

# Why Cultural Context Matters in Biblical Counseling



by SAMUEL J. ALEX, ESTHER LIU, and MICHAEL R. EMLET

What details matter when you are getting to know someone? What catches your attention when you listen to people's stories? As biblical counselors, we certainly aim to understand the desires and motives of our counselees. But we also aim to be attentive to the many facets of people's life experiences, because they impact how we love and minister to them. Consider the following vignette.

Daniel is a 39-year-old man. He is a corporate lawyer in New York City, well-respected among his colleagues. Daniel came to faith in college and is an active member of his church. He enjoys leading Bible studies and discipling the younger men. After completing law school, he moved back home and lives with his parents. For the most part, it has been a workable living situation. However, for the past few years, Daniel's singleness has become a growing source of contention. His mother, in particular, has grown increasingly outspoken about her desire for him to find a wife and settle down. Almost every conversation revolves around this topic:

*Samuel J. Alex (MAC) counseled at CCEF and is currently a doctoral extern at a VA Medical Center in Philadelphia. He has counseled in forensic, neurorehabilitation, and community mental health contexts, and is a PsyD candidate at Immaculata University.*

*Esther Liu (MAR, MAC) serves on the faculty and counsels at CCEF.*

*Michael Emllet (MDiv, MD) counsels and serves as the dean of the faculty at CCEF. His most recent book is Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us.*

“Aren’t there any young women at work? My friend has a single daughter; can I set you up with her? You’re too picky. You’re spending too much time doing church things. You should focus on marriage first.”

These conversations leave Daniel tired and exasperated. Most of the time, he tries his best to tune her out or spend more time in his room to avoid these conversations altogether. There have been times, though, that he has exploded in anger and frustration. These outbursts have been upsetting to his mom, and even himself. He has come to you for counseling, concerned about his temper, not knowing how to make his relationship with his mom better.

How might you counsel Daniel? What are your initial impressions? What problems are you identifying? Let’s add one more piece of information to the case study: Daniel is Chinese American. His parents immigrated to America when he was five years old. Ponder that for a moment. How might this additional information reshape your original approach—the questions you wanted to ask, the possible interpretations you were considering, and your initial goals for counseling? *Does* this additional piece of information reshape your original approach? And maybe most importantly, *should* it?

This article seeks to provide preliminary responses to these questions. In short, we *do* believe this additional information ought to shape our approach. Yet as we engage in this discussion of cultural context, we recognize the breadth and complexity of the topic. We know one article cannot address this in a comprehensive or exhaustive manner. To begin with, *cultural context* is a very broad term. It includes many factors such as language, art, food, customs, and values. And as we saw with the example of Daniel, it also includes a person’s race or ethnicity (more on terminology later).<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, we will

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1. Though cultural context is a broader term that includes race and ethnicity, you will see that we use these terms somewhat interchangeably as the article develops. At the same time, we recognize that two people could share ethnicity but have a different cultural context in other important ways (e.g., a farmer in rural China vs. a CEO in Beijing). Similarly, two people could share important cultural experiences while having dissimilar race or ethnicity (e.g., a second-generation Chinese American vs. a non-Asian in a suburban, upper-middle-class Philadelphia high school where both participate in theater arts). As counselors we should be aware of any and all aspects of a person’s

primarily focus on this last category as we discuss why cultural context matters in biblical counseling. We hope it will serve as the beginning of a larger, biblically-based discussion of these complex and sometimes difficult issues.

Put more broadly, here are the questions we seek to address in a preliminary way. How should elements of cultural context such as ethnicity influence biblical counseling ministry, and what is that based upon? In what ways might our failure to understand people's cultural context, as well as our own cultural context, hamper our ability to know, understand, and help our counselees in a biblical way? And how might our proper understanding of these realities make a difference as we care for people?

We feel compelled to explore these questions for three reasons.

First, the geographical reach of biblical counseling has expanded considerably since the launch of CCEF in 1968.<sup>2</sup> It has blossomed into a multifaceted movement with ministries devoted to biblical counseling and training around the world, including such places as Australia, Brazil, India, Mexico, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, biblical counseling has become a global movement and occurs in locations that differ greatly in cultural values, assumptions, and norms. And though we believe that the essence of biblical counseling translates into all cultures because it is based on Scripture, we need to consider how our ministry to those around us and the training of the next generation of biblical counselors might differ from one context to the next.

Second, our globalized world has become "smaller" so, no matter where we are, we are likely to interact with individuals from a variety of backgrounds. Our cities and towns are becoming home to people from

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cultural context that has a bearing on their counseling needs, but here, for the sake of simplicity, we will often use "cultural context/factors" and "race/ethnicity" as proxies for one another.

2. See David Powlison, "25 Years of Biblical Counseling: An Interview with Jay Adams and John Bettler," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:3 (2018): 83–98. Jay Adams began to train pastors out of John Bettler's church in Hatboro, Pennsylvania.

3. See Bob Kellemen, "10 International Biblical Counseling Organizations to Follow," *RPM Ministries*, January 3, 2019, <https://rpmministries.org/2019/01/10-international-biblical-counseling-organizations-to-follow/>.

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