

How Do You Counsel Non-Christians?



by J. Alasdair Groves

Biblical counseling carries out the Great Commission in personal conversations about significant personal struggles or hardships. Probably the question counseling students ask most frequently is, “How then do you counsel a non-Christian—someone who does not accept the authority of the Bible or the lordship of Christ?”

I have had the opportunity to counsel with a number of non-Christians, so I understand this challenge from personal experience. Can I (or should I) help someone who is not a disciple of Jesus when my entire approach to hope and healing depends on his power, love, and command? If we do not both submit to the Scriptures, has my most vital tool been taken away?

Not at all!

Instead, the Bible itself demonstrates how to engage non-Christians in counseling conversations. It invites us to know Christ—his character, actions, and passions—and be transformed by relationship with him. And because the Bible is designed to create this personal and intimate bond, it has implications for every aspect of our human experience. For this reason, any situation or struggle in any person’s life can become a turning point for

a first step toward God and toward the true humanness he desires in all of us.

What better way to learn how to counsel non-Christians than to study how Jesus himself counseled those who did not believe? Our goal in this article will be to watch him carefully in conversations with unbelievers, to grasp his fundamental orientation in ministry, and finally to draw out practical implications for our own context.

What Does Jesus Do?

Think about the ministry of Jesus. He is incredibly consistent. Jesus’ teaching always revolves around the same core issues: ungodly loyalties, how to treat other people, the interpretation of suffering, a call to change, and the importance of finding hope that is true and reliable.

What is interesting is that he offers the same message both to those who believe and serve God, and to those who do not. Jesus also heals and shows kindness to both groups. In fact, Jesus often uses gifts of kindness (e.g., feeding the 5000) to stir faith, loyalty, and transformation in the hearts of unbelievers.

When we overhear Jesus in personal conversations with people who do not believe in him (yet?), we find that he is still after all these same things. However, even a brief survey of such conversations reveals that Jesus’ approach varies depending on the individual and the situation.

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Consider the range of Jesus' ministry across five examples:

1. Jesus starts a conversation with the woman at the well quite shockingly by asking *her* for something (John 4:4–26). He puts *her* in the position to help *him*. He reverses the direction of helper and person being helped, putting himself in a place of humility and her in the position of being needed. (I have found that counselees almost always appreciate it when I am willing to ask them for help with something.) Having initiated, Jesus then lets her lead. He responds to the issues she raises, but always with personal concern for her. This contrasts with the arms-length theological debate she tries to maintain. When she is defensive—a natural posture for a Samaritan woman in the presence of a Jewish rabbi—he gives an invitation to receive blessing. When he finally does address her lifestyle of sin, he does so by simply naming the facts. Jesus is extremely gentle with a flagrant sinner who is edgy, contentious, confused, wary—and desperate.

2. Zaccheus is a shamed, despised traitor who seems embarrassingly eager to see Jesus (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus' ministry to him is a simple dinner invitation. The conversation with Jesus is unrecorded—apparently it is enough for us to see Jesus move toward Zaccheus with unexpected grace. (Indeed, simple kindness can be a powerful tool when counseling those whose experience is filled with enemies or people who have no time or care for them.) Whatever was said, the unearned, un-looked for, unimaginable honor Jesus shows Zaccheus moves him to *change*. He who had been an extortioner, valuing his own wealth above his countrymen's friendship, responds to Jesus' kindness with radical ownership of his sin that explodes into full restitution.

3. Nicodemus risks his social prestige by coming to Jesus (John 3:1–21). He is genuinely looking for understanding. Jesus puts his finger on the core issue and gives Nicodemus a direct answer to his true question: "Are you the real thing?" (Honoring someone often means answering sincere questions directly.) Jesus explains that his ministry is indeed from God, and God's work is as obvious as trees bending in a wind. Jesus presses Nicodemus to draw the logical conclusion from his own observations about the authenticity of Jesus' ministry.

4. The rich young ruler comes with a question too (Mark 10:17–27). But where Jesus answered Nicodemus' question at its core, Jesus senses more self-justification than genuine curiosity. We are told that Jesus "looked at him and loved him." He demonstrates his love by giving him a "homework assignment" that puts a spotlight on the glaring gap between his stated theology and his functional theology. (Timely homework often opens up the problem behind the presenting problem.) With this assignment, Jesus challenges him to re-arrange his life, but not by reflecting on Scripture or focusing on his identity as a child of God. Rather, he bids for the rich young ruler to take an action that will force him to confront his true life priorities, allegiances, and ultimate hope.

5. Finally, the Pharisees (often) come with a hostile agenda. They also have questions, but their questions are nothing more than traps. Jesus confronts them with incisive directness. He demands that they see the evil in the motives behind their seemingly righteous actions and innocent questions. (When a counselee is being malicious or manipulative, tell the simple truth.) They are blind to their own sin, so Jesus responds by choosing the most vivid language he can find—e.g., "whitewashed tombs" and "brood of vipers" (Matt 23:27–28, 33)—in an effort to shock them out of their self-righteous stupor. Jesus cares enough about them to engage their most dire need, even as they try to destroy him and his ministry.

While there are patterns in these five examples, there is no formula. No system can reduce ministry with unbelievers to three principles or eight sequential steps. With one person, Jesus asks for help and engages in friendly sparring; with one he moves toward; with another he talks about the question at hand; with another he probes and tests; with still another he confronts.

Jesus bids for the ultimate allegiance of every one of these people. But he does not demand that his conversation partners accept the gospel *before* he talks with them. Instead, he constantly establishes the relevance of the gospel for them personally, knowing that without it they will continue to walk away from him. And so he engages these unbelievers on a wide variety of issues. He does not hesitate to talk about their behavior or address their questions, anxieties,

troubles, or purposes. The contours of the world that each unbeliever lives in dramatically shape the way in which the gospel will be heard for what it is: genuinely *good news*. Our goal, then, when counseling a non-Christian is a love unswervingly oriented to the riches of the gospel, yet as creative and flexible as Christ's own ministry when he walked among us.

Jesus Lives out the Parable of the Sower

Jesus' example clearly teaches us that we are to take intentional conversations about life problems (counseling) with non-Christians

Did any of those hostile Pharisees later repent? We don't know, and that's the point. We are to sow the seed thoughtfully and leave the results in God's hands.

This uncertainty is one of the great complexities of Christian ministry. In the majority of counseling situations, you will have some evidence as to whether a person is truly following Christ or not, but you will never know a person's eternal state with full certainty, even when there is a profession of faith. Thankfully, counseling ministry does not depend on having this certainty.

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on a case-by-case basis. Both in public and in private ministry of the Word, however, he is operating from a framework we can identify. *That framework is the parable of the sower* (Mark 4:1–20). Jesus sowed the same seeds with crowds and individuals, with those who loved him and those who rejected and conspired against him. The seed was a simple call to repent—to turn from what is evil in God's sight and to embrace what God loves, especially his mercy and grace—because the Kingdom was coming. Jesus always sowed the same seed (i.e., the same message) and sowed in all types of soil (i.e., to different people), but he tailored his delivery precisely to each individual, knowing exactly what would be most relevant and compelling.

Jesus sowed seeds differently, but we don't know for certain how each seed grew—or didn't grow—in each person. These stories don't tell us about the precise spiritual state (and sometimes the ultimate decision) of the person Jesus is talking to. Was the conversation with the rich young ruler wasted? What was Nicodemus seeking when he came to talk to Jesus that night? Was he a man who feared God but had significant struggles, or was he only seeking God's stamp of approval on his self-made kingdom? Did Zaccheus experience a true conversion, or was he re-dedicating his life to God? What did the Samaritan woman do with the rest of her life?

This means that what *happens* in counseling non-Christians should look very similar to what happens in counseling Christians! The seeds Jesus sows with his disciples are not categorically different than the seeds he sows with outsiders. A wise counselor helps believers and non-believers see themselves more clearly in order to relevantly point them toward Jesus, who is not only the Lord but also Savior, Good Shepherd, King, Friend, Brother, Lover, Judge, and Refuge. With believers and non-believers, you are trying to know a specific individual and discern where God is calling and wooing. In both cases you'll be challenging false notions about who God is and how he works. In both cases you'll be affirming the *good and right* questions, concerns, and truths they are already bringing to the table. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is fundamental: regeneration. Those with ears to hear will hear; those whose ears are stopped up will not hear. The transformation of heart and action that the counselor recommends—through the seeds the counselor sows—will be the same.

Following Jesus in the Details of Counseling

How then do you sow seeds wisely with a person who does not believe in Christ as Lord?

First, I will offer three orienting perspectives to help you frame your approach to a given

individual. Each of these reveals a palette of colors you can apply to the specific variables of any situation. Second, I'll answer three of the most frequently asked practical questions about biblical counseling with non-Christians.

Three Orienting Perspectives

1. *Don't forget the obvious: know and love the person.* Counseling a non-Christian involves building a friendship. Get to know this person. Ask questions. Express appreciation. Show tenderness and compassion. Share things about yourself. Spend time. Listen attentively. Discern what is important. Notice strengths as well as failings. Ask how someone is really doing, and mean it. This question, asked with genuine interest, is a precious gift. If you can care about a friend who is not a Christian, why should counseling be any different? Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and "loved him." We must know and love this person living in separation from God, just as Christ loved us when we walked in darkness.

2. *Help the person look in the mirror.* Help people see themselves accurately. No one does this instinctively. The questions, comments, and reflections you offer have a purpose. They guide non-Christians to articulate their world and simultaneously begin to reinterpret it. Here are four categories of questions you might ask¹:

Questions that bring out good that is already present:

- Where are they putting others ahead of themselves?
- Where do they recognize their flaws and weaknesses?
- Where are their intentions good and their insights accurate?
- Where are they valuing relationships beyond convenience or prestige they receive?
- Where are they standing for what they believe is right when doing so costs them something?

Questions that flesh out significant life situations:

- What are they facing in life—both hardships and blessings?
- Where do they experience shame, suffering, failures, and problems?
- Where do they experience success, satisfaction, comfort, and excitement?
- What are their most significant relationships?

- What do they dwell on as they fall asleep?
- What keeps them from sleeping, or comes to mind in the middle of the night?

Questions that pinpoint behaviors:

- What patterns do their behaviors tend to follow?
- What are their temptations, failures, and fears?
- What are they currently doing to address the problems that have brought them to see you?
- What do they think would solve their problem?

Questions that reveal allegiances:

- What do they desire?
- What are their goals and motives?
- What "voices"—true or false—do they listen to as authoritative for interpreting life?
- What do they love?
- What are they addicted to?
- What are they trusting in?
- Where does their hope lie?

These questions will help you draw people out so they see more clearly who they really are.

These four categories immediately lend themselves to a biblical reinterpretation of life. If they can accurately describe what their lives are fundamentally about, they are starting to track in God's world already. True self-knowledge is a great gift which necessarily exposes people to the nature of their deepest allegiances and the actions that flow from those allegiances.² If they cannot see themselves accurately, "holding up the mirror" may help start the process.

3. *Find out what the person thinks about God.* Every person who is not a Christian has a reason for not being a Christian. Some consciously reject God and the Bible. Others have never given it much thought. Still others believe they are Christians without any real understanding of the gospel of grace. Then there are those who have never heard an alternative to the way they were raised. Some have had terrible experiences in churches, or were mistreated by professing Christians. Some "tried it and it didn't work." As you speak with them, keep an eye out for exactly who this person understands the "God" of the Bible to be. Very often—and this is especially true for those who have been sinned against by people in a church—someone is repulsed by a "God" who is in fact repulsive and has little to do with

the true God. They are right to be repulsed by a divine being who is willful and capricious, or vain and cruel! Understanding the kind of “God”—Christian or otherwise—a person is serving or rejecting is very helpful.

These orienting perspectives lay the groundwork for a presentation of Christ that is incisively relevant and powerful. This kind of seed sowing displays Christ as exactly the help and hope this person needs. Christian ministry is evangelism. In counseling this means we strive for a relationship where the natural next step in the relationship is speaking about the *good news* of the Good Shepherd. What happens when someone acknowledges shame, guilt, wounds, wickedness, weakness or loneliness? That person becomes more open to a Shepherd who laid down his life so his sheep could have glorious, endless, forgiven, painless, shameless, eternal life with God as part of his family.

Three Frequently Asked Questions

Here are three common questions that arise about the actual in-the-room dynamics of counseling non-Christians:

1. *Should I use the Bible with non-Christians?* It depends. “Using the Bible” can mean different things. There is a broad range of ways to engage the Word, all of which qualify on some level as using the Bible: reading aloud, quoting, paraphrasing, allusion, borrowing a metaphor, retelling stories in a different context, and talking about broad principles drawn from Scripture, just to name a few. As is true with Christians, different ways of engaging the Bible will be appropriate for different purposes. Scripture contains examples of all of the above, and all have a legitimate place in ministry.

How you use (or do not use) the Bible also depends on who the non-Christian is that you are talking to. Paul, for example, quotes Scripture heavily when he speaks with Jews who do not believe (Acts 13). With Greek philosophers, however, he does not quote Scripture. He instead references philosophy to ground broad principles from Scripture that are accepted in their world (Acts 17). When talking to Gentile peasants, he uses illustrations from daily life (Acts 14).

Keep Paul’s model, with all its flexibility, in mind. If you speak to someone who is bitter against Christians because the Bible feels like a weapon of abuse, err on the allusional/metaphor-

borrowing end of the spectrum. If you do go to Scripture, the first place to go might be Ezekiel 34, pointing out that God himself feels passionately about abuse of power by spiritual leaders. With an agnostic who is open to spirituality and has little experience with the church, you may move to the words of Scripture more quickly, though the majority of your interaction with Scripture will likely be at the level of paraphrases. Be thoughtful about your choices, always asking yourself where your own fears or tendencies may be hampering you. Are you likely to do a lot of paraphrasing because you worry that people won’t like what they hear, and you want to make it sound “nicer”? Or do you quote woodenly, not trusting that God’s words and ways can breathe through a normal human conversation?

Along the way, no matter how you are engaging the Scriptures, pay attention to the sources of authority and influence the person you are speaking with *does* recognize! Whether this is a style of music, a pop-psychology, a trusted friend or relative, or the 24/7 news cycle, you should explore these. You will always find echoes of or yearnings for the gospel in them.

2. *Should I pray?* Probably. But maybe not at the beginning of the first time you sit down with someone who is likely not a believer. The important thing is this: when you do pray, actually pray. Don’t make the prayer a sermon in disguise. Remember that you are being overheard and be sensitive to the person. But do talk to God, not to the other person.

Intercession on behalf of another person is an enormous privilege and an incredible opportunity to love. Speaking openly about the person’s tender concerns, deep needs, and vexing trials to the One who holds all things in his hands is an intimate and beautiful part of caring for that person. Don’t feel like you have to choose between praying for spiritual needs and praying for physical needs. Take comfort in the knowledge that prayers to our Father that seek the genuine good of the person will inevitably re-interpret someone’s world.

3. *Do I give practical advice?* All the time. I sometimes worry that practical advice that is not riveted to the gospel will teach harmful self-reliance, even if it leads to better behavior. However, as you help someone think wisely about finding relief from hard life situations, you will grow increasingly attuned to places

where pertinent advice is directly shaped by the awareness of all you have come to know about the person (e.g., where someone's loyalties or motives lie). Let me give an example. I remember speaking with a young man (high school age) who had an anger problem. He had a difficult relationship with his younger (junior high age) sister. During the course of our relationship, I witnessed an interaction between the two of them where she was unapologetically rude, and he responded by belittling her and treating her like a 5-year-old. He seemed genuinely unaware that his behavior had been anything other than that of a mature adult dispensing much-needed correction.

I started by commiserating with him about the frustration of being treated as he had been. I was careful not to rush past this. But as the conversation progressed, I told him that I thought he had been insulting and demeaning to his sister. I was candid. If he actually wanted to see change in her life for the better, he was going to need to treat her respectfully and kindly, even when she was rude. In doing so, I laid the foundation for him to see that loving your "enemies" and returning good for evil leads to growth in relationships. I also wanted him to see that if he was genuinely going to deal with anger and have meaningful relationships in his life, he was going to need a source of strength and motivation greater than his own comfort and benefit. That is a powerful seed to sow!

Four People You Might Counsel

There is no simple formula for counseling all non-Christians any more than there is a simple formula for counseling all Christians. In closing, let me simply illustrate what a wise, seed-sowing approach might entail in four very different situations:

1. An eighty-three-year-old woman in a nursing home struggles with depression after losing her husband and close friends. Her children and grandchildren rarely visit. She feels forgotten and betrayed by her family after all the time she spent taking care them.

What will you say to such a woman as you hear her story? Hopefully, you will begin by simply expressing genuine sorrow over the grief and pain she is experiencing. God is close to the broken-hearted. You will give her a taste of that closeness by mourning with

her as she mourns. The loss of loved ones, the sense of isolation, and the sadness over the neglect of her family are all reasonable causes of deep distress.

Where are you going with her? As she feels comfort from your grieving with her, you are planting the seed in her heart that God might actually be close and grieve her losses too. You will look for opportunities to speak about life after death with a God who resonates deeply with her hurt. He has spent all of history reconciling with children who have betrayed him much more deeply than not coming to visit. You will freely share Scripture passages filled with his promises. This same God offers her freedom from her self-isolating bitterness. Even now she can have a life full of joy and significance, found in blessing those people around her whom she does see regularly.

2. Now consider a young woman in high school. She attends youth group and sings at church to keep her parents happy. But when they are not watching, she throws aside her Christian lifestyle, drinks at parties, and dabbles with pot. Her double-life is killing her. Her mood alternates from ecstatic delight when she feels popular and accepted to bitter, self-harming bouts of despair and self-loathing when she feels like no one knows her or loves her for who she really is.

With this young woman, you begin differently. Early on, you might spend time exploring why popularity is so important to her. You might even use a word like "intoxicating" with her. You will try to understand the specific contours of her experience, not assuming that you know why she craves people's good opinion. You will also take episodes of cutting, bingeing, or ripping out her own hair very seriously. Think creatively with her to make a plan to keep her away from these behaviors when she feels discouraged.

Over the long haul, you are going to try to help her recognize that her double life is destroying her and her relationships. She needs to hear that the God she learns about in youth group is not interested in mere outward conformity. Instead, he invites her to a radical integrity that actually results in freedom for her. Ironically, the grace of God allows her to live as herself—all her failings confessed and with no need to hide—in every context. As her counselor, you are free to show great compassion for her, even though she generates much of her own suffering.

3. A man in his early twenties is self-confident, outspokenly atheistic in rejecting his parents' religion, and eager to "live life to the fullest." But he is devastated by a recent breakup with a girlfriend and has sought help from the "therapy" his parents were willing to pay for. This conversation will go very differently from the previous two.

You would likely begin by talking about the breakup. What happened? What did he value in the relationship? What went wrong? Why has it been so devastating? What is he doing to treat the wounds he feels? What

4. Finally, a man in his 40's has marriage problems despite a successful career and successful kids. With him you would likely open by exploring his perspective on the marriage problems, as well as his thoughts on the things that are going right. Does he see his wife as a failure in contrast to himself and the kids? Or is she the dissatisfied judge, for whom no amount of success ever seems to be enough? Perhaps he is confused as to why she is cold and distant, and he responds by spending more time pursuing his job, where he finds greater satisfaction.

In the same way as the previous cases,

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does he think is needed or helpful?

You will also likely explore what he means by his "parents' religion." Did he grow up with smothering legalism, where outward behavior mattered but feelings and motives did not? Were they aggressively political because of their faith commitments, but personally uninterested in spiritual things? Did they lovingly nurture him in a healthy church and he resents them because he feels he never got the "chance" to get outside a Christian bubble? Is his "parents' religion" code for anything old, irrelevant, or getting in the way of doing what he wants to do in the modern, enlightened world?

In time, you will help him articulate a fundamental commitment to his own pleasure on his own terms. At some point, you might begin to raise a question as to whether the very pleasure he is living for is also the thing that killed his relationship. You want to help him see that such a commitment will ultimately isolate him from all relationships.

He needs to know the God who is not a cosmic killjoy—yet who challenges mere self-indulgence. In fact, God desires deeper human relationships for this young man than he has ever tasted, longs to know and be known by him, and has willingly suffered the cost of a "breakup" himself.

your first priority will be to help him put words on his frustration and his interpretation of the problem. If you discover that he sees his wife as the "failure," you'll look for ways he is not as "all together" as he wants to believe. Here you are aiming for him to collide with the reality of his own sinfulness and lead him to a sense of need for God's grace. Or, if she turns out to be the "judge," you help him put words on the things he is living for but does not get from her: an easy life, approval, respect, or accomplishment. Begin to see where he is looking for her, or the marriage, to be his savior and to fulfill his greatest hopes. The gospel offers delightful freedom for a man trapped under the rule of a master he can never please. In this case, he is ultimately more a slave to his dreams of comfort or significance than he is to his wife. If the problem is simply relational distance, you start by encouraging him to pursue his wife rather than withdrawing to his job. Then, your ultimate goal is his embrace of the pursuing love of Christ for him, and that he will embody that same love for his wife. Christ is the one who did not stop loving despite discomfort. When he was rejected, he continued to pursue the bride that he had come to woo and win.

These stories are common. Each one deals with relationships, desires, problems, hopes, and goals. Yet the differences between them lead to

very different approaches for you as a counselor! This, on the one hand, gives you the great privilege of moving into any relationship with humility and flexibility. You know that you can go many possible directions, even when there is much you don't yet understand or appreciate about this person. On the other hand, you come with the enormous confidence that God does have something life re-arranging to say to this person. You will have the opportunity both to speak and to embody his loving-kindness. You will remain alert to the places where the gospel calls people to die to self-centered and destructive ways of living in fresh and relevant ways.

Be a Sower

Embodying Christ's love is nowhere more crucial than in ministry to non-Christians. We have a message to share. It is the same message

of the kingdom that was good news in the ears of sinners when Christ first spoke it. We must be content with nothing less than delivering the good news today, and to deliver it in such a way that the person sees that Jesus himself is surprisingly good. Wise counselors will look to his example to learn how to scatter seeds as he did, digging through the soil for the best spot to plant the gospel in the most personal, loving, and compelling of ways.

1 For a longer discussion of how to ask heart-exposing, life re-interpreting questions, see David Powlison's chapter "X-ray Questions" in *Seeing with New Eyes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 129-144.

2 The theologian John Calvin vividly captures the way accurate self-knowledge leads to knowledge of God in his introduction to the Institutes. See *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 37.

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