probe the Bible's wisdom about life's ultimate questions. To do so, we must translate a theo-dramatic approach to the Bible's redemptive narrative into real life questions that we all ask. We can do this because the acts in the Bible's theo-drama ask and answer the ultimate life questions that every person asks and every counselor must address.

Many theologians have summarized the Bible as a CFR Narrative: Creation, Fall, Redemption. This summary offers a wonderful picture of the grand movement of the Bible's gospel story. However, the Bible paints an even more expansive picture—the “CCFRCC Theo-Drama of Redemption.”

• Prologue:	Community	Before the Beginning/Eternity Past
• Act I:	Creation	In the Beginning
• Act II:	Fall	The End of the Beginning
• Act III:	Redemption	Eternity Invades Time
• Act IV:	Church	In the Fullness of Time
• Epilogue:	Consummation	After the End/Eternity Future

The Bible doesn't begin with creation. It begins before the beginning. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). This is the eternal prologue where we find our Trinitarian God in endless community. Against this eternal backdrop, the Bible then presents the Creation, Fall, and Redemption narrative.

Then, before the end of the story, God embeds the Church, giving us the mission to invite others into the Trinity's eternal Community of Oneness. Just as this four-act theo-drama is preceded by an eternal prologue, so it is followed by an eternal epilogue—the consummation of all things and the beginning of eternity future.

Before we translate these acts into ultimate life questions, we need to consider two elements that are central to all counseling: *God's Word* (our source of truth/wisdom) and *progressive sanctification* (our understanding of the change process). In an outline of life's eight ultimate questions, these two components serve as bookends. By starting with the Word of God, we humbly submit to God's wisdom about life in our broken world. By ending with sanctification, we acknowledge that we must build our answer to the question, “How do we become like Jesus?” upon God's answers to all the preceding questions—upon God's redemptive theo-drama.

Placing the six stages in the Bible's drama of redemption between these two bookends allows us to translate the biblical narrative into eight ultimate life questions for counseling.

- Bookend One: The Word—“Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?”
 - Prologue: Community/Trinity—“What comes into our mind when we think about God?” “Whose view of God will we believe—Christ’s or Satan’s?”
 - Act I: Creation—“Whose are we?” “In what story do we find ourselves?”
 - Act II: Fall—“What’s the root source of our problem?” “What went wrong?”
 - Act III: Redemption—“How does Christ bring us peace with God?” “How does Christ change people?”
 - Act IV: Church—“Where can we find a place to belong and become?”
 - Epilogue: Consummation—“How does our future destiny with Christ make a difference in our lives today as saints who face suffering and fight against sin?”
- Bookend Two: Progressive Sanctification—“Why are we here?” “How do we become like Jesus?”

Wonderful insights that arise in the academy, unfortunately, often languish in the academy. Translating a theo-dramatic approach to Scripture into these eight ultimate life questions helps us to bridge this artificial gap between theologians and counselors.

Talking about the sufficiency of God’s Word is vital—we “translate” that vitality to life by asking, “Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?” Likewise, the doctrine of the Trinity is central to Christianity—we “translate” that centrality to our lives by asking, “What comes into our mind when we think about God?” “Whose view of God will we believe—Christ’s or Satan’s?”

The motif of Creation/Fall/Redemption is prominent in theological discussions in the doctrines of anthropology, hamartiology, and soteriology—we “translate” this prominence to our lives by asking, “Whose are we?” “In what story do we find ourselves?” “What’s the root source of our problem?” “What went wrong?” “How does Christ bring us peace with God?” “How does Christ change people?”

The doctrine of the church, or ecclesiology, is foundational—we “translate” this foundational truth to our lives by asking, “Where can we find a place to belong and become?” The doctrine of the end times, or eschatology, is fundamental—we “translate” this fundamental truth to our lives by asking, “How does our future destiny with Christ make a difference in our lives today as saints who struggle against suffering and sin?”

Progressive sanctification should be the ultimate goal of all theological discussions—we “translate” this ultimate goal to our lives by asking, “Why are we here?” “How do we become like Jesus?”

These *eight ultimate life questions* seek to answer the counselor’s foundational questions: “What would a model of counseling look like that was built solely upon Christ’s gospel of grace?” And, “What would a model of counseling look like that was built solely upon the Bible’s theo-dramatic redemptive narrative?”

Tony, Trudy, and Listening to Scripture and the Soul

To answer these questions, picture Trudy and Tony. Referred to you from another church, you’ve never met them before today. They’ve come to you after already having seen a divorce attorney. Trudy tells you that she’s “100% motivated to be in counseling.” Tony is meeting with you because he feels it’s his obligation to “make one more attempt to save this marriage.”

How would you counsel Trudy and Tony? Where would you start? Head? How would you conceptualize their issues? What would your counseling goals be?

To answer these questions, we'll use Tony and Trudy's counseling case study, and Paul's teaching in Colossians, to illustrate:

How the Bible's theo-drama and life's eight ultimate questions arm us with biblical wisdom categories for thinking deeply about life, applying Scripture robustly to life, and listening both to the Bible's grand story and Tony and Trudy's life story.

Bookend One: The Word—Listening to Stories about the Source of Wisdom

- **Our Question:** “Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?”
- **God's Answer:** We discover wisdom for how to live life in a broken world from the wisest person who ever lived—Christ!
- **God's Answer:** To view the Bible accurately and use the Bible competently we must understand the Bible's story the way God tells it—as a gospel victory narrative—as a theo-drama.

How would the apostle Paul have counseled Trudy and Tony? What would his source of truth be?

In Colossians, Paul models gospel-centered, Christ-focused counsel. Instead of providing a quick answer or a simplistic solution, Paul goes “big picture” by focusing on the larger story—the *largest* story—“Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Rather than offering smaller story “steps,” Paul invites his Colossian friends to journey with him on a treasure hunt so “they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2-3).

Paul practices the sufficiency of Christ and Scripture—the Living Word and the Written Word. Paul ministers Christ through the Word to *every* troubled Colossian saint: “We proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, so that we may present *everyone* perfect in Christ” (Col. 1:28). Paul models bookend number one: the Word—where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?

As a counselor, before I ever counseled Tony and Trudy, I had to answer that question for myself. And, as I counseled Tony and Trudy, I had to listen to their stories about their source of wisdom for life.

Very early on it became very clear where Tony looked for his source of wisdom. Though he claimed Christ as Savior, if I had directly asked Tony, “Where do you find wisdom for life in a broken world?” he would *not* have answered, “God's Word.” Yes, God's Word was authoritative for “spiritual matters” for Tony, but he did not see how the Bible related to his marriage, his feelings, or his search for happiness. Nonetheless, Tony *was* living by a source of truth—what made him feel complete, manly, happy.

Before we could go very far in counseling, I laid out for Tony my conviction that *we discover wisdom for how to live life in a broken world from the wisest person who ever lived—Christ*. Tony, ever blunt, told me, “If you can show me how that works in the *real* world, more power to you.”

In response, I leaned over, acted like I was lifting something extremely heavy, leaned back up, looked Tony in the eyes, and replied, “I'm picking up the gauntlet, accepting your challenge. But it won't be by my power that I'll demonstrate the relevance of God's Word—it will be through God's power....” My calling was to counsel with Tony in such a way that he grasped the relevance of the Bible's relational theo-drama (cf. Eph. 3:14-19).

Prologue: Community/Trinity—Listening to Stories about Our View of God

- **Our Questions:** “What comes into our mind when we think about God?” “Whose view of God will we believe—Christ's or Satan's?”

- **God's Answer:** To know the God of peace and the peace of God we must know our Triune God in the fullness of His holy love demonstrated in the cross of Christ.
- **God's Answer:** Because Satan attempts to plant seeds of doubt about God's good heart, God calls us to crop the Christ of the cross back into the picture.

Secular psychology, by definition, must begin with us—who are we? Gospel-centered counseling begins *before the beginning* with God—who is God and what difference does He make in how we look at and live life in a broken world? That's why Paul begins before time, in eternity past by introducing the Colossians to the cosmic Christ (Col. 1:15-19).

If you have a problem understanding yourself, others, and life, who is sufficient for understanding people and life if not the Creator? It's as if Paul says, "You could try to understand the creature by the creature (worldly wisdom), or you could turn to the Creator to understand the creature. Since 'all things were created by him and for him' (Col. 1:16); turn to Him."

As I counseled with Tony, I pondered, "What comes into Tony's mind when he thinks about God?" "Whose view of God and of life is Tony believing—Christ's or Satan's?" Everything Tony said about his life, his attraction to a co-worker, and his disdain for his wife—it all communicated a sub-biblical view of God, a sub-Christ view of God. Tony's God was not a God who so loved the world that He sacrificed His Son. Tony's God was not a Savior who said, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Tony's god was a genie-in-a-bottle god who wanted Tony happy at all cost.

Detecting those themes in Tony's story did not mean that I blurted out, "You're worshipping the wrong god!" It did mean that I was listening with one ear to Tony's unstated but implied view of God and with the other ear to Christ as the perfect narrative and image of God. And it did mean that we probed together passages like Luke 15 and the Prodigal and Pharisaical sons to see what their views of God looked like, what their false views of God led them to pursue, and how the true God offered them true life.

I entered the theo-drama with Tony by relating two essential aspects of God's story to Tony's story: 1.) To know the God of peace and the peace of God, Tony must know his Triune God in the fullness of His holy love demonstrated in the cross of Christ. 2.) Because Satan attempts to plant seeds of doubt about God's good heart, God was calling me to crop the Christ of the cross back into Tony's picture.

Act I: Creation—Listening to Stories about People

- **Our Questions:** "Whose are we?" "In what story do we find ourselves?"
- **God's Answer:** We find ourselves in a war story and a love story where each of us must answer the questions, "Who captures my heart? Who captivates my soul?"

In describing the Creator, Paul teaches us about creation and the creature—about us. We were not made to live for ourselves. All things were made "for him" (Col. 1:16). All things were made to be dependent upon Him—"in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

The Trinity did not *need* to create, did not *need* us, did not *need* anything (Col. 1:19—the Trinity is infinitely full and complete). Not only is our *salvation* a loving grace-gift ("God so loved the world that He *gave*"—Jn. 3:16), our *creation* is a loving grace-gift from our Trinitarian God who chose to invite us into relationship with the Divine Community. The essence of life is not only relational, it is a certain *type* of relational living—*mutual self-giving, self-sacrificing, other-centered living*.

In the flow of God's grand narrative, Paul's Creation narrative teaches us how we were meant to live with God and others. His other-centered worldview guides us in unique directions when we seek to help Tony and Trudy answer central life questions like, "Whose are we?" "In what story do we find ourselves?"

Tony was seeking to answer the question, “Who am I?” He had wrapped his identity in his job, his kids, and his wife, and as everything was crumbling around him, Tony felt lost, empty, lonely, and worthless. But his female co-worker made him feel important, wanted, and needed...

I didn’t ignore those feelings in Tony. I wanted to hear his story, understand it from his soul. But I certainly did not ignore God’s story—the story that asks a different question than “Who am I?” God’s story asks, “Whose am I?”

If I had asked Tony, “Whose am I?” he would have honestly answered me, “Right now, I am *hers!*” He was captivated by his coworker.

So, Tony and I talked about how he was made for God, and, therefore, how he would only find true and lasting satisfaction in God. We also talked about Jeremiah 2:13 where God charges His people with two sins: forsaking Him the spring of living water, and digging broken cisterns that could hold no water. This woman was Tony’s broken cistern and it was Tony’s faulty view of God (Jer. 2:5, 19) and his broken relationship with God (“Whose am I?”) that made her seem more attractive to him than God. Tony and I entered the theo-drama by probing who captured his heart; who captivated his soul.

Act II: Fall—Listening to Stories about Our Core Problem

- **Our Questions:** “What’s the root source of our problem?” “What went wrong?”
- **God’s Answer:** The essence of sin is spiritual adultery—choosing to love anyone or anything more than God.
- **God’s Answer:** Sin is not just a thief caught in a crime; sin is an adulterer caught in the act.

Tragically, life as it was meant to be fell apart when Adam and Eve attempted to live life apart from the Creator of life. As a result of their rebellion, they moved from other-centered, dependent God-worshippers experiencing shalom to self-centered, independent self-worshippers experiencing shame. Paul captures it in one sentence. “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” (Col. 1:21). Paul informs us that apart from Christ our wills are bent toward Satan’s *sub-version* of God’s grand narrative because our minds are under “the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13).

Since the Fall, life is not just *one* grand narrative—it is *a competition between two* grand narratives that each vie for our attention and commitment. Satan’s grand narrative is filled with *lies*, *self* (self-sufficiency, self-centered), *works*, and *condemnation* while Christ’s grand narrative is filled with *truth*, *God* (Christ-sufficiency), *others*, (other-centered), *faith*, *grace*, and *forgiveness*.

Captured by Satan’s grand narrative, Tony was fierce in his conviction about the source of his problem—*anyone but* himself. First, he said it was the church, because, “All I ever hear from the pulpit is that I’m supposed to kill all desire!” So we probed what the Bible’s theo-drama says about desire: God created us with deep desire (Creation). The desire Tony needed to “kill” was the misdirected, sinful desire for this other woman (*Fall*), and the desire he needed to nourish was the pure desire for God and for his wife (*Redemption*).

Tony, still captured by Satan’s lying narrative, next pointed the finger at Trudy. In his mind, she was his core problem. “She’s not satisfying my desires!” Tony clung to this self-focused mindset even after Trudy had humbly acknowledged faults, confessed sins, and made significant other-centered changes.

So, we looked at James 4:1-4 to explore Christ’s narrative of “What went wrong?” James asks the great diagnostic question, “What causes quarrels and fights among you” (James 4:1a). And we looked at God’s great diagnostic answer in James 4:1b-4—an answer that invited Tony to take a candid look at his spiritually adulterous heart.

It was while we discussed this passage that Christ's redemptive theo-drama began to soften Tony's heart. He began to see not only his demandingness toward Trudy, but his rebelliousness against God. For the first time, Tony wept at the thought of how he was treating Trudy. And he wept as we pondered the biblical reality that the essence of his sin was spiritual adultery—choosing to love anyone or anything more than God. Tony, like the Prodigal Son, began to “come to his senses” as he realized that spiritual adultery was behind his temptation toward marital adultery.

Act III: Redemption—Listening to Stories about Solutions/Soul-u-tions

- **Our Questions:** “How does Christ bring us peace with God?” “How does Christ change people?”
- **God's Answer:** We must build our counseling models of change on Christ's gospel applied to Christians—justified, reconciled, regenerated, and redeemed people.

What if Paul ended with the Fall—with alienation from God, domination by Satan, and our hearts, minds, wills, and emotions surrendered to evil beliefs and behaviors? We would have *no* hope or help to offer Trudy and Tony. But God's grand gospel narrative is a *resurrection narrative*. Death dies. Hope lives. Christ rises and we rise with Him.

To the Colossians, struggling to know how to live well and wisely, Paul opens the curtain to the main movement in the drama of redemption—victory, resurrection. He points the spotlight on the main character in the drama of redemption—*Christ* (Col. 1:4). He points their attention to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, reminding them what they had embraced: “...the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth” (Col. 1:5-6).

Tony's story and God's story were merging—meeting at repentance, confession, and receiving grace. One of the most powerful “grace moments” occurred when Tony and I talked with Trudy about the pain she felt when Tony said, “I wish *you* could be like my co-worker. I want *her*, *not you*!” Through Christ's strength, Trudy not only offered Tony tough-love, but showered him with grace-love. These “tastes of Christ's grace” encouraged Tony to find peace with Christ and peace with his Christlike wife.

Repentance and the grace of forgiveness and peace launched Tony's change process. However, he still needed *sanctification grace* for ongoing power to change. So we explored the ultimate life question, “How does Christ change Tony?” Tony began applying the truth that through *regeneration* his new heart had a *new want to* and that through *redemption* his new heart had a *new can do*. Tony began putting off sinful desires and putting on new Christlike desires. The world talks about “solutions”—how *we* change. The Bible's theo-drama portrays “soul-u-tion”—how Christ changes us at the soul/heart level.

Act IV: Church—Listening to Stories about a Place to Belong and Become

- **Our Question:** “Where can we find a place to belong and become?”
- **God's Answer:** Together with all the saints the church is *the* place to belong to Christ and the Body of Christ and to become like Christ.
- **God's Answer:** Sanctification is a Christ-centered community journey.

In Paul's letter of spiritual counsel, he does not move directly from Redemption to Consummation. Instead, he teaches that the Church finds Herself living between two comings—the first and the second coming of Christ. We are poised between looking back with *faith* in our Redeemer and looking forward with *hope* as we await His return as Conquering Groom. God calls us to speak and live truth in *love* (Col. 3:12-14) as we, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col. 3:16a).

As Paul provides spiritual counsel for the troubled and confused Colossian Christians, he doesn't envision them *alone*. He envisions them together "as God's chosen people" (Col. 3:12), and "as members of one body" (Col. 3:15)—the Church. Paul shares these words of one-another ministry in the context of growth in grace (Col. 3:1-11) because *sanctification is a Christ-centered community journey*.

As I listened to Tony's story, I detected that he had been subtly asking, "Where can I find a place to be *affirmed*—regardless of my behavior?" While the longing for belonging is a God-given one, it does not stop there. The church is a place to belong *and* become—to become more like Christ. Thus it is a place both of affirmation *and* of accountability, of comfort *and* of care-fronting. As Tony came to understand this, he began meeting weekly with a godly mentor and joined his church's men's group. Tony was applying the theo-dramatic truth that sanctification is a community journey.

Epilogue: Consummation—Listening to Stories about Our Future Destiny

- **Our Question:** "How does our future destiny with Christ make a difference in our lives today as saints who face suffering and fight against sin?"
- **God's Answer:** As saints who struggle with suffering and fight against sin, we must crop back into the picture our future purity (the wedding) and our future victory (the final war).

To people beaten down by sin and beaten up by suffering, Paul says, "Let me tell you the rest of the story—the end of the story. We were under Satan's domain of utter darkness. Helpless and hopeless, Christ rescued us. Just as earthly rulers transplant a conquered people from one country to another, so Christ has transplanted us from our earthly citizenship to our heavenly citizenship. But He transplants us not from liberty into slavery, but from slavery into liberty. He transplants us not out of darkness into semi-darkness, but out of dismal blindness into marvelous light. He's disarmed His enemies and yours, triumphing over them by the cross" (cf. Col. 1:13; 2:14-15).

Paul not only pulls back the curtain to show us the end of the war, he also shows us the beginning of the wedding. "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col. 1:22). This is almost identical to Paul's wording in Ephesians 5:25-27 where his focus is on Christ's purifying love for His Bride, the Church. This is wedding language!

Paul is letting us eavesdrop on eternity. The victory is announced. God reigns! The wedding march starts. All the scars and blemishes of sin are cleansed. The bride wears white!

"The war is won! The bride is wed!" The gospel is about God radically changing people.

Tony didn't enter my pastoral counseling office saying, "Pastor Bob, my marriage is difficult, I've been tempted toward an affair, and I would like your help to know how eschatology relates to my struggles today." However, I kept in the forefront of my mind the question, "How does Tony's future destiny with Christ make a difference in how he loves his wife like Christ *today*?" So, Tony and I did ponder the application of the truth that:

- The war Christ wins for us provides *victory* over sin and Satan where once we were their slaves.
- The wedding Christ prepares us for produces *purity* where there once was sin and shame.

Tony and I engaged in discussions that helped him to weigh, from a theo-dramatic perspective, living for immediate desires (the pleasure of sin for a season) versus "looking ahead to his reward" (Heb. 11:26).

Bookend Two: Progressive Sanctification—Listening to Stories about Why We Are Here

- **Our Questions:** “Why are we here? How do we become like Jesus?”
- **God’s Answer:** We are here to enjoy and exalt the Father through the Spirit by emulating the Son: our inner life (heart) increasingly reflects the inner life (heart) of Christ.
- **God’s Answer:** Sanctification is the art of applying our complete salvation (justification, reconciliation, regeneration, and redemption) by God’s grace, God’s Spirit, God’s people, and God’s future hope.

Christ’s victory narrative forms the foundation of Paul’s counsel *and* his agenda for counseling. Typically we seek help from God and each other to fix our feelings and change our circumstances. Paul sees that God is in the change business, but a very different type of change—heart change, Christlikeness. You have “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Col. 3:10). Paul’s soul care mission is to relate gospel truth to the Colossians’ growth in grace by relating the theo-drama to their relationships:

- *With God:* That they would be mature in Christ (Col. 1:28).
- *With One Another:* That they would be united in love (Col. 2:2).

Paul models counseling that relates salvation truth to sanctification reality: “*since*, then, you have been raised with Christ...*therefore* set your hearts on...set your minds on...put to death...” (Col. 3:1-5). Paul models counseling that relates Christ’s victory narrative to our progressive victory in Christ—“having been raised...put to death...” (Col. 3:1, 5).

As I listened to Tony during our first few meetings (marriage counseling and individual counseling), it was quite clear that his ultimate goal for counseling was quite different than mine. Like most counselees (like most of us), Tony fixed his mind on changing his circumstances and fixing his feelings.

As we interacted, I invited Tony to reflect on his goals—for counseling and for life. Gradually Tony shifted his focus from changing his circumstances to asking the Spirit to increasingly *change him into the image of Christ*—whether or not his circumstances ever changed. Tony claimed a new answer to the question of why he was here: to live life today like Christ in light of Christ’s gospel victory narrative.

Connecting Scripture and Soul

I sought to picture with Tony the truth that *theology matters*. The Bible is relevant. The theo-dramatic redemptive message of the Bible is vital for his daily life and our ongoing counseling.

As Tony’s counselor, I did not see myself as his theology instructor. Instead, *theology instructed and guided my thinking as I interacted with Tony*. I listened to Tony’s story theologically—that’s what makes our counseling truly biblical. My understanding of the Bible’s grand story enlightened me to understand Tony and to help him to interpret his life story through a biblical grid—the Bible’s redemptive theo-drama.

The eight ultimate life questions that arise from the Bible’s theo-drama guided the gospel conversations that Tony and I shared. The Spirit shepherded the application of the grand redemptive narrative of the Bible to Tony’s life narrative—relating Christ’s gospel story to Tony’s life story.