

First Things First

Why Anthropology Matters In Counseling

In the task of counseling, how one defines man is crucial in understanding and planning how one will go about helping a person. As a matter of fact, this is perhaps one of the most obvious differences between a biblical view of counseling and those views of secular therapists and those Christians wishing to adopt such messages. In this short article, I will list four reasons why anthropology is important for counseling.

First, a right understanding of anthropology results in a right appreciation to God. When one looks at mankind, whether that person is a counselor or a counselee, the way God has created us should stir up great feelings of amazement and thankfulness to the Creator. King David, in Psalm, could not help but praise God for the way he was put together when he wrote “I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret, *and* skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.” David, when he looked honestly and with faith at God’s creation, was right to praise God and to thank Him for His marvelous work. A right anthropology should cause both counselor and counselee to do the same.

Second, a right understanding of anthropology results in a right understanding of man’s problem. The Bible is clear that man is a sinner, both by nature and by choice (Ephesians 2:1-3). Though man possesses a sin cursed body that bring biological struggles, his biggest problem is not outside himself. Rather, it is himself. In Jeremiah 17:9, the prophet Jeremiah writes “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” Man’s greatest problem is that he wants his own way more than God’s and thus has forsaken the paths of righteousness. Counseling that views man in this way will have an accurate understanding of what in man needs to be changed.

Third, a right understanding of anthropology results in right goals for counseling. There are many proposed goals for counseling in the theories of men. Many believe the goal of counseling is to have healthy, well-balanced, individuals who can pursue personal happiness through the process of meeting needs. On this basis, all of counseling is tailored to the desires of the counselee. Counseling is then an exercise in helping people get what they want in a particular situation.

However, if it is true that God created mankind for His own glory (Genesis 1-2), and that He has redeemed man for His own glory (1 Corinthians 6:19), then a biblical understanding of anthropology should lead a counselor to challenge counsees to seek to please and honor the Lord as of first importance. A biblical understanding of anthropology results in leading counsees to seek, first and foremost, to please and honor the Lord with their lives. That is what man, as a redeemed, created being, truly needs.

Fourth, a right understanding of anthropology results in right methods of change. Out of a theoretical identity comes a practical methodology. Is man simply a byproduct of his biology (Skinner)? If so, counseling should emphasize medication and positive and negative reinforcement; reward and punishment. Is man simply a product of inner frustrations and conflict (Freud)? If so, counseling will focus on unraveling the inner, subconscious struggles. Is man basically good (Rogers)? If so, counseling should not focus on giving direction, but on being a mirror and guide as the person finds his or her own way. Or, is man made in the image of God, called to love and enjoy God by serving others, despite his or her own fleshly desire to love self? If so, counseling will look drastically different! Our anthropology (the study of man) serves to ground our counseling in the lives of people. If a counselor sees man as the Bible describes him, as a created creature who worships whoever or whatever controls his or her heart, then the counselor will seek to deal with heart idols, implementing the put off/put on process of Ephesians 4:17-32 and Colossians 3. A right understanding of anthropology leads the biblical counselor to trust God’s instructions concerning the nature of man and to work within God’s framework for how to help.