



## Selecting a Th.M. in Counseling Thesis Topic

Dr. Bob Kellemen

More and more students are considering taking the Th.M. in Counseling here at CBS. It is a route that I highly applaud. It is actually the route that I took at Grace Theological Seminary. It allows a student “the best of both worlds” in that the student gains the excellent biblical, exegetical, and ministry foundation of the M.Div. program and the counseling, discipleship, and spiritual friendship foundation of the MACCD program. It also enables the student to write a focused Th.M. thesis that can emphasize a research approach to the practice of soul care and spiritual direction.

Many students have been asking, “How do I select a thesis topic for my Th.M. in Counseling?” Of course, there are no easy answers, no one-size-fits-all counsel. However, there are a few factors to consider (not in order of importance).

- **What topic are you passionate about?** It goes without saying, but should be said anyway, that researching and writing a thesis is a tremendous amount of work. To remain motivated, you need to add a passionate personal interest to your academic commitment. What topic gets you talking non-stop? What questions lead you to research even when you don’t have to do it for a course? What topic do you debate about endlessly? What have you already written papers on? This last question not only hints at your passion, it also can lead to a topic, if decided upon early enough, that you can develop during your entire tenure as a seminary student. With each subsequent paper, you can go deeper and deeper into your subject matter.
- **What topic do you want to probe biblically and theologically?** The point of a Th.M. thesis is to demonstrate your ability to apply your exegetical skills. As you’ve progressed through your Th.M. in Counseling, about what issues have you said to yourself, “I wonder how biblical that is?” Or, “I’d like to study and develop that area in greater detail.” Or, “That has great merit and others would receive it more readily if they saw an even greater biblical basis.” Or, “I’m not sure what I believe on this issue; I want to be a good ‘Berean’ and examine this in-depth from the Word.”
- **What topic has sufficient resources for adequate research?** Reviewing current research (professional journals, conference presentations, books, commentaries, etc.) is essential in identifying a worthy topic. This also prepares you should you ever write a Ph.D. dissertation where at least one full chapter is assigned to a complete literature review of your chosen topic. Along these lines, be very hesitant about selecting a topic that no one has ever researched. After 2,000 years of Church history, that likely would mean that it is of lesser importance. Or practically, it likely means that you will have a difficult time finding the necessary resources. For

instance, “Was the Syriac Father Rabbula a better counselor than Paul?” may be fascinating, but you will likely have a difficult time finding adequate resources to develop an informed response. Though your advisers will work with you on final thesis topic selection, you need to enter the process armed with enough potential resources to convince your advisers that your topic is feasible.

- **What topic can make a lasting contribution to the field of discipleship counseling?** The idea of a thesis is to tread new ground. Yes, you build on the work of others, but you then do research that is groundbreaking, that goes where no one has gone before. So, don’t pick a topic that has been run into the ground, unless you believe that you can take a new slant on it. Related to this, research what topics previous CBS students have written on. You should find a new topic unless your thesis deals with a unique aspect of the topic previously addressed.
- **What topic can you “turn into a thesis statement?”** With a thesis, you want to state a hypothesis and either prove or disprove it by your objective biblical research. Because you need to focus, you won’t want to simply say, “I’m going to study how Jesus counseled.” Rather, you might say, “How did Jesus, if at all, counsel men differently than he counseled women, and did the cultural/ethnic background of the person also impact Christ’s chosen approach?” As another example, don’t simply say, “I’m going to study the word *noutheteo* (confronting, exhorting, encouraging).” Rather, you might say, “Comparatively speaking, how many times and in what way was *noutheteo* used compared to *parakaleo* and what implications can we draw for counseling and discipleship?” Or, “linguistically, what is the meaning and usage in context of *noutheteo* and do current models of spiritual direction build biblically upon the New Testament use of this concept?”
- **What topic can you research from the “What?” and “So what?” perspective?** The “what?” question focuses on content and academic theology. The “so what?” question highlights application—spiritual theology (how this relates to one’s personal life) and practical theology (how this relates to ministry). You’ll want to think through possible ramifications in *both* areas, given the nature of a Th.M. in Counseling.
- **What are others saying to you about your topic?** Once you have narrowed your topic through the means suggested above, seek feedback from people who have “been there, done that.” Their probing questions and collaborative interactions may steer you to a more focused approach, steer you in a different direction, or confirm your chosen topic. Whichever way, there is a great wisdom in a multitude of counselors.
- **For additional thoughts on selecting a topic and for detailed information on the procedures for writing a thesis, please refer to the *CBS Paper and Thesis Manual*.**