

The Three-Thirds Process

as a Biblical Counseling Meeting Format

Take a moment and consider the diversity of these following ministries:

- Biblical Counseling
- Discipleship
- Church Planting
- Church Health & Growth
- Theological Training
- Evangelism
- Hermeneutics
- Homiletics
- Global Missions

For The Twelve the essence of everything listed above was all wrapped in the part of the all-inclusive process of following Jesus. Ultimately everything is rooted in discipleship. It can be said that biblical counseling as a ministry is *focused discipleship*. It helps people navigate through real problems towards christlikeness. Or you can say, it gets people unstuck from the banks of the 'discipleship river'.

Globally, the 'discipleship river' is flowing fast in our generation. The Holy Spirit is setting the pace through movements of multiplying disciples, churches and leaders around the world. In the 90s the term 'Church Planting Movement' was coined in an attempt to describe a Holy Spirit-fueled gospel-centered love of God and love of neighbor compounded in discipleship chains so vast that can only be counted in terms of streams of churches starting churches to the fourth generation and beyond. When I first set off to the mission field about ten years ago there were a couple dozen movements, now there are more than 650 sustained church planting movements. What is also interesting to note is most of these movements did not happen on their own. They were catalyzed by outside pioneers (missionaries). In other words, God used individuals and teams to literally disciple a movement.

If there is anything we have learned from these movement pioneers, and from the millions of disciples who have made disciples in these movements, is that the the biblical *process* of discipleship is just as important as the *content* of discipleship. And while theological *content* steers the rudder of the sailboat, it is the *process* that opens and trims the sails. A good sailor keeps an eye on the his direction (heading) and on the sails at the same time because he frequently needs to adjust both. Likewise, a healthy disciple is mindful of both the content he is teaching and how he is spending his time with his disciples. But every sailor is ultimately dependent on wind for any progress. Likewise *content* and *process* are only the controllable aspects of discipleship. Yet we recognize that all progress forward is completely dependent on the work of God the Holy Spirit, who is the unseen doer. The wind blows where it may.

THE APOSTLES RETURNED TO JESUS AND TOLD HIM ALL THAT THEY HAD DONE AND TAUGHT. MARK 6:30 (ESV)

Notice in that verse that Jesus inspected both what they *taught* and what they had *done*. Jesus inspected content and process. Teaching and schedule. Healthy discipleship weds biblical content with a biblical process.

Much has been said about theological content on the subject of biblical counseling. But this article is focused on the biblical process of discipleship, and how that can be adapted in a biblical counseling session.

The Three-Thirds Process was originally formulated by Ying Kai, a missionary to China. It encapsulates several ingredients of a healthy discipleship meeting. It has been adapted around the world in a myriad of cultures and missiological contexts. The vast majority of the 650 Church Planting Movements worldwide use some form of this process.

Here are a couple of reasons why the Three Thirds Process should be of interest in the area of biblical counseling.

1. **Biblical:** Three-Thirds is not explicitly formulated in Scripture. Rather, just like Systematic Theology organizes doctrine, the three-thirds organizes the essential activities Jesus was engaged in when training his disciples. Throughout the Gospels these characteristics is evident, even intuitive, even if they are not presented in the same order. It is interesting to note that each element of the three-thirds process is evident in the training of the Seventy - Two in Luke 10, and also the comings and goings of The Twelve Apostles in the Gospels.
2. **Adaptive:** Three-Thirds have been successful adapted and applied in many cultures, worldviews and education levels. Because of the flexibility of this process it is worth exploring how this can be adapted in biblical counseling.
3. **Fruitful:** Adaptations of the three-thirds is present in most church planting movements worldwide. Fruitfulness alone does not commend a process because as I have stated earlier fruitfulness is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.
4. **Continuity:** Because the Three-Thirds is central to healthy discipleship, adapting this paradigm in counseling brings continuity between biblical counseling and discipleship. It can set healthy discipleship 'DNA' that a counselee will carry in their ongoing walk and ministry.

The following summary of the Three-Thirds Process is an adaptation from Steve Smith's PHD Thesis "An evaluation of Training for Trainers (T4T) as an aid for developing sustained church planting movements (CPMs)", which is available online.

The three-thirds discipleship process

It is a process of building disciples who 1) follow God and 2) fish for men.

A meeting includes three basic sections. The focus of the sections are 1) looking back, 2) looking up and 3) looking forward.

- **First Third: Looking Back** – the goal of this time is to evaluate how the disciples did while apart, celebrate together and encourage them that what God can do through them.
- **Second third: Looking Up** – the goal of this time is to look up to God for new direction by studying a new lesson from Scripture and practicing a skill to help them to obey what they have learned.
- **Final third: Looking Ahead** – the goal of this time is to prepare the people to implement the things about which God has been speaking to them.

Each of these thirds contain a couple of important ingredients. Note that these ingredients do not necessary need to be in a particular order and are highly adaptable.

First Third Looking Back	Second Third Looking Up	Final Third Looking Ahead
Care	Lesson from Scripture	Goal Setting (Homework)
Accountability	Practice a skill	Commissioning with Prayer
Vision Casting		

First Third: Looking Back

Care: This is time when you simply check-in which how they are doing. You might probe with some questions but this is a time for the counselor to listen.

Accountability: Check in on how they did in accomplishing their goals (i.e. homework). Accountability should center on personal obedience to Jesus, and love/outreach to towards others in relation to their specific goals. This doesn't have to a slavish or discouraging time, but a time of celebrating obedience for the steps that have been taken.

Vision Casting: Use Scripture or a testimony to focus on God and our identity in Him. Identity should be two-fold in both who you are in Christ, and what God can do through you. The point is to take eyes off yourself and your performance to God and what he can do. Vision casting also clarifies the importance of why we are meeting in the first place.

Second Third: Looking Up

Lesson from Scripture: This is a time to look at Scripture for a new teaching to learn, internalize, and apply.

Practice: Here is a time to practice a skill or application of Scripture. It may include rehearsing, role-playing, or workshopping particular disciplines or obediences that the counselee will carry into the coming days. The point is to build up the counselee confidence and competence to follow a focused path of obedience by faith in God.

Final Third: Looking Ahead

Goal Setting: This is a time to establish specific action steps the counselee will attempt before the next meeting. This where homework is assigned. It needs to be an appropriate step of faith for the counselee.

Commissioning with Prayer: Simply a time to commend the goals in faith to God and attempt to follow them in faith.

Common Pitfalls and Suggestions

Accountability to the counselor not to God. Instead of you assigning all the homework, help the counselee set some of their own faith-goals. You may offer suggestions, guidance, but ultimately you want the person you are counseling to “own” their goals as personal steps of faith. Vision casting is important here as it frames goals not as something they will do by their own strength, but is laying hold who they are in Christ, and faith in what God can do through them. Also, probably the easiest way to focus on God is to let yourself be held accountable as well. When the accountability time is mutual accountability you are demonstrating that we are obeying Christ together.

Accountability feeling forced or slavish. During the accountability time make sure to celebrate obedience instead of focusing on shortcoming in goal performance. Make sure you cast vision to point to the sufficiency of God, identity in Him, and what He can do through you. Make sure you help counselee set their own goals as steps of faith, and celebrate attempts taken by faith whenever possible.

Too much teaching content. Avoid fire-hosing biblical truth that addresses the issue. Too much teaching doesn't not empower competence or confidence in internalizing, obeying, and teaching others. Shoot for 1-to-1 ratio of what you teach, what is obeyed and what they can share with others. So for example if the issue is prayer, instead of teaching everything you know about prayer, spend time focusing on one passage (The Lords Prayer for example), internalize it, and practice it to the extent that the counselee can teach it to others. If the counselee can explain the lesson to others he has internalized it. If he can't teach it, he hasn't really learned it. Consider limiting teaching time to just one section of Scripture. Remember, you can always use other passages as exhortation in your vision casting time.

Also you may consider giving additional content you have as homework. If you demonstrate how to study one passage together, you may give them additional passages to study in the same way, and let them teach you what the have learned in the accountability time.

Spiritual dependency on the counselor. If our goal is to help people grow in Christ-like dependency on God we need help counselee to be self-feeding. Try modeling personal bible study in your teaching time, and help the counselee discover and set their own application and action steps. You want to show the counselee that the solutions he needs is in the Bible. More than that, he needs to know how he can discover it, and apply it for himself.

Not allowing people to filter out. While you should always exercise good stewardship in the biblical content you teach and the process of helping people along in Christlikeness, ultimately progress forward is a work of God. It is not in your responsibility to chase people down who are not receptive to discipleship. Nor is receptivity something that you can conjure up. Ultimately people will self-select themselves out of counseling if they are not ready for it. Our stewardship is seeking out those who need it and journeying with them as long as it is fruitful.

Three-Thirds Discovery Exercise

Examine Luke 10:1-24 and list evidence of the Three-Thirds ingredients in Jesus' interaction with the Seventy Two.

Observe evidence of...

Care:

New Lesson:

Goal Setting:

Accountability:

Practice:

Commissioning with Prayer:

Vision Casting:

Digging Deeper

Did VISION CASTING get the disciples' eyes off of themselves or their works? Also how did it inspire them to trust God in further obedience?

Did VISION CASTING focus on Identity in Christ, or what God can do through them, or both? How?

How did CARE and ACCOUNTABILITY time influence the NEW LESSON?

What was the amazing NEW LESSON "breakthrough" that caused Jesus to praise the Father with the Holy Spirit?

Was the NEW LESSON taught to the disciples? Was it discovered by the disciples? or both? How?

How did Jesus PRACTICE with his disciples. How did this build confidence and competence for obedience?

Were there any significant interactions that don't seem to fit within the ingredients in the Three-Thirds Process