
The Difference Christ Makes in a Crisis

Michael W. Bobick

What Can Pastor Smith Do?

It's 8:45 on a Saturday night, and the ringing phone breaks Pastor Smith's intense concentration. He promised himself (and God) that it wouldn't happen again this week but there he is, huddled over his sermon notes, desperately trying to pull things together for the next day. "Now who could that be?" he wonders, dutifully reaching for the intruder. The congregation knows better than to call him on Saturday evening—unless it's an emergency, of course. The caller is no church member. The Yellow Pages provided the caller with the minister's number. "I'm gonna do it—I'm gonna do it!" the caller warns. "I'm sitting here with the candles lit. I'm gonna slit my wrists and pray to Satan to take my life, unless you can stop me."

Exactly two weeks later, our harried pastor is on yet another collision course with Sunday morning. An insistent, ringing telephone is no help. It's Juanita, a 20-year-old woman he met earlier in the week. Severely depressed, she rages in anger because of a male relative who raped her. "I'm really going to do it," Juanita threatens. "I'm going to jump off the top of my apartment building."

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Another night, this time a Friday at 9:30, Suzanne, a 30-something woman attending the church with her third husband, is on the phone. "Pastor, I can't take it anymore. I've just got to leave him. We've had another huge fight. Nothing's ever going to change."

What can Pastor Smith say when faced with these actual situations? Do those Bible notes covering his desk help at all?

The Difference that Christ Makes

Specific problems require specific solutions. But the overarching uniqueness of Christian crisis-counseling consists of *the difference Christ Himself makes* in a crisis. The difference is surely not a shopworn notion such as self-esteem in Christ, significance in Christ, or even wisdom in Christ. "Christ" is not a mere adjective, a particular version of a more universal concept. Rather, as the apostle Paul says, "in Him [Christ] all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Christ is every part of speech. He is the whole, greater than the sum of the parts. He is the Alpha and the Omega of all eternity and time—including crunch time.

Pastor Smith has no therapy gimmicks to offer. He uses no soothing psychobabble to patch over deep wounds. Rather, he can present Christ, the Lord of all and yet the Servant of all. It is this Christ that the impending wrist-slasher, the distressed rape

victim, and the hopeless wife urgently need. Christ Himself is the difference that Christ makes in a crisis.

Our Focus: The Priesthood of Christ

In "Coping with Counseling Crises," Jay Adams says that "the counselor's task is to relate God *fully* to the crisis."¹ In relating Christ fully to the crisis, the counselor naturally thinks of the three offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. We will focus here on the centrality of Christ's priesthood to the first 24 hours of any crisis, when the counselor must achieve compassionate contact.

The Purpose of the Priest

The first priest in the Bible appears in Genesis 14: Melchizedek, whom we later learn is a foreshadowing of Christ (Heb. 7). Through the other books of Moses we read of the high priest, a man specially selected to represent other men before God in sacrifice and petitions, and God before men in blessings. As we read in Hebrews 5:1, "For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins."

In fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, the Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect and final high priest. The book of Hebrews uses this theme to encourage believers to persevere in the faith. For example, we read in Hebrews 2:17-18: "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of His people. For since He himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted."

Notice the identification of this high priest with His people: He was "made like His brethren in all things." Verse 14 of this chapter tells us that He took upon Himself flesh and blood—that is, not merely a body, but full human nature. The practical result is that He can help those who are tempted. Hebrews 4:14-16 echoes this same identification theme: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

¹Jay E. Adams, "Coping with Counseling Crises," in *Lectures on Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 101.

Christ, the Final High Priest, Feels What His People Feel

This great priest is both fully divine—He is called the "Son of God"—and fully human. He feels the weaknesses of human nature. He thirsts under a hot sun. Through famished eyes He looks at stones but is able to taste hot, delicious bread. He knows the longings of being a stranger far away from home. He experiences more fully than we do the power of temptation,

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resisting it completely, without hesitation. He feels the force of that hurricane in His face; tempted in all ways as we are, He remains without sin.

Perhaps the key idea here in Christ's priestly ministry is that He is *involved* with His people. He has become one of us. Involvement is an essential part of His sacrificial work. He has "once offered up...Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God," as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* summarizes it (Q. 25). He could do so because this Sinless and Holy One has become one of us; He has taken on human nature forever.

The same Catechism goes on to tell us that Christ now makes "continual intercession for us." He has not stopped being a priest. As the pastoral theologian, John Owen, said, when Jesus was on earth, His intercession took the form of verbal prayers. But now that He is in heaven, His intercession consists of presenting Himself on our behalf. By this Person in heaven, we now have every spiritual blessing in Christ in the heavenlies. Christ remains a High Priest forever, always involved, always identifying with His people.

A story I once heard illustrates the way Christ intercedes for us. There was once a soldier in the Union army, who lost his older brother and father in the war. He went to Washington, D.C., to see President Abraham Lincoln to ask for an exemption from military service. He wanted to go back and help his sister and mother with the spring planting on the farm. He went up to the doors of the White House and asked to see the President. He was told, "You can't see the President! Don't you know there's a war on? The President is a very busy man. Now go away, son! Get back out there and fight the Rebs like you're supposed to!" He left very disheartened and sat on a park bench not far from

the White House. A little boy came up to him and said, "Soldier, you look unhappy. What's wrong?" The soldier looked at this child and began to spill out his heart about his father and brother having died in the war, and how he was the only male left in the family and was needed desperately back at the farm for the spring planting.

The little boy took the soldier by the hand and led him around to the back of the White House. They went through the back door, past the guards and the gener-

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als and high-ranking government officials until they got to the President's office itself. The boy didn't even knock on the door, but just opened it and walked in. There was President Lincoln with his secretary of state, looking over battle plans on the desk. President Lincoln looked up and said, "What can I do for you, Todd?"

Todd said, "Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you." And right then and there the soldier had a chance to plead his case to President Lincoln, who then exempted him from military service due to his hardship.

Through our own Intercessor, Jesus, we have such access to the Father. The Son brings us to His Father's throne and says, "Daddy, here is someone who needs to talk to you." This truth of Jesus our High Priest has tremendous counseling implications.

We will look at just two of them.

1. We Involve Ourselves through Christ

One of the most profound counseling insights I ever encountered was on a sign in a bowling alley in Brooklyn, New York: "People don't care how much you know unless they know how much you care." True, isn't it? Even in a crisis—in which, as a counselor, you need to be more directive than usual—you need first to show that you care. You must be involved with the person's humanity; you are not Super Counselor, barking commands down from the Mount Olympus of advanced sanctification. Like your Master and through His grace, you draw near enough to feel the pain of another in your heart, for this is what "compassion" means. Alongside your High Priest, you suffer with the would-be Satanist, with Juanita the would-be jumper, and with Suzanne, the would-be divorcee, for this is the

literal meaning of "sympathy"—to "suffer with" someone else.

2. We Pray the "Hezekiah Prayer"

What do godly people do when they are confronted suddenly with bad news? To answer that question, I began to search the Scriptures. What I discovered surprised me. I found no one "taking inventory" or making plans. I found instead Isaiah 38:1-6, "In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.'" Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, and said, 'Remember now, O LORD, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in thy sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, saying, 'Go and say to Hezekiah, "Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city!"'

What does Hezekiah do? He enters the valley of Baca—the valley of weeping and praying. God hears him and averts the crisis. Josiah also weeps before the Lord, and this is accepted as a sign of humiliation before Him (2 Chron. 34:27). Jacob wrestles with the angel and prevails through weeping and prayer. Are these examples mere coincidence? Or are these tears of unbelief? The example of Jesus the High Priest confirms the godly reaction of Hezekiah and others. Here we have the second implication of Jesus' priesthood for crisis counseling: we need to get on our knees and cry out to God! Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud cryings and tears to the one able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety." The Hezekiah Prayer reaches its fulfillment in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Christ shrinks back, not from the physical pain of crucifixion (many stronghearted men have endured it bravely), but He sees the wrath of God placed on Him at the cross and asks to be saved from the power of death. Jesus was heard because of His piety. His tears and loud cries were not displays of wild panic, but soul-deep expressions of utter dependence upon God.

Do you see the counseling application? Sometimes the best thing we can do for someone in crisis is to pray a Hezekiah prayer. Let me give you an example. John and Madeleine were a young, childless couple in our church in New York. They had long tried to have a child, but were unable to do so. Finally they found a

pregnant teenager in another state who was willing to give the child up for adoption. What joy they had in preparing for that big day! John prepared the nursery, while Madeleine couldn't stop talking about the child that would soon be theirs. One long-awaited day in July, the healthy baby was born, and they immediately named him "John Jr." They rushed to the hospital and took him home on a Friday.

Saturday morning their phone rang. It was the young woman's lawyer. The woman had changed her mind; she would keep the boy. They were told to return the child immediately. With no hope of ever seeing "their" son again, they would have to obey the order, however grievous. But before John and Madeleine left, they called me. What could I do in their crisis? Could I change the mother's mind? There was obviously only one thing we could do. Together we prayed a Hezekiah prayer.

Monday morning after a seemingly endless weekend, the phone rang at 7:00 a.m. It was the lawyer again. The young woman had changed her mind once more. They could have the child. John Jr. has been with his new parents ever since.

The Lord heard our prayers and saw our tears. We were not alone as we prayed; our High Priest stood alongside us. Are you facing a Hezekiah-type situation, your own Gethsemane? Draw near with confidence to the throne of grace. Are you burdened by the weight of sin and earthly cares today? If you are a believer, you have a High Priest who feels with you.

God's Providence

We have seen how the priesthood of Christ impacts our counseling. Now let's examine the impact of God's providence. The providence of God refers to the fact that God governs everything in heaven and on earth. As John Calvin wrote, "But faith ought to penetrate more deeply, namely, having found him Creator of all, forthwith to conclude he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver—not only in that he drives the celestial frame as well as its several parts by a universal motion, but also in that he sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow."² Not a leaf falls from a tree, not a word is spoken, not a trial or disaster occurs, apart from the will of God.

Throughout the history of the church, Christian opinion has been united on the doctrines of creation and providence. Christian thinkers from all shades of the theological spectrum have confessed that God is a King who does His will in His creation. John of Damas-

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.16.1 (Battles' edition, 1:197-198).

cus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and others have differed on other issues, but each one has acknowledged God's providence.

And why not? Isn't the testimony of Scripture clear? Consider Psalm 103:19: "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all." Or the familiar words of Romans 8:28-29: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called

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according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." It is an unspeakable comfort for God's people, in the midst of their crises, to know that there are no accidents or chance in God's universe. Everything we experience is already filtered through the loving hands of our heavenly Father, who knows our frame and remembers that we are but dust.

West Side Baptist Church

Perhaps you have heard about West Side Baptist Church in Beatrice, Nebraska. Normally all of the choir people came to church on Wednesday night to practice, and they tended to be early, well before the 7:30 starting time. But the evening of March 1, 1950, one by one, two by two, they all had excuses for being late. Marilyn, the church pianist, overslept in her after-dinner nap, so she and her mother were late. One girl, a high school sophomore, was having trouble with her homework, so she was late. One couple couldn't get their car started. They, and those they were to pick up, were therefore late. All 18 choir members, including the pastor and his wife, were late. All had good excuses. At 7:30, the time the choir rehearsal was to begin, not one person was in the choir loft. This had never happened before.

But that night there was a gas leak in the basement of the West Side Baptist Church. At precisely the time at which the choir would have been singing, the gas leak was ignited by the church furnace and the whole church blew up. The furnace room was right below the choir loft!

Chance? Accidents? In God's universe? Don't you

believe it!

The Importance of God's Providence for Crises

The importance of this truth for those in crisis is obvious. Twenty-five years ago, Jay Adams gave a lecture entitled, "Counseling and the Sovereignty of God." In it he showed the practical importance of this doctrine

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in these kinds of situations: What do you say to the parents of a 14-year-old girl who has just been abducted and carried off to an unknown destination? What can you say to the father of seven, who was barely scraping by with his job at the plant, when he learns that the plant will close down? Is there any hope? Is there any point to it all? Adams points us to the sovereign providence of God. He affirms that "the sovereignty of God is the ultimate truth that meets human need."³

The Man Who Had Lost Everything

A Christian man once lost everything he had in the Great Depression. He lost his job, his home, his fortune, and his family. Although he was a believer, he found it very difficult not to lose hope. He just couldn't understand why all this was happening to him.

One day, feeling low and depressed, he wandered aimlessly through the city. He came upon the construction site of a new church building. It was to be a marvelous, cathedral-like structure made of stone. He noticed one mason who was chiseling a triangle-shaped stone on the sidewalk. He asked him, "Excuse me, but what are you doing?" The mason replied, "You see that space up there?" as he pointed to a triangle-shaped opening at the very top of the tower. "I'm working on it down here so that it will fit up there." Those words resonated in his heart. Now he knew what was going on. God was in control! The Master Builder was working on him down here so that he would fit up there.

What If the Truth Doesn't Comfort?

God's providential control over all things is indeed a great certainty in crises. But perhaps you have had the experience of trying to help someone who has just fallen upon a crisis. You tried to encourage him with the

truth of God's loving providence, but the truth didn't take. No comfort came; rather, God's sovereignty seemed like salt in your friend's wound. Or perhaps in your own suffering you have tried to extract hope from the flower of God's providence. No nectar came; perhaps, even for a moment, it tasted more like poison. What went wrong? Was it an inappropriate time to say what you did? That, of course, is possible; we are told to "weep with those who weep"; and not to "sing songs to a sorrowing heart." Could it be that you responded out of unbelief, rather than faith? Certainly at our best moments we say, "I believe, help my unbelief." But is it possible that you gave a one-sided representation of God? Could it be that you omitted the priesthood of Christ as you presented the providence of God? Might you have choked on the bones of a doctrine abstracted from Christ, who is the face of God for us?

You see what I am suggesting. The providence of God truly cannot be understood apart from the priesthood of Christ. The providence of God may not minister help to people in crisis unless, right along with it, we show the human face of Christ. The immediate question of "Why, Lord?" erupts when a crisis arises. It is not enough to tell the parents of the abducted girl that God is sovereign. You must also communicate that Jesus the High Priest feels the trials of His people and carries their burdens in His heart. It is not enough to tell the soon-to-be unemployed father of seven that God is sovereign. You must tell him that his Savior in heaven was tempted by crippling anxiety as well, and can give him help now. Providence and priesthood: both are ultimate truths. What God has put together, let no one separate.

The "Impassibility of God"?

The 20th century witnessed a backlash against the idea of the "impassibility" of God. This term refers to the belief that God cannot feel pain or experience any mental discomfort. The thinking goes like this: God as a perfect being cannot be subject to anything that would disturb His perfect peace. Nothing can make God unhappy, or else He would no longer be a perfect God. So, when emotions are ascribed to God, they are merely a form of "accommodation." That is, God is described in the Bible as having emotion in order to help us understand Him.

I will not go into the details here of this debate. Instead, consider the following statements from Scripture, and ask yourself: do they offer a God who has no emotion, who feels no pain?

"Is Ephraim my dear son?

Is he a delightful child?

Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him,

³Adams, "Coping," p. 61.

I certainly still remember him;
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,' declares the
LORD." (Jer. 31:20)

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart is turned over within me,
All my compassions are kindled.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not destroy Ephraim again.
For I am God and not man, the holy one in your
midst,
And I will not come in wrath." (Hos. 11:8f.)

"But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me,
And the LORD has forgotten me.'
Can a woman forget her nursing child,
And have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget, but I will not forget you."
(Isa. 49:14f.)

We could multiply such examples, each of which would point us to the cross, where the Father, in tender mercy, yields up His only Son for His enemies. Christ makes the sacrifice that God did not ultimately require Abraham to give. Are we to think that God the Father felt no anguish? That pouring out His wrath on His own Son caused Him no bereavement? I believe that D. A. Carson is surely right when he says, "Granted that neither God's emotions nor God's sovereignty looks exactly like what we mean by emotion and sovereignty, nevertheless the Biblical writers choose terms to make us think of God as not only absolutely sovereign, but also a personal, emotional, responding, interacting God."⁴

Once again, the priesthood of Christ helps us here. In Christ the Priest we see Jesus experiencing real pain and suffering. Is His suffering limited to His human nature, as some have said? No. We must keep in mind the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* (the communication of proper qualities). What is true of the divine nature of Christ is true of the whole person of Christ.⁵ What is true of the human nature of Christ is true of the whole person of Christ. It is the whole per-

⁴D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Nashville: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 186.

⁵See B. B. Warfield, "The Emotional Life of our Lord," in his *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1950), p. 94f.

son, Christ, who feels the trials and infirmities of His people. The priesthood of Christ rules out the impassibility of God.

Both the priesthood of Christ and the providence of God have significant implications for how we counsel people in crisis.

People may wonder if God cares. They may already be convinced of God's sovereignty. They might have

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memorized Romans 8:28 long before you were born. But in the period of initial shock, they may still question, "Is God really affected by what's happening to me?"

You can answer them by telling them that the same hand that rules the world was pierced for them at Calvary. It is not a steel claw. Pray with—and for—them a Hezekiah prayer.

Godly people who are faced with a crisis will have much pain and heartache. This is not a sign of unbelief. Our Savior Himself felt the weight of His cross, yet He fully believed in the providence of God. The two—pain and belief in God's providence—are not inconsistent with one another.

Calvin's Grief and Faith

Let us look at one final example of someone in a crisis. When John Calvin lost his wife, he wrote these words to his friend Farel: "I am trying as much as possible not to be completely overwhelmed with grief... Besides, my friends surround me and do not fail to bring some comfort to my soul's sadness...I consume my grief in such a way that I have not interrupted my work...Farewell, brother and faithful friend...May the Lord Jesus strengthen your spirit and mine in this great sadness, which would have broken me had He not extended His hand from on high; He whose service includes the relief of the broken, the strengthening of the weak, the renewal of those who are tired."⁶

The hand that ruled Calvin's world is the same hand that rules ours. That hand will help those in crisis, for He feels the pains of His people. You can be a part of His tender care as you counsel others through His priesthood and according to His providence.

⁶Calvin's letter to Farel, April 11, 1549.